

Study of Bashu Folk Culture Based on Tang Poems and Their English Versions

Ya'an in Li Bai's *To the Moon over Mount Emei*

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Abstract—As a typical representative of Chinese literary canons, Tang Poem is a good carrier of Chinese folk culture. For so many famous Tang poets are either born in Bashu regions or delegated to work or live here, they have left quite a lot of works reflecting Bashu folk culture as literary legacy for human beings. It's not easy to find systematically collected and analyzed materials for folk culture even though there are great developments in all fields nowadays, however, tracing trails of folk culture in literary canons, gathering and analyzing them together would be quite a good way to get information about folk culture organized and stored for further studies, in which Tang Poem stands out, especially when Bashu culture is concerned. Translation is always helping the readers to understand the original text better. Therefore, studying Bashu culture in Tang Poem with the help of their translated versions would be an excellent choice.

Keywords—Bashu folk culture; Tang poems; translated version; literary canon

I. INTRODUCTION

Communications become more and more important in the society. In fact, an effective and profound communication comes from a good understanding of each other's culture. No one can define what "culture" exactly is, but it is accepted that "culture" contains information covering anything one can imagine. Raymond Williams says that "culture can be used to refer to a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development". [1](P1) All experiences, histories and stories will form certain rules, and they can be quite formal ones written down like the laws, they can also be informal ones kept in spoken words or just in one's mind, all of which make up the culture that was formed in the past, that can be changed now and that will have special effect in the future.

According to how the culture is accepted, culture can be generally divided to the official part and the popular part, whose differences can be clearly reflected in a group, for culture is surely formed by groups of people and not by any single individual. Kevin V. Mulcaby says that "an official culture is a body of artistic correctness by the state or the ruling party." [2](P70) Just as what the names indicate, the official part is usually selected by the minority in controlling,

which agree more with their thoughts and interests and they want other just to follow them; the popular part is usually widely spread among the mass, which agree more with ordinary people's life but they are seldom publicized for they are not regarded so important by the controllers who have more chance to get involved in cross-cultural communications.

It's no doubt that both the natural environment and the humanized conditions will influence the formation and development of a culture. To get a general understanding of a culture, it's certain that going to the official bureaus and getting the publicized materials could satisfy the demand. But a real understanding of the culture can only be fulfilled after getting in deep touch with those ordinary people and their ordinary life where popular culture originates. Popular culture really agrees more with real life and offers more reliable and profound information.

Not to say people from different countries, people in different groups in the same country also have their unique popular culture. These groups can be classified according to different standards, but for the ones in such a multi-ethnic country as China, different ethnic groups can hold all people in. Thus, popular culture of each ethnic group can be established relatively independently. As what Lin Yaohua says: "what the ethnics are concerned with is the interactional relationship between human beings' social cultural groups and the biological environment". [3](P55) Lin agrees with Stalin's definition for "the ethnics": A nation (the ethnics) is a stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, history, ethnicity, or psychological make-up manifested in a commonculture. [4] In China, the ethnic groups are usually defined so. The latter factors can only be got after close learning, but the first two can be easily recognized for even though people can't judge what the language is, they know whether it is new and different; it's also easy to judge where the culture comes from because only when people make the decision on which part of culture they would study could they know what they should focus on.

The popular culture closely related with a certain ethnic group is actually an essential part of folk culture. Folk culture is certainly a part of popular culture for it is closely

related with civil life and ordinary people, especially, a group of people with a relatively long history. In such a country as China together with various ethnic cultures, folk culture also contains much. The more reasonable and easier way to study the folk culture is to narrow it down as much as possible. As what has been mentioned above, since those subjective factors as history and psychology can't be exactly defined, it's a shortcut to about folk culture concerned with people speaking the similar language or confined in a certain region. If analysis for folk culture in a country could work well, it will pave an excellent way for future analysis of the whole culture. Thus, the problem goes to how to confirm the limits of the culture, especially, folk culture. Taking all factors that are available into consideration, Bashu folk culture can be chosen as the suitable case.

II. BASHU FOLK CULTURE IN TANG POEMS

Compared with popular culture, folk culture contains less. The biggest difference between them would be that those temporary cultural phenomena called "fashions" belong to popular culture while folk culture is only about the rules, customs and conceptions that have been examined by certain group of people for a long time. Folk culture must be together with a strong historic sense. Therefore, Bashu folk culture is a quite appropriate representative. Long before the unification of China by the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty, there's Bashu culture. Initially, there's a distinct separation between the Ba culture which centers on current Chongqing and the Shu culture which centers on current Sichuan, but later on, they are combined together. In the prime time of the appearance and development of researches on Bashu culture, they are still regarded as a whole. Bashu folk culture represents well the Chinese folk culture, both having been accumulated for a history as long as about five thousand years. In China, Han people's culture at first focused on the central China; while Bashu culture centered on Southwest of China where different ethnic groups nowadays originated from and now most ethnic minority groups can still be found. When culture of Han people are prevailing as main culture in China nowadays, Bashu folk culture also remarks the development of Chinese culture with a strong historic and geographical sense. Researching on Bashu folk culture can open a wider and richer door for the understanding of Chinese culture.

Lin Yaohua says: "Language is the most important expression of culture, while as members of specific ethnic groups, those language users are exactly culture carriers." [3](P68) Ba and Shu peoples take up their responsibility of spread and inherit Bashu folk culture without hesitation, and they have left a wonderful trail in China's history, they make up an essential part of Chinese culture. Bashu folk culture can never be avoided being talked about when Chinese culture is mentioned. It is more meaningful and profound for different ethnic folk cultures are combined here in this intricate one. They are recorded in different languages: the oral stories, songs and performances that are passed on by generations of descendants of Bashu people; the written words in books. While the oral ones are not so easily got and understood by people from the outside, the written ones can be obtained and discussed more easily. A lot of writers who

are born, growing up or just living in (no matter for a long time or just for a few days) Bashu areas have written down a lot about it, from which the information and clue of Bashu culture can be got.

So many great literary workers have kept in touch with Bashu culture in this way or that. Su Shi, Su Zhe and Su Xun, these famous litterateurs coming from the same family of Song Dynasty; great poets led by Li Bai, Du Fu; modern writers like Guo Moruo, Ba Jin and so on... all these writers now and then locate their great works in Bashu regions and talk about people and life here. As far as Bashu folk culture in written works is concerned, Tang Poems could never be neglected. As a typical representative of Chinese culture, Tang Poem stands out from Chinese literary canons and displays a vivid and accurate life taking place everywhere in the Tang Dynasty. As part of Chinese literary canons, Tang Poem agrees with all the requirements and features of the canons. Harold Bloom's describes that "The Canon...has become a choice among texts struggling with one another for survival." [5](P19) As part of the canons, Tang Poems are prevailing in the Tang Dynasty, tested by generations followed and still widely appreciated nowadays. Thus cultural phenomena in the Tang Poems are the ones having experienced the practice of ordinary people, selection of the poets and acceptance of the readers and going along the history for a long time, which are just what the reliable materials researchers on folk culture need. The only problem for collecting information about folk culture in these poems would be that people should trace the trails in them and get the information after careful study and analysis, because the information of folk culture is hardly gathered together systematically. But as long as the work is done, the data would be quite reliable and accurate. Since so many great Tang poets have been in the Bashu areas, they know clearly about Bashu culture and they record all these in their works both directly and indirectly. Studying Bashu folk culture in Tang Poems is surely to be a highly effective and excellent way.

III. FOLK CULTURE IN TRANSLATED TANG POEMS

So many Tang Poems have been translated into different languages. Andre Lefevere has said that "the object of the majority of translations that are produced in our day and age is the communication of information". [6](P41) Only when there's demand for understanding of certain works will they be translated. All literary works are media to transmit cultural information of the time and environment where they are created. Those who want to learn clearly about certain literary works would surely be the ones who are interested in the culture the works are concerned with. For people around the world care more and more about Chinese culture, Chinese literary canons become prevailing again for canons doesn't only stand for the time they are created in, they also speak of the changes and renovations of the society. Tang Poems are translated because culture in the Tang Dynasty was, is and will be a symbol of prosperity and thriving of Chinese culture in history. They offer so wonderful a record of Tang Dynasty still not out of fashion today. For the official culture recorded in canons, there is not so much

space for further analysis because they have already been concluded by experts in history. However, the folk culture in Canons could be easily understood in its own age, but because there is usually lack of systematic collection for the related information, it is not so easily understood now. There are even lots of misunderstandings for them because time and tide do lead changes to the world frequently. Tang Poems could be quite easily understood in the Tang Dynasty. Since the essence of Chinese culture has never been changed too much, the understanding of the official culture part would not be a big problem. However, there are lots of changes for the folk culture in Tang Poems, from the words' pronunciation and spelling to people's different attitude toward the same thing as well as their different understanding for different values in different times, then quite a lot of problems would arise now.

Tang Dynasty is together with strong difference between the controllers and the controlled. Folk culture would not be cared so much by people in high positions because in a hierarchical society, folk culture is more collected with ordinary people and others would not spend so much energy and time there. However, there's great development in the society and economy in Tang Dynasty, which leads to great improvement in communications between people all over the world, as a result, there's a great promotion for average literacy and cultural fusion. When people from different places begin to communicate more with each other, the first barrier they both face with would be language, and then they would certainly ask for the help of translation. Artificial translation means changing one language into another, only caring about the denotations. Real translation requires the translators to know the language all in its denotation, connotation, application as well as its cultural origination and development, for which understanding the culture behind well would be a good way. Because literary canons are the best chosen ones in literature, they represent a culture quite well; meanwhile, because reading is much easier than writing and speaking for a foreign-language learner, many translators like to translate the literary canons. Therefore, there are quite a lot of translated versions for Tang Poems.

Comparing any texts in multi-lingual versions can obviously show the advantage of knowing about different languages. A good translator should be familiar with both the original language and the targeted one together with their cultures. Those translators for literary canons should of course know at least those two cultures well. Otherwise, there would be lots of misunderstandings and thus wrong translations, which could never be accepted by the public. Tang Poems comes down from Tang Dynasty. No one can even be familiar with every culture in modern society, not to say folk culture in the ancient times. Even for Chinese people, understanding every word in works descended from the old times would be difficult. Translated works come into being after the translators well understand them in the original language and then they can translate them into another modern language, which would tend more to be in the modern forms or pronunciations if there's some difference between the ancient and the modern ones, unless someone deliberately chooses to adopt the ancient ways.

When such problems arise, it is suggested to go to the translated versions, even if one can't get an excellent answer, they can understand the original information better. Get the traces of folk culture in Tang Poems, organize and analyze them with the help of their translated versions, then the study of folk culture will be more accurate, reliable and profound.

IV. YA'AN FOLK CULTURE IN BILINGUAL VERSIONS OF LI BAI'S POEM

It is said that Chengdu was so prosperous in the Tang Dynasty that even Chang'an, the capital city then, can't compete with it in economy. Economy is the basis for the development of culture; therefore, so many scholars came to Chengdu or somewhere near to it in Tang Dynasty. As a result, literary culture around Chengdu then also reached its prime. As the central city of Bashu region, the prosperity of Chengdu also leads the cities around it to reach one of the best times in their history. These literary canons concerned with Chengdu and cities around offer a great treasure and legacy of Bashu culture. It is known that all literary works comes out from real life and goes beyond it and people usually emphasize that "beyond life" part, however, when culture, especially folk culture is talked about, the "from real life" part should be more emphasized. They afford a quite reliable source for researching on culture. Tang Poems related with Bashu poets and lives then offer such a good proof for Bashu culture and deserve a further detailed analysis.

Both the big cities like Chengdu and the smaller cities around are all frequently recorded in the works, all demonstrating Bashu culture and its development more or less. Ya'an, a small city not far away from Chengdu, appears often in the great works, Tang Poems included. Tang Poems related with Ya'an naturally show up the city in its unique features. According to its appearance in many great works, it was obvious that Ya'an was an important intersectional city of transportation and culture then, the great poet Li Bai's *To the Moon over Mount Emei* is quite a good example.

The poem *To the Moon over Mount Emei* was written in 725 when Li Bai left the Shu region. There are only 28 Chinese characters in the poem, even so, several places as Emei, Pingqiang, Three Gorges, Qingxi and Yuzhou are mentioned. Going directly to the poem in its original Chinese version, quite a lot of background information can be directly got, for example, the direction of the poet's route, the time of the writing, the traveling vehicle of the traveling... Especially, the feeling and mood of the poet can also be clearly got: in such an autumn night, the poet is to leave the places that he is familiar with, he would go to somewhere he can't meet with his old friend any more, it's full of nostalgia. For someone familiar with China, especially Sichuan, it's easy to know that the poem offers a very complete picture of what the Shu region is like in autumn in Li Bai's time. But for those not so familiar with China, explanations should be added. When the explanation is in Chinese, there's no need for explanations for proper names, which is a typical characteristic of this poem, but these explanations should be done carefully when they are translated.

There are two popular translated versions of this poem — one is from the greatest modern translator Xu Yuanhong, the other one is done by Wen Shu, Wang Jinxi and Deng Yanchang. Both versions are excellent translations and hold their own specialties — Xu's version shows a strong literary sense: Xu adopts more free translation, which means that he doesn't translate the images directly, but displays their connotations, which holds especially true for the names of the locations; while Wen's version goes more to literal translation, in which all the images are shown directly with transliteration for all the names of the locations. Getting these two together is a great way to understand the Chinese version better. The similar parts in both of them are related with all human beings' commonsense for reading poems — the poem is about Li Bai's nostalgia when he travels along the river to leave some familiar scenes and friends, while those specific details about folk culture would be shown by differences displayed in these different versions.

Wen's English version agrees almost completely with the Chinese version, thus, it can be given to all who just want to know what the poem is generally about, anyone who knows just basically about English can get the main idea from it. But if one wants to know more about the deep meaning behind, the advantage of their comparison would stand out. For example, Emei is well-known for all, while Xu avoids the appearance of the name anywhere it is used in the original version. It agrees with the style of his translation for he focuses on transmitting the poet's deep feeling inside. But it also leads to some difference for understanding the poem, Xu's version can be understood as a common feeling happening anywhere, however, Li and Wen's versions get this feeling connected with the special location, together with the time set in, people understand Sichuan culture will get a subtle different reference from it for moon over Emei is surely different from moon anywhere else. Another good example would be the Ya'an culture mentioned in the poem. Go through all versions, nothing about Ya'an can be directly found for it is not directly mentioned. The proper noun "Pingqiang" is seen in Wen's version, while in Xu's version, it is translated as "limpid water blue". If readers just aim at understanding the meaning of the poem, Xu's translation is enough. But for one who believes in the influence of location on people, Wen's version shows clearly that these not so well-known locations will add different flavors to the whole poem. In order to get the cultural information behind, there would be more researches for the exact information. Then, people would know that "Pingqiang" is actually the proper names of Qing Yi River in Ya'an nowadays. And then, it can be known long ago, at least in the Tang Dynasty, Ya'an had already been regarded as part of Bashu culture, it is quite close to Emei and it is a necessary transporting point for those who will enter or go out of Sichuan. Meanwhile, it can be known that Ya'an is a place where not only different geographical places meet with, it is also where different cultures converge for Han people is the majority in China and Qiang here stands for the minority ethnic group, Qiang people. Then, more and more important information about folk culture would be got after closer and closer analysis of these simple but meaningful characters in a short Tang Poem.

V. CONCLUSION

It's easy to get materials concerned with official culture in today's fast developing society, but it's really hard to get the corresponding one concerned with folk culture, which lead to quite a big trouble and confusion to those who want to learn a certain culture well and who look forward to going to accurate details. Literary canons come out then as good carriers of culture, in which Tang Poem is an essential part. Tang Poems are passed on generations after generations as best records of the culture in the Tang Dynasty, they were, are and will be popular forever. Because of the great development of economy in Bashu regions led by Chengdu, many great poets in the Tang Dynasty came down here and left so many Tang Poems written about or in Bashu regions, from which Bashu culture is accurately and profoundly transmitted. As usual, the information about official culture can be easily found in other materials too, but information concerned with certain folk culture can only be shown in certain literary works, Bashu culture in Tang Poems is a good example. However, Tang Poems are created long time ago, there would be some problems now for understanding them, and here translated versions come out for help. There are so many translated versions of Tang Poems and translation is always a good way to understand the original texts. Therefore, tracing information about Bashu culture in Tang Poems and making a good use of the translated versions would pave a way for a meaningful, accurate and profound study on Bashu culture.

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