

Chen Liang Interviews Vernon Frazer in Nanjing – June, 2004

Question: Do you think Pound has invented a new form of poems, from which the Beat Generation have benefited a lot?

Answer: Pound is a major modern poet and was influential on the Beat Generation poets. I have read some poetry of Pound. We also see his information second-hand through the poets that are influenced by him. Pound's style is quite complex, mixed with the characteristics of several groups. For example, Black Mountain group. In his Cantos, Pound took a universal approach and tried to encompass all of the history with mythology and Chinese ideograms, although he hasn't used them correctly. Charles Olson, on the other hand, spent a lot of time reading Pound after WWII. In his poems, he uses the particular to try to achieve the universal. As for me, my Pound influence comes from Charles Olson. When I was 16 years old, I read a book called *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, which is considered a classic which included many post World War II poets, for example, the Beat poets, the Black Mountain poets, the San Francisco poets, even the New York School which later evolved into language poetry. The first poet in the book was Charles Olson. So, he was my first impression of what Beat Poetry was. He really has some contact with the Beats. The New York school poets had a relationship with the Beat poets. This was in the early sixties. So, the influence of Pound comes to me through Charles Olson.

Question: With the movement of feminism, the women poets in the Beat and Post-Beat poets also have aired their strong voice of independence and are, somehow, quite bold in expressing their emotions. I am quite impressed by Cheryl Townsend. What do you think of her way of revealing the sexual experience in her poems?

Answer: After the impact of Lady Chatterley's Lover and Ulysses, in the United States, the issue has somehow been regarded as acceptable. That's not to say everyone will read the poetry like that. It's just our right to express ourselves that way. In my anthology, if I had the time, I would have had some of the gay or lesbian poets selected into it.

Question: What's the influence of Ginsberg on the post-beat poets?

Answer: Ginsberg was a mentor to a number of them. He was generous to the younger writers. I think he even had fun with some of them. There are hundreds of post-beat poets. The Beats were regionally a fairly small group. His influence is not only limited within the poets, but touches my generation, several generations. The people I can say the Post-Beat range in age from 65 to 25 or 28, so there is more than one generation among them. We go back to seek inspiration through poetry and music. I began my recording in 1988 and the next year Ginsberg began his record called *The Line for Real*. We used different musicians. The musicians were all contemporary to each other and in some cases played together. Sometimes, Ginsberg was doing a more changeable job.

Question: what's the most obvious difference between the Post-Beat poets and beat poets, according to you?

Answer: The Post-Beats just carry on the Beat tradition and they try to carry it further. We are working in the areas the Beat Poets have developed. For example, since 1999, I have been

adopting elements of working on the Language Poetry and even Visual Poetry into my work. Of Charles Olson's idea of projected verse, I took that step further. He used the typewriter to shape the page. Now the computer screen is the page, and I can change its size, create complex visual images by using columns, etc, and there is an element of music in my work. One of the continuing threads from Beat poetry and lots of Beat literature to a lot of Post-Beat poets is jazz. The Post-Beats are using free jazz. Jack Kerouac, for example, used to listen to jazz at Minton's and at Monroe's Uptown House in Harlem when he was a college student. The jazz influenced him as much as literature did. The music was mainly "bop", which was a revolutionary music at the time.. Yet, the music we Post-Beat poets are using are of quite different forms. " Bop" and jazz are based on the traditional American standard tone and the blues structure. The new generation of musicians began to get away from that structure and create structures of their own. John Coltrane was particular radical. By the time he died, he was playing an almost religious music. He studied eastern philosophy, which was reflected in his music. He would play sounds which were during the time before him considered wrong. He would screech, he would howl, he could play two or three notes at once with saxophone. A lot of us are influenced by this. It comes out in my more recent work of a series of poems, where I use the computer against using the page, and there is a musical influence as well. I use the page and I use the table device and set the columns. I can set several columns which you can read either separately or together as if you hear several instruments playing together. You can enjoy the solo and also you can enjoy the multi note effect.

Question: The main contribution of Post-Beat poets is to carry the visual image quite further. As for the Language Poetry and Concrete Poetry, do you think they will become the main trend for the future development of Post-Beat poems?

Answer: Not entirely. I am working in one area. Others are working in different areas.

Question: Do you think the accompanying of music will affect the expression of poetry?

Answer: I have been influenced by Jack Kerouac's Spontaneous Bop Prosody. It first came out when I started writing the Language Poetry. He was influenced by Jazz. Listening to him reciting with American jazz, you can how the rhythm of his language match with the rhythm of music. I just take a step further. Of the poets I have selected in the post-beat anthology, a number of them do recite with jazz accompaniment. Before I started with the Language Poetry, I had a Poetry Band. Sometimes, during writing, when I found myself blocked, I would play the music to figure out where the poem was going to go. So, there is a lot of interrelationship between the music and the poem.

Question: As an original poetry writer, you always seem to complain that the writers of pure literature are always marginalized by the society. How do you cope with that, then?

Answer: The American publishing industry is very difficult to break into. It's highly commercialized. Before, say, 1973, publishers were willing to experiment with the avant garde poetry and fiction. When I was young, American publishers would publish innovative writers because they thought it was culturally important. When corporations started to take over, they started to pay attention to the returning of large profit. And other people had to go to small presses. I myself had published a work through a small

publishing press. I couldn't make any money out of it. If we cannot get our books published through conventional means, we begin to get our works published online. In the last three or four years, the influence of my work is growing tremendously. I'm not a celebrity or a superstar. But sometimes people write to me to tell me how much they admire my work. I even have a hard time to write to keep up with the requests I receive. In the age of Beats, they could publish literary magazines in an issue of a thousand copies and you could find them in the bookstores. Now, in most bookstores, you cannot find little literary magazines. When the computers came out, the micro press developed. The micro press is small edition of maybe one hundred copies. Because the computer makes publishing affordable. You don't have to pay for the typing. I type my work.

Question: What's your comment on the modern Chinese poems?

Answer: I think they have done good work and they are interesting people. One of the similarities between the Chinese poets and the Post-beat poets is that both sides are more sexually open. Sometimes they talk about drinking and other habits that the Post-Beats are known for. I have little knowledge about the history of Chinese poetry, but I can see that they are equally good compared with the American poets, as far as the quality of their work is concerned.

Question: Do you plan to write fiction afterwards?

Answer: I haven't written fiction in a couple of years. The poetry is pretty very much consuming my time. I think I will go back on my fiction if I had the time. My fiction is quite different from my poetry. My idea is to use the combination of the avant garde elements and the popular elements. So I use a lot of devices like the television screen play, then I shift to conventional narrative, then I shift to newspaper articles. I have spent most of my time writing without thinking whether it can be published.