

# The Personalized Construction of Du Fu's Image in Stephen Owen's Translation of Du Fu's Poetry

*Yeye Ou*

Hang Seng University of Hong Kong

3306713405@qq.com

**Abstract.** This article primarily analyzes the reasons for the variation in Du Fu's image as it appears in Stephen Owen's translations of Du Fu's poetry. The analysis focuses on three aspects: the techniques Stephen Owen employs in translating Du Fu's poems, the construction of Du Fu's image, and the similarities and differences between Owen's translations and those of other Sinologists. By doing so, the article identifies the differences between the image of Du Fu as portrayed in Owen's translations and the image of Du Fu in the collective memory of Chinese people, and attempts to explore the underlying reasons for these differences.

**Keywords:** Du Fu, Sinology, Du Fu's Image

## 1. Introduction

Stephen Owen, a contemporary American Sinologist, has made significant contributions to the study and translation of Tang poetry, producing numerous works that hold an unshakable position in Western Sinology and Sino-Western cultural exchange. Among the poets of the High Tang, he has a particular fondness for Du Fu. In his work *The Poetry of the High Tang*, he states, "Du Fu is the greatest Chinese poet. [3] " He even compares Du Fu's stature to that of Shakespeare. Later, Owen devoted eight years to translating Du Fu's collected works, following the sequence of poems in Qiu Zhao'ao's *Detailed Annotations of Du Fu's Poetry* from the Qing Dynasty.

Throughout history, many renowned figures have continuously praised Du Fu. For example, Han Yu proclaimed, "With Li and Du's writings, their brilliance stretches a myriad feet long" (*On Zhang Ji*). [4] Bai Juyi praised Du Fu's poetry, stating, "In terms of encompassing the ancient and the modern, scrutinizing the rules of metrics, and achieving perfection in both form and content, Du Fu surpasses Li" (*Letter to Yuan Jiu*). [1] Yuan Zhen even placed him alongside Confucius, saying, "Since the advent of poets, none have equaled Zimei" (*Epitaph and Preface to the Tomb of Du Fu, Assistant Censor of Works of the Tang Dynasty*). [2] The high regard that Middle Tang literary giants like Han Yu, Yuan Zhen, and Bai Juyi held for Du Fu's poetry is evident. [12]

We refer to Du Fu as the "Poet Sage." The original meaning of "Poet Sage" simply referred to someone who was "sagely in poetry," that is, someone who excelled in or was particularly adept at poetry. [13] The title "Poet Sage" was explicitly coined in Wang Shishuo's *Dreaming of Du Shaoling Composing Poetry*: "Qinglian is called the 'Poet Immortal,' while my elder is the 'Poet Sage'". [6]

Before the 20th century, there were not many translations and studies of Du Fu's poetry in Western Sinology. One reason is that translating Du Fu's works is particularly challenging. Herbert A. Giles, a British scholar and former Chinese diplomat, said when first translating Du Fu's poem *The Fair One*, "The reason for translating a poem by Du Fu is because the Chinese consider Du Fu's status second only to Li Bai. It would be wrong not to mention him. However, all of Du Fu's poems that I know are among the most difficult to translate". [7] Another reason is that Du Fu was not as well-known overseas as Li Bai.

Later, more and more translations of Du Fu's poetry appeared in Western Sinology. However, in most translations, Du Fu's image is portrayed as that of a Confucian scholar. In contrast, Stephen Owen's work focuses more on constructing Du Fu's personal image rather than the titles bestowed upon him by the world. Owen's research perspective offers us new approaches to studying Du Fu.

## 2. Translation Methods of Du Fu's Poetry

### 2.1. Introduction to Stephen Owen's Translation of The Poetry of Du Fu

In contemporary Western Sinology, Stephen Owen from Harvard University represents a significant figure in the study of Du Fu. His renowned work, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry*, dedicates a specific chapter to discussing Du Fu. At the outset, Owen provides a high evaluation, stating, "Du Fu is the greatest Chinese poet." Building on a meticulous reading of Du Fu's poetry, he examines Du Fu's relationship with traditional culture and argues his central thesis: that Du Fu's literary style and poetic language "comprehensively embody both ancient and contemporary forms, while also incorporating individual uniqueness, [3]" which is a key reason for his greatness.

It is precisely because of Stephen Owen's outsider perspective that his translation of *The Poetry of Du Fu* has garnered widespread attention. The section on Du Fu's poetry is Chapter Eleven in his *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry*; however, it was the chapter that took the longest to complete. Owen's translation of Du Fu's poetry spans six volumes, with the order and structure based on the Qing Dynasty scholar Qiu Zhao'ao's *Detailed Annotations of Du Fu's Poetry*.

Translators employ different strategies and techniques that can alter the content of the original text. On the one hand, this results in each translator having a distinct translation style, and on the other hand, it leads to varying interpretations by readers. For example, when translating Du Fu's poetry collection, Owen adopts a literal translation approach, believing that this method allows English readers to perceive aspects of the original Chinese text. [8] For difficult allusions or terms, he provides annotations to help native English speakers understand them. As David McCraw comments, "If there are words that native English speakers find difficult to understand, he [Owen] adds annotations to help them grasp the meaning. [14]" However, domestic scholars argue that "Stephen Owen overlooks Du Fu's moral integrity, and his translation misinterprets Eastern classics. [15]"

In our collective memory, Du Fu is a loyal and patriotic minister, embodying the typical Confucian image of a person who "upholds Confucian values, is loyal to the ruler, and has deep compassion for the people and all living things. [16]" In contrast, the Du Fu portrayed in Owen's translation is depicted as a good husband and father, focusing more on Du Fu as an individual rather than his public image. Western scholars consider this translation approach to align with Western aesthetic values, whereas for Sinologists, this interpretation is seen as a misreading.

### 2.2. The Personalized Construction of Du Fu's Image

Personalization refers to something that is non-mainstream, adding uniqueness and individuality on top of what is commonly accepted. [21] The personalization of Du Fu's image involves shifting the focus from his public persona to his personal image.

In translating Du Fu's image, refined and elegant vocabulary is employed. This technique, known as "elegant writing," involves beautified descriptions of scenes and objects in the poetry and enhanced interpretations in the accompanying texts. [17]

For example, Stephen Owen translates Du Fu's line "华亭入翠微, 秋日乱清晖" [6] "from Reinscription on the Zheng Family's Eastern Pavilion, where the terms "华亭" (Huating), "翠微" (Cuiwei), and "清晖" (Qinghui) are respectively rendered as "splendid pavilion," "azure mist," and "clear glow." This translation creates an atmosphere of grandeur, elegance, and refinement, leaving readers with a profound impression of sophistication and romanticism. Through this portrayal, Owen presents Du Fu as a figure of high culture and a lover of leisure, rather than the somber and worried individual typically depicted in traditional interpretations.

Additionally, in his translation techniques, Stephen Owen employs what is termed "beauty writing," which involves expressing emotions directly and showcasing feminine charm. Owen believes that Du Fu intentionally depicted the beauty of his wife in his poetry. In Owen's view, Du Fu used "natural methods" to describe themes that had not been explored by previous poets, particularly familial and ethical relationships. Therefore, when translating such poems, Owen deliberately conveys this idea.

For example, Owen translates the lines "香雾云鬟湿, 清辉玉臂寒" [6] "from Du Fu's poem *Moonlit Night*, which describe a longing wife, as "In scented fog, her cloud like hair do moist, In its clear beams, her jade-white arms are cold." [9] Here, Owen uses entirely positive terms, presenting an image of a loyal wife who misses her husband. Wei Jiahai argues that Owen views ancient Chinese beauties with a sympathetic eye. [17]

In our traditional view, the image of Du Fu is that of a Confucian scholar who is loyal to the emperor and concerned about the nation and its people. However, Owen's approach reveals a different image of Du Fu—one of a good husband, not just a Confucian scholar.

### 2.3. Section Three Similarities and Differences with Other Sinologists' Translations of Du Fu's Poetry

Many Sinologists have translated the works of Du Fu, each employing different techniques and perspectives, resulting in varied representations of Du Fu.

Stephen Owen's translation methods differ from those of the overseas Sinologist Herbert A. Giles. Giles, in his translations of Du Fu's poetry, intentionally downplays historical and cultural connotations, using free translation and domestication techniques to make the poems accessible to general readers.

In contrast, domestic Sinologist Xu Yuanchong's translation of Du Fu emphasizes adherence to the original meaning while also paying attention to the beauty of sound, form, and artistic conception. [18]

Let's compare the interpretations of Du Fu's Two Quatrains (Poem II) (江碧鸟逾白,山青花欲燃。今春看又过,何日是归年。[6]) by three different scholars.

**IN ABSENCE** (Herbert A. Giles)

White gleam the gulls across the darkling tide, On the green hills the red flowers seem to burn; Alas! I see **another spring** has died.....When will it come —the day of my return? [7]

**Quatrains** (Stephen Owen)

From river's sapphire the birds are still whiter, In the mountain's green flowers almost take flame. **This spring too** is soon to pass, And when will be the year I go home? [9]

**A QUATRAIN** (Xu Yuanchong)

Against blue water birds appear more white; On green mountains red flowers seem to burn. Alas! I see **another spring** in flight. O when will come the day of my return? [5]

First, the three translators differ in their translation of the poem's title. Both Xu and Owen use a literal translation, directly translating the original title. However, Owen translates it as "Quatrains," which means four-line poems or quatrains. Owen's translation could be misunderstood as referring to two poems, whereas Xu's translation is easier to understand. Giles uses a domestication strategy, translating the title based on his understanding of the poem's overall meaning, helping English readers grasp the poem's theme. His translation, "In Absence," emphasizes the idea of being away from home, which some scholars believe aligns more closely with the emotions the poet intended to convey. [19] I agree with this view, as Du Fu wrote this poem during his final departure from Chang'an, living a life of exile in the southwest, constantly longing to return east.

Regarding the phrase "今春", both Giles and Xu translate it as "another spring." I believe the word "another" deviates from the meaning the original poem intended to express. The poet wrote this poem to convey his current situation, with the last two lines describing his feelings in the present. The word "又" traces the poet's emotions back to the past, indicating that during his time away in a foreign land, he was saddened by the arrival and departure of spring each year, and this spring is merely another occasion for sorrow. Owen's translation of "this spring" aligns with what the poet intended to express, and to emphasize this meaning, Owen also uses the word "too."

In analyzing the different word choices in these translations, I offer the following brief analysis:

(1) The differences in translation techniques may be related to the translators' historical contexts. Giles likely worked around 1930, Owen around 1990, and Xu in the 21st century. The earlier the translation, the fewer works and references available on translating Du Fu's poetry, leading to more rudimentary translation methods.

(2) The translators' work experiences also play a role. Giles, having worked as a diplomat in Tianjin, Xiamen, and Shantou, gained a deep understanding of Chinese society and culture during this time. Stephen Owen has been passionate about Sinology since childhood and has always been dedicated to Sinological research. Xu Yuanchong, being Chinese, later engaged in translation work. I believe that besides being influenced by their cultural backgrounds, translators are also impacted by their personal experiences when translating.

### 3. Reflections on the Transformation of Du Fu's Image in Translation

#### 3.1. Objective Reasons—The Inevitability of Cross-Cultural Image Transformation

"All literature is built upon a substantial amount of assumed knowledge. What may seem self-evident to readers in one time and place may require annotation in another." [9] Whether it's translating from Chinese to English or vice versa, we inevitably experience "cultural filtering" due to the influence of our own national culture when interpreting the culture of another country.

The difficulties of cross-cultural communication and the characteristics of Du Fu's poetry itself present various challenges in translation, whether by Chinese or English translators. To date, no perfect method has been found to facilitate the widespread dissemination and acceptance of Du Fu's poetry in the English-speaking world. [20] For native speakers, the diction, sentence structure, and emotions in Du Fu's poetry already pose significant challenges to comprehension, let alone for cross-cultural translators.

#### 3.2. Subjective Reasons—Stephen Owen's Non-Confucian Interpretation

Du Fu is traditionally regarded as embodying the "poet-historian" image [22], characterized by his melancholic and resolute style, deeply concerned with the fate of the nation and its people. This image has almost universally become his public persona. Many in the Western Sinological community share this view, perceiving Du Fu's image as static. However, Stephen Owen believes that "such an imagined image of Chinese external culture is shaped by various motives and historical constructions. This image construction is, in fact, a simplification. It is crucial to recognize that traditional China, throughout its long history, has possessed diverse images" (Owen, *An Anthology* xl).

As a Sinologist, Owen, although not entirely rejecting Confucian thought, often maintains a reserved or evasive attitude towards it. [17] For example, in his translations and annotations, he deliberately downplays the Confucian sentiments in Du Fu's poetry, reflecting his literary-historical perspective. He interprets Du Fu's classic works through the lens of the poet's life experiences, considering the artistic nature of life and the life-like nature of art, rather than preemptively framing the poetry within Confucian ideology. This approach is the "result of a reading filtered through culture." [11]

## 4. Conclusion

Stephen Owen's personalized construction of Du Fu's image in his translations demonstrates diversity and reflects an anti-classical characteristic. The image of Du Fu he constructs is imbued with a sense of unfamiliarity, transforming the "sage" Du Fu into a more relatable and endearing "poet" Du Fu in a distinctive manner. This approach highlights the everyday life and artistic aesthetic features of Du Fu's poetry, showing a certain degree of innovation. However, it also significantly deviates from the traditional Chinese discourse. In his efforts to personalize Du Fu, Owen sometimes goes too far, adopting a deconstructionist stance that subverts the long-held traditional perception of Du Fu's personal charm in Chinese scholarship.

When translating, we must consider the perspective of the readers, using words that are accessible and comprehensible to them.

As for ourselves, we should build cultural confidence, daring to engage in dialogue with the world and actively transmitting China's excellent culture. Only in this way can we better inherit China's outstanding classical culture and contribute to the prosperity and development of global culture.

## References

- [1] Bai, J. Y. (1979). *Collected works of Bai Juyi* (G. Xuejie, Ed.). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [2] Meng, Q., et al. (1991). *Poems of historical affairs, continued poems of historical affairs, historical words*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House.
- [3] Owen, S. (2014). *The great age of Chinese poetry* (J. Jia, Trans.). Beijing: Sanlian Publishing House.
- [4] Qian, Z. L. (1984). *Han Changli's poems: Chronological compilation with annotations*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House.
- [5] Payne, R. (1960). *The white pony: An anthology of Chinese poetry from the earliest times to the present day*. New York: John Day Company.
- [6] Qiu, Z. A. (1979). *Detailed annotations and supplementary notes on Du Fu's poems*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [7] Giles, H. A. (1884). *Gems of Chinese literature*. Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh.
- [8] Owen, S. (2003). *Chinese literary theory: English translation and commentary* (W. Baihua & T. Qingmei, Trans.). Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press.
- [9] Owen, S. (2016). *The poetry of Du Fu* (Vol. 3). Boston and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Inc.
- [10] Giles, H. A. (1898). *Chinese poetry in English verse*. London: Bernard Quaritch.
- [11] Yin, X. Y. (2014). *Research on Chinese literary classics in the Western perspective*. Chengdu: Sichuan University Press.
- [12] Liu, Z. W., & Li, X. B. (2018). On the "sacralization" of "poet sage" Du Fu. *Literature & Art Studies*, 12, 63-73.
- [13] Ge, J. C. (2020). On the origins of the titles "poet immortal" for Li Bai and "poet sage" for Du Fu. *Zhongzhou Academic Journal*, 10, 163-165.
- [14] McCraw, D. (2023). Review of *The poetry of Du Fu*, translated & edited by S. Owen, P. W. Kroll, & D. X. Warner. *Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 79, 377-385.
- [15] Yang, J. H. (2011). Cultural filtering and classic variation: On Stephen Owen's interpretation and misreading of Du Fu's poems. *Chinese Literary Studies*, 3, 113-116.
- [16] Guo, G. Q. (2007). Research on the "de-Confucianization" of Du Fu's thought. *Yunmeng Journal*, 28, 71-73.
- [17] Wei, J. H. (2022). The individualized construction of Du Fu's image in Stephen Owen's anthology of Chinese literature translation. *Foreign Languages and Literature Studies*, 6, 74-84.
- [18] Xu, Y. C. (1987). Three talks on "The beauty of meaning, sound, and form." *Journal of Shenzhen University*, 2, 44-47.
- [19] Wen, J. (2013). A study on the descriptive mode of English translation of ancient Chinese poetry: A case study of Du Fu's poems. *Foreign Languages*, 5, 72-81.
- [20] Huang, D. Y. (2020). A discussion on the evolution of Du Fu's literary status from the perspective of English translation history. *Journal of Yangzhou University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2, 112-121.
- [21] Jin, S. B. (2023). Research on the construction of personalized image of radio hosts in the context of full media communication ecology. *Television Guide*, 5, 84.
- [22] Li, J. J. (2023). On Stephen Owen's creative translation of *The poetry of Du Fu*. *Prose Century Theory*, 4, 85-86.