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A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Western Musicians' Composing Music for Chinese Ancient Poetry

DONG Huanling

China Conservatory of Music, China

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Abstract: The characteristics of ancient Chinese poetry resonated with the Western society influenced by Taoist thought in the 20th century, so ancient Chinese poetry set off a wave of enthusiasm in the West at that time. The translation of ancient Chinese poetry is undoubtedly the most important step before creating music, and the misinterpretation in poetry translation often leads to the aesthetic misrepresentation of a piece of music with a matching composition. Some Western composers also over-interpreted ancient Chinese poems through composing music. They reproduced the music of ancient Chinese poetry in the world from their unique perspectives and found a new historical breakthrough point for the integration of cross-cultural art.

Keywords: Chinese poetry and culture craze; misinterpretation; over-interpretation; cross-cultural communication

Notes on the contributor: DONG Huanling is an associate professor at the China Conservatory of Music. Her academic interest lies in linguistics, English teaching, translation theory, and practice.

1. The Historical Phenomenon of Chinese Poetry and Its Culture Craze in the West

The growth of Western literature and art has never left the nourishment of foreign elements. The ancient Greek, Ancient Rome, and Germanic culture are its origins, while the Eastern wisdom constantly gives it new inspirations from the outside. As early as the 16th and 17th centuries, the Eastern style of western music spread in Europe, mainly in the form of stage plays. Exotic musical styles draw inspiration and themes from Arabia, India, Turkey, China, and other eastern countries. Paul Griffith pointed out: "If music were to be liberated again, it would not be to the West, but the East." (Griffith 1978: 124)

Western exposure to Chinese poetry began in the 18th century when westerners began to understand China with the help of missionaries and commercial communication, and deeply admired China's social management and ethical politics. But it is the Chinese Confucian classics that generally attracted western attention and interpre-



tation. The ancient poetry culture did not arouse enough attention and lagged in the western transmission of Chinese thought. After the craze of China in the 18th century, the interest of the West in China in the 19th century gradually faded out, and the mentality of applying to Chinese culture also gradually disappeared, which made some westerners calm down to study Chinese culture. Since the 19th century, not only a large number of Chinese historical books have been fully translated, but also academic attitudes have been greatly improved. This upsurge of Sinology translation has spread to many countries, such as Britain, the United States, France, Germany, etc., and it has also begun to be influenced by the poetry of Oriental culture. With the rise of Romanticism in the 19th century, the western acceptance of Chinese culture and thought also changed. Middle and Near Eastern literature, with its emotional sigh for life and artistic characteristics of color, fantasy, passion, and mystery, is easy to attract the western vision, especially when the Romantic trend of thought arose in the West in the 19th century. When they came into contact with Chinese culture in such an ideological and artistic framework, Taoism was favored in ideology; the pursuit of exotic sentiment, color, passion, fantasy, and other aesthetic requirements to a certain extent dominated the choice of westerners in art. (Qin Huanming 2000: 2)

From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, Taoism began to occupy an important position in the minds of Westerners, gradually replacing the previous focus on Confucian culture. Especially after World War I, the West showed unprecedented enthusiasm for Taoist culture. Taoism advocates the “Tao can be Tao, very Tao” of the spirit of inaction. It holds that the thing is really beyond the grasp of the deliberate pursuit of the man outside and that it can be reached only by natural experience and non-verbal meaning that goes deep into it. Ancient Chinese poetry emphasizes the combination of “music”, “image” and “charm”. In particular, the emphasis on “image” in the ancient Chinese poetry culture and the attention to the poets’ spiritual world can help us gain a profound and interesting intuition and reach a tacit understanding of the truth of all things. Taoist philosophy advocated the love of nature, and “85 percent of ancient Chinese poetry and prose are related to nature.” (Liu Chengji 2006: 35) The “fuzziness” and “openness” of ancient poetry are also derived from the Taoist concept, which is consistent with the Tao’s “understanding”. These characteristics of ancient Chinese poetry resonated with the Western society influenced by Taoist thought at that time, so ancient Chinese poetry set off a wave of enthusiasm in the West in the 20th century. Moreover, ancient Chinese poetry exerted a great influence on the whole western poetry circle in the 20th century and became one of the inducements of the imagist poetry movement in the British and American poetry circles. Many of Pound’s ideas about poetry are the same as some of the basic principles in Tang poetry. Chinese poetry, he argues, is the most “dissembling” of all because the poem always makes things clear in the most concise way, allowing the reader to experience the emotions contained in the poem and translate them into expressions of inner emotions through the description of natural scenes.

The Imagist poetry movement first emerged in England between 1908 and 1909. It was deeply influenced by Chinese poetry and Japanese haiku. The Imagist school uses the simplicity, nature, and implication of Chinese poetry to counter the long history of western poetry. Although Chinese poetry is misunderstood as free poetry, it has fully absorbed the profound spiritual culture of ancient Chinese poetry. The core of imagism is intuitionism. In imagist poetry, “meaning” is expressed and felt as “image”, which is similar to the “artistic conception” theory in Chinese poetics. Image is the image seen by the poet’s intuition, which integrates the poet’s “meaning”, including intelligence and emotion. This combines “meaning” and “environment”, the blending of feeling and scene. So imagist poetics is close to Chinese poetry (Qin Huanming 2000: 2). Chinese poetry has influenced the Imagist movement, and the rise of the Imagist movement, in turn, has further promoted ancient Chinese poetry in the West. In addition to Pound’s translated Chinese poetry, *Cathay*, which was published in 1915, western

scholars such as Arthur Waley, A.C. Graham, and David Hawkes made great efforts to translate Chinese poetry. In the first half of the 20th century, it became a widespread practice for European writers to translate ancient Chinese poems. Many poems were translated into English, German, and French, and songs, vocal suites, and symphonic music were composed by composers from different countries (Qian Renkang 2002: 3).

In the wave of Chinese poetry translation, it is not clear semantically. and in Tang poetry, Li Bai's poems are the most concerned by western artists which are reflected in the composition. As imagist poetry originated in England, English translation of Chinese poetry has been at the forefront. For example, British composers such as Bantock, Warlock, Bliss, Lambert, Britten mostly used Li Bai poetry as lyrics in their poem composing works. Li Bai is a Chinese poet who has attracted the most attention among many Western writers as well as many Western musicians. More than 20 composers loved to compose music for his poems, and his poetry occupied a prominent place in western music creation in the 20th century (Bi Minghui 2007: 99).

In addition, through the research on the selected poems of the composing works and the translated Chinese poems by Westerners in the 20th century, we can also find that many neglected poems and poets in China had aroused the interest of western scholars and filled the gap in the study of Chinese poetry.

2. Translation and Misinterpretation of the Other Culture

In the 20th century, when western composers composed ancient Chinese poems, the first thing they faced was the translators from different cultures and the difference between Chinese and Western cultures. The translation of ancient Chinese poetry is undoubtedly the most important step before the creation of music. There are essential differences between different languages, and the gap of cultural deposits is an insurmountable obstacle. The effect of poetry translation will affect the artistic conception of original poetry conveyed by musical works and play an important role in the world communication of Chinese ancient poetry culture. The translation of the other culture, which is full of fundamental differences, should pursue cross-cultural understanding and pure translation. Furthermore, ancient Chinese poetry has unique artistic characteristics, which makes translation more difficult. Chinese ancient poetry stresses the sense of form, or the love of laws, rules, or fixed patterns, and it has an open, obscure, or euphemistic way of communication or expression, namely implicit or implied. Chinese ancient poetry is rich in uncertainty. When dealing with the "illocutionary" level of poetry, we should consider its linguistic meaning, historical truth, and particular form and understand the unique way of conveying and producing meaning determined by culture. Therefore, misinterpretation is inevitable in translation. Most of the Western composers who perform the composing for ancient Chinese poetry had not made a thorough study of Chinese language, ancient Chinese poetry, and Chinese traditional music. They placed complete reliance on the message conveyed by the selected translations of ancient poems. Therefore, translation plays an important role in determining the aesthetic value of music, and the misinterpretation in poetry translation often leads to the aesthetic misrepresentation of a piece of music with a matching composition. For translators, misreading and misunderstanding are inevitable when facing a new light of text from another language and culture.

Granville Bantock selected 33 Chinese poems translated by Cranmer Byng and used them in six groups of Songs from the Chinese Poets (published from 1918 to 1933). Most of Byng's translation is poetically different from the original poems because he always uses a freestyle and imagination. For example, in Li Bai's poems, no title can be translated as "Adrift" or "Drifting". Only one《行路難》is the closest to this poem translated by Byng. The difference between the translated poem and the "supposed" original Chinese poem makes one feel that Byng

is not using the real Li Bai's poem. However, the translation of the last stanza “長風破浪會有時，直掛雲帆濟滄海”(When man's desire with fate doth war, this, this avails alone—To hoist the sail and let the gale and the waters bear us on.) is consistent with the meaning of the original Chinese poem, which proves that “Adrift” is indeed the translation of《行路難》. Li Bai has a penchant for drinking and poetry and a bit of a negative Taoist attitude (something that Byng emphasizes in his translation). However, Li Bai's poetry is more of an expression of optimism, yet this complex emotion is lost in Byng's translation. In this context, the artistic expression of Bantock's poetic music can only be quite different from Li Bai's original intention.

On the City Street, a classical composition by Constant Lambert, another English composer, cites a translation of Li Bai's poem «相逢行» by the American Japanese scholar Shigeyoshi Obata. The first half of Li Bai's poem is: “相逢紅塵內，高揖黃金鞭。” In Obata's translation, the word “紅塵” is translated as “pink dust” (紅色塵土). Obata did not understand the real meaning of “紅塵” as a metaphor for the secular and earthly world, but only translated it literally without any explanation to western readers. Without a detailed explanation of similar special terms, it is difficult for western readers to understand the deep meaning of the poem, thus causing misinterpretation. Most of Lambert's problems and similar misinterpretations are due to his lack of understanding of Chinese culture, especially ancient Chinese traditional culture, folk customs, or idioms. It is a kind of “cultural image” misreading. For example, there are a lot of images of the “moon” in ancient Chinese poems. The moon is always regarded as a symbol of eternity and loneliness. It reflects the troubles of the world and the ephemeral life and conveys endless feelings and thoughts. But in Western artwork, “moon” has a very different artistic conception and implied meaning. Therefore, it is difficult for western readers to understand the special meaning and status of “moon” in Chinese culture in many ancient poetry translations. Over the long years of history, different nations have gradually formed their cultural symbols. It is the crystallization of the wisdom and history of each nation. They permeate into language and have relatively fixed and unique cultural meanings and broad and deep connotations (Tan Guodong 2006: 118–119). Therefore, the cultural misreading of the text in the cross-cultural context is largely due to the national cultural accumulation in the psychological structure of the interpreter, which constitutes the internal scale for the cultural subject to examine the heterogeneous culture. This cultural misreading in translation often leads to the loss of cultural information, which is not conducive to the readers of the target language to fully understand the national characteristics of foreign cultures. Suppose the translation of poetry is not done correctly, and the artistic conception of the original poem cannot be accurately and profoundly restored. In that case, it is difficult to express the aesthetic implication of ancient Chinese poetry vividly and delicately in musical composition works. Therefore, to do an excellent job in translation, one must enter into the “meaning world” of this culture and acquire a cultural ability, not only the sensitivity of insight into the world from the perspective of monocultural provisions but also the ability of language. Only in this way can we truly translate and interpret culture.

However, “misreading” is a double-edged sword in the process of translation and communication between Chinese and Western cultures. It may cause the loss of the essence of the original culture and is a way to add new elements to the original culture. In his translation of the Confucian classics and the Book of Songs, Ezra Pound used disassembling characters to “over-interpret” the original text and enrich the original brief verse. Such translation is not completely faithful to the original work or even rewritten or recreated, but it has far-reaching significance from the perspective of cultural exchange. Therefore, sometimes the intentional misreading can make the text of one culture get new growth and development after entering another culture.

Peter Warlock published his first vocal work, *Saudades*, in 1923. The *Saudades* is composed of three songs.

The first of these songs is *Along the Stream*, which is illustrated with Cranmer Byng's translation of Li Bai's poem "自遣". Warlock referred to the score in a letter to his teacher in Eton, Colin Taylor, dated November 10, 1917: "I will show you a better song than Heracleitus, which I have finished, and which I have chosen is a Byng's translation of a Chinese poem, 'Along the Stream' (the best poem I have ever read). I even think the song seems a bit like an opera..." It's clear that Warlock was drawn to Byng's translation, and the emotional theme that unites the three songs is a Spanish word "Saudades" which means a feeling of sadness or regret and has no equivalent in English. Warlock also seemed to be convinced that the translation of the poem showed a dark and gloomy atmosphere. Therefore, in the composition, the composer tries to show a sense of sadness and regret. However, if we read the original Chinese poem, we will find that Warlock was influenced by Byng's romanticized translation. Li Bai's poem paints a picture of a drunken night with a hint of sobriety, and a lonely scene with "falling flowers", "moon in the stream", and the last line, "The birds were gone, and men also few.". But the original poem does not mention the words "hopeful melancholy" associated with the Sandades. So Byng's translation exaggerates based on the original emotion of the poem. Byng's translated poem, though emotionally different from the original poem, is still based on the re-creation of the original poem, and this "misreading" is like a second life of ancient Chinese poetry in the West, which reveals another wonderful experience after a new embellishment.

This useful "misreading" in the above example is the translator expanding the space of interpretation of the text and in a unique way to give us a world of diverse ideas. This interpretation and understanding of literary texts is not only a reasonable interpretation of cultural misreading but also a positive interpretation of cultural misreading. When two cultures collide, translation sometimes bears more responsibility for cultural interpretation, and in the process of interpretation, the translator sometimes naturally integrates the local cultural spirit and personal experience. Therefore, we may take this beautiful misunderstanding as a new opportunity for artistic creation. Historically, the misreading has helped westerners create 'Sinology' and 'Orientalism', which are both colonialist and academic. Pound, who knew nothing about the phonological skills of ancient Chinese poetry, misused the free verse style to express the principles of translating ancient Chinese poetry, thus launching the western imagist poetry movement in the 20th century. These are all good examples of the barriers in the cultural exchange that have been dismantled due to misinterpretation, making it easy for foreign cultures to spread in the native place.

3. Western Composers' Over-Interpretation of Chinese Ancient Poems Using Composition

There is also some over-interpretation in the musical composition of ancient Chinese poems. Perhaps because of different cultures, Western composers are eager to express the artistic conception of Chinese poems in musical language. However, such motivation often leads to excessive modification and tracing, which appears to be the excessive use of musical techniques. However, from another perspective, most of these over-interpretations are based on the artistic conception of the poem, that is, the exaggerated interpretation of the original work. The appropriate exaggeration, on the contrary, creates a new opportunity for creation, regenerates the ancient Chinese poetry in another form, and endows it with new ideas for recreation. In his song *Adrift* (《行路難》李白), Bantock adopts romantic, Puccini lyrical melodies and uses a lot of emoticons as a foil to the melodies. These emoticons (*poco largamente cantabile*, *poco animando*, *poco allargando*, *affrettando*, *marcato*, *molto*, etc.) often appear at the beginning of each segment to guide the mood of the music. These emoji terms frequently

appear in the vocal and piano parts, which gives people a sense of being too heavy. The average of five bars to switch emoji is also rare in general vocal works. However, from the composer's point of view, a large number of emotive terms are used to help the singer better understand the dramatic musical language in work. To make the artistic conception of the poem be sung as much as possible, it is necessary to use a large number of emotional hints. We can feel the composer's interpretation of the poem from the changes of every subtle emotion and feel the conveying of the poem's implication. In *Adrift*, Bantock's dramatic dynamics are closely linked to the drama of the poem, and its romantic temperament is also reflected in its repeated emphasis on key lines. When the vocal section reaches its climax, the right hand of the piano accompanist plays the beautiful motive again. Through the repeated emphasis on particular lines, musical melodies are described in greater depth, which is also a means to interpret poetry.

Warlock's composing work "Along the Stream" (《自遣》李白) is a musical work of *andante* speed, which gives people a sense of tranquility. The work does not mark the tone, nor does it divide the bar line. The absence of regular beats and the flexibility of rhythm all show a hint of atonality. To be close to the style and rhythm of ancient Chinese poetry, Warlock avoided using bar lines and stops to influence the conveying of the meaning of poetry, and the melody progress was also very close to the actual chanting style of Chinese poetry. The work is not completely atonal, but it creates an illusory atmosphere. To convey the poem's feeling, Warlock deliberately creates a moral scene of misery and grief, but it exaggerates the sense of loneliness in the original poem, with some excessive embellishment.

The same explanatory effect can also be found in the music of Lambert and Griffith. Both Lambert's extensive use of ancient Greek modes, fixed tone pattern, and "Ritonello" in his compositions and Griffes's excessive use of parallel fourths and fifth degrees, pentatonic scale, and eight sound steps in the composition to add more Chinese elements all reflect the painstaking efforts of composers in the special art form of composing for ancient Chinese poetry. To achieve the artistic effect similar to the original poetry, it is easy to understand that western composers from different cultures adopt some over-interpretation techniques. Chinese ancient poetry culture in the form of music reborn needs to pour into a lot of interpretation. On the contrary, after being reconstructed by the music artists, we can obtain the distant artistic conception in the original poem and have a feeling of the composer's music comprehension. The music works of the composers have become a complex of multiple arts, with a more profound artistic aesthetic pursuit.

4. Conclusion

In the 20th century, western composers' choice of ancient Chinese poems for music is recognition of Chinese civilization and Chinese ancient poetry culture, as well as a result of western artists' self-reflection and incorporation of others into themselves. Western composers chose Tang poetry and Song Ci for their music creation, rather than more direct musical forms such as Tang music and Song music, precisely because the poetic culture of China has touched their heartstrings. This is an aesthetic feeling that cannot be replaced by the tone of Tang music because the essence of the entire Chinese national culture is embodied in ancient Chinese poetry. As Goliath's ancient German poems instead of medieval secular tunes impressed Wolf, he produced *Boylan's Song*. What infected Wolf is that a medieval manuscript of the poetry of Goliath laughs at the church, and their wild, free and easy temperament. This is not a few medieval secular songs can achieve.

Ancient Chinese poetry has had a close relationship with music since ancient times, and the court music and

dance of all dynasties are often integrated with poetry, dance, and music. All the poems in the Book of Songs, Yuefu poems of Han Dynasty, Ci of Tang and Song dynasties, and Sanqu songs of Yuan Dynasty were originally sung with music. However, with the passage of time, this kind of comprehensive art form has hardly been reproduced in the world, and most of the music has been lost. Only the poetry is circulated. Western composers of the 20th century made up for this regret. They reproduced the music of ancient Chinese poetry in the world from their unique perspectives and found a new historical breakthrough point for the integration of cross-cultural art. While restoring the vigor of ancient Chinese poetry in the past, it will undoubtedly promote the pace of cultural exchanges between China and the West and bring more enlightenment to both sides.

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