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Abstract

Briefly examines the impact of Whitman in China and predicts that Whitman's reputation and influence in China will increase.

and sickness,” wrote Whitman in *Specimen Days*.⁹ These perspectives Selzer presents to us again and again; and what emerges is a new reminder of man’s greatness and strength and magnanimity and divinity—perspectives we cannot afford to lose.

Gustavus Adolphus College

THOMAS BECKNELL

NOTES

- 1 *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976); *Rituals of Surgery* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974); *Confessions of a Knife* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).
- 2 “Song of Myself,” ll. 845–846, (1892).
- 3 *Confessions of a Knife*, p. 27.
- 4 *Mortal Lessons*, pp. 16, 23.
- 5 *Mortal Lessons*, p. 25.
- 6 “Starting from Paumanok,” ll. 71–73.
- 7 *Confessions of a Knife*, p. 133.
- 8 “Song of Myself,” l. 942; “To Think of Time,” l. 15; “This Compost,” l. 41.
- 9 *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 1:116.

WHITMAN IN CHINA

Gay Wilson Allen concludes his discussion of “Walt Whitman and World Literature” in *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* with a paragraph on Whitman in the People’s Republic of China.¹ As Professor Allen points out, Chinese readers have had access to a substantial sampling of Whitman’s poems for several decades. Chu T’u-nan, an important member of the Communist Party and an advocate of cultural exchange, began translating Whitman’s poetry after 1930. Over the next twenty-five years he translated fifty-eight of Whitman’s poems, including “Song of Myself,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “The Sleepers,” the “Lilacs” elegy and “I Sing the Body Electric.” In 1955 these were collected in a 324-page volume which contained about one-fourth of Whitman’s total output. In reviewing this book, Angela C. J. Palandri found it generally accurate but noted that some passages were altered to make Whitman’s poetry conform to Chinese politics.²

Chu’s important pioneering effort is now being superseded by a new translation by Chao Lo-jui, an experienced translator and one of China’s foremost scholars of American literature. In 1937 Professor Chao translated “The Waste Land” by T. S. Eliot. During the late 1940s, while her husband was a visiting professor at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, she received a Chicago M.A. and Ph.D., writing her dissertation on Henry James. In 1949 she returned to Peking, perhaps the only Chinese citizen with a Ph.D. emphasizing American literature, and began

teaching comparative literature and the modern Western novel at Yenching University (which became Peking University after the Liberation). For the sesquicentennial of Longfellow's birth in 1958, Professor Chao was asked to translate *The Song of Hiawatha*; this was during the period of China's close relationship with the Soviets, who considered Longfellow a progressive American poet.

Professor Chao received the assignment of translating Whitman in 1963, and she completed some of the poems, including all of "Inscriptions," prior to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Then she found her professional work interrupted during a decade in which the universities were closed down and she, like many Chinese intellectuals, experienced a period of political tumult. In 1978, she was able to resume work on Whitman and other projects. She made a careful revision of "The Waste Land" in 1980, and translations of Henry James's *Daisy Miller* and "The Beast in the Jungle" in 1981. Since then she has again been busy with *Leaves of Grass*.

The poems are being published as they are translated and later they will be republished as one volume. To introduce her readers to Whitman, Professor Chao first translated ten poems from "Drum-Taps" which emphasize political comradeship. These were scheduled to appear in the spring of 1983 in a special poetry number of the Shanghai Translation Publishing House. Next, she prepared five short poems: "I Hear America Singing," "I Sit and Look Out," "Tears," "A Noiseless Patient Spider," and "Sparkles from the Wheel," which will be printed later in 1983 in the first issue of the new Chinese journal, *American Literature*. Since Lincoln is held in very high regard by the Chinese people, Professor Chao has also completed the four poems which are grouped together in *Leaves* under the title "Memories of President Lincoln" for the second issue of *American Literature*. Next to be published is "Song of Myself," which Professor Chao has just finished translating, and the eleven long poems that come after "Calamus," from "Salut au Monde!" to "A Song of the Rolling Earth." These are to be published as a separate book by the end of 1983. In the future Professor Chao plans to introduce gradually, but without sacrificing accuracy, poems with themes that Chinese readers will find more controversial, such as some of the poems in "Children of Adam."

In discussing her philosophy of translating, Chao Lo-jui emphasizes that she has "strong opinions." She rejects the idea of a free translation in favor of being as faithful as possible to the original. Striving for a meticulous fidelity to both Whitman's content and style, she revises repeatedly in search of a judicious blend of accuracy, fluency, and what she speaks of as "idiomatic grasp." Commenting on the relative difficulty of translating Whitman, Professor Chao says that Longfellow was "easy"; Eliot lent himself to a rather literal translation; James, especially the later James, was "very difficult," but Whitman is "impossible."³

Unlike such American writers as Twain or Jack London, Whitman is not widely known in China today, even among students of American literature. But he is considered by the political leadership to be a great progressive poet and a quintessential American. Furthermore, with the present renewal of relations between the United States and the People's Republic, Chinese educators are interested in including more readings from American literature in the schoolbooks for Chinese children. With a new translation of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman will certainly become better known by Chinese intellectuals, but it is also possible that some of his poetry may

filter down into the school textbooks. To Whitman the prospect would seem staggering: one billion new readers and lovers.

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NOTES

- 1 Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 326–327.
- 2 Angela Chih-Ying Jung Palandri, “Whitman, in Red China,” *Walt Whitman Newsletter*, 4 (September 1958), 94–97.
- 3 The author was a Fulbright Professor of American Literature at Peking University in 1982–1983, where he discussed Whitman with Chao Lo-jui.