International Journal of Asian Social Science Research; Vol.3, No.6; 2026
E-ISSN: 3006-2179 P-ISSN: 3005-754X
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70267/ijassr.v3n6.110115
Published by: Zeus Press

Liu Bannong and *Foreign Folk Songs Translated*

Yaxin Cui†* and Zixu Guo†

School of History, Nanyang Normal University, Nanyang 473061, Henan Province, China

†These authors contributed equally to this work.

**Corresponding author: Yaxin Cui.*

Abstract

As a prominent standard-bearer of the New Culture Movement, Liu Bannong, while studying in France and living hand-to-mouth from day to day, compiled and translated Foreign Folk Songs Translated, which was formally published after his return to China. The volume collects more than eighty folk songs from over a dozen countries and regions, and also includes several Chinese folk songs that circulated overseas. In the early years of the Republic of China, when old and new currents of thought clashed violently, the book powerfully disseminated modern ideas such as democracy and science and contributed to the formation of a new Chinese national culture. Even today, this slim volume can still offer many insights into how contemporary China may critically absorb the outstanding achievements of world civilization.

Keywords

Liu Bannong, *Foreign Folk Songs Translated*, New Culture Movement

1. Introduction

Foreign Folk Songs Translated may be rather unfamiliar to most contemporary readers, but its translator, Liu Bannong, is a name everyone knows. Lu Xun called him a fighter in *New Youth*, describing him as lively, courageous, and someone who had "fought several hard battles" [1]. To this day, however, scholarly research devoted specifically to *Foreign Folk Songs Translated* remains rare, chiefly because the book was not printed until 1927 by the Beixin Book Company; by the time it appeared, the left-wing movement was gaining momentum in Beijing's cultural circles, and the many major historical events associated with it have drawn the gaze of researchers of social and cultural history.

When students of literature and musicology mention the book at all, they usually pass over it as an incidental offshoot of Liu Bannong's career of collecting and translating folk songs. Literary scholars, surveying folk ballads and theories of new poetry during the New Culture Movement and tracing how new poetry absorbed folk elements, tend to fold the book into that account[1]; scholars of foreign languages customarily place it within

[1] The main research outputs include: Xu Ting, "Liu Bannong: Pioneer in Building the Theory of New Poetry," *Journal of Wuxi Education College*, 1995, no. 3; Chen Yongchao, "Liu Bannong's Borrowing from and Study of Folk Songs and Popular Tunes," *Modern Chinese Literature Studies*, 2001, no. 1; Hu Huiyi, "On the May Fourth Intellectual Vanguard's Discovery of Folk Ballads — Centering on Hu Shi, Zhou Zuoren and Liu Bannong," *Journal of Southwest Nationalities University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2003, no. 3; Wang Guangdong, "Liu Bannong: The Folk's Linguistic Self-Awareness and Identification of Values — 'the Folk' and the Study of Modern Chinese Writers," *Arts Contention*, 2004, no. 1; Wang Guangdong & Yang Weijian, "The

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Liu's overall system of translating foreign works, examining the principles he followed in rendering foreign ballads[2]; and historians have yet to undertake a systematic, in-depth exploration of the book's background, its texts, and its dissemination and influence in a particular historical moment.

2. The Publishing Context of *Foreign Folk Songs Translated*

With the founding of the Republic, the vestiges of despotism at home had not died out, while foreign aggression grew ever more urgent day by day. In intellectual circles, the winds of conservatism arose in close attachment to autocratic rule, and after the First World War anti-scientific currents gradually spread within the country. It was at such a moment that the New Culture Movement — bent on awakening the hearts of the people through enlightenment and washing away age-old abuses — quietly rose, and Liu Bannong's *Foreign Folk Songs Translated* was one spray in the waves of that movement.

In the early twentieth century, the Western powers grew increasingly eager to turn China into a source of raw materials and a dumping ground. Under imperialist competition, the powers competed to win over the Beijing government, with the result that treaties surrendering sovereignty followed one after another [2, 3]. During Yuan Shikai's rule, China signed the Twenty-One Demands and the treaties of 1915, and the nation's rights had already been drained to a grave extent; when Duan Qirui came to power there followed the Nishihara Loans, and Japanese imperialism still further expanded its writ in China. As rivalries among the powers intensified, China was reduced altogether to an arena where various international forces wrestled with one another [4].

Although the Revolution of 1911 overthrew the imperial system, it failed to establish a stable order. Regional warlordism sprang up everywhere; Yuan Shikai's proclamation of himself emperor and Zhang Xun's restoration followed one after another, the Beiyang military clique split into factions, and China became a battlefield for competing armed forces. Accompanying this despotism was a reactionary current of revivalism: in 1912 the Confucianism Society was founded in Shanghai, openly advocating reverence for Confucius and the restoration of sacrifices [5]. After the World War, anti-scientific voices likewise spread in academic circles [6] — a typical emblem of intellectual conservatism of the early Republic.

Under such turbulent conditions, most of the populace remained cold to the peril facing the nation. Chen Duxiu pointed out: “The common people do not reject the republican system, yet deep within them the old habits of the imperial order are firmly planted... Though their mouths say they do not oppose the republic, their heads are in fact stuffed with the old ideas of the imperial era...” [8]. The young Mao Zedong likewise observed: “China is nominally a republic, but in substance a despotism... This is the consequence of there being no shadow of democracy in the hearts of the masses” [9]. Liu Bannong had an equally intimate sense of the numbness of the people: “Call it old, yet a sixty-year-old grandfather plays poker. Call it new, yet a twenty-year-old youth hunches and stoops...” He therefore judged, in the preface to Foreign Folk Songs Translated, that his own day was an age when one “sang dirges in place of weeping” [10, p. 66].

To break the shackles upon thought and carry forward democracy and science, people of the time widely held that saving the nation must begin with enlightening its intellect — that one must proceed on the level of thought and culture to forge a new culture fitted to the modern nation. Chen Duxiu proclaimed: “If we sincerely wish to consolidate the republican form of government, we must completely wash away, clean and clear, that crew of old ideas — ethics, literature and the like — that oppose the republic” [11]. Mao Zedong also argued that the literature of nobles, the classics, and deformity should be transformed into the literature of common people, modern literature, and literature with life [12], so as to awaken the consciousness of the masses. When Liu Bannong translated La Dame aux Camélias, he expressed the hope “that one or two people in our country might come to appreciate the art of this play” [10, p. 58].

Diversified Expression of Folk Aesthetics — A Consideration of the Relationship between Twentieth-Century Chinese Writers and Folk Culture,” *Comment on Contemporary Writers*, 2006, no. 4; Zhang Taizhou, “On Ballads as a Resource for New Poetry's Self-Construction: Lineage, Form and Dilemmas,” *Literary Criticism*, 2010, no. 5; Liu Jilin, “Folk Ballads and the Modernist Construction of May Fourth New Poetry,” *Journal of Xiamen University (Arts and Social Sciences)*, 2017, no. 5.

[2] The main research outputs include: Xue Fan, “The Course of Translating Songs,” *Music in China*, 2001, no. 3; Xu Xiaoying, “An Overview of Liu Bannong's Achievements in the Translation of Foreign Literature,” *Lantai World*, 2011, no. 29; Wang Dongfeng & Zhao Gu, “The Entanglement of Poetic Form: Liu Bannong's Three Transitions in Poetry Translation,” *Foreign Language Education*, 2019, no. 2.

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This same resolve was also the purpose behind his translation and introduction of foreign folk songs. In 1920 Liu set off to study in Britain and France; besides devoting himself to phonetics, he kept watch year after year over the literature of European and American folk song. In the preface to Foreign Folk Songs Translated he wrote: “When I was abroad, the books about folk songs I collected over five or six years were by no means few, and whenever I saw one I thought good, I would translate a chapter or two out of it” [10, p. 66].

3. The Main Content of *Foreign Folk Songs Translated*

During the New Culture Movement, democracy and science were the resounding slogans of the day. People called them “Mr. Democracy” and “Mr. Science.” Chen Duxiu once said: “To uphold Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science, one cannot but oppose the old ethics, old politics, old art, old religion, and the old literature” [13]. As part of the New Culture Movement, the present book both broke free of the traditional bondage of “literature as the vehicle of the Way” and took the liberation of individuality as its mark, casting sharp criticism on the old morality and the old ethics.

Liu Bannong's closeness to folk song came from his childhood steeped in the waterlands and farmland: “Netting fish and scooping softshell turtles, on the isles in the river... in a cloth gown and straw sandals, riding the water buffalo backwards — this was the most delightful life of my boyhood” [14]. Having grown up familiar with rustic songs, he never forgot the folk tunes of his earliest singing: “Thirty years old — how fast they come! The song I sang at three, I love to this day...” [15]. Yet more than personal feeling, the maladies of the age turned his gaze toward the songs of the people. The traditional literati world's contempt for popular genres had its root in a lack of the scientific spirit; this was the result of the underdevelopment of scientific thought [16]. Liu Bannong held that on the literary scene this temper showed itself in people swallowing the words of Confucius and Mencius whole, undigested, and piling them up on paper [10, p. 152]. In view of this, he turned his scholarly vision toward the letters of the common people, so long ignored.

In 1918 Liu Bannong took the lead in pressing Peking University to launch a nationwide collection of modern ballads, opened a column in the Peking University Daily to publish fine folk songs, and in the same year compiled the Boat Songs of Jiangyin. He hoped thereafter to draw nourishment from such popular literary forms as the Airs of the States, the Music Bureau, dialect, and the drama, giving full play to the resources of popular discourse in the building of new poetry [17]. and thus, in Foreign Folk Songs Translated, kings, marquises, generals and ministers fell silent, while the voices of ordinary people from France, Persia, Nepal, Central Asia and other lands rang out high.

The people of the West Indies eased the toil of the busy farming season with song and dance: “Lift up your basket and dance! Set down your basket and dance! Our fruit is already laid out, and now we may dance” [19, p. 128]. In the countryside of Alsace a father murmured gently to his child: “My golden treasure, close your eyes now, and sleep, sleep, my little darling, go to sleep” [19, p. 44]. French folk voices whispered in everyday life: “If you want salt, you must put in salt... The wisest friend is the one who goes least mad” [19, pp. 6-10]. An English sailor charged his wife at parting: “Don't let any scoundrel take my place, and no matter what hardships you pass through, you should be loyal and true to me” [19, p. 47].

Moreover, in compiling and translating Foreign Folk Songs Translated, Liu Bannong had his own calculations about enlightening the people. He believed that, facing old ideas and old ethics, one must summon the most tenacious will to smash this social psychology... otherwise society could assuredly not progress and culture could assuredly not flourish [20]. It was in this context that Liu turned to folk songs as a vehicle for enlightenment. In Foreign Folk Songs Translated, Liu Bannong used these songs to write plainly of the longing of young men and women for sincere love and free courtship and marriage, proclaiming anti-traditional, anti-ritualist ideas.

“Will You Buy a Hat, My Daughter?” portrays, through an everyday scene of idle talk between mother and daughter, how the mother first probes her daughter's mood with hairpins and hat-trims, only to be gently refused each time; only when marriage is mentioned does the girl lay bare the knot in her heart: “I want it, I want it, I want it — mother, my darling mother, what I want is precisely the illness I am suffering from!” [19, p. 2] — delicately rendering the first trembling of a young girl's awakening feelings. “John Hinnau,” written in somber tones, tells of a steadfast love that keeps faith through life and death [19, p. 43]. Here shines all the fidelity and purity of love among the common folk.

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4. The Influence of *Foreign Folk Songs Translated*

As an important component of the New Culture Movement, *Foreign Folk Songs Translated* took upon itself the mission of its times: to criticize the old ethics and spread new ideas. Western folk songs, largely the utterances of farmers and artisans, are linguistically far removed from the polite literary tradition and served to expose and shake the rigid order of traditional letters; the modern ideas implicit in the ballads likewise dealt a forceful blow to the inherited ethics; at the same time, the book also included Chinese folk songs circulating overseas, further displaying, within the mutual illumination of Chinese and foreign literatures, an open and magnanimous cultural ideal.

The intellectual enlightenment of the New Culture Movement urgently needed the mediation of folk literature. Hu Shi held: "The literary revolution must of course begin with folk literature — this goes without saying. But it cannot be done without passing through a great battle" [22]. Liu Bannong went further still, treating folk ballads as an important form for counteracting the old literature. Liu Bannong went further still, treating folk ballads as an important form for counteracting the old literature. The New Culture Movement thus served to overturn the monopoly of the classical language. Within this historical process, the study of folk ballads developed swiftly. Liu Bannong believed that in these eight or nine years the field had already won for itself a place among the sciences and had made the general public take notice of it, no longer despising it as before — and that could count as a matter to be truly glad of [10, p. 59]. Foreign Folk Songs Translated echoed his work of collecting and editing ballads at the time, and together the two flowed into the current of the age — criticizing the old learning and building a new national culture.

Second, the book vigorously promoted the emancipation of mind in the society of the early Republic. Although the Revolution of 1911 achieved a change of regime, it could not thoroughly clear away the accumulated abuses of society or the shackles upon the spirit. The fixed notions long sedimented in traditional society — loyalty and dependence upon the sovereign, esteeming righteousness while scorning profit, belief in ghosts and spirits — ran deep and stubborn, continuously obstructing social progress. Chen Duxiu observed that the revolutions had all been "tiger-headed and snake-tailed," unable to wash away the old filth [24]. The New Culture Movement was therefore the necessary spiritual remedial lesson after the Revolution of 1911, and one of its chief tasks was precisely to burst the bonds of the old ethics and achieve a rediscovery of the "human being" [25]. Because folk songs stand close to the lives of the people, they can do good to the human heart: they move people profoundly and transform customs [26]. The songs Liu chose foreground vivid individual consciousness and worldly human feeling; he gathered in particular a cluster of foreign love songs — "If You Would Not," "From This Tree," "A Person Certainly Cannot Tell," "The Youngsters," "Like Water Flowing in the River," "I Have Seen Your Face," "O, Leila," "O! You Have Drunk Some Wine," and "Maiden, Fair Maiden" — using sincere, pure writing of love to batter the ossified old ethics, openly calling for the full unfolding of human nature and the liberation of the individual.

In addition, Foreign Folk Songs Translated set itself to spread an open cultural outlook. Geng Yunzhi considered this the most important inner driving force of the New Culture Movement, and one of the basic goals this open conception of culture pursued was to establish a close relationship between Chinese culture and the cultures of the world [27]. To break the incurable habit of cultural closure, scholars of the early Republic sought in many ways, and among this company of pioneers, Liu Bannong had begun earlier to translate and introduce the literature and arts beyond China's borders, and ranged more widely still, touching works of Britain, America, France, India and Korea, and embracing in genre the short story, the fable and the folk tale; his translations Cat the Sleuth, An English Envoy at the Qianlong Court and La Dame aux Camélias came out one after another. Of himself he wrote in Foreign Folk Songs Translated: "Since I am one who loves ballads, naturally I cannot love only those of my own country — sometimes I must love those abroad as well" [10,66]. Casting aside the parochial attitudes of blind xenophobia on the one hand or abject worship of everything foreign on the other, the book spread an open conception of culture.

5. Conclusion

The New Culture Movement of the Republican era raised as the two great banners of its cultural revolution the opposition to the old morality in favor of a new, and the opposition to the old literature in favor of a new, and thereby rendered signal service [29]; Liu Bannong's Foreign Folk Songs Translated was an important fruit of that cultural revolution. With his heart set upon family and country, Liu Bannong had perceived from the

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very beginning of the literary revolution the literary value and social function of folk ballads, and during his years abroad devoted himself to translating foreign folk songs, contributing his strength to the construction of a new culture for the Chinese nation. Though brief in compass, the book is a link in the current of the times that cannot be overlooked.

Looking back over the modern era, Foreign Folk Songs Translated carried the May Fourth intellectuals' aspiration to enlighten the people and renew literature and education. It broke the rigid paradigm of traditional literary forms while criticizing the shackles of the old ethics and spreading modern ideas such as democracy and science, providing significant support for the emancipation of the mind in modern China. As contemporary China advances cultural confidence and mutual learning among civilizations, we should draw upon and absorb every outstanding achievement of human civilization, meeting cultural change with an open posture.

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Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

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