

Liang Yuchun's Translation of English Essays: Motivation and Relationship

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Liang Yuchun, known as "China's Elia" in the history of modern Chinese literature, once played an important role in introducing and translating foreign literature, especially English essays, in the 1920s & 1930s. The present study first gives a general overview of Liang's English prose translation. Then the author focuses her attention on the exploratory analysis of Liang's motivation for translating English essays and his literary relationship with British essayists, John Galsworthy, Charles Lamb and Mary Russell Mitford in particular.

Keywords: Liang Yuchun, translation of English essays, motivation, relationship

Introduction

Liang Yuchun is remembered as an essayist in the history of modern Chinese literature. In his short lifespan, however, Liang Yuchun produced far more translations than essays. He was mainly engaged in translation activities from 1926 to 1932. In less than six years, Liang Yuchun published a total of 36 translated books in a wide range of genres, including novels, essays, poems, dramas, philosophical essays, and literary commentaries.

1. Overview of Liang Yuchun's English Prose Translation

Among Liang Yuchun's many translations, a considerable number are English essays, 47 in total, which are included in five of his translated books, namely *English Essays* (Kaiming Bookstore, 1928), *Some Best English Essays* (Beixin Book Company, 1930), *Tryst*¹ (Beixin Book Company, 1930), *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character & Scenery* (Beixin Book Company, 1931) and *More Best English Essays*² (Beixin Book Company, 1935). The number of essays included is 10, 20, 4, 3 and 10 respectively.

In the prefaces and annotations of these works (especially the three essay anthologies mentioned above), there are not only Liang Yuchun's experience about the creation of essays, but also some words reflecting Liang Yuchun's understanding of translation activities. These two aspects have been discussed together in another article (Jing, 2020) and thus will be omitted here. In this article, we will first make a brief analysis of Liang Yuchun's motivation for English prose translation and then depict his special literary relationship with British prose writers.

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¹ This English title is retranslated from Liang's Chinese translation (《幽会》) by the author.

² This English title is retranslated from Liang's Chinese translation (《小品文续选》) by the author.

2. Liang Yuchun's Motivation for English Prose Translation

According to our study, what motivates Liang Yuchun to form a profound relationship of translation with English prose is the high compatibility of their temperaments and the friendly poetic context of the literary system of his time.

2.1 Highly Compatible Temperaments

As Liang Yuchun once mentioned in the translator's foreword of *English Essays* (1928), "In college, apart from poems, what I like most is essays". He always put by his bed a collection of essays by English writers. "When I am upset, I would read them and feel better." From this we can see that Liang Yuchun had appreciated the essays with his heart, and carried on the exchange of mind and thought with them. So deep his love for British essays was that his understanding and grasp of the original spirit can be described as thorough and profound. Either the author's personality or his/her work style, Liang had a clear understanding. This can be fully demonstrated by the relevant statements in the preface and annotations of his translation.

It is often said that literary translators should try their best to choose the works of writers they like. In this way, it will be easier for them to grasp the author's will, resonate with the original text, and create a translation featuring a unity of form and spirit. That is the very case of Liang Yuchun's translation of British essays.

As early as when he was studying in university, Liang Yuchun began to publish prose works, and what he chose to write was essays. His writing style is in line with the temperament and charm of English essays. Therefore, Liang Yuchun is more proficient in translating essays than novels and poems, and the translation effect is also better. His writing style coincides with the temperament and charm of English essays. As a result, Liang Yuchun's translation of essays is naturally more handy than that of novels and poems, and the translation effect is naturally better.

Of course, Liang Yuchun's prose creation and English essay translation are mutually influenced and complementary. It is not that seemingly simple that Liang Yuchun engaged in prose creation before choosing to do English essay translation. In reality, the reason why Liang Yuchun began to write and translate English essays is closely related to his life experience.

In 1918, Liang Yuchun was admitted into No. 1 Middle School of Fujian Province (present No. 1 Middle School of Fuzhou). Upon graduation in 1922, Liang Yuchun went to Shanghai and sat the entrance examination of English Department of Peking University. With excellent results, he was enrolled in preparatory classes there. After two-year preparatory study, Liang Yuchun was formally admitted into the undergraduate program in 1924 and graduated in 1928. After a short period of teaching at Peking University, Liang Yuchun went southbound to Jinan University, Shanghai and worked as a teaching assistant in English Department. In the beginning of 1930, he returned to Peking University and worked both as a teacher and a librarian. To sum up, having only as short as 27 years, Liang Yuchun's life path can be said to be relatively smooth.

Such a simple life experience is obviously not enough for him to choose to write a novel or a play, and what the composition of an essay requires of the writer's "most important gift is to be able to find significance in the commonplace, to find lessons in the most hopeless things without being careless" (Lin, 1989, p. 71). It is simple life circumstances, so to speak, that had just made Liang Yuchun nurse the habit of noticing and appreciating the details of daily life. In his eyes, "the car, the boat and the sidewalk are three tickets to the fair of life." "As long as

you really use your eyes, you can be regarded as a person who knows life” (Liang, 1934, p. 16). His ideas are very close to the range of materials and arguments of English essays so that once the two meet with each other, they will be as friendly as if they were old friends.

2.2 Friendly Social Context

Of course, personal interests are often a reflection of the social and cultural trend of the times. Early in the preliminary stage of the May 4th Movement, many Chinese writers and scholars began to review, translate and compile British essays for the construction of new vernacular literature. Hu Shi (*On the Construction of Literary Revolution*, 1918), Fu Sinian (*How to Use Vernacular Chinese*, 1919), Zhou Zuoren (*Beautiful Essays*, 1921), Wang Tongzhao (*Pure Prose*, 1923; *The Classification of Prose*, 1924) and Zhu Xiang (*Table-talk*, 1924) successively expressed the idea of introducing the English essay as a model for the construction of modern Chinese prose.

In 1925, Lu Xun translated *Out of the Ivory Tower*³, a work written by the Japanese literary theorist Kuriyagawa Hakuson, in which two sections were devoted to the essay “originating in France and flourishing in Britain”, which provided an important opportunity for the Chinese people then to understand the writing style from the West.

If it is in winter, you can sit on a chair by a warm stove. If it is in summer, you can put on a bathrobe, sip bitter tea, casually chat with your friends, put down what you chat on the paper literally, and you will get an essay. You may talk about whatever you feel ok to comment on. There are scorn and mottos as well as humor and pathos. The subject may touch upon the affairs of state in the world; it may be about the trifles of the market, book reviews, the news of acquaintances, the memories of one's own past, etc. Whatever comes into one's head can be written down as the improvisation of the author. (Lu, 2007, p. 6)

The purpose of Lu Xun's translation of this book was not to specifically introduce the style of essay, but due to the wonderful visual exposition and the reputation and influence of Lu Xun, this paragraph of the definition of the style of essay soon became popular in the literary world and became familiar to almost all the literati at that time (Hong, 2006, p. 119).

The self-expression spirit in English essays is identical to the individual liberation advocated by the May 4th Movement, so in the twenties and thirties of the 20th century the essay was all the rage in the garden of prose. There was a great upsurge in the translation of creation theory and works of famous writers, which exerted a deep influence on the new literati, especially the young generation, of the time.

During this period a large number of translated English essays appeared in such periodicals as *Literature*, *Modern Time*, *Literature and Art Monthly*, *Translation*, *World Literature*, *New China*, *The Analects*, *The Human World*, *The Universe Wind* and *The West Wind*⁴. Many masterpieces of English essayists including Richard Steele, Joseph Addison, Oliver Goldsmith, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Thomas De Quincey, W. H. Hudson, William Makepeace Thackeray, Robert Louis Stevenson, George Gissing, John Galsworthy, Leigh Hunt, G. K. Chesterton, Hilarie Belloc, E. V. Lucas, Robert Lynd, and A. G. Gardiner, were translated. It is in such a translation-friendly social context that Liang Yuchun began to translate and introduce British essays in series.

³ This English title is the retranslation from Lu Xun's Chinese translation 《出了象牙之塔》 by the author.

⁴ The English names of these periodicals are the literal translation of the Chinese names 《文学》, 《现代》, 《文艺月刊》, 《译文》, 《世界文学》, 《新中华》, 《论语》, 《人间世》, 《宇宙风》 and 《西风》 by the author.

3. The Relationship Between Liang Yuchun and British Essay Writers

Among the 47 English prose works translated by Liang Yuchun, 44 are essays that involve 29 writers. Among these authors, two have a clear preponderance in terms of the number of selected essays: John Galsworthy and Charles Lamb. Five essays of the former and four of the latter are included respectively in the essay collections compiled by Liang Yuchun. Next we'll first look at the translation relationship between Liang Yuchun and those two writers.

3.1 Liang Yuchun and John Galsworthy

John Galsworthy (1867-1933) was first introduced to China as a dramatist. Before 1930, many of his dramas had got Chinese translations, of which three were translated by Guo Moruo, respectively *The Struggle*⁵ (Commercial Press, 1926), *The Silver Box*⁶ (Modern Publishing Company, 1927) and *The Dragnet*⁷ (Joint Bookstore, 1927) and one by Xi Dichen and Zhao Songqing, namely *The Pigeon and the Light Dreams*⁸ (Kaiming Bookstore, 1927).⁹

In 1930, Liang Yuchun translated a piece of prose entitled "Evolution" written by John Galsworthy and included it in *Some Best English Essays* (Beixin Book Company, 1930). At that time, he also participated in the translation of "English Series" of Beixin, and took over the translation of four essays by Galsworthy, which was published under the title of "Tryst". In the advertisement published in the fourth issue of the first volume of *Modern Literature*, we found an introduction to the book *Tryst*:

Galsworthy's play "The Struggle" has become one of the most famous plays in the world, and there is also a Chinese translation already. But his clever prose has yet not been introduced. However, it is well worth reading.

Here I have chosen four essays, namely "Distant Green Hills", "Romantic Sentiment", "Happiness" and "Tryst".¹⁰ The first three essays depict the beauty of nature with his love of beauty. The first is his feelings after the European War, which can well tell the pain and root of the war. "Tryst" is what he imagines with a quiet and clear state of mind the beginning and the end of a married woman's love affair with a man while they are having a tryst in the park. They're all chosen from "The Inn of Tranquility", a masterpiece of contemporary English prose.¹¹

Therefore, we can infer that Liang Yuchun should be the first translator who introduced Galsworthy's prose works to Chinese people. In other words, as far as the translation and introduction of Galsworthy's prose in China is concerned, Liang Yuchun had made a pioneering effort. Today, we can still see the publication of Galsworthy's collection of essays (e.g. Ni Qingxi, Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House, 2005), which can be regarded as a continuation and development of Liang's pioneering efforts in introducing and translating Galsworthy's essays.

⁵ This English title is the retranslation from the Chinese version available (《争斗》) by the author.

⁶ This English title is the retranslation from the Chinese version available (《银盒》) by the author.

⁷ This English title is the retranslation from the Chinese version available (《法网》) by the author.

⁸ This English title is the retranslation from the Chinese version available (《鸽与轻梦》) by the author.

⁹ See <http://www.youthchina.org/site/?action-viewnews-itemid-422>.

¹⁰ The English titles of these four essays are the author's back-translation of their Chinese versions "远处的青山", "浪漫情调", "幸福" and "幽会" by Liang Yuchun.

¹¹ The original quotation is taken from an advert published on No. 4, Vol. 1 of *Modern Literature*, 1930.

3.2 Liang Yuchun and Charles Lamb

Now let's turn to Charles Lamb. The most prominent embodiment of Liang Yuchun's love for the translation of British essays is his ardent love for Lamb. In each of the translator's prefaces to the above-mentioned three essay collections, a considerable part is devoted to Lamb. In the one to *English Essays*, Liang reveals his "obsessive desire" to translate Lamb's work.

... Once, after three cups of unstrained wine, I told a friend of mine that I would translate the complete works of Lamb and annotate sentence by sentence. The next day, I came to realize when I regained soberness that if I could do it in a seriously restrained way to interpret unrestrained Lamb, his ghost would come stuttering and quarreling with me in the evening. Sometimes when I am in good mood, I will translate one or two essays of Lamb's. But when I compare my translation with the original, I will inevitably feel disappointed. So I read while hoping to translate his works every day, but I have never succeeded in the past two or three years. (Liang, 1928, preface)

English Essays is a collection of 10 essays by 10 writers and their Chinese translations. Liang Yuchun had intended to write a commentary for each of the six writers of the 18th and 19th centuries, which would be collected together with the translations in the collection, but eventually he gave up, partially for the sake of Lamb.

I meant to write a critical biography for each of these writers in the collection and I tried writing the one of Lamb first. But once I started, I could not stop until I wrote ten thousand words. If that would be the length of each of the other five would-be biographies, they would occupy a space for sixty thousand words..., twenty thousand words more than the translations proper. It is, of course, irrational. So I chose to give up the idea, which I may attend to some day in the future. (Liang, 1928, preface)

When the second collection *Some Best English Essays* was published in 1930, Liang Yuchun introduced all the 20 selected writers in the translation preface, and again spoke highly of Lamb:

Charles Lamb is one of the best essayists of the time. Some say he is the greatest essayist in England. I quite agree. His *Essays of Elia* are so full of humor that no one can read them without laughing. Besides, one will also feel the pleasure of life to a great extent in that Lamb often looks at life from a new standpoint. (Liang, 1930, preface)

The third translation anthology *Some More Best English Essays* collected 10 works. Liang Yuchun explained in the preface that the material selection orientation of this sequel focused on the works' ideological elements, so most of the works selected are written by non-essayists. But in spite of this, two of Lamb's works were selected and translated, even more than each of the first two collections of essays, which is enough to show Liang Yuchun's special feelings towards Lamb.

In this collection are included two essays written by Lamb, who is the only essayist I have been reading all the time in the past ten years. I once wrote a critical biography of Lamb. The more I read it, the less I liked it. Now, Lamb has become so familiar to me that I have little to say about him. (Liang, 1935, preface)

It can be said that Liang Yuchun translated many English essayists, but Lamb is his favorite. His voluminous and brilliant "The Critical Biography of Charles Lamb" has become an important document for Chinese writers to study Lamb and a mirror of Liang Yuchun's profound perception and experience of the ideological essence and stylistic charm of Lamb's works:

Nine-tenths of what he (Lamb) wrote was about himself, and he told us honestly about his inability to understand music, his lack of common sense, his fear of death and ghosts, and even his fear of becoming a thief who would steal money from his firm. He had said that the collection of his essays did not need a preface, because a preface was a

conversation between the author and the reader, and his articles were all prefaces in that sense. It was by his ability to talk of his own affairs so eloquently that he was able to reveal his whole character while gossiping with the readers and thus we could see the real Lamb. (Liang, 1930, pp. 109-110)

3.3 Liang Yuchun and Mary Russell Mitford

In addition to Galsworthy and Lamb, Liang Yuchun also translated and introduced three pieces of unique prose by English female writer Mary Russell Mitford.

Mary Russell Mitford (1786-1855) was one of the few writers of her time who made a living by writing. Her masterpiece *Our Village: Sketches of the Rural Character & Scenery* takes as the prototype the small village where the author lived for more than 30 years. It was originally serialized on a women's magazine in the form of a series of small country stories. The first set of such stories was published in 1824, and after that, every two years a new collection was published till 1832, a total of five sets. When the book was published, it was well received by readers and received acclaim from the circles of critics. It was republished in Britain and the United States, and Mitford became "the most sought-after author" and "highly paid writer" for a time. Some people commented that Mitford used prose to recreate the idyllic scenery in the painting of Lorrain Claude, the French idealized landscape painter in the 17th century, and called her "Claude in the English country life". Others thought her works resembled Dutch oil paintings in style, with vivid details, bright colors and interesting flavors. Charles Lamb, the maestro of writing essays, also praised that "nothing so fresh and characteristic had appeared for a long time". More importantly, of course, *Our Village* created a vernacular tradition of prose and laid the foundation of a branch of literature hitherto untried.¹² As for the unique artistic value of Mitford's prose works, Liang Yuchun has a profound understanding and unique insight of his own:

... Her immortalization is built on her description of the rural landscape as well as the daily life. ... The quietest scenes are presented in such a vivid style that while reading we may feel that a sensitive person has taken us into the gentle and mellow countryside and told us with great interest what she admires. Not only does she have a deep understanding of nature, but she has a warm sympathy for the husbandmen, peasants, vagrants, and shepherds living in the bosom of nature. She uses nature to render wonderful and lovely characters, and at the same time uses wondrous and lovely figures to reflect nature. Her essays are, so to speak, lively poetic prose. (Liang, 1931, pp. 1-2)

We have tried to find out the translation status of this woman writer in China, but other than a few articles commenting on the creative characteristics of her works, there was no information about when her works were translated and introduced into China or which translators had translated her works. In view of this fact, we have tentatively concluded that Liang Yuchun, if not the earliest one, should be one of the translators who earlier translated Mitford's prose works, although we are not sure whether his efforts in the introduction and translation of Mary Russell Mitford have helped the Chinese literary world experience the unique charm of this kind of literary genre initiated by this woman writer, a combination of poems, essays and stories.

Conclusion

In the 1920s and 1930s, Liang Yuchun was one of the most diligent and devoted young translators in the translation and introduction of British essays. Due to the personal temperament identical to that of English essays and the friendly social context for essay writing, Liang Yuchun chose to read, translate and introduce

¹² See <http://www.berkshirehistory.com/bios/mrmitford.html>

English essays and essayists. His understanding of English essays is considered to be the most thorough and comprehensive. Many of his brilliant ideas about essay writing are mainly found in the preface, postscript or notes of the three collections of English essays mentioned above. His introduction to the writers of English essays is also considered to go ahead of the times, and his translation of John Galsworthy, Charles Lamb and Mary Russell Mitford is noteworthy with Charles Lamb attracting most of Liang's attention.

Charles Lamb has exerted an important influence on many modern prose writers in China. However, most poets and writers have read and studied Lamb in original English. For example, in the reading list of Zhu Xiang, a famous poet, is included *Essays of Elia*; on the borrower's card attached to the book *A Biography of Charles Lamb* housed in Beijing Library can be seen the name of Li Guangtian, a famous prose writer. The writer Feng Yidai also wrote an article titled "Benefiting from Lamb" talking about his experience of learning from Lamb in prose writing. In contrast, Liang Yuchun not only read Lamb, but also translated and studied Lamb. The critical biography he wrote for Lamb has now become an important document in the field of Lamb translation and introduction in China. Liu Bingshan, a famous translator, said frankly in the preface to *The Selected Essays of Elia* that his translation of Lamb's essays was actually "a continuation of the translation cause of Lamb initiated by Liang Yuchun" (Liu, 1987, p. 16). It seems not exaggerating to say that Liang Yuchun started the field of translating British essays on a large scale in China.

To sum up, in the initial development stage of modern Chinese prose in the 1920s and 1930s, Liang Yuchun's translation of English prose, especially essays, possessed more important practical significance than his translation of other genres. It not only provides powerful foreign aid materials for the modernization of Chinese prose, but also lays a simple but solid foundation for the lasting dissemination and acceptance of English prose in China.

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