

Strolling through the Enchanting Back Garden of the Heart Book Review: *Philosophical Poetry in Ancient China* Translated by Han Wei

In a state of excitement, I opened this long-anticipated *Philosophical Poetry in Ancient China*, and my memories seemed to instantly transport me back to that brilliant and affectionate old dream. The first time I encountered Dr. Han Wei's work was in 2016 when I had just arrived in Guilin. At that time, facing the world's unparalleled picturesque mountains and serene rivers outside my window, hearing the gentle drizzle in the spring breeze, and breathing in the elegant and mellow aroma of osmanthus, all my senses became acutely attuned. The dormant dreams within me reawakened, and the inspirations that leaped in my heart were no longer mere dust stirred by the northern winds...

Mallows are green in the garden of mine,
Morning dew awaits to dry up by sunshine.
The world is bathed in spring's splendor,
And everything on earth is full of vigor.

Just like the vigor described in the first Han Yuefu poem "A Slow Song" of this book, I embarked again on a dream-seeking journey, with bilingualism as a bridge and poetic inspiration as my pen, gradually discovering myself through Dr. Han Wei's translated verses.

Though in a stable, an old steed retires,
To gallop a thousand miles it aspires.
Though able and ambitious men are old,
They never abandon dreams they hold.

While reading Cao Cao's "A Long Life", I think of the many literati and refined scholars who were influenced by traditional Chinese culture and have written their years into songs, preserving them eternally under the witness of the mountains and rivers. How can I, a young person of today, not strive forward?

"The gone youth will never come back,/Nor does a morning have a return track." Indeed, Tao Yuanming's "Time and Tide Wait for No Man" enlightens us that if one can gain endless joy in learning within a limited span of time, then this life has not been lived in vain!

The reason why these translated poems impressed me deeply is that the translator presented them in a multimodal way, integrating poetry, calligraphy, painting, and singing, advocating for readers to gain a multimodal aesthetic experience during reading. For instance, when Dr. Han Wei was brimming with interest, he would play Bingo games with me, and from time to time, I would receive some English verses on QQ. I remember one pleasant summer afternoon in 2017, on my way back from Huajiang Campus to Jinjiling Campus, Dr. Han Wei suddenly recited: "Tell me the bad experience in the south please/It is me that she does appease/Hometown is the place where my heart is at ease." After reciting, he asked me to guess the original verses in the Chinese

poem. I was astonished but quickly started a mental search, realizing I had not memorized these lines in English but felt a familiar sentiment ... "试问岭南应不好? 却道: 此心安处是吾乡。" After a moment of silence, I quickly grasped the meaning of the English lines! With a triumphant shout of "Bingo!" from him, I felt an overwhelming sense of achievement. It turned out this was Dr. Han Wei's translation. This interactive game mode stimulated my ability to mobilize information. This approach of teaching through lively activities and learning through entertainment, along with these closer-to-the-heart verses, revealed to me the long-standing tradition of Chinese poetic education and made me appreciate the joy of translation. The greatness of poetry lies in how readers, through the artistic world within certain poems, reflect on life and trigger different individual experiences. For me, a year after studying in Guilin, the dusty memories of the past had either been blown away by the spring breeze or erased by my aspirations. The return path my heart inclines toward was no longer desolate but begun to be clear and bright, like the most tender ballad in the summer years. It was at that moment that I genuinely felt "Where enthusiasm leads, the heart feels at ease." Holding firm beliefs and taking resolute action, I pursued my dreams among the mountains and waters!

Of course, in addition to playing Bingo games, the four-in-one multimodal presentation is also reflected in Dr. Han Wei's dynamic integration of the poetic scenes into calligraphy and painting, while reciting and singing the verses melodiously, enhancing interaction with the readers. Poetry has no borders. These philosophical poems, being bilingual, blend the rhythm and rhetorical features of classical Chinese poetry with rich and diverse connotations, thus holding significant importance in cross-cultural communication. International readers, through reading and appreciating these poems, can subtly enhance their understanding of classical Chinese literature, feel the artistic value and charm of classical poetry, and comprehend the Chinese way of thinking, aesthetic concepts, cultural spirit, and philosophy of life (Wei, 2024). As historical and cultural contexts are elucidated, foreigners can resonate with the poets' spiritual pursuits and emotional connotations.

This book contains a total of 100 philosophical poems. In terms of genre, there are five-character quatrains, five-character-regulated verses, seven-character quatrains, seven-character-regulated verses, and some long-regulated verses. Regarding content, it covers a diverse range of philosophical themes. The natural law of the rise and fall, the growth and decay of all things in the universe, the logic of changes in human affairs, and the principles of human society's development are all included.

Today's people cannot see the ancient moon fine,
And yet the ancients enjoyed today's moonshine.
Ancient and present people are like flowing water,
And the full moon has never become brighter.
I hope that when I'm singing over drinking,
The moonlight fills in the wine cup glittering.

This philosophical poem "Asking the Moon" by Li Bai reflects the natural law of things, and conveys the unity of absolute motion and relative stillness in the material world. It reminds me of the significance of "living in the moment", which tells us to cherish every moment. If every moment is spent following one's heart, then the days lived would not be regrettable.

You can identify the tenacious grass in storms,
And devoted officials on turbulent platforms.
The foolhardy do not know morality and justice,
While it is benevolence that wise men practice.

With the translator's handwriting on page 23, this "To Xiao Yu" poem by Li Shimin reflects the logic of changes in human affairs. It makes me understand, from the ancients' wisdom, that history has its advances and retreats, divisions and unions; politics has its principles of benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, and trust; and human relationships have their warmth and coldness, closeness and distance.

With my hands, I transplant rice seedlings in a paddy field,
And as I lower my head, I notice the sky with water filled.
To ensure a good harvest, the roots must be kept pure inward,
And stepping backward actually means moving right forward.

This "Rice Transplanting" poem by Qi Ci reflects the philosophy of life and tells us that sometimes we need to carefully plan and strategically retreat to move forward.

The British poet Blake once said,
To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

Presumably, poets who are capable of writing such classics need to have the observation and imagination to dialectically discover the relationships between all things in the universe, such as big and small, far and near, long and short. The fact that the translator can translate these philosophical poems with both form and spirit intact demonstrates his broad artistic vision, profound cultural cultivation, extensive knowledge reserves, and meticulous thinking and expressive abilities. For example, in the poem "小松 (A Young Pine)" by Du Xunhe which I particularly like, the translator shows great ingenuity in word choice, sentence structure, and rhythm arrangement, using appropriate rhetorical techniques to vividly present the thoughts, emotions, imagery, and artistic conception within the poem.

A young pine has buried its needles in wild grass,
And gradually it stands out from the grassy mass.
No one realizes that it can pierce the high cloud,
Until its lofty height is later praised by the crowd.

The smallness of the pine not only refers to its height but also its nascent state of mind. This feature of the tree is captured with personification, and the title is considered by the translator as "A Young Pine", where "Young" vividly describes the pine's current youth and unrecognized state. The imagery of wild grass and grassy mass in the first and second lines highlights the pine's humble and unassuming character. The adjectives and nouns here accurately describe the pine's growth environment. The imagery of piercing the high cloud and being praised by the crowd in the third and fourth lines shows the pine's emerging achievements, filled with the beauty of painting. The translator also elevates the theme, reflecting the importance of recognizing and nurturing talent. Additionally, the translator has successfully conveyed the unique rhyme scheme of this poem, with the ending rhymes arranged in an alternating two-line pattern (AABB). The sentence structure is balanced and harmonious, presenting both the beauties of music and architecture, thus fulfilling the classical poetry translation's principles of faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance.

Strolling in the garden of philosophical poetry, my heart feels as if it is bathing in sunlight, enjoying one feast after another. Emotions shift with the scenery, and poetry has no fixed interpretation. Each of Dr. Han Wei's translated poems can trigger my memories, reminding me of my own experiences and the pure joy and inspiration derived from each moment. Reading Li Bai's "What a Hard Journey", I recall my early days studying in Malaysia. Although I was surrounded by the lush tropical rainforest, I also experienced the harsh realities that were no less fierce than the battles in the martial arts world; reading Liu Yuxi's "Only When the Sand Is Filtered Out Can the Gold Be Found", I seem to think of the fruitful days after separating the wheat from the chaff; reading Li Shangyin's "A Visit to Leyou Yuan", words like "solitude" and "driving" spring to mind. To me, solitude is one of the most efficient ways of living. Rather than rushing from one bustling event to another, it is better to calm down and savor the scenes I enjoy; reading Huang Bo and Li Chen's "Waterfall", I feel that the translator possesses the remarkable qualities of a waterfall—expansive and mighty, yet with the deep beauty of calm waters. The translator embodies both the grandeur of the ocean, which embraces all rivers, and the enduring persistence of water drops wearing away the stone; reading Lu You's "A Visit to the Village West of the Mountain", the famous line "The pathway along the hills seems to run into a dead end,/When a village emerges where willows and flowers blend." makes me realize that the twists and turns, the bends and returns in life all have their significance. The winding path forward is also a journey back to one's true self. With the keen insight to see details, the courage to ask for directions, and the determination to hold onto one's beliefs, everything can return to a state of calm and clarity. Reading Zhu Xi's "A Spring Day", I feel as if I am once again walking down that old campus path, with the boundless scenery refreshing my senses. The myriad of colors—this is the palette of poetry, an extension of a poetic heart reaching into the distance...

In the blink of an eye, the calendar has turned to 2024. Here, I wholeheartedly congratulate my spiritual mentor

and idol, Dr. Han Wei, on the publication of his new book *Philosophical Poetry in Ancient China!* This poetry collection not only serves as bilingual reading material for Chinese readers but also as a window for foreigners to understand traditional Chinese wisdom and life philosophy. With the widespread adoption and development of information technology, the barriers to accessing poetry have been removed. The revival of classical Chinese poetry composition exerts a far-reaching impact on poetry education in the context of new liberal arts (Wei & Geng, 2022). By understanding these profound philosophical poems, teachers, students, and researchers can gain immense inspiration and enhance their poetic literacy. For teachers, philosophical poetry offers a wealth of teaching materials that can guide students to reflect on the meaning of life, ethics, and the relationships between individuals, society, and nature. This, in turn, can ignite students' enthusiasm in the classroom and cultivate their critical thinking and literary appreciation skills. Meanwhile, to release the students' writing apprehension, the instructor can develop administrative and instructional practices that target the sub-elements of poetry writing, put more emphasis on the choice of words and sentences, the expression of thoughts and emotions, the establishment of themes and subject matter, the selection of the structures and types of poems, the creation of imagery and aesthetic conception, and the use of artistic techniques (Geng & Wei, 2022). Students, through reading philosophical poetry, cannot only improve their language expression but also grasp the deep meanings embedded in the poems, nourishing their growth with the wisdom contained within. This process helps them develop correct life values and worldviews while also sparking creativity and writing inspiration. By imitating and creating, students can incorporate the philosophical insights of classical poetry into their own works, achieving the effect of learning from the past and innovating. Researchers, by studying Chinese philosophical poetry, can uncover the cultural connotations and historical contexts, providing new perspectives and materials for academic research. Analyzing these poems allows researchers to explore the essence of their philosophical

ideas and aesthetic values, offering a rich theoretical foundation and empirical evidence for modern literary studies. Hence, I hope that each of you who will encounter and read these philosophical poems will find true friends across the seas and possess a spiritual garden, comprehending philosophy and history, and embracing wisdom, with a poetic heart forever dwelling within. Just as these lines describe: "In this world, as long as confidants we stay,/We are close neighbors though miles away."

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Note

The book titled *Philosophical Poetry in Ancient China* was composed by ancient Chinese poets, translated by Han Wei, and published by Sichuan Education Press in 2024. For more information, please visit Han Wei's WeChat Channel, *Empowering Poetry, Calligraphy, and Singing* (赋能诗词书法演唱).

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