

[연구논문]

Undoing Discrimination with Discretion:
Marianne Moore's Use of East Asian Motif in
"Nine Nectarines"

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Do you want to improve the world?

Do not think it can be done

— Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching*.

This essay discovers a unique use of East Asian motif in Marianne Moore's poetry in the nineteen thirties, namely one poem titled "Nine Nectarines." East Asian themes, motifs, and forms, were often taken up by many of her contemporary poets in the US, as they were in Britain, yet Moore's use of one East Asian motif, a Chinese porcelain plate, in "Nine Nectarines" is unique in many senses. First, it appears there as a part of the American material culture. Secondly, it challenges in the poem ideas on various contemporary issues such as eugenics, racism, and American commercialism. Finally, even though the art of the Chinese porcelain piece is highly praised, the poem

does not fall into the fallacy of idealizing a race. This essay shows how the poem almost foretells that the use of East Asian motifs in US poetry would take a "naturalizing" or "nativizing" direction from the latter half of the last century.

Before dealing with Marianne Moore's poetry, I must vindicate my choice of the term, "East Asia", over national demarcations such as Japan or China, as well as over the geographically-Eurocentric and culturally-exotic "Far East." Since Korea was largely absent in US or European cultural scenes at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, a Korean student of cultural exchanges is probably fated to have a predilection for a broader term over national identities. However, I have another reason to opt for the global term. It can help provide a perspective to discuss and unravel the complicated process of East Asian influence in modern American poetry. Recent studies have identified the origins of specific influence in literature, e.g. that of Ezra Pound's *Cathay*, using in-depth precision on newfound evidences. Certainly, rigorous scholarship may not and should not allow unheeding eyes on the origins of influences. Yet, as history warns us, too much discrimination will achieve less insight than when balanced with synthesis. East Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Korea share much of their history, culture, and tradition, and most writers in the US had shared interest in more than one of them-China and Japan, most often. Also, the journey of the East Asian resources to the US was often complicated, having one or another country as the intermediary. Similarly, their circulation in the new land was very intricate too, with poets exchanging information and influence with each other. For these complexities, the broader regional term, East Asia, rather than specific country names,

can help afford a space for contributions to be made that may find new aspects of cultural relationships between the US and the region.

Again before dealing with Marianne Moore's poetry, what should be reminded is the fact that the frequent use of the East Asian objects by the US poets at the turn of the last two centuries was not "out of blue" at all. After a little longer than a generation since the opening of Japan in 1856, a fair amount of cultural, material, and human contact with East Asia had already been amassed in the US.¹⁾ Material goods such as artworks and craftworks from Japan and China were widely and fervently consumed throughout the continent; books were written and translations were undertaken; exhibitions of East Asian art were often shown; human contact was not absent either, with increasing numbers of visitors and immigrants from the area. East Asian goods were found in ordinary households, and friends and relatives were coming from visits in the area. By the time when young poets began their careers early in the twentieth century, they were already feeling quite comfortable with East Asian materials in the neighborhood and were also acquainted with East Asian aesthetics. Ezra Pound, for example, grew up near Philadelphia in a house where a Ming vase stood in the parlor,²⁾ and Amy Lowell's homestead was filled with East Asian art pieces her elder brother

1) For a brief look at visual images of East Asian influences late in nineteenth century and early in twentieth century, see the webpage for *Petals on a Wet Black Bow: American Modernist Writers and the Orient*, a Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library exhibition at Yale University, Oct 18-Dec 20, 1996, organized by Patricia C. Willis, <http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/orient/intro.html> (Retrieved on May 27, 2008).

2) James J. Wilhelm, *The American Root of Ezra Pound* (New York: Garland, 1985), 68; qtd. Zhaoming Qian, *The modernist response to Chinese art: Pound, Moore, Stevens* (Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 4.

Percival sent. Therefore, it should be seen rather natural that while growing up many of these young poets picked up many East Asian themes, motifs, and forms to use in their poetry.

Young poets were often not simply pursuing a sheer exotic taste either. When they included East Asian themes and motifs in their poetry, they did it to show their grievances at and responses to various contemporary issues. When Ezra Pound published his translation of Chinese poems from Ernst Fenollosa's manuscript, *Cathay*, in 1915, he was not advertising an exotic aesthetic but undertaking an indirect response to the War.³⁾ Many of the poems in the collection were songs by soldiers, farmers, merchants, and their wives resenting the legacy of wars. When "Kung / walked" in the magnificence of an opening spondee into the English *Cantos* later in 1930,⁴⁾ Confucius and his disciples were coming at Ezra Pound's behest to be a clear contrast with the filthy American or European reality and thus to scandalize it. For the same effect it was that the Chinese history in cantos LII-LIX had to be introduced after Pound's pounding against usury in the US and Europe. Similarly, Amy Lowell borrowed a butterfly image and a short verse form from the Japanese haiku in her "Peace"⁵⁾ published in *Pictures of the Floating World* in

3) It is Hugh Kenner who calls the poems "among the most durable of all poetic responses to the World War I." He introduces a letter from Henry Gaudier appreciating the poems with his comrades in trench. See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1971), 202-203.

4) Ezra Pound, "Canto XIII", *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Direction, 1996), 58.

5) Amy Lowell's "Peace" shows a butterfly image borrowed from "On a Temple Bell," a Japanese haiku by Buson, Earl Miner, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 114.

1919, not just to experiment on the Japanese image or the Japanese verse form in English but also to take a snapshot picture of her war-inflicted world. Sheer exotic taste was even lightly mocked at as we see Wallace Stevens mentioning "old Chinese / sat titivating by their mountain pools / Or in the Yangtze studied out their beards" and "Utamaro's beauty" in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle."

To say that those poets tried to relate East Asian themes and motifs to their reality is, however, not to say that the themes and motifs in their poems are not exotic. Those themes and motifs are exotic, to be true, giving a touch of foreignness in the poems to capture readers' eyes at once. Yet, the more important is the corollary that they have to remain exotic for the poetic effect to stay. In other words, their poetic relevance comes from their foreignness. Applied in the American context, the old-time Chinese soldiers, a Japanese butterfly image, and Confucius and his political philosophy create a new perspective to see American issues in a fresher light. Therefore, it is their foreignness that affords the new perspective, and they have to stay foreign, stay apart from the American context, for the poetic effect to last. They should not become a part of the American context because, if they did, they might lose the freshening or "estranging" effect. In order to have the East Asian and the American stay separate, a process of essentializing the race is not infrequently involved: to find one or another set of aspects as definitive of the racial characters. Poets often turned to the East Asian past and idealized the East Asia in its past radiance: the great Chinese civilization, the aesthetic Japanese, etc.

While this is far from saying they should have done this or they shouldn't have done that, I find in Marianne Moore's "Nine

Nectarines" one East Asian motif already belonging in the American scene and getting further woven into it with contemporary issues. Marianne Moore, although her poetry was often found under East Asian influence by many of her contemporary critics and poets and later ones,⁶⁾ was not a poet who indulged in Asian motifs in her career. Most of her East Asian motifs appeared only in the late 1920s to the early 1930s (when, arguably, most of her best poems were written), her East Asian motifs in 1910s 20s were used, like in many other poets, to locally produce the effect of exotic newness. She began to use more and more of East Asian motifs from late in the 1920s, possibly inspired in broad reading and reviewing activity in her the *Dial* years (1920-1925).⁷⁾ Finally, one East Asian artifice became the main image in her 1934 poem "Nine Nectarines." The poem was first published named as "Nine Nectarines and other Porcelains" in *Poetry* in November 1934 with "The Buffalo" under a serial title of "Imperious Ox, Imperial Dish." One year later, it was revised and renamed as "Nine Nectarines," and was included in *The Selected Poems* of 1935, edited by T. S. Eliot, without the serial name.⁸⁾ The

6) As the earliest, John Gould Fletcher, one of her contemporary poets, recommended Marianne Moore, together with William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, as a poet influenced by Chinese poetry in his 1942 memoir. He curiously picked up her 1917 poem, "The Monkeys," as representative, with two poems from the other two poets. Yet, what he saw in them as Chinese is apparently too general to prove: "The thing that all these poets have in common with the Chinese, is neither a precise similarity in subject matter, nor a direct imitation of form: it is rather a spirit of intense observation, of patient surrender to truth, of complete identification with the object." John Gould Fletcher, "The Orient and Contemporary Poetry," Arthur B. Christy ed, *The Asian Legacy in American Life* (New York: John Day, 1945), 172.

7) One review entry in 1928 on *Guide-Posts to Chinese Painting* by Louise Wallace Hackney (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1927) is introduced in Qian, *Modernist Response*, 168.

titular porcelain plate—as it will soon turn out in the poem—has a three-fold Chineseness. The piece itself is from China; the nectarine is of Chinese origin; and porcelain tableware in general has Chineseness in English—they are *chinas*. Nevertheless, it belongs in American scene as well, just as Chinese art and craft pieces are circulated in the US market, nectarine trees are growing in the American soil, and chinas are used at any US households. In the poem, furthermore, the Chinese porcelain piece is set in conversation with American contemporary issues such as eugenics, racism, and American commercialism and passes through ordeals from those issues.

The poem begins in an ordinary scene observing the titular nectarines' arrangement on a tree. However, as the arrangement is described, it gently yet sternly knocks at the issue of eugenics.

Arranged by two's as peaches are,
at intervals that all may live—

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- 8) Why she first paired "The Buffalo" and "Nine Nectarines and other Porcelains" is not clear yet. She was asked to send a pair of poems by the editor. "The Buffalo" also shows an Asian—but not exactly East Asian—object, the Indian water buffalo, as its main subject, yet how they correspond to each other is not very obvious. Also, even though the two poems were written in the same period and published together, the processes of writing were separate and somewhat different: while "The Buffalo" was composed from her earlier observations from 1920, "Nine Nectarines" was arisen from her recent observations in 1930s. Focused on the use of East Asian motifs, this essay acknowledges the difference and separate "The Buffalo" from the discussions hereafter. For a detailed discussion on the two poems' association, see Robin G. Schultz, "Marianne Moore's "Imperious Ox, Imperial Dish" and the Poetry of the Natural World", *Twentieth Century Literature* 44.1 (Spring 1994): 1–32. For the circumstances surrounding the two poems, see Lawrence Stapleton, *Marianne Moore: The Poet's Advance*, Princeton (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 75–77.

eight and a single one, on twigs that
 grew the year before—they look like
 a derivative;
 although not uncommonly
 the opposite is seen—
 nine peaches on a nectarine.

Eugenics, the pseudo-scientific belief in the possibility of improvement of species—including human one, as well as animal and plant ones—by artificial means such as selective breeding, is touched on here. First of all, the nectarines are growing on a peach tree (“Are they engrafted?” readers may question), in an arrangement “that all may live” (“Were they pruned in an orchard?” readers may question again), and they are said to seem a “derivative” of peach (“Aren’t nectarines truly a garden variation of the peach?” readers may conclude, remembering the European folk-genealogy of nectarine as a garden variation). All these associations are suggested, however, only to be disbelieved soon in the fifth to eight lines: “although not uncommonly / the opposite is seen— / nine peaches on a nectarine.” In other words, the nectarine fruits on a peach tree are not engrafted but natural; nor are they a *derivative* but so close a *cousin* of peach that mutations between the peach and the nectarine are often found on either tree. Therefore, the fruits are not necessarily growing in a garden, and the belief in artificial improvement of species is derided in rhyming “derivative” with “live,” initiating the binary opposition of “artificial cultivation” versus “natural growth” later to be dealt with.

Nectarine and peach are indeed not randomly picked topics but carefully chosen ones, for the debate concerning the origins of peach

and nectarine is a well-known one in the field of eugenics. The debate was actually discussed in Charles Darwin's *Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication* published in 1868, which Marianne Moore, the former biology major at Bryn Mawr and a life-long lover of animals in all orders, avidly read and copied passages from in her reading journal.⁹⁾ Nectarine was formerly thought of as a garden variation of peach in European tradition, and Darwin made an inquiry in the folk-belief, found it groundless, and introduced in his book numerous instances of genetic mutations between the two trees.¹⁰⁾ In the light of the Darwinian allusion, the belief in artificial improvement is discredited and the hierarchy of the original and the derivative is subtly doubted.

In the following part of the poem, what is under observation is surprisingly revealed as not real nectarines but a depiction of them in an art piece from *China*, and the racism issue is involved in the poem during the while.

9) According to David Kadlec, copies from Charles Darwin's *Variation* appeared in Marianne Moore's reading journal from 1919. David Kadlec, "Marianne Moore, Immigration, and Eugenics," *Modernism/Modernity* 1,2 (1994): 27-28.

10) Darwin reports "[w]e have excellent evidence of the peach-stones producing nectarine-trees, and of nectarine-stones producing peach-trees,—of the same tree bearing peaches and nectarines,—of peach-trees suddenly producing by bud-variation nectarines (such nectarines reproducing nectarines by seed), as well as fruit in part nectarine and in part peach,—and lastly on one nectarine-tree bearing half-and-half fruit, and subsequently true peaches. As the peach came into existence before the nectarine, it might have been expected from the law of reversion that nectarines would give birth by bud-variation or by seed to peaches, oftener than peaches to nectarines; but this is by no means the case," (*Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication*, v.2 (New York: Orange Judd, 1868), 411: qtd. Schultz, "Imperious Ox, Imperial Dish," 19).

Fuzzless through slender crescent leaves
 of green or blue or
 both, in the Chinese style,

In years of the anti-Asian hysteria fomented by the "Yellow Peril" propagandists such as Lothrop Stoddard and Madison Grant,¹¹⁾ identifying a beautiful piece of art as "Chinese" should have sounded as nothing casual but *piqued*. Moore was working on the poem in 1933,¹²⁾ the year when Adolf Hitler took the rein of Germany. While witnessing the rise of the Nazism and other branches of radical racism in parts of Europe and in Japan, America in the 1930s was also racially highly controversial with its own legacy of slavery and an almost epidemical variety of racist theories propounding public ears. She had actually toned down the poem's anti-Nazi vehemence in this second version by deleting the "jack-boots" part in the first version, but not sacrificing its anti-racist stance. The issue of racism was closely related with that of eugenics introduced above, for racist theorists from the end of the nineteenth century in Europe or in the US had often mobilized pseudo-Darwinian evolutionary theories and eugenic ideas at their service. According to racist theorists, human races elsewhere but in Europe were genetically flawed, or less "fit" for survival, or evolutionarily backwarded, or historically belated,

11) Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* was published in 1920; Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* in 1916. Earlier versions of "Yellow Peril" theory had influenced the setting up of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. For a discussion of "Yellow Peril" discourse in the 1920s and 1930s in the US, see David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

12) Moore mentioned her nectarine poem in a letter to her brother in 1933. Stapleton, *The Poet's Advance*, 77.

etc., and were inferior to the European race by nature.

As a matter of fact, the observer is not even looking at a *real* Chinese art piece but a *printed* reproduction of it, because lines 13-17 say the colors are “by the uninquiring brush / of mercantile bookbinding.”

... the four

pairs' half-moon leaf-mosaic turns
out to the sun the sprinkled blush
of puce-American-Beauty pink
applied to bees-wax gray by the
uninquiring brush
of mercantile bookbinding.

Most critics suppose the poetic situation as an observer looking at a Chinese artwork and do not pay due attention to the word “bookbinding.” In a recent article on the poem, Victoria Bazin actually introduces one entry from the poet’s mother Mary Warner Moore’s notebook as a credible source, where the mother describes a Chinese plate in a window display of an automobile company.¹³⁾ Details in the entry look very close to the poem’s, and highly plausible is the surmise that Marianne Moore, living with her mother in close relationship, was inspired by her mother’s observation. Yet, as we know with John Keats’s “Ode to a Grecian Urn”—which Moore also knew and possibly had in her mind while writing “Nine Nectarines”—, a poet writing a poem on art does not necessarily have to stay faithful to one specific piece of art. The usual guess might seem

13) Victoria Bazin, “Just Looking at the Everyday’: Marianne Moore’s Exotic Modernism,” *Modernist Cultures* 1,2 (2006): 66.

better grounded in the first version of the poem, for the title then was "Nine Nectarines and other Porcelains." Should the title stand, it logically follows that the "Nine Nectarines" in the title must be one porcelain piece. Nevertheless, a printed reproduction can replace the real piece without causing damage to the logic, for the observer may not be looking at all "Other Porcelains" from Britain, France, etc. at the same time—unless she or he were in a pottery museum or a porcelain shop. The observer is probably looking at a picture book or a magazine on art.

Thus woven newly into the poem with the Chinese piece, real or printed, is the issue of American mercantilism, or commercialism. The picture should probably have appeared in a commercial or an article to promote the consumption of Oriental art in an issue of a magazine or even in a picture book for the same purpose such as the *Illustrated London News*.¹⁴⁾ While the vulgarity, banality, and "mercilessness"—as phonetically suggested in "mercantile"—of the "uninquiring" mercantilist mind is hinted at from the forcefully hyphenated American compounds of "puce-American-Beauty" and "bees-wax", and therefore is identified as American, the contrasting subtlety and carefulness in art is identified as Chinese. And just like nine nectarines are in the piece by Chinese artist, the arrangement of them in the piece is, in turn, so delicately and carefully rendered by

14) Bazin reports Moore often looked up to the *Illustrated London News* for articles on Chinese art by Frank Davis, one of which she cited in her note for "Nine Nectarines." Bazin also introduces typical page arrangement in *The Illustrated London News*, and the effect of it. The last pages of issues featured "A Page for Collectors" by Frank Davis, an article about ancient Chinese Culture, with various ads, and frequently found among them were those for "The Finest Chinese Porcelain" showing photos and descriptions. See *Ibid.*, 61–63.

the poet, Marianne Moore, who was earlier involved in the American Arts and Crafts movements, was sharing the then dying-out "instinct of workmanship" of New England craftspeople.¹⁵⁾ Here in the poem, she perceives the element of mercantilism in the printed page and takes side with the artisanship, identified as Chinese, so much so that she almost vies herself with the Chinese artistry in the porcelain piece with her own craftsmanship in her poem.

Looming in the contrast between the "uninquiring brush" of American "mercantilistic bookbinders" and 'inquiring brush' of 'Chinese artists' by inference, is another concern that may have made the poet feel the more uncomfortable at the printed page. East Asian goods occupied a very contradictory position in the newly arising commodity culture in the US in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. They became successful merchandise because they were highly appreciated as the outcomes of unalienated labor of artisanship.¹⁶⁾ In an article on the status of Japanese goods at the end of nineteenth

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- 15) Cynthia Hogue, "The Plucked String': Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore and the Poetics of Select Defects," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 7,1 (1998): 89-100. For Marianne Moore's relationship with the Arts and Crafts movement as well as hers with various avant-garde artists, see Linda Leavell, *Moore and the Visual Art* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 15-16, 138-39.
- 16) According to Thomas W. Kim in "Being Modern: The Circulation of Oriental Objects," they were not just commercially but also aesthetically successfully circulated that they eventually influenced public taste and created new demand. See Thomas W. Kim, "Being Modern: The Circulation of Oriental Objects," *American Quarterly* 58, 2 (June 2006): 379-405. Kim also points out the specialness of Oriental goods as "while museum curators and private collectors also gathered African and Native objects, Oriental objects were the ones that entered the home and everyday lives of the general populace not just as curiosities but as exemplars of cultural refinement and the highest aesthetic aspirations," *Ibid.*, 387.

century and in the beginning of twentieth century, Christopher Bush says "the American enthusiasm for things Japanese fed both the rise of the commodity and the rise of an antimodernist, vaguely anticapitalist ideology that sought alternative to the culture of mass consumption. Japanese things excelled in the former area by appealing to the concerns of the latter."¹⁷⁾ With a few reserves and distinctions, the same will hold true with Chinese goods. Indeed, the aforementioned American Arts and Crafts Movement and the notion of the American or New England workmanship itself were developed simultaneously with the circulation of Oriental art- and craftworks in the mass market. The American movement was partly influenced by the Oriental examples, and often found a model in the Oriental culture.¹⁸⁾ In this light, Marianne Moore's sympathy with *Chinese* artisanship is not surprising at all. It is rather like recognizing a comradeship, if not decisively turning her back against American mercantilism and racial discrimination.

Nevertheless, the anachronism of finding a model for modern American craftspeople in ancient East Asian artisans is just obvious. On the one hand, to have an ancient foreign land as the model without considering the differences in conditions surrounding the production and consumption of goods is not practically or ideologically enabling the movement either to meet "what the age demanded," to quote Ezra Pound, or to resolve the discontents and

17) Christopher Bush, "The Ethnicity of Things in America's Lacquered Age", *Representations* 99 (Summer 2007), 80.

18) Jackson T. J. Lears says American antimodernism found their models in medieval or Oriental cultures and gives ample examples and analysis of them in *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

problems felt by American craftspeople. On the other hand, as discussed earlier, idealizing ancient East Asian artisans result in a sort of essentializing the race. The inherent problem of essentialization is that while trying to define the "essence" of a race, it ignores the diversity in the *people of the group* or the changeability of their *characteristics*, and ultimately separates the Western idea of a race from the real people. The East Asia was a frequent subject in eugenics, racism, and commercialism discourses in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, not just for the promoters but also for the debaters. For example, W. E. B. Du Bois sought fraternity from the Asia to call for a global action to exterminate racist practices.¹⁹⁾ However, the arguments from either group often involved essentialization of the East Asia, either idealizing the past glories or disparaging the present predicament. And the potential danger is manifest in the theories by racist groups. For the purpose of discrimination, they ultimately robbed the real people of any theoretical possibilities to have potentials and chances to realize them.

Marianne Moore was not just "fiercely egalitarian"²⁰⁾ but also acutely aware of the dangers in essentializing the race from the beginning of her career. She said "Black / but beautiful" in 1918 in "Melanchthon," which prompted Ezra Pound to question in a letter whether she was "a jet black Ethiopian Othello-hued" or not.²¹⁾ In

19) For a collection of excerpts on Asia from Du Bois' work and a introduction of his lifelong interest in the area, see Bill V. Mullen and Cathryn Watson eds, *W. E. B. Du Bois on Asia: Crossing the World Color Line* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005).

20) Cristanne Miller, *Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 129.

21) *Qtd. Ibid.*, 133. It was in December, 1918, and Marianne Moore and Ezra

"Hero," she had a "decorous frock-coated Negro" be the hero enduring the "fearless sightseeing" white "hobo." In "The Labors of Hercules" she derided the racial prejudices by calling the following as a part of the heroic toil:

to convince snake-charming controversialists
that one keeps on knowing
"that the Negro is not brutal,
that the Hebrew is not greedy,
that the Oriental is not immoral,
that the German is not a Hun,"

In "Nine Nectarines," to undo the racist and eugenicist argument, Marianne Moore has her Chinese motif go reveal the wonders of China and shatter American or European misconceptions on the origin of the nectarine.

Like the peach *Yu*, the red-
cheeked peach which cannot aid the dead,
but eaten in time prevents death,
the Italian
peach-nut, Persian plum, Ispahan

secluded wall-grown nectarine,
as wild spontaneous fruit was
found in China first, But was it wild?
Prudent de Candolle would not say.

Pound were in the beginning of their correspondence. Moore replied, after narrating her personal data long, "contrary to your impression, I am altogether a blond and have red hair." Qtd, *Ibid.*, 134; Charles Tomlinson ed, *Marianne Moore: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 16.

At the peach *Yu* legend in the beginning, the life-preserving power is entitled as Chinese, echoing the co-prosperity theme of "all may live" in the first stanza. Then, the tracing of the tree's genealogy discovers its spread to Europe as a process of "walling-in" of the wild plant. Here "the Italian" put in a separate line is more than conspicuous. Therefore, the binary opposition of "wild spontaneous" versus 'cultivated' 'artificial' life is transferred to that of China versus Europe. Two misconceptions are dispelled too. One is the European folk-belief that nectarines and peaches are from Persia, which was recently corrected when Moore wrote the poem. The other is that nectarine was a cultivated variety of the peach, which was also recently disputed by Charles Darwin mentioned above when Moore wrote the poem. "Prudent de Candolle," Alphonse De Candolle, was a French-Swiss botanist who had to reluctantly accept Darwin's observation in 1868. In his 1855 treatise *Geographie Botanique Raisonne*, de Candolle argued that nectarines must be completely a product of human cultivation, not a natural mutation but an artificially engineered variation. According to Robin G. Schulze, Darwin in the nectarines and peaches section in *Variations* was debating de Candolle, and de Candolle had to retreat later in his 1886 work *Origin of Cultivated Plants*.²²⁾

I laid stress, in 1855, on other considerations in support of the theory that the nectarine is derived from the common peach; but Darwin has given such a large number of cases in which a branch of nectarine has unexpectedly appeared upon a peach tree, that it is useless to insist longer upon this point, and I will only add that the

22) Alphonse De Candolle, *Origin of Cultivated Plants* (New York: Appleton, 1886), 226-27; qtd. Schulze, "Imperious Ox, Imperial Dish," 19.

nectarine has every appearance of an artificial tree. Not only is it not found wild, but it never becomes naturalized, and each tree lives for a shorter time than the common peach. It is, in fact, a weakened form.

Therefore, "Prudent De Candolle" exemplifies the reluctance to accept the wild spontaneity of the nectarine tree. At the same time, as his passage implies that artificial breeding may result in "a weakened form," eugenic pride in artificial improvement is seriously damaged.

Now the authority as origin is transferred to China, the usual American or European racial hierarchy is subverted, and eugenic ideas are disparaged. Marianne Moore, then, reaches further to question the validity of the human criteria in deciding "flaws" and the flawless.

One perceives no flaws
 in this emblematic group
 of nine, with leaf window
 unquilted by *curculio*
 which someone once depicted on
 this much-mended plate
 or in the also accurate

 unantlered moose or Iceland horse
 or ass asleep against the old
 thick, low-leaning nectarine that is the
 color of the shrub-tree's brownish
 flower.

"Flawed" the stanza itself is, having fifteen lines—including the four cited above—instead of regular eleven lines, it claims complicated titles for perfection and accuracy. The porcelain piece, as it finally turns out here, has "no flaws" even though it was unstitched of a "*curculio*" once there and actually was "much mended";

and the animal featured in the piece, “unantlered moose or Iceland horse / or ass,” is “also accurate” even though it seems unidentifiable at all in her depiction. How is an animal a “moose” when it is “unantlered”? When such incongruities prevail, questioning of the fundamental criteria rather than verifying the stated on them is often the poetic effect. Indeed, words such as “flaws” and italicized “*curculio*,” Latin for ‘weevil,’ therefore ‘vermin,’ reverberate eugenic racist propagandas, and the marked use of those words have the propagandas put into interrogation. It is only under human bias that the “much-mended” plate seems flawed, and the physique of the animal seems inaccurate, and to believe we can handle or “mend” “flaws” is a human hubris.

Have tables turned, and an alternative hierarchy set? That Chinese imagination is superior to European or American scientific enquiry? Moore seems to have known the danger in essentializing races as well as that in discriminating races, so she bridles the poem and lets it veer away from the danger:

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A Chinese “understands
the spirit of the wilderness”
and the nectarine-loving kylin
of pony appearance—the long-
tailed or the tailless
small cinnamon-brown, common
camel-haired unicorn
with antelope feet and no horn,
here enameled on porcelain,
It was a Chinese
who imagined this masterpiece.

The poem as a whole shows a visual resemblance of a nectarine tree. It has three eleven-lined stanzas, one five-lined one, a line of six dots as if denoting an omission—it is actually where Moore deleted several stanzas—, and again the regular eleven-lined stanza as the last, so it looks like a nectarine tree with flowing leaves and hanging fruits in the first two stanzas, the stout tree trunk in the third and fourth, and with the dotted line as the ground line, the last stanza as its root. Each stanza is, roughly if not exactly, dealing with the corresponding part of a tree. Leaves and fruits in the first stanzas, the tree trunk with a quadruped leaning against it in the third and fourth, and reaching the root in the final stanza, naturally, origins are uncovered, mysteries resolved, and potentials released. First, the perfection and accuracy in the plate piece is identified as from the Chinese gift to “understand[s] the spirit of wilderness,” unlike the Persian or European or American pursuit to tame, or domesticate, or artificially engineer it. Second, the unidentifiable animal in the previous stanza is finally given name as “kylin” (麒麟), or *qilin* in pinyin, the imaginary Chinese unicorn. Third, syntactically resembling “the spirit of wilderness,” the portrayal of the kylin shows the paragon of the power of wilderness released in all its changeability and inconsistency: a “long- / tailed or the tailless,” “cinnamon-brown” in color yet “common camel-haired,” “unicorn” with “no horn.” And the spirit did the Chinese understand.

However, things do not take the path to idealize China. While still appreciating the *wilderness* depicted in Chinese *art*, the irony of which I will soon turn back to, however, Marianne Moore adroitly hedges the adoration for Chinese art. Reminding us of the controversy over the “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” in John Keats’ last stanza in

the "Ode to a Grecian Urn," she carefully puts the "understands / the spirit of the wilderness" stated in the generalizing present in double quotation marks as if citing it—from a curatorial note in the page, possibly. In contrast, when the truth is ascertained at the end, it is stated in the specifying past tense, and bears no quotation marks: "It was a Chinese / who imagined this masterpiece." The general effect is close to equivocating: locating the Chinese ingenuity in time and space, thus limiting the range of it rather than eternalizing or universalizing it.

Ironies run undercurrent to forestall idealization of China, too. So far in the poem, the contrast between the Chinese "wild spontaneity" and European "artificial cultivation" has been established. However, the evidence of the Chinese gift to "understand[s] the spirit of wilderness" given in the poem is Chinese *art* rendering the *wilderness*. Human understanding of the wilderness has to be represented nowhere but in art. Therefore, the dichotomy between wilderness and artifice is blurring. Moreover, because the Chinese belong to humanity and humanity, either the Chinese, or the European, or the American, belong to nature, the dichotomy between wilderness-as-Chinese and artifice-as-European or American turns out as sheer fake. The irony reaches further in the depiction of kylin. In her note for the poem, Moore cites a Frank Davis that the kylin "has the body of a stag, with a single horn, the tail of a cow, horse's hoofs, a yellow belly, and the hair of five colors."²³ Kylin is an imaginary conglomerate of attributes from various animals, and therefore has the right to be described unidentifiable. On the other hand, the hybridism of this marvelous creature reads surprisingly

23) Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 265.

like a biological engineering ideal.²⁴⁾ When kylin itself looks just like a hybrid, why can't the ancient Chinese imagination be just a precedent for the American or European bio-engineering mind? It is, indeed, for historically the Ancient China was the land of excellent artificial cultivators of species, most famously of the gold fish, for example.²⁵⁾

While Marianne Moore avoids idealizing the Ancient China, she also treats Chinese themes and motifs so home in the US that she does not often bother to explain them in details. She doesn't explain that peaches and nectarines are the symbol of longevity in China, or that kylin is the Chinese unicorn. Nor does she reiterate the peach *Yu* story, as if assuming some sort of foreknowledge in readers. And when she does explain, she does it in her note which doesn't appear on the same page with the poem. She even does not have the "kylin" printed in italics, as if it already belongs to the English vocabulary, while curiously italicizing the more familiar "curculio" of Latin.

American poetry from after the World War II shows a tendency of naturalizing or nativizing motifs and themes formerly foreign, not just of East Asian but of all origins. While the tendency is generally found in all poetry written in English as the globalization proceeds, it is especially strong in poetry written in the US just as the country becomes home to more and more people of diverse origins. And the tendency is the same in poems written either by foreign-born poets or by native-born poets. Words, thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and

24) The American horticulturalist Luther Burbank, for example, was a famous hybridizer, and he crossbred peaches with almonds, apples with quinces, potatoes with tomatoes, etc., for new varieties. Kadlec, "Marianne Moore, Immigration, and Eugenics," 40.

25) *Ibid.*, 29.

perspectives of East Asian origin are used as if they were native in American poetry. In Gary Snyder's 1959 poem "Riprap," for example, "the game of *Go*" (棋) in the middle of the poem is so comfortable in American English that it becomes the poem's aesthetic and philosophical principle: equality of creatures of all orders in the world in transience. In Li-Young Lee's 1986 poem "Eating Together," for another example, Chinese kitchen utensils, recipes, proverbs, and attitudes are already at home in American English that they don't require any additional explanation, just as the dead father in the poem is buried so peacefully and comfortably in American underground that he needs feel "lonely for no man."

Anticipating this new turn in American poetry, Marianne Moore's "Nine Nectarines" defeats eugenic and racist ideas and thus un-discriminates races. She warns her contemporary world that belief in biological improvement through artificial means is just arrogance. As shown in the mutation of nectarines and peaches, the nature does miraculous things far beyond human divination. She also warns the European and American misapprehension that they as a race could excel all other races. If the Americans or Europeans think they have advanced the farthest in controlling animal or vegetable or human varieties, they should remember that even more excellent jobs were once achieved by the ancient Chinese. Perhaps, closest to Marianne Moore's message could be the Lao-tzu's saying cited in the beginning of this essay. The following stanza flows:

The world is sacred
 It can't be improved,
 If you temper with it, you'll ruin it,
 If you treat it like an object, you'll lose it,

Did she know the passage? Probably yes, in years later if not in 1933, for she would read *The Tao of Painting* by Mai-mai Sze in 1956.²⁶⁾

26) Moore cites *The Tao of Painting* in her note for "O to Be a Dragon," another poem with a Chinese motif, first published in 1957 (Moore, *Ibid.*, 290). For her enthusiasm with the book, see chapter 11-12, "Moore and *The Tao of Painting*" and "Moore and O to Be a Dragon," in Qian, *Modernist Response*, 167-78, 181-92.

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Abstract

**Undoing Discrimination with Discretion:
Marianne Moore's Use of East Asian Motif in
"Nine Nectarines"**

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This essay analyzes the uniqueness in the use of East Asian motif in Marianne Moore's "Nine Nectarines." It presupposes that when a considerable amount of cultural, material, and human contact with East Asia had already been amassed in the US since 1856, it was natural that young American poets in the early twentieth centuries frequently showed East Asian themes and motifs in their poetry, and tried to relate those themes and motifs to various contemporary issues. However, East Asian themes and motifs were essentially exotic in many poems because their poetic efficacy arouse from their foreignness. Therefore, the themes and motifs had to look always foreign and curious in order for the poem to seize readers' eyes. In an effort to secure the distance between the East Asian themes and motifs and the American context Also, a process of essentializing the race was also often involved: to define a race on the basis of a partial set of characteristics. In contrast, in "Nine Nectarines," Marianne Moore picks up from the ordinary American life a three-fold-Chinese motif, a nectarine porcelain plate from China, and weaves it in conversation with contemporary American issues such as eugenics, racism, and commercialism. The Chinese motif reveals the limit of and makes a clear contrast with some radical ideas on those issues, yet the poem does not fall in idealizing the race on partial grounds. As a conclusion, this essay shows Marianne Moore's use of the Chinese motif in "Nine Nectarines" as anticipating the later turn of the American poetry: to

naturalize the foreign in the American poetry.

Key Words

Racism, Eugenics, Mercantilism (or Commercialism), the Exotic, Essentialization, Naturalization, the East Asia