

# Studying Folk Culture in Song Ci Based on Comparing Their English and Chinese Versions

## Case Study on Ba Shu Culture in Song Ci

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**Abstract**—Understanding of folk culture would be quite good for the fast developing society with more and more requirements for communications in all fields. However, folk culture is really concerned with so large a scope, especially in such big countries as China. The profound and effective way to solve the problem is go to literary canons for these canons are chosen by people in large numbers and meanwhile have gone through the test of time and history. Among the great representative literary masterpieces, Song Ci goes closest to folk culture no matter its origin is talked about or its meaning and influence are concerned. Song Ci is together with a strong sense of the times. However, it's quite interesting that this problem can be handled with the help of its translated versions in different languages, especially its English and Chinese versions. Thus, study folk culture in Song Ci in different translated versions could be an effective and meaningful way to learn more clearly and accurately about a new culture and its people.

**Keywords**—folk culture; Song Ci; Chinese culture; canons; translation

### I. INTRODUCTION

With fast development of the society, there are more and more communications between people and these communications would never be satisfied with ordinary greetings and common information, they are closely related with profound understanding of a new culture. There is no exact definition for "culture" for it covers everything. Raymond Williams says that "culture can be used to refer to a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development". [1] Though it also contains some uncertainty sense, it doesn't mean that it is not reliable, and it just means that even though the "intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic" ones almost cover anything that can be thought out, the composition and connotation of "culture" still can't be illustrated completely. Culture never belongs to any single individual. It goes through the history and it was, is and will be accumulated gradually. Culture is conclusion drawn from the past, thoughts brought out at the present and anticipation proved in the future. Culture cannot be overthrown overnight but it is full of changes for conditions outside often changes. Culture is closely related with the society and well reflects what the society is and what the society needs. No matter

how changeable culture would be, it's no doubt that there is still a strong stability for the essence of culture within a certain community, which again proves the importance and benefits of understanding a culture well for all communications.

Now that all know the importance of culture, how to deal with culture's wide coverage becomes a difficult problem. It's commonly agreed that culture is divided into two parts — high culture and popular culture. John Storey says that "popular culture is mass-produced commercial culture, whereas high culture is the result of an individual act of creation". [1] This "individual" here is not used as a noun to mean being a single one but an adjective to modify the "act of creation", emphasizing that the act is put out by a single act carried out by a small group compared with the "mass" mentioned. Then, high culture can be regarded as the one agreed by the chosen members carrying out an individual act, not a series of different acts. Thus, high culture is about culture for a limited group, usually those in controlling, which is almost equal to "official culture", the culture that is accepted by the minority taking the lead in a society. In reality, lots of people would deal with the official culture for no one can avoid communication with others and for the initial communications between two cultures, either party would ask for the help of the high culture. High culture stands along with the prestigious, and main culture should firstly agree with the opinions of the controllers. Learning about main culture is a shortcut to get a general impression of a new culture. While popular culture belongs to the mass and it comes out from ordinary life, therefore it is extensive and also difficult to be entirely grasped. By contrast, popular culture agrees more to true life for ordinary people inside are quite familiar with it. It's natural for people to take common things in their lives for granted and care less about them, thus there's less official recordings for popular culture, which will subsequently be ignored by the outsiders more. The moment one decides to learn about a culture, the first things the learner wants to get and the learned wants to offer would be the official ones. So, within a limited time, it is normal to let the learners learn about its official part, but if they want to really understand the culture and reach a better communication in the future, it's better to let them know the popular culture. Among popular culture, the most important

one for such multi-ethnic countries as China is folk culture, which is closely related with certain ethnic groups, holding the strongest local colors and reflecting the most authentic life.

Now, learning about a culture is successfully narrowed down to learning about the popular culture, especially the folk part, it seems that the problem becomes easier, but learning about folk culture is also not so easy as one thinks, there's usually not so much systemized information about it and it is directly related with local people's real life, which is far far away from an outsiders' life. At this right moment, classical works would come out as rescuers, among which Tang Poems and Song Ci would ever carry up the biggest burden as far as Chinese culture is concerned for they are most famous and world-acknowledged representatives of Chinese literary canons. At the same time, according to their separate unique features, compared with Tang Poems, Song Ci agrees more with folk culture. Therefore, digging the cultural connotation, especially that of folk culture, in classical works, especially Song Ci, is really meaningful and effective.

## II. FOLK CULTURE IN SONG CI

Literature originates from the real life. It is the writers' expressions of their feelings, opinions and hopes about the outside world and it will stimulate the readers' various emotions, influencing their life values and even their life itself. Besides the documentary or historic books that directly keep the record of culture, literature is the best carrier of culture. Though it would not record culture so directly and systematically, close reading and analysis of literary works would promise a better understanding of culture without the common boredom coming with those monotonous recordings, for any literary works would be with a typical literary touch, which is composed by such adoptions of figures of speech like comparison, personification, exaggeration and other techniques and which is different from real life but still changes according to real life. Meanwhile, unlike other forms as oral stories, performances etc., literary works are written down. Thus, no matter how long the time would be, as long as there are books, the original description would be kept. Though people of different times may understand the works in different ways, the main idea and essence of the work would not change. It would never fade away — any disappearance or destruction would high possibly lead to the extinction of materials kept in other forms.

Among all literary works, literary canons would be the best to be connected with culture. Being "Canon" means being chosen and tested from different perspectives by history and human beings. Harold Bloom says that "The Canon, a word religious in its origins, has become a choice among texts struggling with one another for survival". [2] Literary canons stand out from a large pile of choices. They are written and selected by different people, standing for all culture, not just the high part or the folk part. Usually the high part is gathered together officially and the formalized material can be found easily, but it is not so for the folk part. Culture is connected with such a large scope, so are literary

canons. Culture can be divided into different parts, so can literary canons. It has been concluded that tracing the information about folk culture in literary canons offers a quite effective shortcut for learning about a new culture, and then can these concerned literary canons be also narrowed down? Of course, folk culture is together with a strong ethnic sense, which means that folk culture is closely related with a special group of people who gather together with unique characteristics, especially those who are referred to as an ethnic group for they originate from a certain common place, descend from the same family or hold the same genetic or physical features. Folk culture is formed for a relatively long time and recognized at least by the group and acknowledged by the public. Therefore, while talking about folk culture related with a special group, people can go to literary canons which hold exclusive color of that group, thus solving the problem. For example, when it goes to the folk culture of the Chinese people, especially the Han people, Tang Poems, Song Ci and Yuan Qu are the most challenging choices for they are special literary productions of the Chinese people, among which Song Ci is in fact the best representative.

Just as what the name indicates, Song Ci stands for the poems with typical rings of the Song Dynasty. They are prevailing in the Song Dynasty and still quite popular nowadays in not only the Chinese society but also the whole world where Chinese culture is cared about. Now that Song Ci is also a collection of poems as the Tang Poems in the Tang Dynasty and Yuan Qu in the Yuan Dynasty, why is it singled out and given a special name as "Ci"? There must be some specialties with them. All works are written to express the poets' feelings and opinions about what they experience, see and meet with and Tang Poems reach the climax of expressing the authors' subjective emotions, but with very strict rules for their existence, not to say their contents, even for their forms. In form, Tang Poems are set up with certain unchangeable number of characters, fixed beat and rhythm, stable rhyme and even constant tone of the line or stanza. Most great Tang Poems written by such great ones as Li Bai, Du Fu and others always show the poets' caring about the kingdom, the people or at least a group of people who live under a comparable situation. Even when some of them talk about personal wretched life, depressing love affairs, they will sublimate the theme to such a degree that such great things as patriotic complex, preoccupations for the people or anticipation for a bright future appear here and there. Du Fu's great poem "The Hut is Broken by the Autumn Wind" is a typical representative: the main character in the poem lives under a hut with a broken roof in great poverty, but he still requests there to be happiness for all poor people, he cares not only for himself but the whole people, there's no depression as thought but a strong optimistic sense.

In the Song Dynasty, the government emphasizes the importance of study to a quite high extent. More and more people grasp the chance and try their best to express themselves. Thus it's natural for Ci to appear and get popular then. When the poem goes from the Tang Dynasty to the Song Dynasty, they are less restricted by the rules; they are usually created as lyrics for some commonly accepted musical melodies. Although there are still limitations for

Song Ci for the musical melodies have been fixed up already, the requirement for Ci is relatively lowered for music belongs to folk culture and its rules are not set up by a smaller group of higher-educated people like those for the traditional poems, by contrast, the rules of Ci are usually brought out by the majority of the civilians based on their agreement with each other. Ci is closely related with music. The great advantage of music is that it is usually together with a popular and relaxing melody and rhythm and it can be easily remembered and inherited. They are more closely related with human beings' feeling at that right moment and record the real life more vividly and acutely. When poems are combined with music, they come down from the sacred throne of complimenting the controlled ones or worrying about the whole world to the civilian stage of complaining the personal sadness and praising one's success. Ci should be the poems that talk more about ordinary life and usually focus on personal feelings. Ci cares less about the high ones' life and even adopts such commonly unaccepted ones as prostitutes and drunkards as the main characters. A large number of poets in the Song Dynasty live such a special and luxurious life that they care less about the outside world, and they usually go to some not so normal lifestyles. Liu Yong, as one of the typical examples, goes to the brothels and taverns to and fro. He writes about the life there and shows his great sympathy and enthusiasm. Most of what the poets write about comes out from ordinary life, thus they can cause all resonations. They are not as close to the official culture as to the folk culture. Yuan Qu sticks to the rules of Song Ci, but because Yuan is controlled by the minority, though it is quite true to life. Generally speaking, Quan Yu belongs to the minority and it can't be as pervasive as Song Ci. Thus when talking about folk culture, especially the folk culture of the Chinese people, Song Ci becomes the best choice.

### III. SONG CI IN MULTILINGUAL VERSIONS

Communications between two groups would naturally meet with language barriers. When they speak the same language, people with different understanding and experience would explain the same things in different ways. When they speak different languages, the problem would more distinguishably stand out. In fact, human beings may speak different languages, they put the words in different orders, but all human beings hold the same feelings, they all love the real and beautiful and hate the evil. Language may be showed up in different forms, they contain the same essence, what really lies behind the language barriers is not the language itself but the culture they originate from and reflect. Then, the way to solve problems caused by language barriers is to translate and introduce the concerned culture in different languages, helping people from different fields and countries learn more accurately and clearly about each other.

While talking about understanding folk culture, it is concluded that making use of Song Ci would narrow the scope down and offer an effective shortcut. In all Chinese literary canons, Song Ci occupies such an important place that everyone would try his/her best to learn about Song Ci, translation and introduction of Song Ci therefore becomes quite common, then there are usually versions of Song Ci in

different languages, especially those ones in English and Chinese. Though Chinese is so widely used now, for most people outside of Chinese culture, it is still very difficult. In fact, even for Chinese themselves, Chinese is not so simple. Unlike those western languages as English that focuses on the sound, Chinese is well-known for its emphasis on the meanings. Even the same Chinese character can be understood in different ways. There are quite a large number of homonyms and synonyms in Chinese. Not to say the ancient Chinese, even for Chinese nowadays, even native speakers would encounter misunderstandings now and then. It is said that "A lyric poem is a seemingly private, honest and true emotional response, spoken from the heart." [3] As typical lyric poems, Song Ci usually talks about the poets' or the protagonists' quite subjective emotions, for which people can only really understand them correctly when they truly experience or when they totally learn clearly about the background information. Under such circumstances, the advantages of translated versions in different languages would show up.

Only the works popular among the intellectuals would be translated. Also, widely-accepted translations can only be done by those quite familiar with the languages, so is for Song Ci. Although Song Ci is connected with music the popular culture and it is easily acceptable in Song Dynasty, the melody for them are not so well kept as the lyrics and sometimes they have disappeared already. Combined with the certainty that the pronunciations and even the meanings of the characters would be changed with time, it's sure that it would be difficult for most modern people to understand them well. Then, there's an interesting paradox: people who can't understand both languages well cannot issue the task of translating, but translation in either language would help the readers understand the works better as long as the reader knows even just a little about both languages.

As collection of poems, there are so many poems in Song Ci and not all of them would be cared about and even translated. It's no doubt that the poets' fame, writing style and language would play important roles, but what the poems reflect and how people think about them count for more. When folk culture is connected with Song Ci, the foremost consideration should go to the selection of Song Ci. All Song Ci still popular nowadays can be called the "canons". Folk culture is closely related with local color. Therefore, based on which part of it will be studied, the scale of the selection can be narrowed down. The problem now is how to judge the relationship between them. For example, if folk culture of Ba Shu (mainly referring to the culture of Sichuan and Chongqing) is concerned, Song Ci having nothing to do with the area would not be cared about, at least, not too much attention would be given to them.

As a literary form, Song Ci unavoidably agrees with the basic rules, the fundamental one is that literary works are the writers' reflection of the outside world in texts and the readers' resonance to them. There are always arguments on which part plays the most important role, the texts, the writer or the reader. Most critics talk about the writing skills, effects and background information as life experience, birth location and studies accepted etc. about the writer; the New

Critics believe in the timeless meaning of the text; the reader-response theorists say "readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature." [4] All three are important when they are evaluated from different perspectives. When the aim is to get information about folk culture — let's say, the Ba Shu culture, after the decision about the location is made — Ba and Shu areas consequently, the following step is to get material collected from three aspects: first, the writers should be the ones connected with Ba Shu culture — they could be born here, have lived here or at least been influenced by culture here, for no one can talk about folk culture clearly and accurately without being really involved into it; second, the texts should be directly connected with Ba Shu culture, no matter it is about locations, people or customs, otherwise, how can the researchers convince others of their ideas? Third, the readers' response should be reflections of their thoughts on Ba Shu culture caused by their reading of these works. There would be no doubts for the first two points, which agrees with the idea of narrowing studying a new folk culture down to just Song Ci. But there should be some explanations for the third point for it sounds like a commonsense for all readers. In fact, while talking about the readers, the other side, the writers should not be neglected. When certain folk culture, for example, Ba Shu culture, in literature canons, let's say, Song Ci, is concerned, the works related with Ba Shu Culture would be chosen and the writers are undoubtedly quite familiar with it. It's natural for people to take things they are quite familiar with for granted. They would treat them as commonsense and not go to detailed explanation. Therefore, for the readers from other cultural circumstances, especially those in other ages, there would be barriers for understanding. Under such conditions, go to translated versions of these works. The first important point is that those works selected to be translated are usually well accepted by others, which means that they represent well the culture contained and there are people who care about the culture. When there are special points only existing in one culture, even the translator doesn't notice it, the readers of the translated versions would of course react to it in different ways. Then, trace the trail of the culture, explaining it in simple language. This "simple" doesn't mean being superficial, instead, it means being words that people researching are familiar with, It would offer a quite excellent way any others would not be able to compete with for with the help of the translators' profound research, the ones who aim to learn about the culture can also understand it better in a simpler way.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In this fast developing world, understanding culture helps a lot in all communications. For the part of official culture, there would be no difficulty to get them because they are usually cared by people high in important posts, they can be got relatively easily. However, the folk culture part agrees more with reality in life and they are usually neglected. To make up for the faults created by human beings in this long history, learning more about folk culture deserves a long-time effort. But for such great countries as China, there's

such a large population and there are so many special ethnical groups, folk culture would be naturally connected with a quite big scale. As one important part of typical Chinese literature, Song Ci comes out as this critical moment and offers a quite good way to learn about folk culture, because literature is a very good carrier of culture. Make a good choice for study of folk culture at a special time, and a better understanding of people and their society and their culture would never be a dream anymore.

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