

Conclusion

The transmission of Tang poetry to the Western world is a significant event in the history of cross-cultural communication. Placed in the cultural context of the English-speaking world, and beginning in the late nineteenth century, translation of and research on Tang poetry have evolved over 100 years from the random, sporadic, and general stage to becoming more systematic and specialized. In traditional Chinese culture, which has now been partially integrated into the mainstream of Anglo-American culture, the reason why Tang poetry was able to become a prominent entity with special significance was that it integrates the essence of the Chinese language, ideology, and poetic concepts and it shows unique charm in its finest artistic achievements.

In its home country of China, Tang poetry has been on people's lips for thousands of years. With its strong vitality and enduring influence, the Chinese poetic treasure of Tang poetry came to the attention of Anglo-American missionaries as well as of diplomats who had long sojourned in China. On the basis of their knowledge of China, they would translate Tang poetry and act as intermediaries when introducing Chinese society and traditional Chinese culture to Western countries. These early British and American sinologists initiated the transmission of Tang poetry to the West. At the same time, they blazed a path for its subsequent development. However imperfect their English translations of Tang poetry might have been, these poems, written in the hieroglyphs of an ancient Oriental nation, were rendered for the first time into English and read in a completely different cultural setting through their persistent efforts. Through these translated poems, cultural explorers of the English-speaking world were given an opportunity to take a distantly occidental look at the summit of Oriental poetry.

Once it began, the impact of the English translation of Tang poetry quickly spread to literary and cultural circles of the Anglo-American world. With conservative and exclusively British cultural traditions, the English translation of Tang poetry was not given adequate attention in Britain. But thanks to the inclusive immigrant culture of the United States, the English translation of Tang poetry infused fresh and vigorous inspiration into American poetry and prompted American poetry to break away from traditional European constraints and create its own cultural characteristics. With their fresh, natural, and flexible writing style,

translators extracted and produced a romantic and beautiful world of Tang poetry beyond the seeming vulgarity of the present. This world might neither be the one created by Tang poets nor the one appreciated by native Chinese readers, but its unique aesthetic appeal was equally powerful. Through the English translation of Tang poetry, Western readers were sincerely impressed by Tang poetry as if they had been communicating with those poets in the Tang dynasty. In this world of Tang poetry, adapted from the Western literary experience, the mysterious Oriental poetic images became vivid and lively, and no longer appeared remote or unapproachable.

Generally, translators of poetry possessed extraordinary poetic creativity. In the long course of their study, interpretation, and translation of Tang poetry, they were not only fascinated by the concise language, lingering implications, and unique artistic style but were also nurtured by traditional Chinese poetics and even by traditional Chinese philosophy. From simple imitation of poetic techniques to acceptance and identification of poetic conceptions, they gradually immersed themselves in the aesthetic thought of Tang poetry and constructed a classic “Chinese style” in modern American poetry. Since then, the traditional Chinese culture represented by Tang poetry spread more widely in the English-speaking world, producing a more lasting impact on the societies and cultures outside China. This phenomenon proved again that the lasting aesthetic value of Tang poetry could transcend times, regions, nationalities, and cultures. It also proved that, as the essence of the world’s traditional cultural resources, the aesthetic ideals of Tang poetry could be perceived and accepted by the modern Western world and effectively promote cultural complementarity and a respect for multiculturalism.

Poetry is both a personal expression of individual minds and a symbol of national culture. As Tang poetry has been passed on from the Tang dynasty to the modern times, and from the East to the West through successive translators’ aesthetic filtering, it is inevitable for the final English version of Tang poetry in modern times to bear the imprints of translators’ experience and emotions. The translators’ knowledge of Western traditions and literary backgrounds, especially the poetic background, shaped their aesthetic orientation to poetry, and this established orientation would sway their attitude in selecting and interpreting Tang poetry and would determine the angle and method they preferred to have in interpreting Tang poetry and in presenting it to the target reader. Among so many Tang poems, which poems could be put on the reading list of the average English reader through translation and which poets could be known earlier or better by the English-speaking world were entirely subjective decisions of the translators according to their aesthetic orientation.

Those Tang poets who are admired by Western readers may not necessarily be those who received high acclaim in China, and those recurring Tang poems in translated texts may not necessarily be recognized in their home country. This was especially obvious in the beginning stage, when the translation of Tang poetry was not so systematic and specialized.

First, the Romantic tradition of Western poetics respects individual emotional expression. Wordsworth, one of the “Lake Poets,” held that poetry is a spontaneous

overflow of powerful feelings that originated in the emotions and were recalled in peace, and that poets usually produce poems out of their passions, which were aroused by real-life events. Among Tang poets, Li Bai's poems were the closest to the literary views of the West, displaying his unusual talent in the poetic creation and his vibrant lines and lofty sentiments. Therefore, Li Bai was the first to receive particular attention from Western translators. As his works entered the Western world, Li Bai was honored with soaring fame. The image of Li Bai producing wonderful poems in high spirits had been well known to the English-speaking world, and even to the whole Western world, where he was regarded as the epitome of classical Chinese literature and even traditional Chinese culture.

Meanwhile, Western translators could not understand the themes of some Tang poems, which expressed the poets' aspirations or conveyed moral messages, and even if they did understand them, they might not identify themselves with this conventional concept of classical Chinese literature, because a large number of Tang poems expressed personal thoughts and aspirations. For example, in his lines "Should I get mansions covering ten thousand miles, I'd house all the poor and make them beam with smiles," Du Fu expressed his yearning, which arose from his difficult experiences, and his poems carried a fiery passion that expressed his sincere sympathy for the people and deep concern for the country's future. However, Western readers may not empathize with his emotions. Likewise, Bai Juyi's poems "Guān Yīmài" (观刈麦, "Watching Harvesting Wheat") or "Màitànwēng" (卖炭翁, "An Old Charcoal Man"), which contained numerous descriptions of hard reality and expressed sincere personal feelings, were not valued as much in the West as such legendary and romantic poems as "Chánghèn Gē" (长恨歌, "A Song of Everlasting Sorrow") or "Pípá Xíng" (琵琶行, "Song of a Pipa Player").

Western translators were very much impressed by the clear conscience and lofty ideals of the traditional Chinese literati as revealed through Tang poetry. Fletcher compiled and translated hundreds of Tang poems in his two books, since he viewed Tang poetry as an integrated entity: "all combine here to form China's great ideal, great charm—peace." Poets of the Tang dynasty were imbued with passionate love for their motherland and her magnificent scenery, inherited immortal spirits of previous generations and integrated the ideological essence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism into their daily lives. Their poems essentially portrayed the beauty of nature with poetic images of tranquil, serene and peaceful views. "There is no girding up of the lions to slay, no enthusiasm for destruction; no great greed for wealth or possessions; no social distinctions of caste. There is just human life portrayed in terms of Nature." (Fletcher, 1918, preface) This is the chief reason why Fletcher not only devoted himself to the translation of Tang poetry but also why many other translators chose to translate pastoral poems over those on other subjects.

Of course, whether in China or in other countries, in ancient or modern times, there are common aspects of human life, dreams, and emotions. In the process of translating Tang poetry, translators had come to understand Chinese culture and Chinese people through Tang poems and attempted to convey the core ideas of the originals to Western readers from different approaches. But, due to obstacles in the

cultural communication between the East and the West and the great discrepancies between Chinese and English, translators inevitably failed to represent certain keywords and sentences correctly in the process of their translation.

One feature of Tang poetry is the use of allusions to express thoughts and feelings. However, because of different cultural backgrounds between the East and the West, frequently used allusions and cultural and ethnic words, which are readily understood by Oriental readers, are beyond the comprehension of Western readers, and even of scholars who were quite steeped in sinology. Furthermore, the range of allusions had been expanded to cover a wider area than did our usual concept of allusions. In general, allusions can be classified into the following kinds:

The first are nouns with specific cultural implications, such as names and places from legendary tales. For example, “*牛郎织女*” (*qiānniú zhīnǚ*, the cowherd and the weaving girl) form the line “*如今直上银河去，同到牛郎织女家*” (*Rújīn zhíshàng yínhé qù, Tóngdào qiānniú zhīnǚ jiā*); the designations of some special items, such as “*鸿雁*” (swan goose) and “*砧杵*” (the washing stone and stick) from “*落日鸿雁度，寒城砧杵愁*” (*Luòrì hóngyàn dù, Hánchéng zhēnchǔ chóu*) or “*红叶*” (red leaf) and “*砚台*” (inkstand) from “*夕阳照个新红叶，似要题诗落砚台*” (*Xīyáng zhàogè xīn hóngyè, Sìyào tíshī luò yàntái*); some Chinese calendric terms, such as “*寒食*” (*Hanshi*), “*清明*” (*Qingming*), and “*惊蛰*” (*Jingzhe*), among others.

The second kind of allusion includes objects with special or derived meanings. For example, the peacock is a symbol of joy and auspiciousness in the Chinese culture, but in English it has a derogatory sense, meaning pride and vanity, or being conceited. Similar objects include “*moon*,” “*dragon*,” “*cuckoo or azalea*” (*杜鹃*), and “*chickens and dogs*” (*鸡犬*). Although there are also cultural references to these objects in the West, their meanings are totally different. The metonymic and metaphorical use of such objects as the “*lotus*” (*荷花/莲花/芙蓉*), the “*willow*” (*杨柳*), the “*sailing boat*” (*行舟/行船*), “*cloud and rain*” (*云雨*) and the “*Blues of Annals*” (*青史*), were also regarded as independent of and unrelated to anything familiar to Western readers.

The third kind of allusion is abstract ideas implying deep cultural traditions, such as loyalty to the sovereignty, as expressed in “*为主坚能不顾身，赴汤蹈火见忠臣*” (*Wèizhǔjiān néng búgùshēn, Fùtāngdǎohuǒ jiànzhōngchén*, risking our lives to protect the lord and getting ready to jump into boiling water and plunge into raging fire—going through hell and high water), a strong sense of homesickness, as in “*若为化得身千亿，散上峰头望故乡*” (*Ruòwèi huàdeshēnqiānyì, Sànsàng fēngtóu wàngùxiāng*, I would rather turn into a breeze, lingering on top of the mountains as long as I can, to take a look at my hometown from a long distance), and blood and bone kinship, as in “*谁言寸草心，报得三春晖*” (*Shuíyán cùncaoxīn, Bàodé sānchūnhuī*, such kindness of the warm sun cannot be repaid by the grass). These sensations, as expressed in Tang dynasty poems, are hard for Western readers to empathize with to a satisfactory degree.

Culture is manifested in language, and language is part of the culture. Those words loaded with traditional Chinese culture, whether through free translation or transliteration, would confuse English readers if no further explanation was made in the target text. Therefore, when translators encountered allusions, they chose to

ignore them, would resort to transliteration, gave a rough, free translation with simple annotations, or would simply avoid poems with allusions when they selected poems for translation.

Such practices ruled out numerous famous poems in the choice of poems for translation. A fine example of this is Wang Wei's quatrain "Jiuyuèjiuri Yi Shāndōng Xiōngdì" (九月九日忆山东兄弟, "Thinking of My Brothers on Mountain Climbing Day"), which may be considered to be one of the most widely circulated poems of Tang poetry. The line "每逢佳节倍思亲" (Měiféng jiājìe bèi sīqīn, I am twice as homesick on a holiday) is known to everyone in China. Yet, English versions of the poem are very rare. This poem involves not only the folk-custom of climbing mountains to view the distance on the Double Ninth Festival (ninth day of the ninth lunar month), but also the typically nostalgic feelings of the Chinese, so it is hard to convey these culture-specific notions for which no corresponding words could be found in English. And confined by the number of words and the rhythmic patterns of the poetic genre, this poem is rather ambiguous. Generally, poems with fewer allusions and plainer language are easier to translate.

Allusions were also the direct cause of misunderstanding and misinterpretation in the translation process. For example, in the line "名花倾国两相欢" (Míng huā qīngguó liǎng xiāng huān, both the precious flower and the lady are beautiful and lovely), "名花" (míng huā, the precious flower) refers to the peony flower specifically; however, the word "peony" would not completely convey the implied meaning of the original work. "Peony" in English refers to both the tree peony and the herbaceous peony, while the tree peony and the herbaceous peony give two different cultural indications in traditional Chinese culture. The words "倾国" (qīngguó), similar to "倾城" (qīngchéng), which literally means causing the fall of a state or of a city, refers to women of unsurpassed beauty. It would be a great mistake if the phrase were literally interpreted as an "overturned kingdom." However, in the English versions of Tang poetry, such mistranslations are not rare.

Even today, both Chinese and English translators who are interested in classical Chinese poetry translation are still cudgeling their brains trying to solve these problems. Out of their strong love for Tang poetry and its profound cultural connotation, British and American scholars and poets of successive generations make persistent efforts to promote Tang poetry in the West through their translations. Since the 1920s and the 1930s, the translation of Tang poetry developed in both quantity and quality. By the end of the twentieth century, with the direct participation of overseas Chinese intellectuals, this transmission began to thrive. Since the 1980s, American studies on Tang poetry have involved translation, annotation, and appreciation. American scholars, by combining Western theories and research methods, now view Tang poetry as a specialized and independent academic field of study. Over the past decade, they have indeed made remarkable progress.

Today in the English-speaking world, the study of Tang poetry in sinology or Chinese Studies is just regarded as a branch of Chinese literature. It is hard to find an authoritative academic institution like the Tang Literary Society, which does research exclusively on the subject of Tang literature. In the curricula of

universities, “Tang Poetry Appreciation” is still a sub-subject affiliated with higher research subjects. That is to say, research on Tang poetry and even on traditional Chinese poetry has not yet become an independent discipline.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the sustainable growth of China’s economic power and international status, sinology, and Chinese Studies have once again become hot subjects in the West. Since 2004, a “Mandarin craze” has been on the rise, which shows that Westerners’ interest in China has extended from literary and cultural areas to various areas of society. In 2007, the Federal Government of the United States announced its “National Security Language Project,” which regulated government departments in allocating special funds to promote ten traditional foreign languages. Chinese ranked second. With the increasing scale of Chinese-language teaching, the number of people learning the Chinese language is rapidly increasing. More and more people who are interested in traditional Chinese culture are now able to overcome language barriers to explore traditional Chinese culture more directly and deeply. The close relationship between language and culture has also contributed to an upsurge of interest in academic circles and the general public in studying traditional Chinese culture. In such a climate, Tang poetry, as the classic part of the traditional Chinese culture, will receive wider attention.

Thanks to convenient modern transportation and communications, cultural communication, exchange, and reference in various fields between the East and the West have overcome visible geographical restrictions. Scholars have acquired unprecedented knowledge about China and Chinese culture, and consequently, cultural misunderstanding has been largely eliminated. However, the study of Tang poetry, based on the previous translation and research achievements of the last century, leaves much room in the Anglo-American countries for further development, but offers promising prospects for the future.

Afterword

We are very much honored to have had the opportunity to be the translators of the monograph *Tang Poetry in the West: A Historical Perspective* by Dr. Lan Jiang, and the process of translation was such an arduous one leaving with us a great deal of bitter sweet memories.

The bitter memories revolve mainly around the eruditeness of the book and the “untranslatability” of most of the sporadic verses, if not all, in it. Poetic, profound, and mysterious as it is, Tang poetry is considered an engaging and yet daunting genre for most contemporary readers to touch upon. And to translate a monograph as such may be an area only fools rush in while angels fear to tread. The book covers a time span of over 500 years ranging from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first century, during which missionaries, merchants, diplomats, and sinologists all made their significant contributions to the introduction and translation of Tang poetry to the western world. The extensive citation of sources in both English and Chinese definitely adds much to the academic value of the book, but meanwhile it brings the translators a pile of hard nuts to crack: proper names spelt in the Wade-Giles romanization system and in pinyin, back translation needed here and there, and the unavoidable sacrifice of meaning for rhyme or vice versa, to name just a few.

Despite the countless challenges we went through, we have certainly tasted the sweetness of the translation job as well. Amid the hustle and bustle of modern-day life, we enjoyed the serenity and peacefulness so much when we sat down to translate a monograph on Tang poetry and Chinese culture at large. We feel fortunate to have got acquainted with a number of historical figures who made their indelible contributions to the translation of Tang poetry to the west. While we admired the extraordinary versatility and rigorous scholarship of Herbert Allen Giles who compared translations to “moonlight and water” and originals to “sunlight and wine,” we were also amazed by the infectious enthusiasm and literary gift of the poet, Launcelot Alfred Cranmer-Byng, who proclaimed that “the time has come when the literary man should stand forth and claim his share in the revelation of truth and beauty from other lands and peoples whom our invincible European ignorance has taught us to despise.” Interestingly, we let our Chinese students majoring in English here in Xi’an, China, compare Cranmer-Byng’s translation of

Du Fu's *The Never Ending Wrong* with that of Giles in their translation class and approximately 90% of them tend to appreciate the latter. In the meantime, an experiment conducted by one of our graduate students in her research abroad shows that Cranmer-Byng's translation was much better received than Gile's among her students in the Confucius Institute in Trinidad and Tobago. Last but not least, the insight of the author of the monograph into Tang poetry and her research approach benefit us tremendously. Her continuing encouragement and unfailing support were never absent throughout the long journey.

Good or bad, this is all that we can put in front of you, our dear readers, for judgment and criticism at your own discretion.

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