

## Chinese Classical Poetry and Prose in World Literature

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### Abstract

Chinese classical poetry and prose, as the treasure of world literature, demonstrates the three dimensions of “world literature” put forward by David Damrosch in its cross-cultural dissemination and reception. This paper, grounded on the definition by Damrosch about “what is world literature”, clarifies the crucial role of Chinese classical poetry and prose in world literature through three key aspects: its influence in East Asian civilizations, its translations in English-speaking world, and its translations in Francophone world. The paper shows that Chinese classical poetry and prose is not only an essential component of the world literary system but also a quintessential model for cross-civilizational dialogue.

**Keywords:** Chinese poetry and prose; world literature; translation; influence

How might we define world literature? The topic of “What is world literature?” is not only a classification of literary works but also a profound reflection on the interaction of multiple factors such as global culture, society, and history. As the global political landscape continues to evolve, the definition and scope of world literature have also been continuously changing. “The arrival of the true ‘world literature time’ is an inevitable trend”, as Goethe talked with Eckermann, “that poetry is the common property of all mankind... National literature has more or less had its day, now that the age of world literature is at hand; and everyone should now do what they can do to hasten its arrival” (Eckermann, 2022, conversation on 31 January 1827). But, what is world literature? The renowned American scholar David

Damrosch in his book *What Is World Literature?* proposed a threefold definition focused on the world, the text, and the reader: world literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures; world literature is writing that gains in translation; world literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time (Damrosch, 2003, p. 281). The discuss above shows that world literature is a kind of shared heritage of humanity and it is related to translation.

### **1. Chinese Classical Poetry and Prose in East Asian Literature**

Ancient Chinese poetry and prose are the core of East Asian literature. In East Asian literature, Chinese literature is the earliest and most mature, whether in its thematic content, composing techniques, subject tops, literary genreforms, or literary standards, From a scholarly point of view, China was also regarded as a Kingdom of Poetry with Tang poetry flourishing at a time when Europe was still in what has been called the Dark or Middle Ages (Duran, 2014, p.174). Apart from Chinese literature, most other East Asian literatures were created under the impact of Chinese classical poetry and prose, such as the *Book of Songs*, *Wenxuan (Selections of Literature)*, and *Baishi Wenji (Li Bai's Collected Works)*, and literary creation.

The ancient East Asian civilizations, such as Japan, the Korean Peninsula, and Vietnam, with Chinese characters as their common written script respectively, transformed their original and oral literature into the written one grounded in Chinese character and literature, aiming at leveraging on Chinese classical literature to develop their own national literature. The ancient Japanese developed the kana syllabary by adapting components of Chinese characters and “thirty-one-syllable metric system”(sanshiyiyin yinsu lv) through assimilating valuable cultural elements from culture of Chinese Pre-Qin period (221 BC) to the poetry and prose of

Tang dynasty, thus standardising the rhythm and structure of waka and popularising up to now. Before this phenomenon generated, waka was alive in a rhythmless and limitless state from the 6th to 9th centuries. Included much waka, the *Genji Monogatari* was listed into the anthology *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* and is deeply influenced by the China's poetry *Chang hen Ge (The Everlasting Longing)* in thematic ideas, and is properly integrated with historical facts and allusions of the classics, such as *Shi Ji (Records of the Grand Historian)*, *Han Shu (History of the Han Dynasty)*, and *Zhan Guo Ce (Strategies of the Warring States)*.

Moreover, Japanese literary works from the Heian period with characteristics of world literature took in the elements from ancient Chinese literature. For example, *Man' yōshū* contains many poems that apply Chinese poetic forms and rhythms, such as five-character “regulated verse” (lǚshī) and seven-character “quatrain” (jùejǔ); *Taketori monogatari* not only borrows from the Chinese legend “Chang'e flying to the moon” (Chang'e Benyue), but also draws inspiration from the philosophical concept of “the “Theory of the Sun-Moon Divine Object” (Riyueshen Ketu Lun); *Makura no sōshi* adopts the poetic techniques and themes of Bai Juyi (772-846).

The influences on Korea are also notable. For instance, Huoli Zigao of Korea wrote elegies by Chinese four-character poems to a man's death by drowning. And in the mid-7th century, Silla adopted the basic state policies of Tang dynasty after it unified Peninsula. According to the policies, people who read through one of the three works, including *Li Ji (The Book of Rites)*, *Zuo Zhuan (The Commentary of Zuo)*, and *Wenxuan*, plus with *The Analects* and *Xiao Jing (The Classic of Filial Piety)*, could be considered a qualification for high-ranking positions. Afterwards, Goryeo dynasty (918-1392) imitated the policy “recruiting officials

through poetry” from the Chinese Tang dynasty. From the transmission of *Shi Jing* to Giao Chi (a region), to Li dynasty (1010-1225) and Chen dynasty (1225-1400), when Vietnamese poetry absorbed the stylistic norms of Tang poetry and integrated native nan character (a writing system used in Vietnam) language literature to create new six-character and eight-character verse, which in turn influenced the development of Chinese-style poetry. Later, as the establishment of tributary relations between China and Vietnam, Vietnamese literature flourished under the impacts of the classical Chinese literature. In other words, as Karl-Heinz Pohl said that the place of poetry in a concept of world literature is a very special one and too much of its fascination depends on the respective form, and this is especially so in the case of Chinese poetry, where we not only have a written language which is incomparable to European languages, but also a wealth of formal features unknown in any other national poetry (Pohl, 2018, p. 284).

According to David Damrosch, world literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures. This metaphor vividly elucidates the dynamic progression of world literature from fragmentation toward integration—what David Damrosch describes as “the essential nature of texts entering the realm of world literature”. The optical property presented in elliptical geometry reveals that light rays emanating from one focus will, upon refracting at the ellipse’s boundary, invariably converge at the other focus, with the trajectory of these refracted points constructing the spatial form of the ellipse. This geometric feature provides an analytical framework for study world literature. Damrosch innovatively adopts this elliptical refraction phenomenon to build his literary propagation model, of which Focus A and B represent source culture and host culture, respectively. Within this conceptual space, cultural elements from A

necessarily refract toward B, and the elliptical space generated through their interaction fundamentally constitutes a dynamic field for the generation and evolution of world literature. This field contains three essential characteristics. Firstly, any text incorporated into the world literature system necessarily establishes intertextual relationships with dual cultural gene (the source culture and host culture), which lays the foundation for world literature's diversity; Secondly, as cross-cultural reception deepens, previously isolated national literatures undergo a paradigm shift from cultural monologue to dialogue through the refractive dynamics of the elliptical field. Third, the uneven distribution of ray lengths within the ellipse visually manifests the reception gradient in cultural transmission, demonstrating an inverse relationship between propagation distance and acceptance degree. This phenomenon corresponds precisely to the transformational patterns of cultural elements in cross-contextual dissemination.

Works continue to bear the marks of their national origin even after they circulate into world literature, and yet these traces are increasingly diffused and become ever more sharply refracted as a work travel farther from home (Damrosch, 2003, p. 283). The works, such as *Shi Jing*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, have spread to various cultural spaces worldwide from a horizontal perspective. The influence of these national literary works varies in different cultures, much like the varying lengths of lines radiating from the center of an ellipse to its arc. It is evidently challenging for national literatures to transcend literary traditions. However, if literary works are fully researched about their cultural, composing, and authorial background and placed in a new cultural context to appreciate with referencing their source culture, transcending literary traditions will be much easier. For example, Chinese works, such as *Shijing* and *The Analects* are spread across the East Asian cultural sphere and the Western

world, where they have been widely accepted. Their themes and subject matter have been absorbed and adapted by writers from different cultural contexts. This effect not only fosters the literary development of foreign cultures but also promotes the dissemination of the source culture embedded in the original works.

## **2. Chinese Classical Poetry and Prose in English-speaking World**

According to David Damrosch, world literature is writing that gains in translation. Translation and world literature offer multifaceted perspectives for readers on the complex intermediary role of translation in the dissemination of literature worldwide. In a cross-cultural context, the “world literature” accepted by readers includes the world literature anthologies that are almost translated and compiled (Zhou, 2016, p. 66). Chinese classical poetry and prose are not only widely influential of Sinophone cultural sphere in the East Asian, but also in the Francophone and Anglophone worlds, which is largely due to the critical role played by translation. In other words, translation facilitates the spread of Chinese culture in Western countries and Chinese classical poetry gains in translation. Likewise, Western countries benefit from refined and rhythmical Chinese classical poetry through translation. This highlights the fact that world literature gains immensely from the act of translation, as it enables cultural exchange and mutual enrichment.

The spread of Chinese classical poetry and prose in the English-speaking world has been significantly influenced by notable translations. *Gujin Shixuan (Chinese Poems)*, written by the British scholar Charles Budd (the birth and death dates are unknown time), published in 1912 by Oxford University Press, has 55 Chinese-English poems, originally produced from the Han, Wei, Six Dynasties to Tang, Song, and Qing Dynasties. Besides, *Yinyi Tangshi Xuan*

(*Gems of Chinese Verse*), the first Chinese-English Tang poetry works, was compiled by British translator W.J.B. Fletcher (1879-1933) in 1918. Additionally, Stephen Owen (1946-?), an American sinologist who refers to himself as an “stranger to the kingdom of Tang poetry”, has made tremendous contributions to reconstructing Chinese literature history. He has published more than ten monographs, such as *Chutang Shi (The Poetry of the Early Tang)*, *Shengtang Shi (The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High Tang)*, *Zhongguo Zaoqi Gudian Shige de Shengcheng (The Making of Early Chinese Classical Poetry)*. He initiated the project “building Library of Chinese Classics series”, and translated the first project, 1,400 poems from *Du Fu Shiji (The Poetry of Du Fu)* in this series. This marks the first full English translation works of Du Fu (712-770) in academic history.

In 1915, Ezra Pound(1885-1972), an American poet, published *Hua Xia Ji (Cathay)*, a Chinese-English Chinese classical poetry, which holds 317 poems and many of them are written by Li Bai (701-762). He also adapted *Shi Jing* with American folk style and then translated Chinese philosophical classics *Da Xue (The Great Learning)*, *Zhong Yong (The Doctrine of the Mean)*, *Lun Yu*, and *Mengzi (The Mencius)*, thereby introducing Chinese philosophical concepts to the West. In the 1960s, renowned British sinologist David Hawkes (1923-2009) translated and published *Chi Ci 楚辭 (Elegies of the South)*. All these translations advance Chinese literary classics and traditional culture.

The three representative anthologies of world literature, including *Bedford Anthology of World Literature*, *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, shared a large number of poems written by the poets, such as Bai Juyi, Du Fu, Li Bai, and Wang Wei and some individual anthology also selected the works by Han Shan

(the birth and death dates are unknown). These anthologies elaborate the impacts of these classical texts on later literary works in the introductions and prefaces on the influence, and the latter two anthologies feature a special section Tang poetry, selecting works from four poets with different styles and themes respectively, including 14 poems from Bai Juyi, 18 from Du Fu, 27 from Li Bai, and 25 from Wang Wei, thus creating a vibrant depiction of Chinese Tang dynasty poetry. As selecting Chinese classics, the three anthologies reflect the humanistic concerns, universal values presented in ancient Chinese literature, matching the values with world literature.

### **3. Chinese Classical Poetry and Prose in French-speaking World**

Perhaps the best that can be said for world literature is that even as it encourages monolingualism, it also acknowledges and promotes the essential role of translation in our present world order, and that it seeks to bring together under the same covers literature not only originating from the West but also as outsourced from the rest of the world (Bassnett, 2018, p.18). Chinese classical poetry and prose were translated into French and their related study in the French-speaking world began in the 18th century. These activities enable Chinese classical poetry and prose to be popular in the French-speaking world.

In 1735, the French sinologist Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (1674-1743) compiled *Zhonghua Diguozhi* (description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise), which involves the poets Qu Yuan (around 340 BC-278 BC), Li Bai, Du Fu, and others. Subsequently, Qian Deming (Joseph-Marie Amiot, 1718-1793), a French sinologist, compiled the book *Zhongguo Zazuan* (Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les moeurs, les usages, etc. des Chinois),



which introduced the lives of 7 poets from Tang dynasty. In 1862, the French sinologist Le Marquis d'Hervey de Saint Denys (1822-1892) issued the first Chinese-French poem collection. 5 years later after that, the French sinologist Judith Gautier (1845-1917) published *Baiyu Shishu (Livre de Jade)* inspired by Chinese classical poetry, and revised and renamed it, which has gained widespread recognition in Europe through its multiple reprints and translations, significantly influencing European perceptions of Chinese poetry.

By the second half of the 20th century, the translation of Chinese classical poetry had achieved remarkable accomplishments. For instance, the authoritative works *Zhongguo Gudian Shiji (Anthologie of de la poésie chinoise classique)* was translated by the French sinologist Paul Demiéville (1894-1979) and 16 Chinese scholars. Additionally, there are also numerous French translation works of Chinese poetry, such as *Zhongguo Shige Baoku (Trésor de la poésie chinoise)* by Claude Roy (1915-1997), *Li Shangyin Shi Shiyishou 李商隱詩十一首 (Amour et Politique Dans la Chine Ancienne-Cents Poèmes de Li Shangyin)* by Yves Hervouet (1921-1999), *Gushi Shijushou (Les Dix-neuf Poèmes Anciens)* by Jean-Pierre Diény (1927-2015). In 2009, France pressed the collection *Zui Weida de Zhongguo Gudianshi (Les Plus Grands Classiques De La Poésie Chinoise)*, including 3 volumes of *Shi Jing Xuan (Poèmes Chinois du Livre Shi Jing)*, *Tang Shi Xuan (Poèmes Chinois de la Dynastie des Tang)* and *Song Ci Xuan (Poèmes Chinois de la Dynastie des Song)*, translated from Chinese to French by the renowned Chinese translator Xu Yuanchong (1921-2021). Furthermore, in 2013, Dolphin Books published *Zhongguo Shici Xuan (Anthologie des Poèmes Chinois Classiques)*. All of these translations demonstrate the popularity of classical Chinese poetry and prose in the French-speaking world.

“Perhaps because of lyric poetry’s ties to national languages and to a history of poetry in a particular national language, it encounters problems when situated in the context of world poetry, I would like to follow the old argument a bit further, then to consider how things have changed in the past dozen years, and finally to take what may seem an odd detour, in the poetry I know best, Chinese” (Owen, 2003, p. 533). According to Stephen Owen, in the context of world poetry, Chinese poetry in national language is the best, which lays the foundation that Chinese poetry and prose constitute an indispensable component of world literature. By examining Chinese classical poetry and prose through the view of “world literature”, this study not only strengthens our understanding of world literature theory but also expands the scope of research on Chinese classical poetry. The findings reveal how traditional Chinese culture has influenced other civilizations, demonstrating reciprocal cultural exchanges where other cultures have drawn inspiration from Chinese traditions. This phenomenon not only underscores the world-historical significance of Chinese classical poetry and prose as well as ancient Chinese culture but also acts as a fundamental pathway to realizing and promoting the intrinsic value of Chinese culture itself.

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