

TRANSLATOLOGICA PRAGENSIA VIII

**WANG WEI IN THE WEST****Reception and Representation  
of an Oriental Literary Image**

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**ABSTRACT**

What do contemporary Western readers know about Wang Wei, an eighth-century Chinese landscape and pastoral poet? How has his image changed in and linked with the receiving cultural-social-historical context over the past one hundred years? This paper aims to sketch out the history of the reception and representation of Wang Wei, one of the most translated Chinese poets in the English-speaking countries, Britain and North America in particular. The argument is that Wang Wei's poetry, which involves the imagery of landscape and spirituality, fits into the revolution of English literary Modernism and the development of cultural politics in the twentieth century. After a brief introduction to Wang Wei's life and poetry, I will discuss how literary, cultural and social norms in the target system have affected the way Wang Wei and his poetry is translated and represented in English since the beginning of the twentieth century. The translation and research focus, even of the same poem, shifts within different social contexts and historical periods.

If we decide [...] to work through translation, we have opened a Pandora's box of problems that call the very enterprise into the question. [...] What is being read in these translated poems – the English or the poetic ideas and images? (Owen 2003: 539)

As more classical Chinese poems become available to the Anglophone world, it is possible to focus on individual authors with more breadth and depth. As Lefevere (1992b: 9) remarks, translation is “potentially the most influential because it is able to project the image of an author and/or a (series of) work(s) in another culture, lifting that author and/or those works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin”. A poet like Wang Wei from the past and the foreign has come into the heterogeneous Anglophone literary system.

This paper intends to explore how Wang Wei 王維 (701–761), a Chinese Tang-dynasty poet, was received and represented through the twentieth century in the Anglophone world, what images of him different translators have created at different times for different readers in the receiving context, and why some of his poems are most translated in certain periods. This paper intends to argue that the reception and representation of Wang Wei in the Anglophone world coincided with changing poetics and ideology during the course of the twentieth century, which sustained his (re-) translation.

In the Chinese context, Wang Wei occupies a canonical position. He has been labelled as a landscape poet and the founder of the Southern School of monochrome landscape painting. Educated readers may have heard the frequently quoted statement about his work – “there is poetry in his painting and painting in his poetry”, a remark made by Su Shi, an eleventh-century poet. His work has frequently been interpreted from the perspective of Zen Buddhism (Xiao 1997; Deng *et al* 1993). Simply put, the reception of the poet has been linking with poetry, painting, and spirituality. Wang Wei was already famous in his day. As Owen (1981: 36) puts it:

Particularly in the last decade of his life and the two decades following his death, Wang Wei has a strong claim to having been considered the greatest poet of the day. His late prestige with the imperial family was surely one factor in the admiration of his younger contemporaries, but he was also the central social figure in the world of poetry; his acquaintance with other contemporary poets was broad and his influence tremendous.

Wang Wei’s achievement in poetry ranked with Li Bo and Du Fu, two of the most often translated Chinese poets. Based on Zhao Diancheng’s *The Complete Works of Deputy-Minister Wang with Annotations* (*Wang Youcheng ji jianzhu* 王右丞集箋注) (1736),<sup>1</sup> he was described as a versatile literary man from an upper-class family and entered officialdom around the age of twenty. He had a virtuoso talent for painting, writing, and instrument playing. Being able to compose verses at the age of nine, he excelled at quatrain-style poetry. He was a filial son and a pious Buddhist, who would practise meditation after returning home from court. It can be seen from the essays of Liu Xu and Song Qi that Wang Wei’s political career was interspersed with his secluded country living, suggesting his inclination towards nature and quietism.<sup>2</sup> His proneness to Buddhism can be perceived from his first name Wei 維 and courtesy/style name Mojie 摩詰, given by his mother, a devout Buddhist. The combination of both names, Wei Mojie, makes up the Chinese transliteration of an Indian Buddhist sage’s name, Vimalakīrti, which, according to Zhou (1994: 67), signifies a purified mind. Wang Wei alluded to his name in one of his poems: “My [first and style] names differ from my hobbies [of writing and painting], but my heart still doesn’t know” (*ming zi ben xi li* 名字本習離, *ci xin huan bu zhi* 此心還不知).<sup>3</sup> In Tang society, Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra was a popular Buddhist classic read by both lay people

<sup>1</sup> Before his death, Wang Wei reached his highest official position as *Shangshu Youcheng* 尚書右丞, a state counsellor or minister. This is why he was called Wang Youcheng and his official title is used as part of the title of his standard anthology in Chinese.

<sup>2</sup> There are not many extant accounts of Wang Wei’s life. Even in the canonical anthology mentioned above, only basic biographical information on his family background, talents, education, and political career is provided. Liu Xu 劉昫 (887–946) and Song Qi 宋祁 (998–1061), two official biographers of Wang Wei, supplied approximately 700 words in *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (*Old Tang History*) and 450 words in *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (*New Tang History*) respectively. Both essays are collected in the anthology.

<sup>3</sup> Technical note: The original poems of Wang Wei used in this paper are based on Chen Tiemin’s *Xin yi Wang Wei shi wen ji* 新譯王維詩文集 (*The Poetry and Other Writings of Wang Wei with Annotations*).

and intellectuals. The sage, Vimalakīrti, was depicted as a layman-Buddhist as Ch'ên (1964: 385) describes:

Here was a layman rich and powerful, [...] but was also a faithful and wise disciple of the Buddha, a man full of wisdom and thoroughly disciplined in his conduct. Indeed the educated elite of Chinese society must have that here was a model that they could emulate, for though Vimala was a Buddhist, he could very easily have been taken for a Confucian gentleman.

Cheung (2006: 58–68) also remarks that the popularity of this sutra with the cultured gentry was crucial to the transfusion of Buddhism to the upper classes of society in Tang China.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars (Xiao 1997; Yang 2007) argue that the philosophy of “emptiness” in Wang Wei’s landscape poetry comes from this sutra, with which Wang Wei had been familiar since he was young. It can be said that the layman-Buddhist image of Vimalakīrti might offer an explanation for Wang Wei’s lifetime engagement in Buddhism while remaining an imperial official until his death.

In the English context, how Wang Wei and his poetry have been received has been changing with time. Herbert Giles’s *A History of Chinese Literature* published in 1901 contained two of Wang Wei’s poems. As Giles (1973: 150) introduced Wang Wei as Meng Haoran’s (689–740) contemporary poet, the first poem selected is about the former’s farewell to the latter, who was seeking refuge in the mountains. The second poem, “Bamboo Lodge” (*zhu li guan* 竹里館),<sup>5</sup> serves as an illustration of a thumbnail introduction to the poet that he retired into seclusion and occupied himself with the consolations of Buddhism:

Beneath the bamboo grove, alone,  
I size my lute and sit and croon;  
No ear to hear me, save mine own;  
No eye to see me save – save the moon.

This poem has been rendered over the past century by different poets and scholars, for instance, Ezra Pound, Gary Snyder, and David Hinton, whose translations are included in Weinberger’s *The New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry* (2003: 67).

Wang Wei’s work was introduced to English readers again in the 1910s. The next poem appearing in a volume publication is no. 6 of the seven hexasyllabic quatrain series entitled “Pastoral Pleasure” (*tian yuan le* 田園樂):<sup>6</sup>

One early morning.  
Peach blossom after rain

<sup>4</sup> From AD 200–600, this sutra had been translated into Chinese seven times.

<sup>5</sup> The title of the poem is not provided in Giles’s book.

<sup>6</sup> The title of the poem is not provided in Waddell’s book.

Is deeper red;  
The willow fresher green;  
Twittering overhead;  
And fallen petals lie wind-blown,  
Unswep upon the courtyard stone.

It was included in Waddell's *Lyrics from the Chinese* (1914: 33), four years earlier than Pound's translation and publication of the same poem in *The Little Review* in 1918, which will be discussed later. Waddell did not identify who the author of the poem was. She introduced it as a work from the Tang dynasty. In addition, the translation is not complete. At least the last line of the original is not translated. The word-for-word translation for the last line is "sing-orioles-mountain-guest-still-sleep" (*ti ying shan ke you mian* 啼鶯山客猶眠), rendered by Hinton (2006: 8) as "and orioles are scattering song. A mountain wanderer sleeps on." The reason for the abandonment of the last line is unknown, but the image projected is serene and dynamic, with *twittering* livening the quiet sketch of a morning scene. The word *twittering* does not exist in the source poem.

In 1915, Wang Wei appeared as Omakitsu (the Japanese form of Wang Wei) in Pound's *Cathay*. He was represented with the poem below, "Four Poems of Departure" (Chinese title: "Song Yuan er shi Anxi 送元二使安西" (Seeing Off Yuan the Second on a Mission to Anxi):

Light rain is on the light dust.  
The willows of the inn-yard  
Will be going greener and greener,  
But you, Sir, had better take wine ere  
your departure,  
For you will have no friends about  
you  
When you come to the gate of Go. (Eliot 1928: 115)

At that time, Pound could not decide whether this poem belonged to Rihaku (the Japanese form of Li Bo) or Wang Wei. The tone of departure and exile of the poem incidentally corresponded to the contemporary keynotes of separation and sorrow around the time of World War I. As one's reading of a literary work interacts with his or her contemporary environment, it can be assumed that the coincidence led to a different kind of interpretation, and this poem and other *Cathay* poems came to be read almost as war poems. Kenner draws attention to this and also the way in which thereafter some Chinese poetry became associated with attitudes to war. He (1971: 202) argues that "the Chinese poems paraphrase an elegiac war poetry nobody wrote. [...] Perfectly vital after 50 years, they are among the most durable of all poetic responses to WWI." Alexander's interpretation of *Cathay* might testify to Kenner's viewpoint. According to him, war was a theme that obtained special prominence in 1915:

As Pound chooses only a few of Fenollosa's poems to make up *Cathay*, the selection itself tells us something about his responses. The particular emotional quality of *Cathay* is regretful and plangent, and its themes meet on this note. These themes embrace departure, exile, estrangement, separation, love, war, travel, escape, pleasure, heroism, rapture, ecstasy. (Alexander 1979: 101)

The focus of the same poem shifts within different social contexts and historical periods. In 1980, the poem above was categorized by Yu in the "Nature Poems" chapter in her book and translated as "Farewell to Yuan the Second on His Mission to Anxi" (1980: 176–77):

In Wei City morning rain dampens the light dust.  
By the travelers' lodge, green upon green – the willows' color is  
new.  
I urge you to drink up yet another glass of wine:  
Going west from Yang Pass, there are no old friends.

Although Yu also indicated the pattern of farewell perceived in the poem, the focus was placed on nature, the key attribute in Wang Wei's landscape and pastoral poetry. In the first decade of the current century, the same poem was rendered by Hinton (2006: 77) as:

"Farewell to Yüan, Who's Been Sent to An-hsi"

Morning rain scents the city's light dust. And it's green  
here at this wayhouse, the fresh green color of willow.

Stay a little. Linger out another cup. Once you've gone  
west over Solar-Bright Pass, there will be no old friends.

This translation, by omitting the city-name *Wei* and changing the transliteration *Yang* into *Solar-Bright*, stresses the imagistic landscape. In addition, setting the poem in two neat couplets reflects traditional Chinese poetics of antithesis. Most of all, the obvious reduction of the use of *you*, compared with Pound's version, helps highlight the observation of nature and the backdrop where a farewell event is taking place. As in traditional Chinese landscape painting, the human figures are small and vague, while landscape occupies most of the scroll. The translation of the poem is an epitome of the different images of Wang Wei being created in the English-speaking world at different times throughout the twentieth century.

Wang Wei is among the few Chinese poets who have been translated into English, contained in anthologies and treated as a single subject in volumes. According to Yu (1979: 219) and Wagner (1981: 9), Wang Wei and his poetry have been more frequently translated than any other single Chinese poet. Reasons for the constant scholarship and translation can be best summarized by Yu (1980: xi):

... the quietude of many of his nature poems, appealing to subcultures of the late sixties in the West; his reliance on concrete imagery, which translates rather well; the infrequency of obscure allusions in much of his work; his comparatively straightforward diction and syntax; and the quite manageable size of his corpus.

Yu's statement indicates five reasons. The size of Wang Wei's poetry is a practical aspect which would be considered in both original and target cultures. Compared with Du Fu's over 1500 existing poems, Wang Wei's poetry of less than 500 is relatively easier to be researched and translated. The other reasons are closely related to the receiving system. Namely, Wang Wei's poetry meets with literary and spiritual trends in the Anglophone world.

It is obvious that the direct treatment of language and the rare use of obscure literary and historical allusions in Wang Wei's poetry can avoid excess annotations or footnotes for a terse five-syllabic quatrain. In Wells's view (1974: 8), the relatively little employment of mythological allusions facilitates general readers in reading Wang Wei's work. While imagery can elicit a diversity of responses and interpretations from the readers, the reduction of allusions and metaphors is helpful to minimize difficulty in understanding a foreign poem for lay readers without much knowledge of Chinese culture and literature.

Wang Wei's succinct landscape poems with concentrated imagery echoed modernist poetic trends and were employed by poets like Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell to promote Imagism in the early twentieth century. Although landscape is universally changeable, the visual images conjured up by mountains, rivers, forests, and rocks may transcend boundaries of nations and languages. As Pound (1954: 25) argues, images of the visual imagination can be rendered intact. His rendition of "Dawn on the Mountain" (1918: 1) demonstrates this aspect:

Peach flowers turn the dew crimson,  
Green willows melt in the mist,  
The servant will not sweep up the fallen petals,  
And the nightingales  
Persist in their singing.

Pound's translation displays his principles of Imagism: "use no superfluous word and no adjective which does not reveal something" (Pound and Litz 1985: 324). A variety of colours produced by nouns like peach flowers, dew, willows, and petals construct a poem of rich imagery based on the use of *vers libre* or free verse, natural and succinct language, accurate and concrete images, and direct expression. Images are presented as images, rarely and even not charged with the poet's personal and emotional impressions. In addition, from Wang Wei's and other classical Chinese poems, Imagist poets found an effect of collage and a prominent tradition in Chinese literature and philosophy – the juxtaposition between the internal (feelings) and the external (scenes). Imagistic poets experimented with the Chinese mode of writing and infused

it into their own. This can be seen in Ayscough and Lowell's translation of Wang Wei's "The Blue-Green Stream" (*Qing Xi* 青溪) (1921: 123):

We are in the midst of a noise of water,  
Of the confused and mingled sounds of water broken by stones,  
And in the deep darkness of pine-trees.  
Rocked, rocked,  
Moving on and on,  
We float past water-chestnuts  
Into a still clearness reflecting reeds and rushes.  
My heart is clean and white as silk; it has already achieved  
Peace;  
It is smooth as the placid river.

Compared with Robinson's relatively literal translation (1973: 49), of which the number of lines follows the original:

There is the murmur of water among rocks  
And the quietness of colours deep in pines  
Lightly lightly drifting water-chestnuts  
Clearly clearly mirrored reeds and rushes  
I have always been a lover of tranquillity  
And when I see this clear stream so calm

While Robinson's translation illuminates the traditional Chinese poetics of parallelism, Ayscough and Lowell's rendition highlights images.

In the mid-twentieth century, the calmness of nature perceived in Wang Wei's poetry corresponded with the rising Western interest in Eastern spirituality associated with a group of intellectual supporters, i.e. the Beat writers, who promoted poetry and Oriental philosophy, through which public awareness of poetry was increased and interest in Zen meditation was developed. The elements of Imagery and Zen, always associated with Wang Wei's nature poetry, were apparent in the poems of two Beat poets, Kenneth Rexroth and Gary Snyder, whose contribution to the dissemination and translation of classical Chinese poetry is recognized. In addition, the tranquil ambiance in Wang Wei's poetry responded to a postwar human yearning for simplicity and peace. For example, the use of psychedelic drugs in the 1960s seemed to connect to a double desire for enhanced sensation on the one hand and for inner tranquillity on the other.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is understandable that poets like Han Shan (Cold Mountain) and Wang Wei were introduced to the literary marketplace, especially in North America, around the 1950s when people were looking for alternatives and when Zen Buddhism

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<sup>7</sup> It is necessary to clarify that the point here is to sketch the cultural politics of the receiving end. It is not attempting to say that translators of Wang Wei, especially those in the mid-twentieth century, all took psychedelic drugs and then developed an interest in his work.

became a vogue. Their poetry became an alternative for the receiving environment of the time, interacting with a contemporary context. “Deer Park” (*Lu Zhai* 鹿柴), which has often been read from the quietism of Zen, is probably Wang Wei’s most known and most translated poem in English. Weinberger’s *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* (1987) collects different translations of this quatrain in English, Spanish and French. Rexroth translated the small poem as “Deep in the Mountain Wilderness” in 1970, and Snyder translated it as “Deer Camp” in 1978. Here is Snyder’s version:

Empty mountains:  
no one to be seen.  
Yet – hear –  
human sounds and echoes.  
Returning sunlight  
enters the dark woods;  
Again shining  
on the green moss, above. (Weinberger and Paz 1987: 42)

The human sounds and echoes serve as a sharp contrast to the quietness of mountains. Also, some of Rexroth’s own poems reveal the ambiance of silence. For example, “Another Spring”:

The white moon enters the heart of the river;  
The air is drugged with azalea blossoms:  
Deep in the night a pine cone falls;  
Our campfire dies out in the empty mountains. (Rexroth 1966: 145)

The imagery of the poem at first glance is similar to that of Wang Wei’s “Birds Sing in the Ravine” (*niao ming jian* 鳥鳴澗):

Few people see the acacia blossoms fall,  
Night is quiet, the spring mountain empty.  
The sudden moon alarms mountain birds.  
Long moment of song in the spring ravine. (Barnstone *et al.* 1989: 52)

The quatrain above is often interpreted with an overtone of Zen epiphany. For example, the Barnstones (1989: 56) remark that “the frequent ‘empty mountain’ evokes also the empty mind, the meditation state or the moment of Chan [Zen] awakening.”

During the first decade of the present century, Wang Wei’s poetry has come to be read from an angle of spiritual-ecology (Torrance 1999; Larkin 2004; Hinton 2006). The philosophy of Zen is still valued. The new perspective of environmental awareness is adopted to interpret the poet’s work. For example, seven of Wang Wei’s poems are contained in Torrance’s *Encompassing Nature* (1999: 207–10), a book which aims to present writing inspired by the natural world and to illustrate the relationship between culture and nature. Here are the sixth and seventh couplets



of the first anthologized poem “A Song of Peach-Blossom River” (*Tao Yuan Xing* 桃源行) (1999: 208):

Living on the uplands, above the Wu-ling River [Peach-Blossom River],  
On farms and in gardens that are like world apart,  
Their dwellings at peace under pines in the clear moon,  
Until sunrise fills the low sky with crowing and barking.

It can be assumed that this poem is selected to embody the spirit of simple life. As Hochman (1998: 74) remarks, “if mountain people are thought to have any wealth, it is primarily in terms of peace, quiet, and scenery.” The people, as the stanza above shows, follow the rhythms of nature, adapting to how nature functions – work when the sun rises and rest as the sun sets. In addition, Wang Wei’s figures have a slow and relaxed pace of life reflected in their language and dress as the fifth couplet shows:

Woodsmen tell him their names in the ancient speech of Hans [202–220 BC];  
And clothes of the Ch’in Dynasty [221–207 BC] are worn by all these people.

This corresponds to what Hochman (1998: 73) states, “people living ‘close to nature’ are seen as moving slower, deciding slower, changing practices slower.” It can be said that readers find peace and serenity in Wang Wei’s descriptions of harmonious landscape.

The spiritual-ecology reception reflects the changes of the readers’ horizon of expectations, or rather, the historical context after the mid-twentieth century when ecology appeared in the public narrative. As Buell (1995: 7) states, “In the Cold War era, ecocide was always a more serious threat than nuclear destruction. In literary history since World War II, the resurgence of environmental writing is as important as the rise of magical realist fiction”. One of Larkin’s variations in his *What the Surfaces Enclaves of Wang Wei* (2004), based on Robinson’s *Wang Wei: Poems* (1973), demonstrates the pure imagery of nature, rejecting the man-in-nature impression. Here is Robinson’s “Sophora Walk” (*gong huai mo* 宫槐陌) (1973: 29):

It is a by-path sheltered by sophoras  
Much is green moss in the secret shade  
The gateman respectfully sweeps in case  
A monk from the hill comes to call.

The quatrain is condensed into one full sentence but arranged into three run-on lines by Larkin, who tries to illuminate the image of moss and avoids the human traces of “gateman” and “monk”:

Moss under the gate  
called from shelter  
in these secret sweeps. (Larkin 2004: unpaginated)

Different from Robinson's translation, which sketches the gateman's preparations for a coming guest, Larkin's interpretation puts emphasis on the still image of a non-human environment. The word "shelter" serves as a sign for protection from danger, attempting to raise people's ecological awareness and call for environmental preservation. His rewriting of the poem may be seen as his reflection on and dialogue with the current world.

According to Venuti (1998: 67), "translation wields enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures". Translation is an effective means of renewing tradition by bringing foreign and past culture into the present. It not only helps unify cultures, but also stimulates the evolution of home literature by borrowing literary sources from foreign literature. As Lefevere and Bassnett (1990: 11) remark, "translation as an activity is always doubly contextualized, since the text has a place in two cultures". In the case of Wang Wei, one factor in Wang Wei's being received and represented across time in the English-speaking world might bear on his representativeness of his original context. The horizon of expectations in the Tang dynasty showed how the poet and his work was judged. However, it does not constitute an absolute and final interpretation in the course of evolution, especially when a literary work is refracted via translation and interacts with foreign "Universes of Discourse", which, in Lefevere's explanation (1992a: 35), include "the whole complex of concepts, ideologies, persons, and objects belonging to a particular culture". Thus, another factor can be summarized by a Chinese proverb "times make heroes". Willis Barnstone (2004: 106) has also pointed out the quality of contemporariness he found in Wang Wei:

Since the memory of information from yesterday's newspaper is not different from a translated document from twenty-three hundred years ago. Sappho or the Chinese Tang eighth-century poet Wang Wei seems more contemporary, familiar, and intimate to me than the great majority of writers I read today.

In a nutshell, Wang Wei's poetry fits into the development of cultural politics in the Anglophone world in the twentieth century and the current decade. Certain characteristics of his poems are selected to accommodate to the literary Modernist "make it new" vogue in the early twentieth century, the Zen fashion of the Beat Movement in the mid-century, and the current trend of eco-spirituality emphasizing the harmony between humanity and nature. Thus, his poetry has been sustained in English via constant interaction with various literary and social factors in the polysystem of the target language.

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