



# A Study on English Translation of Classical Chinese Poetry in T'ien Hsia Monthly

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**Abstract:** T'ien Hsia Monthly is an English academic journal founded by Chinese scholars in the Republican period, aiming at "introducing China to the West" and conveying Chinese culture. The "Translation" column is among the earliest academic journal column in modern China that systematically translated and introduced traditional Chinese culture, intellectual thought, and literary works, covering poem, fiction, drama, essay and other subjects, which is typical and exemplary. This paper focuses on the historical background of the English translation of classical Chinese poetry in T'ien Hsia Monthly, discussing translators' modes and strategies, as well as the transmission of Chinese culture in the process of translation studies.

**Keywords:** T'ien Hsia Monthly, Translation of Classical Chinese Poetry, translation studies

## 1. Introduction

T'ien Hsia Monthly was an English-language academic and cultural journal edited by Chinese scholars, published from August 1935 to September 1941 during the Republican period, producing a total of 56 issues. The title T'ien Hsia Monthly derives from Sun Yat-sen's ideology "the world belongs to all". It also reflects the enduring tradition of Chinese intellectuals to engage with issues ranging from family matters to national and global affairs (Wu Jingxiong, Wen Yuanning, et al., 2009:2). It included five academic column: Editorial Commentary, Article, Chronicle, Translation, and Book Review. Notably, the "Translation" column published translated works in genres such as fiction, poetry, and drama, making it among the earliest academic journal sections in China to engage in a large-scale effort to introduce Chinese culture, literature, and thought to the world.

Translating literature is often more complex than translating other types of texts, with poetry representing the most intricate form of literary translation. Employing appropriate diction and concise expression to convey the original meaning and evoke the poet's state of mind—thereby achieving the translation ideals of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance"—tests not only the translator's literary accomplishment but also their methods and strategies. This paper focuses on the English translations of classical Chinese poetry published in T'ien Hsia Monthly, exploring the translators' models and strategies and examining the diverse translation paradigms they employed within the context of cross-cultural communication.

## 2. Overview of Classical Chinese Poetry Translation in T'ien Hsia Monthly

Chinese poetry can be traced back to the Shijing (Classic of Poetry) and the Chu Ci (Songs from Chu), continued in Han Yuefu poems, and further developed through the folk songs of the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties. It subsequently entered its golden ages with Tang Shi (poetry from the Tang Dynasty) Song Ci (lyric poetry from the Song Dynasty), and Yuan qu (aria from the Yuan Dynasty), gradually transitioning into Ming and Qing dynasty poetry. The New Culture Movement later broke the formal constraints of classical Chinese poetry by advocating the "Modern Poetry and New Poetry". The term "classical Chinese poetry" in this study specifically refers to literary genres predating modern poetry. It does not include English translations of modern poems such as *The Serpent*, *The Dead Water*, *Souvenir*.

T'ien Hsia Monthly was initially published monthly, with a pause in June and July, resulting in ten issues per year. Every five issues published over a half-year period were compiled into a single volume. After August 1940, it was issued bimonthly, resulting in a total of 12 volumes. Following the publication of the first issue of Volume 12, the journal ceased operations due to the outbreak of the Pacific War, resulting in a total of 56 published issues. Teresa Li published a total of 142 translated poems across Volume 6, Issues 1 and 3 (1938), Volume 8, Issue 1, and Volume 9, Issue 3 (1939). H.H.Hu and Harold Acton collaboratively translated and published a collection of 9 poems by Su Tung-p'o (Su Shi) in Volume 8, Issue 2 (1939). N.L. Smith and R.H. Kotewall (also known as Lo Yuk-wo) jointly translated 24 poems in Volume 9, Issue 4 (1939). Different poetic forms, such as 5-character and 7-character quatrains, combined with various translation modes—including translations by single Chinese translators, by Chinese and foreign co-translators, and foreign co-translators—along with

diverse translation methods and strategic choices, resulted in translated texts imbued with distinct cultural nuances.

### 3. John C. H. Wu (under the alias of Teresa Li)

Between 1938 and 1939, John C. H. Wu published 142 translated classical poems in T'ien Hsia Monthly under the pen name of his wife, Teresa Li (also known as Li Youti) (Li Song & Shu Mengzhi, 2024:46). John C. H. Wu (1899-1986) was a renowned Chinese jurist who also made significant achievements in translation, producing English translations of works such as Draft Translation of the Psalms, the Daodejing (Tao Te Ching), and various texts from the Hundred Schools of Thought. His systematic translation of classic Chinese literary works in T'ien Hsia Monthly was deliberate and purposeful. His overarching goal as a translator was to present to the West a modern China that was both proactive and imbued with a long historical and cultural tradition, while also radiating a modern cultural vibrancy (Zhao Ying, 2013:5).

John C. H. Wu possessed a vast historical range in his work. He rendered works ranging from China's oldest anthology, Shijing (the Classic of Poetry), through the Sao-style poetry of the Chu-Han contention period, the five-character poetry of the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, and the celebrated poetry of the Tang and Song dynasties. His scope further extended to the ci poetry of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, and finally to Qing dynasty poetry, taoqu (suites), and jintishi (modern-form poetry). In terms of genre, his translations covered lüshi (regulated verse), jueju (quatrains), zayan (irregular line-length poetry), taoqu, sanqu (non-dramatic songs), and jintishi. Overall, the selection of poems achieved a basic balance across eras and poets. Notably, he translated 10 poems by the Tang poet Li Shangyin, 17 by Li Yu, the Later Emperor of Southern Tang, and 11 by the Qing poet Nalan Xingde, sufficient to demonstrate John C. H. Wu's particular esteem and fondness for their work.

In translating over a hundred poems, John C. H. Wu avoided pale literalism, instead adopting a characteristically liberal approach grounded in the poems' narratives — an approach particularly evident in his rendering of titles. For instance, in translating the same song title, Xijiangyue, used by four different Song Ci poets, he chose not rely on transliteration or a single English equivalent, but instead translated it variously as A Poem on Wine, Mid-Autumn, Two Recluses, and Enjoying Solitude, according to the overall content of each poem. When translating three of Nalan Xingde's ci to the tune "Caisangzi" (采桑子), he rendered their titles as Boredom, A Regret, and The Moon is Mocking Me. For two poems by Li Yu to the tune "Wang Jiangnan" (望江南) and the upper and lower stanzas of his "Wangjiangnan (Xian Meng Yuan)" (望江南·闲梦远), he translated the titles as A Dream, Tears, Endless Tears, Home Thoughts in Spring, and Home Thoughts in Autumn. For three of Li Yu's poems to the tune "Changxiangsi" (长相思), the titles were translated as Thinking of My Love, A Girl's Yearning, and Again!. The translation of the titles represents a highly condensed summary of the poem's overall content and essence of its emotion. John C. H. Wu eschewed a one-size-fits-all approach; instead using his sensitivity to the poetic content and his linguistic versatility to aid Western readers' understanding, fully demonstrating his literary proficiency and translation expertise.

Among the 142 poems translated by John C. H. Wu and published in T'ien Hsia Monthly, 47 were translations of Tang poetry, representing the largest proportion. His translations underscored the shared ground between Eastern and Western literature. To aid Western readers in better appreciating Tang poetry, he situated it within the broader context of world literature, revealing shared artistic expression and emotional resonance by setting Tang poets alongside outstanding Western poets. In terms of translation strategy, he broke free from the formal constraints of the original poems, employing modern English free verse. This approach reduced the sense of unfamiliarity for English readers towards classical Chinese poetry and enhanced its resonance with the Western poetic tradition. Let us take Li Shangyin's "Jinse" (锦瑟) as an example:

| Source text   | Translation text   |
|---|--|
| 锦瑟<br>李商隐<br>锦瑟无端五十弦，一弦一柱思华年。<br>庄生晓梦迷蝴蝶，望帝春心托杜鹃。<br>沧海月明珠有泪，蓝田日暖玉生烟。<br>此情可待成追忆，只是当时已惘然。 | The WEB OF LIFE<br>By Li Shang-yin(813-858)<br>The precious harp has fifty strings,<br>No more, no less.<br>How every string, every nut, evokes thoughts<br>Of my youthful days!<br>In his morning dreams, Master Chuang was metamorphosed<br>Into a butterfly!<br>The Spring heart of Prince Tu Yu of old still echoes<br>In the cuckoo's cry!<br>When the moon shines brightly on the murky sea,<br>Tears come from the pearls.<br>When the sun is warm, the jades of the Blue Fields<br>Send up smokes in curls.<br>A sudden glimpse into the mystery of mysteries flashed<br>Across my mind,<br>But its meaning escaped immediately, for like lightning<br>It struck me blind!<br>( Teresa Li, 1939:63 ) |

The original poem is a regulated verse (lǔshi) written in seven-character lines, concise in structure yet profound in meaning. Breaking free from the constraints of meter and rhyme, the translation unfolds in unrhymed free verse, where repetition amplifies emotional intensity, thus making it more accessible to target-language readers. Although John C. H. Wu adapted the poetic form and linguistic style to the aesthetic habits of Western readers, he nonetheless strove to preserve the aesthetic characteristic of the original—"conveying meaning through imagery" (立象尽意)—endeavoring to translate key images with fidelity wherever possible. For images involving allusions or historical references that lacked clear equivalents in the target culture, the translator tended to opt for universal imagery as substitutes rather than resorting to explanatory translations, preserving the coherence of the poem's imagery system and avoiding over-interpretation.

In summary, John C. H. Wu's poetry translation prioritized the conveyance of imagery over rigid adherence to form. He chose free verse forms to accommodate the reading habits of British and American readers, aiming through this balanced approach—finding similarity within difference and difference within similarity—to offer them a sense of familiarity and novelty (Zhao Ying, 2013:25).

#### 4. H.H.Hu and Harold Acton

H.H. Hu, courtesy name Buzeng and literary name Chan'an, was a botanist who dedicated himself to the study of Chinese botany starting from 1918, establishing him as a pioneering and foundational figure in modern Chinese botany. Concurrently, he possessed a unique humanistic sensibility. In January 1922, when *The Critical Review* (Xueheng) was founded in Nanjing, H.H. Hu, as one of its sponsors and contributors, along with other representatives of the "Critical Review School" (such as Mei Guangdi, Wu Mi, and Liu Yimou), criticized the New Culture Movement. As a leading figure of the Critical Review School, he keenly followed the New Culture Movement and societal developments, advocating for cultural revival. From a conservative perspective, he criticized the radicalism and excesses of Hu Shi and the New Culture Movement, and persistently composed poetry in classical forms (Shen Weiwei, 2005:237).

Harold Acton was a British poet and sinologist who taught English literature at Peking University from 1932 to 1939. He delighted in lecturing on and disseminating Western modernist poetry theory, particularly that of T.S. Eliot. As a cultural conservative, he introduced Eliot's "The Wasteland" imagery to the new generation of poets in the "Northern School" of the 1930s, offering them an alternative mode of thought and expressive technique different from the prevailing practices of "venting nostalgic sentiments" or writing about urban life (Gong Minlv, 2013:37). Acton also actively translated modern Chinese poetry into English; during his tenure at Peking University, he collaborated with his student Chen Shixiang to produce the first English translation of modern Chinese poetry, *Modern Chinese Poetry* (1936).

H.H.Hu and Harold Acton both held conservative and preservative stances towards traditional literature. In 1939, they jointly translated *Nine Poems of Su Tung-p'o* for *T'ien Hsia Monthly*. This effort was not only a practical embodiment of the Critical Review School's motto—"promote national essence and assimilate new knowledge" (昌明国粹，融化新知)—but also a masterful introduction of traditional aesthetic poetry, presenting representative Chinese literary classics to the Western world. Their collaborative translation is significant for fostering mutual appreciation between Chinese and Western literature and reflects the humanistic spirit and literary essence championed by advocates of Chinese literature like the Critical Review School.

In 1932, recognizing the limitations of the new literature, H.H.Hu planned to "translate Su Tung-p'o's poetry into English and take it to Europe for Western readers" (Wang Zichen, Hu Dexi, Hu Deming, et al., 1986:90). Both men were also engaged in poetry themselves, with H.H.Hu notably prolific in classical-style compositions. Sharing Acton's advocacy for interpreting China's cultural reform through a traditional and historical perspective and opposing the tendency towards wholesale Westernization, they commenced their collaboration. At the time, Acton was not yet proficient in Chinese, so they adopted a collaborative translation model: H.H.Hu first rendered the poems into English, and then Acton polished and refined the English versions (Yan Hui, 2009:91).

First, we turn to the English translations of the nine poem titles: *Teng Chao Tower at Cheng-Mai Post Station* (澄迈驿通潮阁), *Boating in the River Ying* (泛颖), *A Song of Cloud-Gathering* (撝云篇), *Answering Tzu-Yu* (子由渑池怀旧), *Over the Mountains* (过岭二首之一), *A First Glimpse of Huai Mountains From The River Ying* (出颖口初见淮山是日至寿州), *T'ien Ho Temple at Fu Feng* (扶风天和寺), *Staring Early From Li-Yang* (浚阳早发), and *Fourteen Horses Painted By Han Kan* (韩干马十四匹). The poem titles serve as highly condensed summaries of their respective poems. Most of the translations above are direct and straightforward; however, three titles are particularly noteworthy: For *A Song of Cloud-Gathering*, which depicts the poet gathering clouds into a cage on his journey, the translators cleverly used the word "Song", likening this poem and experience to a rhymed poetic piece and thereby imparting a sense of liveliness and leisure. For *Answering Tzu-Yu*, the place name "Mianchi" and the notion of "remembering the past" are essentially omitted,

with the translators directly opting to use "Answering" to convey the poem's purpose succinctly and clearly. For *Fourteen Horses Painted By Han Kan*, the entire poem expresses that Han Kan, despite his talent for painting paint horses, received little recognition for his art or the poet's own verse in reality. The translation incorporates the specific content and the intent of the original poem, employing the passive voice ("Painted By") rather than a possessive form ("Han Gan's") to subtly communicating the original meaning.

In terms of translating the poetry itself, the English versions prioritize conveying both the content and emotions of the original. For example, in *A Song of Cloud-Gathering*, the scene of swirling clouds and mist is rendered as: "Maybe the dragons had expelled and chased them. They sprang and capered like the phoenix-bird, Scattering to shape the mist in the eastern suburb, Or freezing into stacks of withered trees". The verbs "expel", "chase", "sprang", "caper", "scatter", and "freeze" vividly capture the ethereal, ever-changing forms of the clouds and mist, bringing the imagery to life. Another example comes from *T'ien Ho Temple at Fu Feng*: "临风莫长啸， 遗涕浩难收." The translation handles this as: "Tis better not to whistle against the wind, For the echo will only scatter beyond recall. The translators avoided a literal translation or explanatory notes for specific characters. Instead, they drew on their understanding, employing terms like "echo" and "scatter" to fully express the mingling of scene and emotion, capturing the poet's spontaneous outpouring of feeling.

As an exemplary work of cross-cultural poetry translation, their collaborative translation of *Nine Poems of Su Tung-p'o* successfully achieves an organic integration of traditional Chinese poetics and Western poetic aesthetics while faithfully conveying the essence and literary value of Su Shi's poetry. The translators' bilingual literary accomplishment and creative experience jointly contributed to this classic instance of English translation of Chinese classical poetry.

## 5. Neil.L. Smith and R.H. Kotewall

Volume 9, Issue 4 of *T'ien Hsia Monthly* published 24 classical Chinese poems translated by N.L. Smith and R.H. Kotewall. N.L. Smith was a distinguished linguist from the University of London, UK. R.H. Kotewall, a prominent figure in Hong Kong and the first Chinese the official Justice of the Peace, exerted influence and made contributions across various sectors. His participation in translating Chinese poetry into English not only reflected the cultural influence of *T'ien Hsia Monthly* after its relocation to Hong Kong but also exemplified its goal of "promoting Sino-Western cultural exchange." The two later co-translated *The Penguin Book of Chinese Verse* (1962), a pioneering work in the English translation of Chinese poetry.

In the same issue that featured the translated works, Wen Yuanning also praised the two translators in an editorial commentary (1939:347): The translators' aim in their translations has been to keep faithful not only to the spirit, but also to the letter of the originals. That they have admirably succeeded in the latter, no one will deny. But while verbal faithfulness in translation is a quality to be commended, yet unless leavened by the spirit of poetry itself, it is apt to degenerate into dull prose. At their best they have, however, achieved the rare distinction of combining both accuracy and fire. Where their translations read like original poems of the most exquisite kind, they have been most truly and faithfully literal in their English renderings of Chinese words and phrases. This is possible because both Mr. Smith and Sir Robert are not only masters of the English language but also diligent students and lovers of Chinese literature.

The twenty-four translated poems include two five-character poems from the Wei and Jin as well as the Southern and Northern Dynasties period, eight poems and lyrics from the Tang dynasty, eleven quatrains and lyrics from the Song dynasty, one five-character quatrain from the late Yuan dynasty, and two poems from the Ming dynasty. In their translation of each poem, N. L. Smith and Luo Xuhe provided the author's birth and death dates, and in some cases added explanatory notes regarding the historical or cultural background of the works. For instance, in their translation of Ou Yangxiu's *Yuan Xi*, they included the parenthetical note "The Lantern Festival (Festival of the First Full Moon)" to explain the traditional Chinese holiday. Similarly, in the translation of Li Qingzhao's *The Weight of Sorrow (Wuling Chun)*, a note appears beneath the author's name: "Regarded by many as China's greatest poetess. This poem is believed to have been written after her husband's death" (1939:399), offering context about the poet and the poem's historical background.

All the translated poems adopt a strict line-by-line literal translation approach. For example, the line "凭添两行泪， 寄向故园流" is rendered as: "I use it to add a double stream of tears, And send them flowing down to my old home. Here, the "double stream of tears" is directly translated, naturally conveying the poet's deep homesickness. Another example is: "深笼夜锁独栖鸟， 利剑春断连理枝" is translated as "Locked deep in its cage by night the lonely bird rests; The keen sword in Spring sunders the twining branches". The "lonely bird" refers to a solitary bird resting alone, symbolizing lovers held in confinement; the "twining branches" metaphorically refer to a loving couple. The translation does not provide explicit explanations of these images but instead renders them literally, omitting the process of interpretation—But this is also a drawback in comparison to liberal translation. However, due to Luo Xuhe's proficiency in Chinese, the choice of words is

highly precise and the translation avoids the common misunderstandings or omissions often found in poetic translations by Western translators.

Overall, the translated poems by the two translators demonstrate considerable accuracy in conveying the original meaning of the poetry. Their use of free verse maintains a rhythm that closely aligns with the structure of the original poems, while the rendering of poetic imagery is vivid and evocative. As such, their collaborative translations may serve as exemplary models.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examines the practice of classical Chinese poetry translation in T'ien Hsia Monthly, highlighting the unique value of diverse translation paradigms in cross-cultural communication. From John C.H.Wu's adoption of poetic liberal translation and free verse to adapt to Western aesthetics, to H.H. Hu and Harold Acton's insistence on literal translation within historical context to preserve cultural authenticity, and to N.L.Smith and Luo Xuhe's advocacy of semantic equivalence strategies, translators employed distinct conceptual and methodological approaches. Despite their differences, all successfully facilitated the cross-lingual transmission of the cultural core of classical Chinese poetry.

As a significant vehicle for the transmission of Chinese poetry to the West in the modern era, T'ien Hsia Monthly exemplifies the deep intercultural collaboration between Chinese and Western translators. Drawing on their bilingual literary competence and collaborative translation model, these translators not only captured the artistic essence of the original poems with remarkable precision, but also, through creative transformation, constructed a distinct aesthetic framework for classical Chinese poetry within the target language culture. Their work established a model for future Sinological translation practices.

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