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## From Familiar to Foreign: Katherine Anne Porter's Intercultural Disillusionment \*

Yuka SATO

### Introduction

Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980) is well known for writing literature based on her own experiences. She wrote many stories set in Mexico while staying there, and *The Old Order* and other works about the South are based on her childhood experiences in Texas, while her only novel, *Ship of Fools*, reflects her travels in Europe.

It is said that Porter's works were more popular while she was alive than now. According to Jeffery Lawrence, her popularity proves that "the most successful examples of fiction set in foreign countries that continued to be recognized as 'American' literature because they were filtered through the 'felt experience' of a US writer" (28). Lawrence also cites the New Criticism slogan "write what you know" (28). In the Introduction to Porter's critical essay collection written by Robert Penn Warren in 1979, he characterizes Porter from two perspectives: her approach to handling the past, and the consistency throughout her work. Warren evaluates both as being compatible with William Faulkner (13-14). Furthermore, Lawrence focuses on Porter's experimental aesthetics, which "was recast by the New Critics as exemplary modernist style, that is, how the emphasis on personal experience in Porter's writings was transformed into a question of purely literary technique" (46).

However, Porter does not necessarily write with a purely experiential aesthetic, since the conflict between experiences and fiction is often observed in her works. Although it is not easy to grapple with Porter's attempt to transform her experiences into literary work, the stories

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addressed in this paper may provide a clue to understanding Porter's literature, comparing her works in Mexico with her earlier ghostwritten work, *My Chinese Marriage*.

#### 1. Texas to Mexico: Along the Gulf of Mexico

Katherine Anne Porter was born in 1890 in Indian Creek, Texas. Porter married at 16 years old to break free from her family. However, her first marriage did not succeed. Throughout her life, she would go through four brief marriages. In 1915, she contracted tuberculosis, which would later be depicted in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. Two years later, she started to write in newspapers and magazines to make a living first in Denver and then New York City. According to Darlene Harbour Unrue's biography of Porter, her Mexican friends asked her to go to Mexico because the country was undergoing significant change (*The Life of an Artist* 70). As a result, she spent some time in Mexico during the 1920s.

In Mexico, the revolution had begun around 1910. Porter became acquainted with local statesmen due to her political interests and for the purpose of conducting interviews. Lawrence notes that Porter's interest in Mexico characterized her, even though there was a strong journalistic trend at the time that contrasted with the Lost Generation's focus on Europe in the 1920s. As opposed to the Lost Generation writers, Porter thought Europe "was not the world she inhabited at all—having grown up in Texas, she felt a stronger connection to Mexico than to Europe" (Lawrence 37). It is well known that she expressed her feelings toward Mexico by describing it as "familiar" in a short essay published in 1923.

I write about Mexico because that is my familiar country. I was born near San Antonio, Texas. My father lived part of his youth in Mexico, and told me enchanting stories of his life there; therefore the land did not seem strange to me even at my first sight of it. ("Why I Write about Mexico" 869)

Such simple “familiar” feelings for Mexico could be found in her early works. The poem “Enchanted” (1923), written during her stay in Mexico City, shows her familiarity with Mexico:

On these familiar stones, this homely stair,  
I set my feet as I am used to do;  
I draw the curtains in my quiet house,  
And feel the winds blow through.

Oh, tranquil roofs and muted drowsing bells,  
Full of old secrets, marvel and be still  
To see a wraith of fiery magic pass  
Over my dark door sill. (“Enchanted” 73)

In this poem, which reflects her days in Mexico,<sup>1</sup> Porter expresses her sense of reliance and intimacy through the depiction of the house. The stones of the house she stays in are “familiar,” and she feels the house itself is a safe place whose curtains provide and respect her privacy.

This familiarity with Mexico is evident in an immature but plain poem she wrote about Texas in 1912, “Texas: By the Gulf of Mexico.” As Unrue notes, the imagery in this poem may be attributed to Porter’s early marriage to a wealthy man from Texas (“Introduction” 7). In the poem, she describes the appeal of her home state by contrasting it with the North:

Ye shivering ones of the frozen North, list to my happy song  
Of the seventh heaven nestled here below,

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<sup>1</sup> As stated in Unrue’s Introduction of *Katherine Anne Porter's Poetry*, “Enchanted” is under the influence of the Nicaraguan poet Salomon de la Selva, who had a romantic relationship with Porter around 1922 (“Introduction” 12).

In our rich, fertile valleys, midst sunkissed fruits and flowers

In Texas, by the Gulf of Mexico. ("Texas" 65)

The poem continues with the lines, "Come build yourself a cottage, plant roses by the door/ Then forget the sleet and snow you left behind," ("Texas" 65), and ultimately concludes that "Texas is a paradise" ("Texas" 65). This poem presents an idyllic image of Texas, located on the Gulf of Mexico, free from the cold of the North and characterized by a rustic, beautiful life of building cottages.<sup>2</sup> It can be said that her interest in Mexico was not only shaped by political ideals but also by her geographical proximity to the country. Furthermore, she may have unconsciously projected the idyllic imagery of Texas onto Mexico, albeit somewhat naively, and her artless identification with America and other countries sometimes appears. In "Why I Write about Mexico," her essay mentioned above, she presents an optimistic view of America;

. . . in my childhood I knew the French-Spanish people in New Orleans and the strange "Cajans" in small Louisiana towns, with their curious songs and accustoms and blurred patois; the German colonists in Texas and the Mexicans of the San Antonio country, until it seemed to me that all my life I had lived among people who spoke broken, laboring tongues, who put on with terrible difficulty, yet with such good faith. . . I have never thought of these people as any other than American. Literally speaking, I have never been out of America; but my America has been a borderland of strange tongues and commingled races, and if they are not American, I am fearfully mistaken. ("Why I Write about Mexico" 870)

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<sup>2</sup> William A. Gleason points out that splendid cottages have become fashionable since 1850, and they are thought to be an American national taste (Gleason 37).

Is her theory here one of America as a benevolent melting pot, or one of American arrogant expansionism? Although this essay might be about Mexico, she ends it with the line “All the things I write of I have first known, and they are real to me” (“Why I Write about Mexico” 870).

Eventually, Porter’s sense of familiarity with Mexico is destined to deteriorate. Most of Porter’s works set in Mexico revolve around the central theme of disillusionment or disappointment. It might even be said that these two themes constitute her entire future body of work. As Thomas F Welsh explains, Porter visited Mexico again and again after her disillusion with it, and “Mexico was like a lover who always betrayed her trust, but on some unconscious level she welcomed the betrayal because it always revealed tragic truths that became the subject of her art” (Welsh 229). In “Flowering Judas,” published in 1930, Porter depicts her disenchantment with Mexico by using the word “unfamiliar.” Her innocent approach to Mexico ends in a sense of self-betrayal.

## 2. The End of Fantasy: An Unfamiliar Mexico in “Flowering Judas”

In “Flowering Judas,” Porter illustrates a white female protagonist, Laura, gradually becoming disillusioned with the Mexican Revolution. Laura, a white woman, is flirted with by Braggioni, a Mexican revolutionary. He often visits her apartment, and both Laura and Braggioni project idealized images onto one another. Laura is disillusioned with Braggioni, who does not appear to be the revolutionary she believed he was, while Braggioni also calls Laura “gringita” (97), which means a white woman of American or British origin. Eventually, she begins to think that it would be better to run away from the current situation:

The gluttonous bulk of Braggioni has become a symbol of her many disillusion, for a revolutionist should be lean, animated by heroic faith, a vessel of abstract virtues. This is nonsense, she knows it now and is ashamed of it. Revolution must have

leaders, and leadership is a career for energetic men. . . But she cannot help feeling that she has been betrayed irreparably by the disunion between her way of living and her feeling of what life should be, and at times she is almost contented to rest in this sense of grievance as a private store of consolation. Sometimes she wishes to run away, but she stays. *Now she longs to fly out of this room, down the narrow stairs, and into the street where the houses lean together like conspirators under a single mottled lamp, and leave Braggioni singing to himself.* (97, emphasis mine)

Braggioni is far from Laura's ideal of a revolutionary. Moreover, he carries a handkerchief scented with perfume from the Jockey Club in New York and says, "I have a taste for the elegant refinements" (99). His affinity for New York, which Porter describes as "the most foreign place" to her ("Why I Write about Mexico" 870), distances him from the Mexicanness that Porter once deeply identified with.

Laura, who is disillusioned by the revolutionary Braggioni, cannot discover a place where she belongs in neither Mexico nor America. "Where could she go? Uninvited she has promised herself to this place; she can no longer imagine herself as living in another country, and there is no pleasure in remembering her life before she came here" (99). Continually, she feels "not at home in the world" (102) in Mexico and her discomfort extends even to children she teaches;

Every day she teaches children who remain strangers to her, though she loves their tender round hands and their charming opportunist savagery. She knocks at unfamiliar doors not knowing whether a friend or a stranger shall answer, and even if a known face emerges from the sour gloom of that unknown interior, still it is the face of a stranger. (102)

In comparison to the narrator of "Enchanted," Laura feels unfamiliarity with the doors and interiors of the buildings. While Braggioni gives up seducing Laura and goes home where his wife has been waiting, weeping because of the absence of her husband, he "looks about the

room. Nothing is changed, the smells are good and familiar, he is well acquainted with the woman who comes toward him with no reproach except grief on her face” (107).

After refusing Braggioni, Laura has a dream about Eugenio, a young revolutionary man who committed suicide in the jail that Laura frequently visited. He says in her dream, “Get up, Laura, and follow me: come out of your sleep, out of your bed, out of this strange house. What are you doing in this house?” (108). Laura cannot accept his invitation because he is already dead. From the beginning of the story, Laura has suicidal feelings, and they grow stronger because she did not help Eugenio despite her association with Braggioni, a revolutionary leader. According to Welsh, Porter’s sense of self-betrayal was formed by her experience in Mexico;

By May 1921, the time of the deportation crisis, the models for Braggioni had convinced her that Mexico as potential paradise could be nothing but a dream. But out of the dreamer’s failure came the artist’s success. If Mexico could not assuage her troubled psyche, it helped her contemplate the entwined betrayals of revolution and self, and transform her disillusion and spiritual isolation into Laura’s. (135)

Thus, “Flowering Judas” illustrates the unfamiliar Mexico and the loss of the sense of home that Porter had felt since she was a child. Just before Porter became disillusioned with Mexico, she was working on a project during her stay there. She had written retold and original tales for children before she began to sublimate her own experiences into novels.

Interestingly, Porter’s first substantial project was ghostwriting *My Chinese Marriage*, an autobiographical novel about an American woman who emigrates to China through marriage. As Unrue mentions, this ghostwriting job provided Porter with the funds to travel to Mexico, (*The Life of an Artist* 70), though she did not publicly acknowledge her role in its authorship. In that novel, the sense of disillusionment that I have discussed is absent, despite the challenges

a young American woman would have faced in China. What was it about the novel that made Porter refuse to count it as her own work?

### 3. Ghostwriting Someone Else's Experience: An Analysis of *My Chinese Marriage*

During her stay in Mexico, Porter ghostwrote *My Chinese Marriage*. This autobiographical fiction is about an American woman from Michigan who marries a Chinese man and emigrates to Shanghai. After returning to America, her husband dies of tuberculosis. *My Chinese Marriage* was published in 1921, following four printings in *Asia* earlier that same year. The work was publicly attributed to an American woman with the initials M.T.F. at the time, now known as Mae Tiam Franking. However, the true author was Katherine Anne Porter, a budding journalist and aspiring writer. Because there is no manuscript by either Porter or Mae Franking, it is difficult to distinguish how much of the work was Franking's idea and how much of it was attributed to Porter.<sup>3</sup>

*My Chinese Marriage* contains four parts. In Part 1, Margaret (Mae's fictional name) meets her future husband, Chan-King, in America. They marry and move to Shanghai in Part 2. In Part 3, the story describes interactions between Chan-King's mother and Margaret. Finally, Part 4 is about Margaret's stay at Chan-King's family's home and their subsequent return to the United States.

In Part 1, scenes of Margaret's bigotry toward Chan-King and her curiosity about him alternate in turn. They initially meet on the opening day of college and gradually become close. However, a Chinese flag he gives her evokes her racial prejudice.

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<sup>3</sup> *My Chinese Marriage*'s annotated version, published by the University of Texas Press in 1991, includes additional notes by Franking's descendants and correspondence between Mae and Tiam.

Then he offered me a small embroidered Chinese flag. I hesitated, looking at the writhing, fire-breathing dragon done in many-coloured silks. Again the old prejudice swept over me. I was about to refuse. But I saw in his eyes an expression of hesitating, half-anxious pleading, which touched me. I took the flag, puzzled a trifle over that look I had surprised. (3)

Notwithstanding her bias, she finally decides to marry Chan-King. After immigrating to Shanghai, she attempts to think of China as her home: “. . . I was with my husband and child, driving rapidly towards the home prepared for me. I had come home to China” (15). Her determination to adapt to Chinese culture succeeds, but this is not solely due to her efforts; it can be said that the environment of the house she moves into in Shanghai also plays a significant role.

The house in Shanghai is “a newly built house in the style called semi-foreign” (16) and its door has “a very American-looking push-button” (16), and when the family came home, several Chinese servants welcome them. Chan-King, born in the Chinese upper class, calls it a “very modest little home” (16), but as evidenced by the presence of a radiator, it is a well-modernized house. Although the installations are Westernized, a Chinese nanny takes care of their son, Wilfred: “Then Wilfred was surrendered to his amah, a fresh-cheeked young woman in stiffly starched blue “coat,” white trousers and apron, while we made ready for a tiffin engagement with Chinese friends of Chan-King’s” (16). This mixed culture of Western and Chinese can also be found in their kitchen and the servants there:

We were really very practical and modern and comfortable. *Our kitchen provided for an admirable compromise between old and new methods. It had an English gas-range and a Chinese one.* But the proper Chinese atmosphere was preserved by three well-trained servants who called themselves Ah Ching, Ah Ling and Ah Poh. *Most Shanghai servants are called simply “Boy” or “Amah” or “Coolie,” but ours chose*

*those names, as distinctive for servants there as “James” and “Bridget” are with us.*

Ah Ching did most of the house-work and the running of errands; Ah Ling did the marketing and cooking, giving us a pleasantly varied succession of Chinese and foreign dishes; Ah Poh, the amah, looked after Wilfred and attended to my personal wants. (17-18, emphasis mine)

As the gas range in the kitchen indicates, Chinese and Western utensils coexist, but the Chinese atmosphere is secured by the presence of Chinese servants. Moreover, the servants have names such as James and Bridget, and their Western aspect seems to reassure Margaret. It is clear that the house in Shanghai is a place where Margaret feels at home, with the Chinese and Western cultures blended together. Ironically, in this modernized house, Margaret cannot perceive the sounds from outside.

The noises of hurrying, half-modernized Shanghai reached me but vaguely, deep within my cool, quiet house where the floors were spread with white matting and the walls were hung with symbolic panels. The click of the ponies’ feet on the pavement, the thud of the rickshaw coolies’ heels as they drew their noiseless, rubber-tyred vehicles, the strident scream of the motor horns, the strange, long cries of the street venders, all came to me muffled as through many curtains that sheltered me from the world. (20-21)

Inside this half-Western house in Shanghai, Margaret does not recognize local people’s activities, sounds or figures. Her husband starts to think that she needs to go outside and socialize more. Once she starts becoming more sociable, Margaret sees Chan-King’s mother visiting the Shanghai house.

What kind of relationship is constructed between Chan-King’s mother and Margaret in the Chinese-Western house? In Part 3, there are several scenes in which Margaret talks with Chan-King’s mother, who visits Shanghai, about sewing and clothing. Chan-King’s mother, Madam

Liang, is characterized by her garments. She “was dressed in black brocade, its stiff folds and precise creases accentuating her dignity” (30). When Margaret and Madam Liang go shopping, her mother-in-law buys Margaret some clothing: “In the silk shops she bought marvellous brocaded satins and embroidered silks and she made me select the pattern I wanted for myself” (32). This time, Margaret is not embarrassed by the embroidered silk, in contrast to her earlier reaction to the Chinese flag Chan-King gave her. At the end of Madam Liang’s visit, she says, “This is a Chinese house, with a Chinese wife in it. Everything is Chinese. I could never have believed it without seeing, for I thought your wife was a Western woman. I am happy” (34). This statement indicates that Margaret accepts Chinese values as Madam Liang wishes. In the United States, Margaret feels uncomfortable about the Chinese flag, but she eventually came to enjoy wearing various Chinese dresses, owning many of them. Madam Liang’s receptive attitude toward Margaret emphasizes her transition to being able to embrace Chinese culture.

Pleasantly living in the eclectic house, Margaret becomes able to wear embroidered clothing, a symbol of Chinese culture. Gaining recognition as Chan-King’s wife from her mother-in-law, Margaret decides to leave the house in Shanghai and move to Chan-King’s family home in Southern China, unconsciously acting in line with her mother-in-law’s wishes. Different from the cozy house in Shanghai, the family house in the South is “complicated structure” (48) of “homes within a home” (48), where families have lived for generations, which impresses Margaret deeply. Furthermore, she gets able to hear various Chinese sounds, as opposed to life at the house in Shanghai. She can perceive “the clang of a brass gong, shuddering on the stillness, the staccato sound of slender bamboo sticks shaken together in a cylindrical box, the measured beat of a small drum-rattle, as the different street vendors announced their wares (58),” in the garden of the family house before returning to the United States.

At the end of the story, they go back to America because of Chan-King's job. Before departing, Mae bids farewell to China at an old temple, saying, "This is home! I wish we were not leaving, even for a day!" (58). Although they plan to return to China, Chan-King dies of tuberculosis. In Part 4, the narrator, Margaret, indicates this tragedy, inserting an episode about a Chinese widow who do not remarry after her husband's death. The novel concludes as follows:

So, by the visible evidences, my history is finished. But it has begun anew for me, not as I wished, not as I hoped, but on a level that I can endure. For I have my children and my memories and my home in China, which waits with the gentle healing of sight and sound and place . . . and I have learned that in love, and only in love, we can wring spiritual victory out of this defeat of the body. (59)

Margaret ends the story with sentiment about her "home in China, which waits with the gentle healing of sight and sound and place," but Margaret goes on to die of tuberculosis a few years later, the same disease that took her husband's life.

In 1920, Porter went to Ann Arbor, Michigan, and interviewed Mae Tiam Franking for six weeks. As Unrue examines, "She apparently wanted to put the Ann Arbor project out of her mind because she considered ghostwriting degrading and far removed from the artistic writing she really wanted to do" (*A Portrait of an Artist* 70-71). Porter wrote to Edward Schwartz that he must not put *My Chinese Marriage* on the list of her works in 1953.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, she stated the following:

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<sup>4</sup> See Edward Shwartz.

I wrote this book from the dictated records of Mae Tiam Franking in all innocence and good faith . . . and God knows it couldn't have been more false, because she had no notion what had happened her. (Hilt 3)

Finally, Margaret returns to Michigan, and her thoughts of being a “Chinese wife” shift toward her husband’s homeland, China, at the end of the novel. In fact, Mae did not go back to China. Then, what was it that Porter wrote that the real Mae could not understand?

After experiencing disillusionment with Mexico, Porter realized that China was not Mae’s true home. This suggests that, while writing the novel, Porter may have thought of Mexico as her own home and completed Mae’s story with a certain degree of innocence. In a letter to her family in 1920, Porter wrote about *My Chinese Marriage* that it is “charming and sympathetic” (*Selected Letters* 47). However, she inverted the evaluation of the story later. We can say that she seemed to understand in her later years that what Mae had told her and what she had written was not based on truth, even though it met the expectations of *Asia* and its readers.

In the Foreword of *My Chinese Marriage*, Joan Givner quotes two passages from Porter’s essay in 1955, “St. Augustine and the Bullfight.”

Adventure. The word has become a little stale to me, because it has been applied too often to the dull physical exploits of professional “adventures” who write books about it, if they know how to write; if not, they hire ghosts who quite often can’t write either. . . W. B. Yeats remarked—I cannot find the passage now, so must say it in other words—that the unhappy man (unfortune?) was one whose adventures outran his capacity for experience, capacity for experience being, I should say, roughly equal to the faculty of understanding what has happened to one. (808)

In short, Mae might be considered an unhappy woman not due to her unfortunate short life, but rather because of her lack of capacity for experience. We can assume that at least Porter held

this view. This essay reflects Porter's pride as an artist, as she transforms personal experiences into fiction that explores broader themes, such as the fear of the familiar becoming foreign and the disillusionment with others, ultimately representing a deeper sense of self-disenchantment.

M. T. F. is introduced in *Asia* as follows; "This story is not the obvious thing at all—not the history that a novelist would construct, given an American woman and a Chinese man to conduct through the experiment of intermarriage" (*Asia* June 1921 2). Contrary to the explanation, it is said that *My Chinese Marriage* could not have ended happily, in Margaret's remaining an ideal Chinese wife if it had not for the technique of Porter's storytelling.

## Conclusion

Since Porter was eager to write authentic works and concealed the fact that she ghostwrote, she did not say much about *My Chinese Marriage*, the second-longest work in her entire writing career. Nevertheless, Porter, who had lost her sense of home in Mexico, knew that there could never really be a beautiful resolution in Margaret's real story.

We might argue that both the retold lives of others early in her career and the loss of her affinity for Mexico profoundly impacted her later work. Even in her last and only novel, *Ship of Fools*, the narrator explores the inner voices of Germans and Americans, while Mexican characters remain marginalized. Nevertheless, Porter starts the novel with a description of a beggar in Mexico;

The beggar who came to the terrace every morning in time for the early traffic appeared around the corner shambling and crawling, the stumps of his four limbs bound in leather and twine. He had been in early life so intricately maimed and deformed by a master of the art, in preparation for his calling, he had little resemblance to any human being. (4)

Despite her detachment from the Mexican characters, Porter still vividly depicts the beggar in her novel. If this reflects Porter's ability to precisely observe and capture detail, we might say that her apprenticeship allowed her to refine her unique style of writing.

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