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Lan Jiang

# A History of Western Appreciation of English-translated Tang Poetry



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*To my Dearest Girls, Shelyn and Tiffany  
Yang, for Being There For Me Always*

# Foreword

Why would anyone other than a specialist in Chinese literature want to read this book? This is an obvious and understandable question, which certainly crossed my mind as I embarked on the reading of Dr. Jiang's manuscript. For me, someone who specializes in Western literature but who has had an abiding interest in China, the question of the translation of Tang poetry into English seemed esoteric and potentially irrelevant to me as an uninformed layman. Yet, as I soon discovered thanks to Dr. Jiang, this is much more than a list of translators and their works, it is the story of a meeting of civilizations. It is the story of me and of you, the reader.

The "exotic Oriental" has been a concept that for centuries has conjured visions in the Western imagination of stately pagodas, incense, Golden Buddhas, sheer silks, spices, pearls, and mysterious potions. In particular, the Chinese have long been viewed as "inscrutable," "unpredictable," and "unfathomable." "Chinese"—any one of the hundreds of languages or dialects spoken in what have been territories under Chinese jurisdiction—has been judged by many Westerners as "impenetrable." But today, at the time of the publication of this book, Mandarin Chinese is being studied and spoken by a greater number of Westerners than ever before. China is on the rise, and interest in the Middle Kingdom is exploding all over the globe. Fascinated by the beauty of Chinese characters, tempted by the many delicacies of Chinese cuisine, and allured by other Asian delights, Westerners have long desired to commune with the East, but have been put off by the difficulties of communication and engagement. How does one foster a relationship with a person that he or she cannot understand? And how can one understand the "Other" without direct contact or study? Until quite recently, travel to Asia was limited, difficult, expensive, and, in certain cases, potentially dangerous. In the realm of study, yet another complicating factor was, until recently, the inability to access easily resources to learn about Eastern languages and cultures, even if one was interested.

How, then, did Westerners of the English-speaking world learn about China? In an act of faith, they had to rely on the accounts of those who had gone to the East and had communicated their impressions in writing: merchants, missionaries, diplomats, academics, and occasional travelers. Of these, perhaps the three best

known were the Venetian merchant and eventual diplomat Marco Polo (1254–1324), the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), and the American novelist Pearl S. Buck (1892–1973). Others, of course, had published accounts of their journeys and work in China, but very few of these accounts had ever caught enough of the attention of the English-speaking public to reach a broad swath of a general readership.

Western interest in China was not purely aesthetic. For centuries, the most vibrant trade route in the world, the Silk Road, had been the link between West and East. Western contacts with the East, and especially with China, had mostly been indirect, through the services of middlemen along the vast routes leading from Venice and Constantinople into the Holy Land, Arabia, Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and, eventually, China, or, conversely, along shipping routes that connected the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean with land routes that ran through India into China. By the nineteenth century, Western nations tired of intermediaries and progressively insisted upon open access to Chinese markets, at first reluctantly abiding by Qing restrictions that limited trade to be conducted through the port of Canton (Guangdong), but then continuously forcing their way militarily into the interior of the nation. Greater contact between Western and Chinese governmental and civil entities saw a multiplication of officials to mediate affairs, giving increasing numbers of Westerners the opportunity either to visit China, or, more often, to live and work in China, something which had not generally been possible for previous generations of non-Chinese. Greater numbers of foreign functionaries in Chinese territory also required greater numbers of Western support personnel, and while the Qing attempted to confine them to foreign districts, a proliferation of communication and commerce could not be stemmed. Chinese merchants craved trade relations as much as Westerners did. Western diplomats and missionaries were being posted throughout the Chinese empire in cities such as Tianjin, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Hankou, Jiujiang, Ningbo, and Xiamen, among many others, and were often spending large portions of their careers living in China.

While the “Orient” may still have seemed distant in Western minds, world events were drawing East and West closer together. As had so very often been the case in world history, merchants had gone first, followed by armies, diplomats, and missionaries. In this intriguing study, Dr. Lan Jiang takes us on a fascinating journey of cultural contact and assimilation that started in the sixteenth century with the Jesuits’ attempt to build intellectual bridges between China and Europe. Spearheaded at first by the work of Italian, Portuguese, and German Jesuits, it was eventually the work of the French Jesuits who, through their prolific publications, fostered curiosity about the Middle Kingdom in fellow Europeans. Interest spread in secular circles in France as well, and, as Dr. Jiang shows, by the early nineteenth century the first Chair of Chinese Studies was established at the prestigious Collège de France, marking the birth of the modern science of sinology. Interest spread to other European nations, and by the mid-nineteenth century, the United Kingdom, which had lagged somewhat in the scientific study of China, was also becoming fully engaged in the realms of trade and diplomacy. Dr. Jiang demonstrates clearly and carefully that, as Westerners slowly became more familiar with Chinese life,

language, and, eventually, culture, they became increasingly interested in the greatness of Chinese civilization and wanted to share their discoveries with other English speakers who did not have the experience or the knowledge to access the great cultural treasures of China.

Skillfully, Dr. Jiang charts the gradual but steady growth of knowledge and understanding of Chinese language and culture in the English-speaking world, as British sinologists, both amateur and professional, advanced into more sophisticated levels of insight and appreciation. Such is the story of the various British diplomatic translators and missionary publishers such as Joseph Edkins (1823–1905), Edward H. Parker (1849–1936), and Herbert A. Giles (1845–1935), who wrote grammars of the Chinese language, compiled dictionaries, translated literary, historical, philosophical, and religious texts, and started academic journals to share their findings. Similar activities were being conducted by sinological counterparts from the United States, such as Samuel Wells Williams (1812–1884) and William Alexander Persons Martin (1827–1916), and, as Dr. Jiang points out, sinology was growing into an important area of study in America, as was demonstrated by the establishment of East Asian Studies Departments at universities across the United States, including, Yale, Columbia, Harvard, and the University of California at Berkeley.

While Westerners may have been ignorant of specific elements of Chinese greatness, there had never been question that China did possess one of the great civilizations of the world. Of the many dynasties of China, one in particular, the Tang (618–907 C.E.) has always been judged by scholars of Chinese history to be the “Golden Age” of Chinese cultural life and production. Celebrated especially for its outstanding poetic creation, the Tang dynasty boasted many of the finest poets in the history of China. Within China, these writers had been extolled as among the finest representatives of Chinese thought and the Chinese spirit, but outside the nation, they were barely known. Interestingly, it would be classical Chinese poetry that would serve as perhaps the greatest vehicle of intercultural communication between China and the English-speaking world, and, as Dr. Jiang shows so convincingly, it was Tang poetry that would have an enormous influence on the culture of that world in ways that were unexpected.

What constitutes a good translation? One of the most intriguing aspects of Dr. Jiang’s work is her overview of the theories of translation pursued by each translator, and, through abundant comparisons and deep analysis, she adroitly tells each sinologist’s personal story as it is evinced in his or her work. Every translation is an act of personal investment, and, as Dr. Jiang underscores so beautifully, it is this manifestation of self that is actually an attempt to establish a deep communication between the translator and the original Tang poet. What is more, this personal revelation of the translator also acted as a bridge between the Tang poet, the translator, and those who read the translation. In short, Dr. Jiang traces a series of relationships, not just of those between the poet and the public with which he or she wished to connect, but also between the translator who is searching to make a spiritual connection with the poet, and the general public, which is also longing for a closer connection with China and its people.



Finally, in one of the most fascinating contributions of her study, Dr. Jiang charts the concrete ways in which Tang poetry inspired Western authors in the creation of their own works. Discussing in detail the cases of Alfred Cranmer-Byng (1872–1945), Arthur David Waley (1889–1966), Judith Gautier (1845–1917), and William John Bainbrigg Fletcher (1879–1933), among many others, Dr. Jiang traces how translations of Tang poetry came to have a significant impact on literary culture in the English-speaking world. It is well known that Ezra Pound was deeply influenced by Tang poetry; however, fewer readers may have recognized the profound impact that Tang poetry had on the work of poets Florence Ayscough (1878–1942) and Amy Lowell (1874–1925). Perhaps the most surprising effect of the diffusion of English translations of Tang poetry was the role it played in the renewal of American poetry by inspiring poets such as the Modernist William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), and Kenneth Rexroth (1905–1982) and Gary Snyder (1930–), two of the major poets of the San Francisco Renaissance and the Beat Generation.

But what of the future of Tang poetry translation in the English-speaking world today? Dr. Jiang's *tour de force* reminds us that the study and translation of Tang poetry in the English-speaking world is becoming increasingly sophisticated, professional, and widespread. As China and the English-speaking world move closer together in the areas of trade, diplomacy, and culture, more and more nonspecialists, like myself, who still have a deep and enduring interest in China and its people, will be able to benefit—and learn—from the more accurate and more conveniently available resources that will make the Chinese language and Chinese culture more accessible. Dr. Jiang's groundbreaking work is just such an admirable contribution to this worthy enterprise and, as I found, holds a multitude of intellectual surprises and delights.

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