发初覆颐，折花门前剧。

郎骑竹马来，绕床弄青梅。

同居长千里，两小无嫌猜。

十四君远回，差遣未尝开。

低头向暗壁，千唤不一回。

十五始展眉，愿同生海水。

常存抱柱信，岂上望夫台。

十六君远行，瞿塘滟滪惊。

五六月不可触，猿鸣天上哀。

门前迟行迹，一一生绿苔。

苔深不能扫，落叶秋风早。

八月蝴蝶黄，双飞西园草。

感此怀故人，坐愁红颜老。

Moved by this, my heart sat grief red face old.

早晚下三巴，预将书报家。

soon late down three Pa's in-advance letter inform home.
A Thousand Year Transmission of “The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter”

A Poetical and Cultural Analysis of the Two “Chang Gan Xing” Poems

Li Bai’s “Chang-gan Xing” and Ezra Pound’s “The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter” are the same poem written in different languages. Li Bai is the master poet of the Chinese ideogram (a written symbol for an idea or object.) His poetry creates ironies by drawing scenes in the reader’s imagination. “Chang-gan Xing” (the Chinese title of the poem) reflects Li Bai’s ideogram style. From the scenery portrayed, Li Bai not only expresses the river-merchant’s wife’s sorrow of separation from her husband, but also reflects his own social and emotional situation. Pound's work has significance not only because it builds effective communication through time and across cultures. He also develops new symbolic meaning in the process of re-creation. Pound’s translation
captures the vivid setting of the original poem, but some of the untranslatable cultural aesthetic ironies have been left behind by his translation.

The river-merchant’s wife is the speaker in this poem. She calls herself “Qie” (“I”—a humble term used by women when they speak of themselves). She speaks to “Jun” (“my lord you”, using a respectful title for her husband). We also can say the “Qie” in this poem are poets Li Bai and Ezra Pound; they use the character, the river-merchant’s wife, to speak of their humble social position.

Li Bai is one of the best ideogram poets in China. His ideogram poems have long been known as the fundamental principle for poetic composition in China (“Li Bai”). A diligent reader in his youth, Li Bai was influenced by Taoism. They believe that nature would have similar emotions to man: “Nature and man communicate with each other….All things on earth are interlinked, their spirits are influenced by each other” (Hou 483). The idealistic metaphorical way of expressing people’s feelings by reference to natural things is very common in ancient China.

The facts of Li Bai’s life come to us through a veil of contradictions and legends. He started out at age 25 to travel the country. He wandered through Yangtze River Valley, hoping to gain recognition for his talents. In 742, he was summoned to the capital of Chang’an, modern Xi’an, and was appointed to the Hanlin Academy (meaning “the writing brush forest”) by Emperor Xuanzong (“Li Bai”). Li Bai is like the river-merchant’s wife. When he receives a letter from “his lord,” he is greatly delighted and eager to serve the emperor like an ancient capable statesman. His desire to meet his lord is expressed by the river-merchant’s
wife, in the last two lines of “The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter”, he says: “I will come out to meet you, / As far as Cho-fo-Sa” (Pound 28-29). However, the Emperor Xuanzong only had him as a palace poet to write trivial lyrics while the emperor and Yang Guifei, his favorite imperial concubine, were feasting. Unwilling to serve such a meaningless function, Li Bai left the capital in less than two years. Li Bai did not have the power to change his situation. He was waiting…waiting, like the river-merchant’s wife, waiting for a lord, who appreciates his intelligence. He expressed himself in writing, and drowned his sorrows in wine. In China, we all call his book “A hundred poems per gallon of liquor.”

Ezra Pound also had a period of voluntary exile in his life. Susan Schweik has pointed out that, “Pound, in choosing a third nation, the emblematically foreign China, could write poems sympathetic to the values and experiences of those ‘left behind’ without betraying the ‘Frontier guard” (Schweik). Ezra Pound was born in Hailey, Idaho, in 1885. Pound voluntary exiled himself in Europe. In 1907, he became interested in Japanese and Chinese poetry. Around this time Pound founded a poetic movement called Imagism, which linked techniques derived from the Symbolist movement and Oriental poetry (“Ezra Pound”).

“The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter” was published in 1915 in Ezra Pound's third collection of poetry, Cathay: Translations, which contains versions of Chinese poems composed from the sixteen notebooks of Ernest Fenollosa, a scholar of Chinese literature (“Ezra Pound”). Ezra Pound’s studies of the Fenollosa’s manuscripts versions of Chinese poem translations led to his significant contributions to poetry. He derived the Imagism technique from classical Chinese and Japanese poetry, which follows traditional rhyme and
meter in order. He also promulgated a movement in poetry by stressing clarity, precision, and economy of language (“Ezra Pound”). In Pound's words, one must...compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome” (“Ezra Pound”).

Pound sent “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter” to his friend, Gaudier-Brzeska, an artist who died in the trench warfare of World War I. Gaudier-Brzeska wrote back saying it, “...depicts our situation in a wonderful way” (Schweik) because they were in the position of “left behind” poets. In the twentieth-century war age, there were no suitable positions for poets, for idealists. Pound was a “left behind” poet; he hardly found a position in his society to employ his intelligence. He needed the river-merchant’s wife’s sorrowful story to carry out his elegiac grief caused by the war. The waiting woman’s vivid expressions allow Pound to express his feelings outside of the social convention.

Li Bai and Ezra Pound send “A letter” to speak to “my lord you” (Pound 12), who in their higher social hierarchy, would listen to their sorrows and appreciate their intelligence. The tone, as “I” speak to “you”, invites the reader to join the scenes and feel the sorrow no matter if he is far away or how much later. It is sent out seeking conversation, which makes the wife’s sorrow speak to “you”, the lord then, the reader now.

“Many critics have argued that the core of Pound’s criticism is his demand for precise visualization rather than suggestiveness” (Yip 35). Ezra Pound broke through the word-by-word text translation and is considered the poet most responsible for promoting a modernist aesthetic in poetry (“Ezra Pound”). The American critic and poet, T.S. Eliot, has called Pound “The inventor of Chinese poetry...through his translation we really at last get
the original” (Yip 3). In “The River-Merchants Wife: A Letter” Ezra Pound creates a visual communication channel. The river-merchant’s wife speaks out of vivid motion by drawing her environment, drawing her memory, and drawing her desire.

Ezra Pound illustrates a river-merchants wife’s sorrow by drawing three scenes in the poem: scenes in memory (Lines 1-14); scenes in imagination (lines 15-18) and scenes in front of the speaker (lines 19-25). In the second part of the last stanza (lines 25-29), Pound expresses the key mood by questions to “you”, asking for your response. Its hurts the reader’s lonely heart. Pound’s modern English poem techniques save Li Bai’s original dramatic vision and some of the symbolic details. However, the literal allusions from Chinese culture are lost in Pound’s translation.

The first three stanzas arrange some of the details to illustrate the images in the river-merchant’s wife’s memory of their love story. “The artist seeks out the luminous detail and presents it. He does not comment. The watchword for the entire spirit of Romance is, no doubt, vivid presentation” (Yip 35).

In Ezra Pound’s “The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter”, the first stanza each line creates a detail to illustrate the central image of the little girl and her future husband playing together: “While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead” (Line 1). Her hairstyle tells that she was very young when she met her husband, because in old China the mark of an adult woman in the ancient culture was elaborate arrangements of uncut long hair. “You came by on bamboo stilts” (Line 3) tells us that her husband also is the same age. The actions like “pulling flowers” and “playing horse” emphasize the natural, contented activity of children.
Pound makes this young couple seem joyful by using the word-“play” in line 2, 3 and 4. “Played flowers... playing horse... playing with blue plums” (Lines 2-4). The simple verb-play fills the scenes with childlike innocence. The relationship between the little girl and little boy is pure, “without dislike or suspicion” (Line 6).

In the second stanza, she talks about the memory of her first year marriage. “At fourteen I married my lord you” (Line 7). She calls her husband “my lord you”. On one hand, the title shows that she carefully follows the custom by calling her husband a respectful title. On the other hand, she is very unconfident about her wifely status in a new adult world. That is why she says:

“I never laughed, being bashful.

Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.

Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back” (Lines 8-10).

The river-merchant’s wife “stops scowling” in the third stanza. She is not too bashful any more to speak out about her happiness. “I desired my dust to be mingled with yours...Forever and forever and forever” (Lines 12 13). The triple repetition in line 13 of “forever”(Line 3), this is a modern English technique to express how strong her love is. In this stanza, the story in her memory is as beautiful as a fairy tale. Her love for him is so deep now, she loves him forever, and even death cannot separate them.

The river-merchant’s wife’s image of separation is developed in the fourth stanza. Even “You went in to far Ku-to-en” (Line 16), Even “you have been gone for five month” (Line 17), I am with you. I can see “the river of swirling eddies” (Line 16); I can hear “the monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead” (Line 17). The river-merchant’s wife follows her husband in
her mind; they are separate but she cannot stop missing him. The use of the natural image of
the sounds of the monkeys reflects the sound of her sorrow. Ironically, the sounds that
monkeys make are generally interpreted as chirping, happy sounds; the wife's sorrow is so
great that she can only hear the monkeys' noise as “sorrowful”(Line 18).

The final stanza contains two parts. The first part, from line 19 to line 25, illustrates how
the river-merchant's absence changes the vision of their house and his wife. The word
“dragged” (Line 19) in line 19 indicates that he does not want separation. The moss indicates
that they are separate for long time. The moss also illustrates the idea that the sorrow the wife
has experienced is “too deep to clear … away (Line 21)!” She cannot stop missing her
husband, as she cannot clear the moss away, because it is growing in her heart. She stands at
the same front gate where she used to pull flowers; now she is watching:

“The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.

The paired butterflies are already yellow with August

Over the grass in the West garden ;”( Lines 22-24).

The sadness of the river-merchant's wife is reflected back to her by comparing different
views in spring and autumn. It is like the wife’s life: she tasted the love flower when she was
young; now she feels the hurt of separation in her own in lonely autumn.

In the second part of this final stanza, the river-merchant's wife reaches out from her
lonely world of sorrow to her husband in a direct question: Please let me know when and by
what route you are returning, so I can walk several hundred miles to meet you. “As far as
Cho-fu-Sa” (Line 29). Cho-fu-Sa must be the farthest place she can name; from here, we not only feel her strong love, but also she speaks out to readers. The strong love and the sorrow separation creates tells us that she would go out looking for her husband no matter how far away is he.

Li Bai’s “Chang-gan Xing” tells the same story of the river-merchant and his wife, but instead of Pound’s English poem techniques, Li Bai refers to many untranslatable literary allusions and ancient Chinese philosophy behind the poem. This rich cultural background is another kind of implied scene Li Bai draws in this poem.

Dong Zhongshu, a scholar of the Han Dynasty (206B.C.-220A.D.), worked out a motif of interaction between tian(nature) and ren(people). He pointed out that the four seasons are related to people’s feelings: “people have joy, anger, sadness, and happiness, as has spring, summer, autumn, and winter” (Hou 483). In Li Bai’s “Chang-gan Xing”. The two little people meet in the spring and play with flowers and blue (green) plums. The climax of their story happens in the summer when the Yang Zi river has “The impassable rapids” (Chang-gan Xing 22) in May. The river-merchant’s wife expresses her sorrow in fall when “the leaves fall early this autumn, in wind” (Line 22).

The “blue plums” and “bamboo stilts” actually, are “green Plums” and “Bamboo Horse” in Li Bai’s poem. The immature plum is a symbol of little girl, the “Bamboo horse” is a symbol of a little boy. This simple language expression, “green plum” and “bamboo horse,” are symbolic of natural couples who grow up together. These images run-through a thousand years of Chinese history as a standard expression to describe young couples.
The lines 13 and 14 in Pound’s “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter” say, “I desired my dust to be mingled with yours. / Forever and forever and forever. Why should I climb the look out?” (13-14). An ancient story of two lovers and a pillar is embedded in the original Chinese poem but lost in the translation. In the original poem, Li Bai says, “If you have the faith of Wei sheng, Why am I afraid to climb up the waiting tower?” (Lines 15 16)

Wei-sheng is a character from Shi Jing-The Book of Songs (1027-771 BC). He had a date with a girl at a pillar under the bridge. The girl did not show up. The flood came, and he died holding tight to the pillar. The waiting tower is wait–for-husband tower or rock, which alludes to a story of a woman waiting for the return of her husband on a hill. One vision has it that she was turned into a rock while waiting (Yip 192). Without knowing this traditional story, we can’t understand the full meaning of the poem.

Li Bai instead says, “You went into far Ku-to-en, by the river of swirling eddies” (Line 15) as Ezra Pound does. He talks about the yan-yue rocks, at qu-tang town, which was a famous area of “swirling eddies” in the Yangtze Valley. “It is because certain Chinese poets have been content to set forth their matter without realizing and without comment that one labors to make a translation” (Ezra Pound). Li Bai describes the dangerous Yan Yu Dui, where no one can get close in May. The river-merchant is there. The wife is worried about him, so she can hear “the monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead” (Line 17). Li Bai’s idealism causes the wife to go thousands of miles away (in her imagination), to see her husband is suffering, to hear the sorrowful noise.
In Ezra Pound’s last stanza of “The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter”, He saves the visual scene of Li Bai’s original by emphasizing visual details. “The leaves falling in wind / the paired butterflies yellow with august.” The river-merchant's wife says “They hurt me” (Pound 25). This emotion refers to all the images in this stanza; it points out her whole mood of sadness and loss.

“However, in “Chang-gan Xing” Li Bai emphasizes the leaves falling early, which is consistent with a later line “I grow older” (Line 25) to express how the sorrow of the separation in the wife’s life affects her as she grows older early. “The paired butterflies” are from one of the most popular Chinese folk stories. A pair of lovers finds happiness to be reborn as a pair of butterflies after their death. In ancient China, people used the Lunar Calendar in which “August” is another way to say autumn. The paired butterflies turn yellow together in autumn. “West” in Chinese Buddhist culture represents the Elysian Fields after death. The butterfly lovers go to the end of their life together. That is the best blessedness in Chinese tradition. That is why when the wife sees this Autumn view in front her, she feels “They hurt me”( Line 25) in Li Bai’s version.

These two poems, vividly present a one-character play, which is played by a river-merchant’s wife. Li Bai received her “letter”. Through his poem, he makes a bottle of Chinese wine, uses a traditional recipe, with a self-created flavor, decorated by his imagination, and processed by a thousand years of Chinese history. I appreciate this process as I taste a drop of Li Bai’s wine. In addition, we must thank Pound who introduces the river-merchant’s wife’s “letter” to the modern world. Pound retains visual details of Li Bai’s
poem. He also personalizes characters (I, You) to communicate with readers. We can breathe with her story. We can see the color of the flowers, hear the monkeys’ sorrowful sound, and share the wife’s tears. As Pound’s letter to Williams of October 21, 1908, makes this statement of his ideal:

“To paint the thing as I see it.

Beauty.

Freedom from didacticism…” (Yip 35).
This article provides an overview of the ideas of nature which are embedded in the traditional Chinese philosophy. This article explains the motif of interaction between nature and man, that the four seasons are related to people’s feelings.

This is an article about the Chinese poet, Li Bai. It introduces Li Bai as the finest poet of the Tang dynasty. He has attracted the best translators, and influenced several generations of American poets, from Ezra Pound to James Wright.


This book theoretically analyzes Ezra pound’s *Cathy*. It explores the cultural background of Ezra Pond’s idealism and the literal allusions from Chinese culture that are lost in Pound’s translation.
The Song of Ch’ang-gan

1. Qie hair barely covered my forehead.

2. Plucking flowers, on the side of front gate

3. You are riding on a bamboo-horse toward me.

4. Tease around with green plums.

5. We were living in capital Ch’ang-gan.

6. Pure little couple, without dislike, nor suspicion.

7. At Fourteen,

8. jun, I became your wife.

9. I seldom laughed, being bashful.

10. I lower my head toward the dark wall.

11. Jun, Called out,

12. A thousand times, I am too bashful to join you.

13. At fifteen I start evolve my eyebrows

14. We wish to stay together till dust, till ash.

15. If you have the faith of Wei sheng,

16. Why am I afraid to climb up the waiting tower?

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1 This is my literal translation of the Chinese poem.
2 Chang’gan the capital of Tang Dynasty (618-907), modern Xian. Chang Gan Xing, is an kind of song score for woman to sing their sad love stories.
3 Qie, “I”-a humble term used by women when speaking of themselves).
4 Bamboo-horse & green plum symbolize the ungroup lovers, naturally couple born together.
5 Bamboo-horse & green plum symbolize the ungroup lovers, naturally couple born together.
6 “Jun”-“my lord you”, a respectful title call her husband.
7 Wei-sheng had a date with a girl at a pillar under the bridge. The girl did not show up. The flood come, he died holding tight to the pillar.(from Shi Jing-The Book of Songs,(1027-771 BC)
8 The waiting tower is wait-for-husband tower or rock which alludes to a story of a women waiting for the return of her husband on a hill. One vision has it that she was turned into a rock while waiting.
17. At sixteen you went on your long journey
18. Crossing the yan-yue rocks,
19. to qu-tang town
20. By the impassable rapids,
21. you can’t in shore for five months,
22. I heard monkeys sing the dead song to heaven.

23. your footprints, by the gate,
25. Moss are too deep to sweep away
26. Falling leaves, autumn winds are blowing early.
27. In the mid-autumn, A pair of old yellow butterflies
28. They fly together over the grass, to the west Garden, to the end of their life.
29. These smite my heart.
30. I have waiting in worrying too long, my youth, my beauty passed away.
31. When you would come down from the San Ba town?
32. Please let me know ahead of time.
33. I will welcome you, no matter how far...
34. Even all the way to Long Wind Sand town.

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9 the yan-yue rocks, at qu-tang town and San-ba town are on Yangtze Valley.