

# Translation and Transmission of John Keats in China (1949-1979)

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## **Abstract:**

The year of 2021 witnesses both the bi-centennial anniversary of John Keats's death, and the centennial anniversary of the Chinese translation and transmission of his poems. The latter one-hundred-years history can be divided into three stages: the beginning in the first half of the twentieth century (mainly during the period of Republic of China), the development from 1949 (when People's Republic of China was founded) to 1979 (when the Great Cultural Revolution ended), and the flourishing new stage since China's Reform and Opening up. It is generally assumed that Keats's works are underappreciated during the first thirty years after the founding of People's Republic of China, and thus the translation and transmission of Keats in this period in China has been less discussed than necessary. This paper sorts out the data concerning Keats being translated, introduced, and transmitted in the years of 1949-1979, and makes comments on the achievements obtained by Chinese translators and scholars. It attempts to argue that Chinese translators and scholars have made continuous efforts, and contributed considerably in the following fields: the translation of Keats's poems and letters, the composition and translation of literary history textbooks and literary theory textbooks concerning Keats, the studies and transmissions of Keats's poems and letters, etc. The translation and transmission of Keats in China (1949-1979) have inherited the tradition created by Chinese Keatsian scholars in the first half of the twentieth century (Stage I), and laid solid foundations for the translation and transmission of Keats in China's New Era of Reform and Opening-up (Stage III).

**Keywords:** Keats; Translation, Transmission, The First Thirty Years After The Founding of People's Republic of China (1949-1979)

## **Introduction**

The English Romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821) was introduced into China at the beginning of the twentieth century. The year of 2021 witnessed both the bi-centennial anniversary of Keats's death, and the centennial anniversary of the Chinese translation and transmission of Keats's works. The latter one-hundred-year history can be divided into three stages: Stage I. The beginning in the first half of the twentieth century (mainly during the period of Republic of China); Stage II. The development from 1949 (when the People's Republic of China was founded) to 1979 (when the Great Cultural Revolution ended); Stage III. The flourishing new stage since China's Reform and Opening up in the 1980s. It is generally assumed that Keats's works are underappreciated during Stage II (Zhang, 2015, pp. 251-252; Shen & Wang, 2015, p. 65), and thus the translation and transmission of Keats in China in this period have been less discussed than necessary.

This paper sorts out the data concerning Keats being translated, introduced, and transmitted in the years of 1949-1979, and makes comments on the achievements obtained by Chinese translators and scholars. It attempts to argue that Chinese translators and scholars have made continuous efforts, and contributed considerably in the following fields: the translation of Keats's poems and letters, the composition and translation of literary history textbooks and literary theory textbooks concerning Keats, the studies and transmissions of Keats's poems and letters, etc. The translation and transmission of Keats in China (1949-1979) have inherited the tradition created by Chinese Keatsian scholars in the first half of the twentieth century (Stage I), and laid solid foundations for the translation and transmission of Keats in China's New Era of Reform and Opening-up (Stage III).

### **Translation & Transmission of Keats's Poems and Letters in China (1949-1979)**

Till now, 120 of Keats's 150 poems and 170 of Keats's 250 letters have been translated into Chinese. In Stage I, 46 translators published the translation of 89 Keats's poems. Among them 41 were repeatedly translated, so together 48 poems of Keats were in Chinese. There was no monograph of Keats's poems in Chinese. The translation of either his poems or letters were published in journals or compilations of poems.

In Stage II, The most important achievement is a monograph of Keats's poems in China (Keats, 1958). It is significant for the following reasons. Firstly, it includes 65 poems of Keats, among which 22 were translated into Chinese for the first time. Hence, the number of translation of Keats's poems rose up to 70. Secondly, it is presently the most active translation: (1) It is the most highly quoted translation. Such famous scholars as Zuoliang Wang and Xiuyan Fu cite Zha's translation in their works. (2) It is again and again published in China. Thirdly, it classifies Keats's poems into three kinds: 47 sonnets, 16 lyrics (four odes included), two narrative poems, which is easy for Chinese reader to understand, and also sets an example for later generation of translators to arrange Keats's poems. Fourthly, Zha sings highly of Keats's poetic talent and art in the preface, claiming that Keats has "strong passion for the society" and his poems have serious social themes. Those comments give support for Keats's poems to be accepted in China.

There are other translators of Keats's poems in Stage II.

Guangzhong Yu translated "On the Grasshopper and Cricket," and included it in his *Collection of English Poems* (Yu, 1960). Yu also wrote notes to the poem and summarized Keats's artistic style. Yu published *Translation and Review of Keats's Famous Works* in 2012, including 361 of Keats's poems and five of Keats's letters.

Ting Lou (1967) edited and translated *Selection of English and American Poems*, which included three of Keats's poems: "Ode to a Nightingale," "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," "La Belle Dame sans Mercy: A Ballad." Only one of Byron's poems and two of Shelley's poems were included, indicating the preference of Keats. Lou also composed a sketch of Keats, claiming his poetic achievements among the most glorious in England.

Ruihong Zhao translated four sonnets ("On the Grasshopper and Cricket," "Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition," "How many bards gild the lapses of time," "If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd") and two odes ("Ode to a Nightingale," "To Autumn") in 1979; he wrote two papers on them. These translations and papers were included in his work *Poetry and Romanticism* (Zhao, 1993). According to Zhao, Keats is as important as French poet Rimbaud (1854-1891) and Chinese Tang Dynasty poet He Li (790-816). The three are all talented elites in their own motherland (Zhao, 1993, p. 396). Keats's letters are stressed by quoting T. S. Eliot's words (Zhao, 1993, p. 253). Zhao read aloud Keats's poems together with students in the classroom to promote the transmission of Keats's works.

In Stage I, six translators translated 51 letters of Keats's. Among them seven were repeatedly translated, so together 44 letters of Keats were in Chinese. Among them 37 are the letters to Fanny Brawne, girlfriend of Keats. The purpose of the translation was to encourage the Chinese young men to pursue true love and happy marriage. In Stage II, five translators translated 39 letters of Keats's. Among them four had been translated in Stage I; 12 were repeatedly translated in Stage II, so together 23 letters of Keats were put into Chinese for the first time. Hence, the number of translation of Keats's letters rose up to 67. Not only is the number increasing but also the selection points to a new direction.

Firstly, Yumei Mao translated 10 Letters of Keats, representing Keats's view of imagination, sensation, his view of poetry as natural as leaves of a tree (Keats, 1961, pp. 132-140). Mao remarked in the postscript that Keats tends to compose pure poetry, using poetry as a tool to create an imaginary world. Keats's pure poetry is different from and inferior to Byron's and Shelly's political poetry.

Secondly, Kejia Yuan, the second translator in Stage II, translated 18 Letters of Keats that focus on Keats's passion for and understanding of Shakespeare, as well as Keats's view of negative capability (Keats, 1964, pp. 149-165). Yuan analyzed Keats's view of imagination in the postscript.

Thirdly, Qianyu Huang translated "Letter to Fanny Brawne" (May, 1820), and included in *Love Letters* (Keats, 1975, pp. 182-183).

The fourth translation was included in *Selected Western Literary Theory* (Keats, 1979a, pp. 60-66). Ten letters of Keats are selected in the book, but four of them were from Yumei Mao's translations; the other six were formerly translated by Yumei Mao and Kejia Yuan, and Tongji Lin's translations were based on the former works. Since Lin worked as Professor of Fudan University, and famous scholar Lifu Wu was the editor of *Selected Western Literary Theory*, this book is so influential that two of the letters are quoted by *References for Thinking in Images* edited by Fudan University (Keats, 1979b, pp. 67-68).

The translation of Keats's letters concerning his view of poetry means that Stage-II scholars pay more attention to Keats's literary theory, and that Chinese university students can gain access to more about Keats's view of poetry. That helps transmit Keats's image as a great Romantic poet.

## Introduction & Transmission of Keats by Monographs in China (1949-1979)

In Stage II, Chinese scholars of English literature were much influenced by Soviet scholars, paying more attention to Byron and Shelley than to Keats. Nevertheless, Keats still was part of the teaching contents of China's higher education in the 1950s. He was introduced in detail in at least the following three university textbooks.

Firstly, *The History of English Literature: A Brief Outline* introduced Keats's life story, *Endymion*, *Hyperion*, sonnets and odes (Fan, 1983, pp. 384-388). Although it was published in 1983, its contents were teaching materials to English major students in Nanjing University in 1954-1955. And it has been an important textbook for decades since its publication. Fan remarked that Keats is an ambitious liberalist who fights against the capitalist political and religious system, that *The Eve of St. Agnes* is as important as *Romeo and Juliet*, and that *The Fall of Hyperion* indicates that life is a forever going/progressive movement. Above all, Keats's odes are his most successful poems, representing his strongest passion for life.

Secondly, Fudan University was funded by the National Educational Bureau to compose *A Teaching Syllabus of English Literary History* in February, 1956. It makes a list of teaching points on Keats: Byron's and Shelley's support and approval of Keats, Keats's humanistic and materialistic adoration of beauty, comparison between *Hyperion* and *Paradise Lost*, comparison between Keats and Burns, etc. (p. 22).

Thirdly, Zhouhan Yang and other scholars edited *European Literary History* (vol. 2) that is an important university textbook during Stage II. It argues that Keats's *Poems* (1817) displays his taste for classical poetry and his talent for depicting natural scenery, that *Endymion* (1818) symbolizes Keats's pursuit of beauty and ideal, and that the third collection of poems includes more famous works than ever (Yang, et al., 1979, pp. 58-59). 多人

In Brief, scholars in Stage II stressed the importance of Keats's earlier letters and later poems, especially the narrative and epic poems that show Keats's revolutionary ideas.

Works translated from Russian into Chinese decided Keats's position in the history of literature in China. Zhouhan Yang translated *The Nineteenth-Century Foreign Literary History* (1958, pp. 660-671), in which Keats's literary position was remarked: Keats neither belongs to revolutionary Roman-

ticist nor reactionary Romanticist (p. 478); Keats is a talented young poet, one of the most outstanding English poet (p. 660); Keats calls on people to transcend the dark world and enjoy lifetime. Liuling Dai translated *A Survey of English Literary History*, in which Keats is claimed as one of the three progressive English Romantic poets, who is inspired by his ambition (1959, p. 340); all Keats's poems are liberal-oriented; *Hyperion* has revolutionary theme without doubt, and *The Fall of Hyperion* represents Keats's mourning of French revolution in the 1790s (p. 343).

There are English works including Keats. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* was translated into Chinese in 1979, published by Taipei's Zhiwen Press, which mentions Keats in several places: when arguing against the biographical analysis of poetry, the author cites Keats's letter to Woodhouse that a poet has no identity (p. 119); when analyzing the relations between literature and other arts, the author quotes Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (p. 203). Will Durant's *The Story of Civilization* was translated into Chinese in the 1960s, published by Taipei's Youshi Wenhuaishiye Press, which mentions Keats many times: Keats is parallel to Shelley (1966b, p. 366); Englishmen took Pope's translation of Homer as the best until Keats recognized Chapman's Homer "loud and bold" (1966a, p. 242).

Japanese work also included Keats. *Film Theory* by Yanqi Xu was translated from Japanese into Chinese in 1963. It quotes Keats's lines "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / are sweeter" to show the visibility of films (p. 58).

### **Studies on Keats's Works in China (1949-1979)**

In Stage II, there was no monograph focusing on the studies of Keats, but there were some papers and items from dictionaries or reference books concentrating on Keats studies. Though the number of papers was not considerable, the authors were first-class scholars, whose wonderful prosaic writings show the way to Stage-III Keatsian studies.

For example, Deyu Yang (1979) analyzed the translation methods of Keats's epitaph, evoking much discussion about it; Jueliang Zhou (1963, pp. 75-83) composed notes to "To Autumn", and compared it to Chinese writing; Jiaying Wang wrote a sketch of Keats in his *Short Life Stories of Great Writers* (1976, pp. 99-103), assuming that Keats's works would shine in the

sky eternally; Yuanshu Yan (1977, pp. 26-36) compared *Lamia* to Chinese folk tale *White Snake Story*.

Some papers did not mainly talk about Keats, but simply mentioned Keats, which help us know the image of Keats in China. Kejiang Yuan (1959) believed that Chinese readers should read more about Milton, Blake and Keats; Funing Li (1962) hoped young students would read "Ode to a Nightingale" to learn about its structure and syntax. Weizhi Zhu (1978, p. 90) compared Keats to He Li, the Tang Dynasty poet who died young, lamenting on both their fates.

Pengzheng Wang completed a brief life story of Keats, which was included in *Biographies of Famous Foreign Writers* (1979, pp. 498-500). It is three pages long, and has a black-and-white Keats's portrait. The portrait *Keats* attached to the article is probably copied from Severn's portrait. The black and white shows the strength of the face.

Scholars in Stage II also collected Keatsian materials. Liantian Luo edited *Bibliography of Tang Dynasty Literature Studies*, which includes three papers on the comparative studies between Keats and He Li (1979, pp. 62-63). Kaifeng Normal College in Henan Province edited *Bibliography of Foreign Literary Studies*, which includes 10 papers on Keats in the twentieth century in China (1964, p. 166).

## Conclusion

In Stage II, translation and transmission of John Keats in China has made considerable achievements. Although there was no monograph focusing on the studies of Keats, there was *Selected Poems of John Keats* in Chinese, major letters concerning Keats's view of poetry have been put into Chinese, and mainstream literary history textbooks have made comments on Keats's works. These books were circling among university students, and from them arise the new generation Keatsian scholars since the 1980s. Without their efforts, there would not be the nine monographs in the field of Keatsian studies, 15 monographs entitled *Selected Poems of John Keats*, two monographs entitled *Selected Letters of John Keats*, one monograph entitled *Critical Biography of John Keats* in Stage III.

In spite of the poor materialistic conditions and the unfavorable cultural atmosphere, translators in 1949-1979 continued to shoulder their responsibility to transmit and spread foreign literature to enrich Chinese

culture. By that means they have also adjusted their own identity as an intellectual. Since Keats's narrative poems were stressed more in Stage II, the tendency helped to counterbalance the image of Keats in the first half of the twentieth century as an aesthetic poet. He has become a revolutionary poet close to Byron and Shelley, superior to Wordsworth and Coleridge.

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