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Seven Translations, Two Images: the Poetry of Wang Wei in America

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Abstract

This article outlines the English translation and research status of Wang Wei's poetry within the two contexts of the development of modern American poetry and sinology studies. On the one hand, as American poets liberated themselves from the confines of British and European cultural traditions and propelled changes in poetic concepts and forms, they regarded Wang Wei's landscape and reclusion poetry as a paradigm of Chinese poetry, utilizing the diverse nature of classical Chinese poetry as a resource. On the other hand, sinologists aiming for a deep understanding of Chinese literature have attempted to "correct" American readers' one-sided perception of Wang Wei's poetry by revealing the complexity and richness of Wang Wei as a person and his poetry in their research. Gaining insight into the state of research on the translation of Wang Wei's poetry in the United States and the historical evolution of Wang Wei's image aids us in contemplating the selections, misreadings, and creative transformations involved in the cross-regional dissemination of literature, along with the intricate interactions between the literary creation, literary movements, and cultural currents of the areas where literature is spread, interpreted, and received.

Keywords

Wang Wei – Chinese poetry in English translation – sinology – literary dissemination

1 Resources for Poetic Transformation: Translations of Wang Wei's Poems before 1975

Wang Wei 王維 (ca. 701–761) has been a Chinese poet favored by American readers since the early 20th century. There are as many as seven different English translations of his collected poems, which is rare among Chinese poets. One important reason why American readers favor Wang Wei's poetry is that the imagery and Zen philosophy (禪宗) contained within resonate with the cultural trends reflected in the two "anti-traditional" poetry innovation movements in the United States.[1]

The first was the New Poetry Movement of the early twentieth century, which marked the beginning of modern American poetry. It was within this movement that Imagist poets found fresh poetic expression in Chinese poetry. They were dissatisfied with the direct didactic or lyrical style of 19th-century British and European poetry, arguing that it conveyed the poet's thoughts and emotions but concealed the richness inherent in the objects themselves. Instead of discussing, analyzing, and illustrating in the poem, they advocated the direct presentation of the object itself in concrete images, thereby freeing reading and interpretation from the constrains of logical language. In their view, many Chinese poems contain vivid imagery and do not use pronouns and prepositions to explain the logical relationships between images. This provided a model for the "modern" poetic language they sought.

The second "anti-tradition" was the anti-academic poetry movement represented by the Beatniks in the 1950s and 1960s. Participants in the movement questioned the alienation and antagonism between human beings and nature in industrial society and modern civilization, and advocated the re-establishment of a harmonious relationship between the two. In their view, Eastern Zen philosophy emphasizes the unity of self and the universe, advocating for the integration of the self into nature, which provided a philosophical basis for their thoughts.

The starting points of the aforementioned two poetry movements are reflected both in their assessment of the essence of classical Chinese poetry and in the choice of the genres of poetry they translated. The focus on

1 For an overview of translations and research on Wang Wei's poetry in America, see Wang Lina 王麗娜, "Wang Wei shige zai haiwai" 王維詩歌在海外, *Wenxue yichan* 文學遺產, no. 4 (1991): 107–13; Zhang Wanmin 張萬民, "Yingyu shijie de Wang Wei yanjiu" 英語世界的王維研究, *Wenxue yu wenhua* 文學與文化, no. 1 (2011): 46–52; Hong Yue 洪越, "Qige yiben, liangzhong xingxiang: Wang Wei shi zai Meiguo" 七個譯本，兩種形象：王維詩在美國, *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論, no. 7 (2020): 157–66. The present English article is an abbreviated translation of this last Chinese article.

imagery and Zen philosophy has led American poets to favor the landscape poetry genre of Chinese poetry. Zhong Ling 鍾玲 has noted that the translations in the New Poetry Movement included a large number of poems related to nature by Li Bai 李白 (701–762), Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), Wang Wei, and Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770).[2] Specifically regarding Wang Wei, although his more than four hundred extant poems cover a variety of themes and styles, most English translations focus on his landscape poems.

Witter Bynner (1881–1968), who was the earliest to introduce Wang Wei to the United States, exemplifies this choice. Bynner was an important figure in the New Poetry Movement for his translations and imitations of Chinese poetry.[3] In 1922, he published fifteen English translations of Wang Wei's poems and the short essay "Translating Wang Wei" in *Poetry*, one of the main platforms of the New Poetry Movement.[4] These translated poems were selected from thirty of Wang Wei's poems in the *Tangshi sanbaishou* 唐詩三百首.[5] Most of the selected works are related to nature and human experiences within nature.

In the short essay "Translating Wang Wei," he praises the "deep and beautiful spirit of optimism" under the influence of Taoist thought in Wang Wei's poetry, stating that Wang Wei lacks the melancholy of Du Fu and Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (689–740), nor does he seek solace in wine like Li Bai. Instead, he "found an abiding content in the 'green and healing hills' and in the highly humbled and attuned mysticism of Lao-tzu's teaching," so he finds fulfillment in mountains and forests and in the mysticism of Laozi's 老子 (ca. 571–471 BCE) thought.[6] Bynner analyzes Wang Wei's lines "You ask me about good and evil? Hark, on the lake there's a fisherman singing" 君問窮通理，漁歌入浦深, as using "simple happiness" to face "complicated morality." Bynner tells us that Wang Wei's actions "were all in flow with universal forces: they sang like the fisherman – there was no fret, no jealousy, no self-exaltation, no irritated struggle; only harmony, humility, exalted identity with nature."[7]

2 Zhong Ling 鍾玲, *Meiguo shi yu Zhongguo meng: Meiguo xiandaishi li de Zhongguo wenhua moshi* 美國詩與中國夢：美國現代詩裡的中國文化模式 (Guilin: Guangxi shifandaxue chubanshe, 2003), 126.

3 Zhao Yiheng 趙毅衡, *Shishen yuanyou: Zhongguo ruhe gaibianle Meiguo xiandaishi* 詩神遠遊：中國如何改變了美國現代詩 (Shanghai: Shanghai yiwen chubanshe, 2003), 30–32.

4 Witter Bynner, "Poems by Wang Wei," and "Translating Wang Wei," *Poetry* 19, no. 5 (1922): 235–41; 272–78.

5 Tr. note: The *Tangshi sanbaishou* is an anthology of exemplary Tang dynasty (618–907) poetry that has been popular as a teaching resource ever since its first publication in the late 18th century.

6 Witter Bynner, "Translating Wang Wei," 272–73.

7 Ibid., 274.

The most concentrated period of publication for translations of Wang Wei's poetry into English was the 1970s, with the broader context being the counterculture movement sweeping Europe and America at that time. Within this intellectual trend, the poetry of Hanshan 寒山 (dates unknown), known for its Zen flavor, along with the poetry of Wang Wei, gained popularity and several different English translations were made of their work. Hanshan's poetry resonates with a wide range of readers, but there are more English translations of Wang Wei's poetry. Four collections of Wang Wei's poetry were published from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s. These include *Poems of Wang Wei* by Chang Yin-nan 張英蘭 (dates unknown) and Lewis Calvin Walmsley (1897–1998) in 1958; *Hiding the Universe: Poems of Wang Wei* by Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉 in 1972; *Poems of Wang Wei* by G. W. Robinson (dates unknown) in 1973; and *An Album of Wang Wei*[8] by Ch'eng Hsi 程曦 (ca. 1918–1997) and Henry W. Wells (1895–1978) in 1974.[9] Below, I examine the distinctive features of the translations in relation to the translators' backgrounds, as well as links to the two American poetic innovation movements and cultural trends mentioned above. Unlike the translation of Han Shan's poems by Beatnik poet Gary Snyder, none of the translators of Wang Wei's poetry were pioneers of the anti-academic poetry movement. Despite being influenced by the counterculture of the time, the translators of these versions had deeper ties to the New Poetry Movement of the early 20th century.

The translation by Chang and Walmsley was published by the Tuttle Publishing Company in 1958. The collection includes a foreword explaining the principles of selection, an introduction describing the origins of translation and the characteristics of Chinese poetry, a brief biography of Wang Wei, and 136 translated poems. The translation follows the traditional Chinese poetry anthology format, organized by poetic form and stanza length. What attracted Walmsley was the tranquillity of the fusion between humans and nature in the poems. He chose to translate landscape poetry and not court or social poetry, which "lacks natural beauty."[10]

Walmsley's views on Chinese poetry were clearly influenced by the New Poetry Movement. For example, the view that Chinese characters are ideograms

8 Tr. note: It is interesting to note that the Chinese translation, "王維詩之畫意," back-translates as "the Painting of Wang Wei's Poems." Hong notes it in the body text below.

9 Chang Yin-nan and Lewis C. Walmsley, *Poems by Wang Wei* (Rutland: Tuttle Company, 1958); Wai-lim Yip, *Hiding the Universe: Poems by Wang Wei* (New York: Grossman, 1972); G. W. Robinson, *Poems of Wang Wei* (London: Penguin Books, 1973); Ch'eng Hsi and Henry W. Wells, *An Album of Wang Wei* (Hong Kong: Ling-ch'ao-hsuan, 1974).

10 Chang Yin-nan and Lewis C. Walmsley, *Poems by Wang Wei*, 14–15.

and that Chinese poetry is visual and pictorial.[11] This influence is reflected in his design of the collection: included in the book are eleven landscape paintings, which are intended to emphasize the beauty of the poems' imagery.

American sinologists and translators have not rated this translation highly. The main criticisms are that the translator's voice is louder than the poet's[12] and that the translator's "passionate and effusive" voice is very different from that of Wang Wei.[13] To make the translation more "dramatic," Walmsley translated *zhi* 知 (recognizes) as "warn"; *jian* 見 (sees) as "whisper"; and *ti* 啼 (to chirp) as "sing."[14]

The translation most influenced by the New Poetry Movement is that of the poet and scholar Wai-lim Yip, published in 1972 by Grossman Publishing in New York. In Taiwan, Yip studied English and American literature, translated T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), and wrote modern poetry. In the 1960s, he went to the United States to study comparative literature, and his doctoral dissertation was on Ezra Pound's (1885–1972) *The Book of the Divine*. In the 1970s, he introduced Chinese poetics to the United States. In the 1980s and 1990s, he introduced comparative poetics to China, with both initiatives having a considerable impact.

Yip's poetic perspective is consistent with that of the early 20th-century Imagist poets, and he built a poetic theory upon this basis. Yip highlights differences in expression between Chinese and Western poetry by comparing Wang Wei's portrayal of nature with poets from England and America, such as William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Wallace Stevens (1879–1955), and Gary Snyder.[15] Taking Wang Wei's "Birdsong Stream" (*Niaomingjian* 鳥鳴澗) and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" as examples, Yip asserts that Wordsworth's poetry "consistently 'explains how' external objects influence the mind, or 'explains how' the mind interacts and responds to external objects, and 'how' they mutually complement nature." This, in turn, leads to "the scene gradually losing its directness due to the author's intervention for mediation and justification." In Wang Wei's poetry, "scenes arise and develop naturally, with

11 Ibid., 17.

12 Eliot Weinberger, *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei: How a Chinese Poem is Translated* (New York: Moyer Bell Limited, 1987), 17.

13 Pauline Yu, "Wang Wei: Recent Studies and Translations," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 1, no. 2 (1979): 232.

14 J. R. Hightower, review of *Poems by Wang Wei*, translated by Chang Yin-nan and Lewis C. Walmsley, *Ars Orientalis* 4 (1961): 444–45.

15 Wai-lim Yip, "Wang Wei and the Aesthetic of Pure Experience," *Tamkang Review* II.2 and III.1 (1971–72): 199–209; Wai-lim Yip, "Introduction: Wang Wei and Pure Experience," in *Hiding the Universe*, 3–15.

the author not interfering with the growth and change of the scenery's intrinsic life through subjective emotion or intellectual logic; the scene is directly observed by the reader."[16]

Yip's translations are how he puts his poetics theory into practice. He first sets out his poetic viewpoint in a preface entitled "Wang Wei and Pure Experience." Then he illustrates this view with a selection of 52 poems. In order to demonstrate how Chinese poetry uses concrete imagery to convey its themes, he retains the syntactic structure of the original poems in his translations, juxtaposes images, and avoids the use of personal pronouns, possessive pronouns, and prepositions to eschew logical relationships between images. For example, Yip translates "空山不見人" directly as "Empty mountain: no man."

Yip's translations have received mixed reviews. Supporters say it "brings out the terseness of the original."[17] However, critics argue that such literal translation makes the reading experience in English deviate from that of the original poems because of the major syntax differences between Chinese and English poetry.[18]

Next, we turn our attention to the translations by Ch'eng Hsi and Henry Wells, published by Ling-ch'ao-hsuan in Hong Kong in 1974. This collection of poetry, along with Wells' own pieces modelled after Wang Wei, is an example of American poets translating Chinese poetry from the perspective of the New Poetry Movement, and how their translations in turn influenced American poetic creation.[19]

The Chinese title used alongside the English translation is *Wang Wei shi zhi huayi* 王維詩之畫意 (The Painting of Wang Wei's Poems; the English title is "An Album of Wang Wei"). This is a fitting Chinese title since the fifty poems selected for translation are mainly landscape poems. In the book, each translation is accompanied by the Chinese characters of the original and a painting

16 Wai-lim Yip, "Zhongguo gudianshi zhong shanshui meigan yishi de yanbian" 中國古典詩中山水美感意識的演變, in *Zhongguo shixue* 中國詩學 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1992), 88–89.

17 H. K. Josephs, review of *Hiding the Universe: Poems*, translated by Yip Wai-lim, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 33 (1973): 270.

18 Sam Hamill, "Wang Wei and Saigyo: Two Buddhist Mountain Poets," *The American Poetry Review* 22, no. 2 (1993): 45; A. C. Graham, review of *Chinese Poetry: Major Modes and Genres*, by Wai-lim Yip, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 40, no. 3 (1977): 646.

19 The connection between Wells and the New Poetry Movement is evident in his early writings. His monograph published in 1924, which discusses the imagery of Elizabethan poetry (1558–1603), was influenced by the Imagist movement. See Henry W. Wells, *Poetic Imagery, Illustrated from Elizabethan Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1924).

created by Ch'eng Hsi to match the poems, attempting to demonstrate the beauty of the Chinese characters and the beauty of the painting in the poems themselves. In translating, Wells did not pursue a word-for-word fidelity to the original text but instead sought to convey the "tone and structure" of the original poem, making an effort to represent the rhythm of Chinese poetry through the metrical patterns of English poetry.[20]

A translation less associated with the New Poetry Movement is that of G. W. Robinson. This selection of poetry published by Penguin Books in 1973 blends sinological training and personal taste. Robinson emphasized the complexity of Wang Wei, pointing out that he is not just a hermit poet, but also has a worldly side, with many poems depicting social life and the inner conflicts between officialdom and reclusion. However, when selecting poems, Robinson based his choices on "personal preferences."[21] There is, in fact, little difference between his selections and other translations. Among the 127 poems he translated, 94 also appear in Walmsley's translation.[22]

Robinson's individual interests echo the ethos of the counterculture movement focused on re-establishing harmony between humans and nature. He considers the allure of Wang Wei's poetry to be in its depiction of the unity between humans and nature illuminated by Buddhist and Taoist philosophies: "His observation of nature was not objective, nor that of an aesthete, because he was himself a part of nature, and it is this integrality that he celebrates."[23]

2 Correcting the One-Sided Impression of Wang Wei: Wang Wei Studies in the 1970s

The 1970s represented not only a high point for translating Wang Wei's poems, but also a focus of research attention on Wang Wei. A contributing factor to this circumstance was the fast-paced growth of the academic environment in post-war America. After World War II, the United States emerged as the hub for academic research across Europe and the Americas. As higher education became more widespread and the ranks of educators and scholars swelled, Chinese scholars started to teach at American universities, where they introduced Chinese poetry. Notables include Chen Shih-hsiang 陳世驤 (1912–1971),

20 See Carl F. Klinck, "Henry W. Wells (1895–1978): Correspondence with Carl F. Klinck: A Memoir," http://canadianpoetry.org/volumes/vol17/klinck.html.

21 G. W. Robinson, *Poems of Wang Wei*, 24.

22 See also Pauline Yu, "Wang Wei: Recent Studies and Translations," 236.

23 G. W. Robinson, *Poems of Wang Wei*, 16.

who taught at the University of California, Berkeley, from the 1940s to the 1970s, and James J. Y. Liu 劉若愚 (1926–1986), who was on the faculty at Stanford University from the 1960s to the 1980s. Two of the most outstanding young scholars on Wang Wei in the 1970s, Marsha Wagner and Pauline Yu, received their PhDs at Berkeley and Stanford, respectively; the former was introduced to Wang Wei's poetry by Chen Shih-hsiang, and the latter had James Liu as her doctoral supervisor.

Research on Wang Wei in American academia was rare before the 1970s. However, between 1975 and 1979, four doctoral dissertations focused on Wang Wei's poetry appeared in quick succession: Marsha Wagner's *The Art of Wang Wei's Poetry*; Pauline Yu's *The World of Wang Wei's Poetry: An Interpretation of Symbolist Poetics*; Luk Yuntong's 陸潤堂 *A Study of Wang Wei's Landscape Poetry from the Perspective of Comparative Literature* (completed at the University of Michigan); and James Vincent Feinerman's *The Poetry of Wang Wei* (completed at Yale University).[24] Among them, Pauline Yu and Marsha Wagner published monographs in 1980 and 1981, respectively. Yu authored *The Poetry of Wang Wei: A New Translation and Commentary* and Wagner wrote *Wang Wei*, which became part of the "Twayne's World Authors Series."[25]

According to Zhang Wanmin 張萬民, these studies apply Western theories like New Criticism and phenomenology to elucidate Wang Wei's poetry, placing importance on detailed textual analysis and paying attention to temporal and spatial concepts within the poetry.[26] One prominent characteristic of these works is the endeavor to "correct" the "one-sided portrayal" of Wang Wei evident in earlier translations of his poetry, while aiming to uncover his complexity as a person and as a poet.

As we can see, translation of Wang Wei's poetry and academic research about his life and work are closely connected. In fact, there is a clear aim among researchers to "correct" earlier translations that "simplified" Wang Wei as just a reclusive poet of landscape imagery. In the preface to her monograph,

24 Marsha Lynn Wagner, "The Art of Wang Wei's Poetry" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1975); Pauline Yu, "The World of Wang Wei's Poetry: An Illumination of Symbolist Poetics" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1976); Thomas Yuntong Luk, "A Study of the Nature Poetry of Wang Wei in the Perspective of Comparative Literature" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1976); James Vincent Feinerman, "The Poetry of Wang Wei" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1979).

25 Pauline Yu, *The Poetry of Wang Wei: New Translations and Commentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Marsha Lynn Wagner, *Wang Wei* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981).

26 Zhang Wanmin 張萬民, "Yingyu shijie de Wang Wei yanjiu" 英語世界的王維研究, *Wenxue yu wenhua* 文學與文化, no. 1 (2011): 46–52.

Marsha Wagner says that she hopes to "correct the one-sided conception of Wang Wei perpetuated by previous critics" and, together with other younger scholars, she "engaged in a general reevaluation of traditional Chinese literary history and criticism."[27]

Wagner especially esteems Stephen Owen and Pauline Yu. Indeed, in the 1970s, the most creative scholars in Wang Wei's research were the then-young Stephen Owen, Marsha Wagner, and Pauline Yu. Owen had just received his PhD and was teaching at Yale University. The three of them went on to publish their research on Wang Wei in 1980 and 1981. In Stephen Owen's *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang*, a dedicated chapter discusses Wang Wei's poetry in the framework of literary history and the trends of the modern literary scene.[28] Wagner's monograph thoroughly covers Wang Wei's life, thought, and poetic art, using New Criticism to analyze his poetry. Pauline Yu's monograph focuses primarily on translation. In her "Critical Introduction," she argues for an interpretation of Wang Wei's work within the dual framework of Western and Chinese poetics.

In addition to publishing monographs, these scholars also wrote book reviews of translations and research works on Wang Wei. Examples include Pauline Yu's lengthy book review, "Wang Wei: Recent Studies and Translations," on the book of the same name (1979). Another example is Stephen Owen and Marsha Wagner's respective reviews of Wai-lim Yip's 1976 book, *Chinese Poetry: Major Modes and Subjects*.[29] In their articles and book reviews, they seek to "correct" the previous translations of Wang Wei in three areas: the historicity of the poems, the concepts of poetic creation, and the comparisons between Chinese and Western poetics.

Therein, they emphasize the need to understand Wang Wei and his poetry within historical context. Earlier English translators of Wang Wei's poetry depicted him as an ancient Chinese "landscape poet" detached from specific historical circumstances. Scholars, by contrast, placed Wang Wei and his poetry within a historical context, considering the poet's personal experiences, the heritage of Chinese poetry, and the poetic ideas and works of his time.

27 Marsha Wagner, Preface to *Wang Wei*.

28 Stephen Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981); for the Chinese translation, see Yuwen Suoan 宇文所安 [Stephen Owen], *Shengtangshi* 盛唐詩, trans. Jia Jinhua 賈晉華 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2004).

29 Pauline Yu, "Wang Wei: Recent Studies and Translations," 219–40; Stephen Owen, review of *Chinese Poetry: Major Modes and Genres*, by Wai-lim Yip, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 37, no. 1 (1977): 100–2; Marsha Wagner, review of *Chinese Poetry: Major Modes and Genres*, by Wai-lim Yip, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 98, no. 3 (1978): 292.

From the perspective of Wang Wei the man, it was previously believed that Wang Wei resigned from his official position and retired to live in seclusion in his later years, or that he held an official position but had no interest in a political career. However, scholars have analyzed and especially integrated the research by Chinese and Japanese experts on Wang Wei to illustrate that he was, in fact, successful in his career and never withdrew from the official world. The allure of officialdom and the desire to return to his personal life coexisted in him throughout his life.

Wagner believes that Wang Wei was both politically ambitious and yearned for seclusion, since many of his poems deal with the contradiction between engagement and withdrawal. Moreover, Wang Wei's attitude towards this contradiction was not fixed but varied according to different readers and contexts.[30] Owen believes that the conflict between officialdom and retirement posed a dilemma for Wang Wei, which adds depth to his works. Owen writes: "If Wang's inclination to private experience was a more fertile source for his poetry, his public values were also strong, and the genuine conflict between them gave real force to Wang's gestures of renunciation."[31]

Scholars have also noted that Wang Wei's poetry is not limited to landscape poems. His poetry is, in fact, richly varied. Owen highlights that Wang Wei produced works with diverse themes and styles throughout various phases and circumstances in his life, making him a poet who was not only "developing a truly individual poetic voice," but also honing "his degree of mastery over traditional poems and his powers of innovation."[32] Wagner and Yu also emphasize the diversity of Wang Wei's poems, which is evident in how they set out the chapters of their books on Wang Wei. The five chapters of Wagner's book are: "The Poet's Life"; "Wang Wei the Court Poet"; "Wang Wei the Nature Poet"; "Wang Wei the Buddhist Poet"; and "Wang Wei the Painter." The five chapters of Yu's book are: "Critical Introduction"; "Juvenilia and Other Literary Exercises"; "Court Poems"; "Buddhist Poems"; and "Nature Poems." Unlike the four previously mentioned translations of Wang Wei's poems, Pauline Yu's translation includes a large number of works other than landscape poems.

The second aspect of the "correction" concerns the mode of poetic expression and focuses on questioning the views of Wai-lim Yip. Researchers on Wang Wei in the 1970s often began their studies by arguing against Wai-lim

30 Marsha Wagner, Preface to *Wang Wei*, 126.

31 Stephen Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry*, 40.

32 Ibid., 38.

Yip,[33] targeting the general perspective of Chinese poetry held by American poets since the 20th century as represented by Yip.[34] Regarding Yip's proposition that Wang Wei conveys pure experience in his poetry by eliminating the self, thus presenting a vision that is free from the poet's intellect, logic, and rational thought, some scholars argue that this confuses the poet's creation process with the finished work, since poetry cannot portray the world without being influenced by the poet's subjective awareness.[35] Even if the poem does not involve reasoning or emotional expression, the imagery presented is still selected by the poet. The natural appearances in the poem are achieved through technique, yet the technique is hidden.

The third aspect of the "correction" concerns the comparison of Western and Eastern poetics. Yip expands the characteristics of Wang Wei's poetry into universal principles of Chinese poetry and, on this basis, summarizes the differences between Chinese and Western poetic concepts and aesthetic sensibilities. However, some Sinologists object to generalizing the differences between Chinese and Western poetry on the basis of selecting a single type of Chinese and English poem for comparison. For example, Owen believes that Yip's theory is reductive. He argues that Yip's approach takes Tang poetry as representative of all Chinese poetry and employs a single reading method as the "universal principle"[36] of Chinese poetry, which thereby simplifies the richness of Chinese poetry into something monotonous and uniform.[37]

Pauline Yu argues against sweeping comparisons between Chinese and Western poetry from a different perspective. She suggests that while there are differences between Chinese poetry and European and American poetry, there are also similarities. For example, both Chinese Metaphysical Poetics and European Symbolist Poetics emphasize that, in order for readers to perceive a poem's meaning, poetry needs to use concrete imagery rather than logical language to argue and explain.[38] In another respect, Phenomenological Poetics and Chinese Metaphysical Poetics both pursue the fusion of subject and

33 In their doctoral dissertations, Marsha Wagner, Pauline Yu, and James Feinerman challenge Yip Wai-lim's theories. In their book reviews, Wagner, Stepehen Owen, and Angus Charles Graham all dispute Yip's viewpoints.

34 See A. C. Graham, review of *Chinese Poetry: Major Modes and Genres*, by Wai-lim Yip, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 40, no. 3 (1977): 645.

35 Stephen Owen's review, 101; Pauline Yu, *The Poetry of Wang Wei*, 21.

36 Stephen Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry*, 322.

37 Stephen Owen's review, 101.

38 Pauline Yu, *The Poetry of Wang Wei*, 24.

object in the act of creation, believing that poets need to forget themselves and immerse themselves in the phenomenal world to create good works.[39]

This method of searching for common ground between Chinese and Western poetics disrupts the comparative model of representing Chinese poetics with Wang Wei's poetry and then contrasting it with Western poetics to find differences. In the words of one sinologist, Pauline Yu's research "should dispel, once and for all, the superficiality and distortion of the 'oriental mysticism' approach to Wang which has plagued a true appreciation of his poetry for so long."[40]

3 Spirit, Tone, and Musicality: a Discussion on Translation

After the 1980s, translation and study of Wang Wei's poetry continued, but it never reached the fervent levels of translation and research that characterized the 1970s. In translation, two collections of Wang Wei's poems have appeared, one by father and son, Willis and Tony Barnstone, *The Laughter of the Empty Mountains: The Poems of Wang Wei*, published in 1992,[41] and the other by David Hinton, *The Selected Poems of Wang Wei*, published in 2006.[42] In terms of research, unlike the scholars of the 1970s who aimed to "correct" the oversimplified understanding of Chinese poetry and propose new research paradigms, the English studies since the 1980s have mainly focused on in-depth explorations of specific topics. Some have continued to discuss particular issues in the study of Wang Wei, while others have reinterpreted parts of Wang Wei's works. One of the more notable discussions has been that of poetry in translation, in which the main participants were both poets and translators themselves.

The most engaging book on assessing the translation of Wang Wei's poems is a small volume published by Eliot Weinberger in 1987, entitled *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*.[43] Although Weinberger examines the translation of only a single poem, he addresses multiple issues related to translating Chinese

39 Ibid., 34.

40 Richard John Lynn, review of *The Poetry of Wang Wei*, by Pauline Yu, *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 4, no. 2 (1982): 262. Apart from "correction," the relationship between Wang Wei's poetry and Buddhism was also an important topic of study on Wang Wei during this period.

41 Tony Barnstone, Willis Barnstone, and Xu Haixin, *Laughing Lost in the Mountains: Poems of Wang Wei* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992).

42 David Hinton, *The Selected Poems of Wang Wei* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2006).

43 Eliot Weinberger, *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*.

poetry, including the relationship between the original poem and its translation, the difficulties in translating classical Chinese poetry, and the advantages and disadvantages of translations by poets versus scholars.

Weinberger divides translators of Chinese poetry in Europe and the United States into two categories: scholars, most of whom do not write poetry; and poets, most of whom do not know Chinese. Sinologists who translate poetry strive to convey both the meaning and structure of the original poem, attempting to retain the original syntax as much as possible, but this often results in a translation that lacks poetic essence. In Weinberger's view, good translations should be first and foremost good poems. He praises the translations of "Lu Zhai" 鹿柴 by Kenneth Rexroth (1905–1982) and Snyder, as their works are not just translations but also "poetry,"[44] specifically "American poetry."[45] Even though poets' translations are not quite "accurate" in that they occasionally modify the original poem's meaning, change its syntactic structure, or even add or remove lines, he feels that it is precisely such translations that are more capable of conveying the original poem's "spirit."

So, what is the "spirit" of a poem? Weinberger believes that the "spirit" of a poem is its "force," and the translator's most important task is to discover this "force" and then carry it forward in another language. In contrast, the preservation of poetic form is of secondary importance, since "every force evolves a form," not the other way around.[46] Hence, Weinberger appreciates Rexroth's translation for being close to the "spirit" of the original work, even though Rexroth's translation strays from the original in several respects, such as converting a quatrain into seven lines, altering the philosophical "empty mountain" (*kongshan* 空山) to the more common "mountain wilderness" (*huangshan* 荒山), and inserting words not found in the original.[47] Weinberger admires Snyder's translation for the same reason, that this translation is a "reimagining" of the original poem by the translator, who brings the original scene to life in the English poem.[48] In this sense, Weinberger highly praises Pound for discovering the "vitality" of Chinese poetry and using this unique "vitality" to create a new poem in English.[49]

Sam Hamill (1943–2018) also considers conveying the "spirit" of poetry significant in translation. However, in contrast to Weinberger, his concept of

44 Ibid., 23.
45 Ibid., 43.
46 Ibid., 9.
47 Ibid., 23.
48 Ibid., 43.
49 Ibid., 9.

"spirit" encompasses more concrete aspects such as semantics, style, and tone. Hamill often writes about the "tone," considering it the most challenging part to translate in Wang Wei's poetry. According to Hamill, most translators have not succeeded in this area: Yip Wai-lim fails to convey the "effortless" tone of Wang Wei's poems; and Robinson's translation appears "mundane, flabby, prosy," lacking the original poem's "simple, direct, and uncluttered" tone. It might be precisely due to his understanding of the difficulties in translating tone that Hamill highly values the "uncluttered" and "ease" of Barnstones' translation.[50]

The father-son team of Willis and Tony Barnstone, whose work Hamill admires, are both poets and translators. Like most poet-translators, the Barnstones favor translations that are first and foremost good English poems, and they cite the American poet John Frederick Nims (1913–1999) in support of this position: "The worst kind of unfaithfulness to the original is to translate a good poem in another language into a bad poem in English."[51]

In an article on translation written a few years after their publication of Wang Wei's poems, Tony Barnstone suggests that translations of Chinese poems should focus on "musicality." He thinks that poets in early 20th century America used Chinese poetry as a tool to counter the Victorian poetic style focused on musicality by translating Chinese poetry into free verse, resulting in English translations of Chinese poetry that rarely pay attention to musicality.[52] In fact, free verse is not without rhythm; rather, it creates a new kind of rhythm. Pound's "phrasal rhythm" and Waley's (1889–1966) "accentual rhythm" were used not only in the translation of Chinese poetry but also in the creation of American poetry. However, American poets generally do tend to focus on the vivid imagery of Chinese poetry rather than its musical effects. Hence, Barnstone advocates that the new generation of translators of Chinese poetry should take into account the musical quality of the poems, "[using] the whole poetic arsenal-syllabics, sprung rhythm, off-rhyme, half-rhyme, internal rhyme, assonance, consonance, and so forth-to try to give the English version of the poem a deeply resonant life."[53]

Indeed, Hamill has also considered how to enhance the musicality of the translated poems. He notes that, similar to English poetry, Chinese poetry is highly musical and can be chanted. However, the monosyllabic nature of

50 Sam Hamill, "Wang Wei and Saigyo," 46–47.

51 Tony Barnstone, Willis Barnstone, and Xu Haixin, *Laughing Lost in the Mountains: Poems of Wang Wei*, IXVI.

52 Willis Barnstone, "The Poem Behind the Poem," in *The Poem Behind the Poem: Translating Asian Poetry*, ed. Frank Stewart (Port Townsend, Wash: Copper Canyon Press, 2004), 74.

53 Ibid., 75.

Chinese characters, the five- or seven-character stanza structure, and the rhymed endings of Chinese poetry cannot be effectively conveyed through the established metrics of English poetry. Attempts to do so usually end up as "academic doggerel." Therefore, alternative approaches must be sought. In his own translations, he tries out using consonant rhymes and vowel rhymes, half rhymes, and approximate rhymes. He also praises the Barnstones for employing half rhymes in translating poems by Wang Wei, for the excellent musical effect they achieve.[54]

4 Two Images of Wang Wei

The translations and studies of Wang Wei in the United States have created two distinct images of the poet. One is a serene and straightforward landscape hermit poet, the other a complex and rich poet with inner conflicts and exceptional poetic skills. These two images coexist in contemporary America and are embodied in two recent translations of Wang Wei's poems.

David Hinton's translation presents readers with the former image of Wang Wei. Although this translation is one of the most recent, it is closer in editorial principles to the translations of the 1950s–1970s, choosing Wang Wei's landscape poems and highlighting the tranquil mood and Zen spirit within them. The "corrections" to this "one-sided impression" made by sinologists in the 1970s appear to have left no trace in this translation. Even though the bibliography lists the main studies on Wang Wei from the 1970s, the introduction does not integrate these research results.

The Barnstone translations, on the other hand, present a complex and rich portrait of Wang Wei. They interpret Chinese poetry in its historical context, recognizing that Chinese poetry is as rich as American poetry, and that Chinese poets are as complex as American poets. Their translation incorporates the results of Wang Wei studies from the 1970s, providing a comprehensive introduction in the preface to the era in which Wang Wei lived, his experiences, social interactions, and his Zen Buddhist thought. In terms of poem selection, they focus on showcasing the diversity of Wang Wei's poetry: in addition to landscape poems, they also select many court poems, social poems, and frontier poems.

The formation of the two images of Wang Wei represents two different modes of literary transmission across regions. One approach is for scholars to

54 Sam Hamill, "Wang Wei and Saigyo," 47.

aim at understanding foreign literature, revealing the richness of foreign literature and the multifaceted nature of humans. The other is the poets' "selective borrowing" (*nalai zhuyi* 拿來主義), imagining and selecting foreign literature according to their own creative needs. This type of appropriation is bound to be one-sided or even essentialist. However, it is precisely because it uses the driving force of creativity inspired by foreign literature that such foreign literature is able to take root locally and eventually become a part of the native literary tradition.

Some American poets, inspired by Chinese landscape poetry, have employed concrete imagery to address the theme of the relationship between humans and nature. This is precisely the phenomenon under discussion.[55] Sometimes, even after understanding the richness of Chinese poetry, poets and translators still choose the "one-sided" Chinese poetry.

Hinton is a case in point. From the bibliography and interviews in the anthology related to his translation of Wang Wei, we can see that he is familiar with the research on Wang Wei and aware of the diverse and rich nature of Wang Wei's poetry. However, he only translates Wang Wei's landscape poems. This choice is closely connected to his life philosophy of focusing on the ecological environment and the practice of living in nature (he resides at the base of a hill in a small town in Vermont, where he earned a living for a long time by working part-time as a stonemason). The image of Wang Wei as a landscape hermit poet has become integrated into his own creative work and life.

Weinberger describes the charm of "Lu Zhai" in this way: the poem leads "a nomadic life: insinuating itself in the minds of readers, demanding understanding (but on the reader's own terms), provoking thought, sometimes compelling writing in other languages. Great poetry lives in a state of perpetual transformation, perpetual translation: the poem dies when it has no place to go."[56] Wang Wei's poems are great poems in this sense. In contemporary America, Wang Wei's poetry continues to be read, translated, and studied, stirring debates and controversies, and invigorating the creative work of American poets: their "nomadic life" continues.

Translated by Thomas McConochie

55 See also Zhong Ling 鍾玲, "Zhongguo shige yingyiwen ruhe zai Meiguo chengwei bentuhua chuantong: Yi Jian Hesifei'er xina Du Fu yiwen wei li" 中國詩歌英譯文如何在美國成為本土化傳統：以簡・何絲費爾吸納杜甫譯文為例, *Zhongguo bijiao wenxue* 中國比較文學, no. 2 (2010): 41–52.

56 Eliot Weinberger, *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, 1.