



ACCEPTANCE AND TRANSLATION OF LI BAI'S POETRY IN EUROPE AND AMERICA UNTIL AROUND THE 1990S

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Abstract:

Li Bai's poetry is the highest embodiment of poetry in the Tang dynasty. Its introduction and translation to Europe and America is one of the classic models of the spread of Chinese classic culture to the Western world. In about three hundred years' spreading Westwards, the poetic thought and vitality in his poems have been transmitted, extended and sublimated in heterogeneous cultures. This article comprehensively and systematically studies the translation history and transmission process of Li Bai's poems in America and some major European countries like Britain, France, Germany, Russia, etc. until around the 1990s. It aims to summarize the ways and characteristics of Li Bai's poetry going to the West and to find out its influence on the Western world from a more comprehensive and objective perspective, helping people to better understand the spread of Li Bai's poetry and Chinese classic culture to the West, and enlarging the overseas influence of Chinese classic culture.

Keywords: Li Bai; English translation of Tang poetry; Europe; America; Chinese poetry

1. Introduction

Li Bai (701–762), also known as Li Po, courtesy name Taibai, is one of the most outstanding poets in the Tang dynasty of China distinguishing himself as the “Poetry Immortal” and “Poet Knight-Errant”. He was acclaimed from his own day to the present as a genius and a romantic figure who took traditional poetic forms to new heights. Admired by the world, this extraordinarily brilliant poet who wrote hundreds of immortal poems in his life has exerted profound and continuous influence on the world literature through the ages.

Li Bai's poetry is elegant and vigorous in words, rich in imagination and varied in imageries and hailed as an artistic treasure in the Chinese and world literature. Du Fu's poetic lines “*His pen surprising wind and rain, / His poems make gods and ghosts weep*” are vivid in

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summarizing the high achievement of his poetry. For thousands of years, the academic circles have been continuously interpreting and explaining his poetry.

Since the eighteenth century, spanning time and space, Li Bai's poetry has resonated greatly in overseas heterogeneous cultures and civilizations. He has become the first few Chinese poets whose works were accepted by the Western world and made a great impact on it thereafter. In a sense, it is from Li Bai that Westerners began to know Chinese poetry and accept it. (Wang, 2002). Therefore, he plays an incomparable and irreplaceable role compared with other Chinese poets in the history of Chinese culture going to the West (Qin, 2003). In the past 100 years, the world-wide influence of Li Bai's poetry has never ceased attracting the interest and attention from scholars across cultures. If Chinese poetry is the authoritative representative of Chinese classic literature, Li Bai's poetry fully deserves to be called the embodiment of Chinese poetry. His works occupy an important position in world literature, constantly stimulating future generations to create new works.

2. The acceptance and translation of Li Bai's poetry in France

The French missionary Jean Joseph Marie Amiot, Chinese name Qian Deming, is said to be the first one who introduced Li Bai's poetry to the Western world (Wang, 1985). In 1735, the famous French scholar Jean-Baptiste Du Halde published a highly influential book entitled *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise, enrichie des cartes générales et particulières de ces pays, de la carte générale et des cartes particulières du Thibet, & de la Corée*. When discussing Chinese poetry, he occasionally mentioned Li Bai and Du Fu and commented that in the Tang dynasty, the poets Li Taibai and Du Zimei are parallel with Anacrone and Horace. This kind of comparison shows the Westerners' initial understanding of the character differences between Li Bai and Du Fu---the former is heroic and unconstrained while the latter objective and prudent.

In 1780, the French missionary Jean Joseph-Marie Amiot and others in the fifth volume in the *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, etc. les chinois par Les missionnaires de Pékin* specifically introduced Li Bai's life. In 1862, the French sinologist Marquis d'Hervey-Saint-Denys published his book *Poésies de L'époque des Thang*, the earliest French translation monograph on the Tang poetry. The book selected a total of 97 poems from 35 poets of the Tang dynasty, ranking Li Bai the first and his poems the top in number (32 poems) among all. Ancient Chinese poetry has become popular in France and throughout Europe since then, which was greatly attributed to the contributions of Marquis d' Hervey de S. Denys.

The famous French aesthetic poet Judith Gautier published the collection of translated Chinese poetry---*Le Livre de Jade* in 1867. She commented that Li Bai wrote poems in a concise and unique way---the most difficult one that he could handle with ease. He is good at adopting a bizarre and colorful writing style and selecting images rich in citation, implication and irony. Collected in the book are 19 poems from Li Bai, ranking first in number. Most of his selected poems were short but beautiful and rhythmical (Qin, 2003).

At the end of the first half of the last century, Patricia Guillermaz translated 22 poems of Li Bai and included them in *Poésie Chinoise*. In 1964, Paul Demiéville (1894-1979), a French sinologist published in *Anthologie de la poésie chinoise Classique*, a total of 106 poems from 40 poets

of the Tang dynasty such as Li Bai, Du Fu and Bai Juyi. This book has aroused great repercussions, greatly promoting the spread of Tang poetry to France and starting a new upsurge in the translation and research of the Tang poetry in France in the 20th century.

3. Acceptance and translation of Li Bai's poetry in the UK

The eighteenth-century Britain lacked the ability to conduct independent research on China. Its knowledge about China was mainly through France; therefore, the study of Sinology in Britain was at an undeveloped stage and only a little bit of information about Li Bai was available at that time.

In 1761, Thomas Percy compiled and published the first English version of Chinese novel *Hau Kiou Choaan* or *The Pleasing History* translated by James Wilkinson. On a blank page of the manuscript of this book, James Wilkinson wrote down five outstanding Chinese poets he knew, with Li Bai the first in the name list, and the time was in 1720. This list was printed on the end page of the reprint book *Hau Kiou Choaan* in 1774. Around 1780, British poet John Scott created a long poem entitled "Li-Po; or The Good Governor: A Chinese Eclogue" to study Li Bai, but his findings are quite unmatched with the poet's real image (Gao and Zhang, 2015). Although the studies and English versions of Li Bai's poems were few and far during the eighteenth century, the sporadic mentions of the poet Li Bai in some records have undoubtedly not only played a tentative role in translating and disseminating his poetry in Britain, but also laid a good foundation for the upsurge of his poetry in Britain in the following decades.

In the 19th century, the translation activities of Li Bai's poetry began to sprout and gradually developed in the UK. During this period, the number of researchers grow steadily, and the identity of translators are varied. The poems selected for translation are mainly popular and short ones, but diverse in style, giving British readers a chance to enjoy and appreciate the charm of Li Bai's poetry and the profoundness of Chinese classical culture (Gao and Zhang, 2015). Sir John Francis Davis (1795-1890), a British diplomat and sinologist, in his *Chinese Poetry* translated Li Bai's poems, which were widely read by Western readers. His translation of "The Inlet of Peach Blossoms" (original title "Gift to Wang Lun") is included in his book *On the Poetry of the Chinese* (Wang, 1985).

Among the British missionary sinologists, Joseph Edkin (1823-1905) has made an outstanding contribution to the translation of Li Bai's poems. In 1888 in *China Review*, he published a review called "Li Taibai as a Poet", in which he translated Li Bai's two poems "Yóu Nányáng Báishuǐ Dēng Shíjī Zuò" (Written after Climbing Mt. Stone Surge when Visiting the White Water at Nanyang) and "Yóu Nányáng Qīnglíngquán (A Visit to the Clear Cold Fountain at Nanyang)". This article involves not only his translation but also explanation of Li Bai's poems and allusions. He appraised Li Bai's poetry as soul-stirring and breath-taking comparable with those of Wordsworth, the great romantic "Lake poet" of the United Kingdom. In 1889, he completed another article "On Li T'ai Po, With an Example of His Poetry" to analyze and appreciate the translations of Li Bai's 22 works such as "Jing Ye Si" (Quiet Night Thought) and "Duzuo Jingtingshan" (Sitting Alone at Jingting Mountain). He reaffirmed Li Bai's unique artistic writing style by calling him "the greatest poet of China", and highly praised the strong passions and unconstrained personalities in his poems (Jiang, 2018).

Herbert A. Giles (1845-1935), who had the greatest impact on the spread of Tang poetry to the West, systematically translated Tang poetry and introduced it to the scholars in the English-speaking world. He translated and published *Chinese Poetry in English Verse* (1898), which includes nearly 200 poems from 102 ancient Chinese poets in dynasty order, with 21 poems from Li Bai, the most selected poet. In short, the translating of Li Bai's poems in Britain in the 19th century has undoubtedly played a positive role in the dissemination of Li Bai's poetry and Chinese classical culture in the English world and even the whole Western world.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the West world has set off a new Sinology craze, marking the appearance of the first climax of Tang poetry translation. The translation of Li Bai's poetry has started a rising trend in the UK, and research on Li Bai and his poems becomes more diversified. In addition to the translations of his poems, more attention has been paid to the analysis of his poems and his life experience. At the beginning of the twentieth century, *A History of Chinese Literature* (1901) compiled by Herbert A. Giles included Li Bai's 9 masterpieces. He insists that Li Bai's poems should be translated into metrical verses, which can help better express poet's feelings and convey the exotic culture in his poems (Dang, 2012).

William John Bainbridge Fletcher (1871-1933) compiled his first dynastic English-Chinese collection of Tang poetry *Gems of Chinese Verse* (The Commercial Press, 1919), in which Li Bai's 36 poems are found. In 1925, Fletcher's *More Gems of Chinese Verse* (Commercial Press) was published in English and Chinese languages, with detailed notes and some excerpts from English poems. This book has been reprinted many times and has a significant influence on the English world. It includes a total of 105 poems, including Li Bai's 17 poems, Du Fu's 30 poems, and 58 poems by 28 other poets (Jiang, 2018). In these two books, Fletcher selected a total of 286 Tang poems for translation. The scope of his selected poems is wider than that of *300 Tang Poems*. His extensive and systematic translation of Tang poems signaled the successful transition from the sporadic to the systematic translation of Tang poetry (Jiang, 2018). In a sense, the two books can be rightly regarded as milestones in the introduction of Tang poetry to the English-speaking world.

The famous British sinologist L. A. Cranmer-Byng (1872-1945) translated a large number of Chinese poems in his *A Lute of Jade* (London, 1911), *A Feast of Lanterns* (London, 1924), and *Asian Grand View: An Interpretation of Chinese Art* (London, 1932), in which Li Bai's poems were included and translated accurately in meaning and beautifully in form.

Another famous English orientalist and sinologist, Arthur Waley (1888-1966) achieved both popular and scholarly acclaim for his translations of Chinese poetry. He is called "the great transmitter of the high literary cultures of China to the English-reading general public; the ambassador from East to West in the first half of the 20th century" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Waley). He devoted his life to translating oriental literature, with special focus on Tang poems. In *The Poet Li Bai* (1919) and *More Translations from the Chinese* (1919), he translated 23 and 6 of Li Bai's poems respectively. His book *The Poetry and Career of Li Po* was published in 1950 (Wang, 1991), in which many of Li Bai's poems were selected. The poet's life experiences as well as his poetic creation were fully discussed and much knowledge about Tang history and Chinese culture was introduced in detail as well. The book is evaluated as one of the most important books introducing Li Bai to the English world, ushering Li Bai's research development in the Western world to a new stage. Since its publication in 1950, the book has received rave reviews and has

been re-published consecutively, which greatly promoted the spread of Li Bai's poetry in the English world (Gao & Zhang, 2015).

In short, the British scholars in the 20th century did not reduce their research interest in Li Bai. The number of translations increased, the translation quality was improved, and the research content was more abundant. The translation strategies gradually shift from the choice between literal translation and free translation to the discussion between metrical translation and free translation. The English translation of Li Bai's poems at this stage has a profound impact on the West and even the whole world in terms of language, mentality and morality.

4. Acceptance and Translation of Li Bai's Poetry in Germany

It is at the end of the 19th century when Germany began to study Li Bai and his works. In the book *Beiträge zur Chinesische Poesie* by C. A. Florenz published in 1889, there are 12 translations of Li Bai's poems. In 1899, in his book *Blüthen Chinesischer Dichtung*, Alfred Forke translated 27 poems of Li Bai.

At the beginning of the 20th century, German scholars published many translations of Tang poetry, including Hans Heilmann's book *Chinesischen Lyrik: vom 12 Jahrhundert v. Chr. bis zur Gegenwart* with 24 translated versions of Li Bai's poems. The translations of Li Bai's poems are also found in Otto Hauser's *Li-Tai-Po, Chinesische Gedichte, 1* included in *Aus fremden Gärten 1* published in 1906, with 26 poems from Li Bai. More translations of Li Bai's poems can be found in such books as Hans Bethge's *Die Chinesische Flöte* published in 1907 (15 poems), Otto Hauser's *Die Chinesische Dichtung* published in 1921 (6 poems), and Klabund's *Gesammelte Nachdichtungen, China, Japan, Persien* published in 1930 (43 poems). Moreover, Hans Schiebelhurth in his *Gedichte nach den unsterblichen des Li-Tai-Po*, Kurt Eggers in *Herz im Osten, der Roman Li Taipés des Dichters*, etc. all involve translating Li Bai's poems.

After the World War II, there appeared constant studies on Li Bai's poems, among which are Carl Albert Lange's *Der Pavillon aus Porzellan; Li-Tai-Pe'spiegelgedicht in zwölfwacher Abwandlung* published in 1946; Erich von Becherath's *Balladen um Li Tai-pe* published in 1947; Hans Schiebelhurth's *Gedichte: Nach den unsterblichen des Li-Tai-Po* published in 1948. Gunther Debon's *Li Tai-bo Gedichte: Eine Auswahl* in 1962 including his translations of Li Bai's 56 poems (Wang, 1991).

5. Acceptance and Translation of Li Bai's Poetry in Russia

The history of Tang poetry transmission in Russia has undergone about a hundred years, dating back to the year 1880 when the Russian sinologist Васильев В.П. (1818-1900) finished his book *Очерк истории китайской литературы*, the first Chinese literature in Russia and in the field of Sinology across the world. This book, for the first time, took Li Bai and other Chinese poets like Sima Xiangru, Du Fu and Su Dongpo into the Russian culture (Li, 2016). In 1911, Russian sinologist Vasilii Alekseev (1881-1951) published his translations of Li Bai's poems from the Chinese language in *Poetry in "Prose of the Poet Li Bo: in Praise of Nature"*.

Since the 1950s, the translation of Li Bai's poems has gradually been developing in the Soviet Union. Николай Трофимович Федоренко and А. Gitovich are important figures in

translating Li Bai's poems, whose translations are popular among Russians at that time. In the 1980s, the study of Li Bai's poetry peaked in the Soviet Union, and many Russian sinologists come to study and translate Li Bai's poetry.

6. Acceptance and Translation of Li Bai's Poetry in the US

In the over 100 years between the early 19th century and the beginning of 20 century, American poetry and literature were largely influenced by British and European literature. In 1890, American poet Stuart Merrill translated from French to English Li Bai's poems in *Le Livre de Jade* (*The Book of Jade*) by Judith Gautier. In 1894, the American missionary William Alexander Parsons Martin (1827-1916) published in his book *Chinese Myths and Legends and Miscellaneous Poems* Li Bai's three poems including "Changgan Xing (A Soldier's Wife to Her Husband)", "Yuexia Duzhuo 1 (On Drinking Alone by Moonlight I)", "Xinglu Nan (Traveling Is Hard)", which made him an early sinologist to translate Tang Poetry and Li Bai's poems in America. His translation of "The Troubles of a Traveler" is collected in the book *Eighteen Capitals of China* by W. E. Geil.

From the early 20th century to the 1930s, Sinology was quietly emerging in the United States, together with the translation of Tang poetry. Influenced by Chinese ancient poetry, American Imagist poetry was born, aiming to get rid of the limitations of traditional poetry in terms of content, form and structure, such as the over-emphasis on the form and structure of poetry, and affectation in content. The imagery poets represented by Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell translated a large number of Chinese ancient poems including Li Bai's poems, which played an important role in the research of Li Bai and the dissemination of his poems in the United States.

Ezra Pound's *Cathay* (1915) includes Li Bai's English translated poems such as "Yùjiēyuàn" (The Jewel Stairs Grievance), "Jiāng Shàngyín (The River Song)", "Sóng Mèng Hàoràn zhī Guǎnglíng (Separation on the River Kiang)", "Sóng yǒurén (Taking Leave of a Friend)", "Sóng yǒurén rùshǔ" (Leave-Taking near Shoku), and "Dēng jīnlíng fēnghuǒtái (The City of Choan). In 1921, Amy Lowell published *Fir-Flower Tablets* including nearly 150 English translations of Chinese poems, among which are Li Bai's 80 poems (Chen, 2013). In addition, Witter Bynner and Kiang Kanghu's book *The Jade Mountain: Being Three Hundred Poems of the Tang Dynasty* (1929) included translations of Li Bai's 24 poems.

In 1922, *Li Po: the Chinese Poet* translated by the sojourner scholar in America Shigeyoshi Obata (1888-1971) was published by E. P. Dutton & Co. The book including Li Bai's 124 poems is an integration of translation, research and poetry, providing a full picture for the Western readers to get close to Li Bai and his poems in a more complete way. The book has a great historical significance in that it reflects the recognition of Li Bai's literary status in the English world. Roger Soame Jenyns' (1904-1976) two books -- *Selected from the Three Hundred Poems of the T'ang Dynasty* published in 1940 and *A Further Selection from the Three Hundred Poems of the T'ang Dynasty* published in 1944 in London respectively included 11 and 9 poems of Li Bai. (Wang, 2002.)

The time since the 1950s on in the United States once again witnessed a surge of Chinese poetry translation. Between the 1970s and 1980s, the United States has become the center of translation and research of Tang poetry in the Western world. Its research has continued to this

day, and the translation of Li Bai's poetry is also one of its research interests. The interest in the translation of Li Bai's poems never fade away. In D. G. Frodsham's *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century* and Arthur Cooper's (1916 - 1988) *Li Po and Tu Fu* (1979) many translations of Li Bai's poems can be found.

L. Fusek translated and published *Among the Flowers* in 1982 and Stephen Owen's *Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* published in 1996 involve research and translation of Li Bai's poetry. Undoubtedly, the prevalence of Li Bai's poetry in the United States has not only provided a new perspective and rich nourishment for American modern and contemporary poetry in the past over one hundred years, but also transmitted the profound Chinese cultural heritage to the United States.

7. Conclusion

Li Bai's poetry is a bright pearl in Chinese national literature. It has been shining for thousands of years and widely disseminated and translated in the world for hundreds of years. Li Bai's poetry not only has an impact on world poetry and literature but has even played a positive role in national values, as Arthur Waley says in his book *The Poetry and Career of Li Po*: "As a result of two Wars that have devastated the World men and women everywhere feel a twofold need. We need deeper understanding and appreciation of other peoples and their cultures, especially their moral and spiritual achievements" (Waley, 1950: VII).

As a matter of fact, Li Bai's poetry can be widely translated into a variety of languages and accepted by different ethnic groups, spreading in different countries around the world. With the change of time, the research and positioning of Li Bai's poetry will continue to change, Li Bai's poetry will continue to be further explored and interpreted, and the achievements will surely become a valuable world cultural heritage and treasure.

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