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Mentor, Translator, and Cultural Bearer: A Study on *English Translation of Poems from the Tang and Song Dynasties* Edited by Professor Wan Xuemei

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Abstract: *English Translation of Poems from the Tang and Song Dynasties*, co-compiled by Professor Wan Xuemei and American scholar Frederick Turner, represents a prominent academic achievement in the English translation of classical Chinese poetry in recent years. Adopting a collaborative model between Chinese and foreign scholars and adhering to the core principle of rendering poetic texts with poetic language, the translated work has developed distinctive features in conveying classical imagery, handling rhythm and rhyme, and interpreting cultural connotations. From the three identities of mentor, translator and cultural bearer, this paper examines the significance of the work in translation practice, cross-cultural communication and academic inheritance. It argues that the book provides a feasible collaborative approach for the translation of Chinese classics, effectively asserts the subjectivity of Chinese culture in cross-cultural dialogue, and constitutes a solid and successful attempt to promote the global transmission of excellent traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords: English translation of Tang and Song poetry; poetic translation; cultural transmission; translation practice; *English Translation of Poems from the Tang and Song Dynasties*; exchange and mutual learning among civilizations

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标题：师者·译者·传灯者——品读万雪梅教授主编《唐宋诗撷英新译》

摘要：万雪梅教授与美国学者弗雷德里克·特纳联手编译的《唐宋诗撷英新译》是近年来古典汉诗英译领域颇具代表性的学术成果。该译著采取中外学者协同合作的编撰模式，坚持以诗性语言传递诗性文本的核心原则，在古典意象传达、声韵节奏处理与文化内涵阐释等方面形成了独到的风格。从师者、译者、文化传灯者三重身份切入，分析该译著在翻译实践、文化对外传播与学术传承层面的意义，认为其为中华典籍的外译提供了一条可行的中西协作路径，在跨文化交流中有效彰显了中国文化的主体地位，是推动中华优秀传统文化海外传播的一次扎实而成功的尝试。

关键词：唐宋诗歌英译；诗性翻译；文化传播；翻译实践；《唐宋诗撷英新译》；文明交流互鉴

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1. Introduction

Translation is not merely a transformation of linguistic signs, but a dialogue and meaning exchange between different cultures, which plays an irreplaceable role in cross-cultural communication (Munday, 2016). Against the background of the internationalization of excellent traditional Chinese culture, the translation of Chinese classics has become an important dimension of civilizational dialogue and the construction of cultural subjectivity, rather than mere linguistic conversion. In recent years, studies on the English translation of Tang and Song poetry have gradually moved beyond the single approach of literal translation and attached greater importance to cultural transfer and the communication of spiritual values. The academic circle no longer takes “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” as the sole criterion, but pays more attention to whether translations carry the cultural genes of the original poems and enable English readers to appreciate the vastness of “the lone smoke rising straight in the desert” and the delicate sentiment of “missing one’s family all the more on festive days”. After more than ten years of cross-cultural dialogue and academic refinement, Professor Wan Xuemei and American scholar Frederick Turner have jointly completed *English Translation of Poems from the Tang and Song Dynasties*¹.

This translation avoids the cultural barriers commonly found in Western translators and remedies the occasionally stiff English expressions of Chinese translators. With an integrated Chinese-foreign collaborative model, it constructs a multicultural dialogue arena for the global dissemination of Chinese classics (Gao & Liu, 2025), and offers significant reference value for general readers, translation researchers, and teachers and students in comparative literature.

2. The Style of a Mentor: Mutual Nourishment Between Teaching Practice and Classic Compilation

Professor Wan Xuemei is a scholar long devoted to frontline teaching. As Professor and PhD Supervisor at the School of Foreign Languages, Jiangsu University, she has long taken cultural inheritance as her academic

¹ Wan Xuemei, Frederick Turner (2024). *English Translation of Poems from the Tang and Song Dynasties*. Nanjing: Southeast University Press. Following citations will only indicate page numbers without further explanation.

mission. In courses such as Comparative Literature and English Novel Studies, she does not confine herself to one-way knowledge delivery, but guides students to perceive the unique character of Chinese culture through the comparison of Chinese and Western cultures. This pedagogical philosophy naturally permeates her compilation and translation of classical works.

Teaching and research reinforce each other in her academic practice. *English Translation of Poems from the Tang and Song Dynasties* provides Hanyu Pinyin for each poem, a detail that duly considers the needs of foreign learners and beginners of Chinese, lowering the threshold for approaching classical poetry and enabling more readers interested in Chinese culture to engage with canonical works. Such a reader-oriented design reflects her years of teaching experience. Meanwhile, she often brings insights from the translation process into the classroom and employs translated poems as teaching materials, realizing interactive integration of research and teaching. This translated work is both an academic output and a practice of cross-cultural education, embodying the principle that teaching and learning promote one another.

After years of research in comparative literature and cross-cultural studies, Professor Wan Xuemei came to understand that differences between Chinese and Western cultures lie not merely in vocabulary, but fundamentally in modes of thinking and aesthetic visions. After extensive discussion, she and Turner reached a consensus: translating classical Chinese poetry into English is not a mere linguistic substitution, but the harmonious coexistence of two ways of perceiving the world and experiencing beauty (Wan & Qian, 2019).

This idea became the guiding principle of the translation: never force Chinese poetry into the metrical framework of Western poetry, nor rigidly replicate Chinese parallel structures. Instead, it follows the natural rhythm of English and strives to preserve the flavour and artistic conception of the original poem. Such an equal, respectful and uncompromising attitude enables the translation to retain the authenticity of the original while remaining natural and coherent.

3. The Wisdom of a Translator: Translation Practice in a Cross-cultural Perspective

The most distinctive feature of *English Translation of Poems from the Tang and Song Dynasties* is its collaborative translation by Chinese and foreign scholars. Grounded in Chinese culture, Professor Wan Xuemei takes overall charge of poem selection, cultural interpretation and structural design. With his sensitivity as an English native poet, Turner conveys the poetic essence in authentic and lyrical English.

3.1 Innovation in the Compilation and Translation Model

Professors Wan and Turner leverage their respective strengths: upholding the cultural core of Chinese poetry while ensuring natural and idiomatic English. This model largely reduces misunderstandings arising from the cultural limitations of a single translator, who may either misinterpret the source culture or adopt excessive domestication to cater to target readers, resulting in the loss of cultural connotations (Venuti, 1995).

For a long time, classical Chinese translation has faced two typical dilemmas: Chinese translators produce culturally accurate but occasionally stiff English; Western translators write fluently yet often misread Chinese culture. This collaborative work effectively addresses both problems. Turner captures the poetic core and composes in line with the aesthetic habits of English readers; Professor Wan supervises the cultural dimension

and corrects potential distortions in imagery and context. Taking Wang Wei's "desert lone smoke" as an instance, the translation (p. 24) correctly interprets "smoke" not as ordinary cooking smoke, retains the core scene of desert, solitude and sunset glow, and achieves a smooth and natural English rhythm, which directly illustrates the merits of the collaborative model.

3.2 Choice of Translation Strategies

The whole work adheres to the principle of "translating poetry with poetry": employing English poetic forms to convey the artistic conception and spirit of classical Chinese poetry, rather than mechanical word-for-word correspondence. In handling imagery, the translation retains distinctively Chinese symbols such as red beans, bright moon, frontier fortress and Peach Blossom Spring without replacing them with Western equivalents, allowing readers to experience the unique charm of Chinese imagery directly. For potentially ambiguous terms such as "bed" in *Quiet Night Thought*, the translation makes appropriate adjustments without impairing poetic flavour (p. 44), avoiding modern misinterpretation and conveying imagery with greater precision.

In terms of prosody, given the phonetic differences between Chinese and English, the translation does not rigidly copy Chinese tonal patterns, parallelism or rhyme schemes, but organises sentences in accordance with English stress patterns, so that the rhythm resonates with the emotional tone of the original poem. The crispness of Du Fu's quatrains, the serenity of Wang Wei's landscape poems, and the forthrightness of Li Bai's farewell poems are all appropriately reflected in prosodic arrangements.

For allusions, customs and cultural emotions embedded in poetry, the translation adopts an approach that is implicit but not obscure, integrating cultural connotations into verses naturally without redundant annotations or explicit elaboration. Distinctively Chinese expressions such as "climbing heights on the Double Ninth Festival" are rendered implicitly, enabling readers to grasp underlying cultural meanings while appreciating poetic beauty without consulting extra materials.

3.3 Analysis of Translation Examples

Example 1: Wang Wei, *Autumn Evening in the Mountains*

English Translation: The mountain's empty after fresh rain, / Autumn permeates evening air; / A bright moon's shining through the needled pine, / Among the stones the spring flows pure and clear. (Original Chinese: 空山新雨后, 天气晚来秋。明月松间照, 清泉石上流。) (p. 30)

The translation preserves all core images: empty mountain, fresh rain, bright moon, pine trees, clear spring and stones. The language is concise and unadorned, retaining the original scene without imposing Western rhetoric. "Empty" echoes the tranquillity of the "empty mountain"; "permeates" captures the spreading aura of autumn, consistent with the quiet harmony pursued in Chinese landscape poetry. The rhythm is gentle and natural without forced rhyming, matching the serene and tranquil mood of the original.

Example 2: Du Fu, *Happy Rain on a Spring Night*

English Translation: A good rain knows the season when it's right, / In spring, on time, it makes things sprout and grow. / Follow the wind, sneak out into the night; / All moist things whisper silently and slow. (Original Chinese: 好雨知时节, 当春乃发生。随风潜入夜, 润物细无声。) (p. 97)

The translation centres on key images including spring rain, night wind and all living creatures. “Sneak out” vividly depicts the quiet arrival of rain; “whisper silently and slow” reproduces the gentle quality of rain nourishing all things. The appreciation of spring rain rooted in agrarian culture is conveyed implicitly rather than explicitly. The alternation of long and short sentences and varied stress create a soft and steady rhythm, consistent with the fine, silent nature of spring rain.

Example 3: Li Bai, *To Wang Lun*

English Translation: Li Bai has got aboard his boat, his journey will be long; / Upon the bank he hears the sound of footsteps and of song. / The Peach-Tree Lake is deep, so deep, a thousand feet wellnigh, / But not as deep as Wang Lun’s heart as he bids me goodbye. (Original Chinese: 李白乘舟将欲行，忽闻岸上踏歌声。桃花潭水深千尺，不及汪伦送我情。) (p. 43)

The translation retains iconic scenes such as boating, singing on the bank and Peach-Tree Lake; “Peach-Tree Lake” maintains its cultural connotation; “footsteps and of song” recreates the traditional singing custom. The metaphor of deep pool for profound friendship is strengthened by the repetition of “deep”. The rhyme scheme (long/song, wellnigh/goodbye) conforms to English poetic conventions, lending musicality to the lines and conveying sincerity and boldness.

4. The Responsibility of a Cultural Bearer: Cultural Transmission and Academic Value

In this book, Professor Wan Xuemei demonstrates not only the care of an educator and the expertise of a translator, but also the consciousness and commitment of a “cultural lamp-bearer”. What she undertakes is not a mere linguistic conversion of Chinese poetry, but the transmission of the spiritual core and aesthetic charm of classical poetry across linguistic boundaries, so that readers around the world can perceive and appreciate them.

In cultural transmission, the book is gentle yet resolute: it neither caters to Western tastes nor imposes Chinese values, but presents the landscape conception, human warmth and reflections on life in Chinese poetry through natural and poetic expressions for English readers. As they read, they can naturally perceive the aesthetic ideal of “harmony between man and nature”, the value of loyalty and affection, and the love for nature in Chinese culture (Wan & Qian, 2019), and gradually understand and embrace Chinese culture through aesthetic resonance. More importantly, it consistently stands on the position of Chinese culture, fully preserving the cultural root and spiritual temperament of poetry, clearly asserting the subjectivity of Chinese culture in cross-cultural dialogue, and presenting overseas readers with an authentic, gentle and profound Chinese civilisation.

Academically and practically, *English Translation of Poems from the Tang and Song Dynasties* carries remarkable value. In translation practice, the in-depth Chinese-foreign collaboration strikes a balance between cultural authenticity and linguistic fluency, avoiding cultural misreading and stiff expressions, and provides a replicable paradigm for the translation of classical poetry and more Chinese classics. In academic research, it breaks the previous pattern centred on Western translators and offers new texts and perspectives for the study of Chinese-foreign collaborative translation and cross-cultural poetics. Furthermore, the work can be directly

applied to translation teaching and talent development, transforming practical experience into teaching resources, facilitating the positive interaction between cultural inheritance and academic research, and continuously accumulating experience for the translation of Chinese classics.

5. Conclusion

English Translation of Poems from the Tang and Song Dynasties, polished by Professor Wan Xuemei and Professor Turner, is a professionally rigorous and humanely warm translated work. Guided by the core idea of “translating poetry with poetic language”, it achieves high fidelity in restoring imagery, shaping rhythm and conveying cultural connotations. Supported by the Chinese-foreign collaborative model, it paves a feasible and sustainable path for classical Chinese poetry to go global.

This book is not only a high-quality literary translation, but also a practical vehicle for cultural transmission. While promoting mutual visibility and learning among civilisations, it firmly establishes the subjectivity of Chinese culture and provides a tangible reference for academic research and teaching in classical translation. On the journey of spreading excellent traditional Chinese culture worldwide, such professional and warm translations uphold the authentic poetic nature of classical poetry and enable the millennia-old Eastern aesthetics to radiate unique charm in cross-cultural exchanges.

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