
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Legend of Christina Rossetti's "Song" in China

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| ABSTRACT

"Song: When I am Dead, My Dearest", a poem by the 19th-century British poetess Christina Rossetti, has been translated into more than one Chinese version and cherished by Chinese admirers since the beginning of the 20th century, among which modern poet Xu Zhimo's translation is most well-known. Xu's translation was later set to a song by the Taiwanese singer Luo Dayou and was popularly sung, even by the leading actress in TV series. The translations of the "Song" have also been anthologized into textbooks in colleges, middle schools, and primary schools and so have been widely read by Chinese students. The "Song" is now by no means an unfamiliar poem to Chinese literature lovers, music fans, TV audiences, and students; rather, it has created a legend of reception of foreign poems in China.

| KEYWORDS

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1. Introduction

In the history of the Chinese translation of foreign poems, there have been many examples that a small foreign poem was translated into Chinese, loved by many literati and ordinary readers, and even included in textbooks in colleges, middle schools, and primary schools. However, it is rare that a small English poem is translated by a well-known Chinese modern poet, composed by singers into songs and widely sung by people, and entered into popular TV series, so it could be more widely popularized. This little poem is "Song: When I am Dead, My Dearest," written by the 19th-century British poetess Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894). Rossetti wrote more than one poem entitled "Song", but it was this one that made her widely known in China.

1.1 The Poetess Christina Rossetti

Christina Georgina Rossetti was born in London, England, on December 5, 1830. In the 19th century, she was a well-known female poet in London, England. Religion is the main content of her life and thoughts. For example, British novelist Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) once stated, "It was religion, of course. Even when she was quite a girl, her lifelong absorption in the relation of the soul with God had taken possession of her." (Woolf, 1980, p. 239). Her life was greatly affected by religious issues, and her love was even delayed consequently. Because of her religious beliefs, she successively dismissed her love relationship with James Collinson (1825-1881) and Charles Cayley (1823-1883). It was said that she stopped going to theaters after she was 18 years old. She liked to play chess but then quit. She believes that the joys of the world are all phantoms, and the world of free paradise is the place that humans should yearn for. Perhaps because of the repression and anxiety brought about by religious beliefs, she, who is short, loses temper and likes to wear black, looks much older than her actual age. After someone saw her photo in 1863, the response was, "I can't believe that this cold-faced, old-faced woman is Christina, who is only 33 years old" (Ni, 2003, p. 48). Her thought of being controlled by religion is reflected in her poems and becomes the motif of her poems. When she was alive, her poetry did not sell well. It is said that "Her annual income from her poetry was for many years about ten pounds." (Woolf, 1980, p. 241). In her later years, she lived with her mother and two religious aunts and was financially struggling, and mainly depended on her work royalties of about 40 pounds a year to make ends meet. Her "Goblin Market" is her most famous poem, which is a long poem in

her collection, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*(1862). Many of her poems are full of lyrical meaning, with melancholy in plain words, delicate but with touching power, and a strong sense of rhythm, so they are very popular with readers. In China, the two poems considered to be her lyrical masterpieces are the short poems "Song: When I am Dead" and "Remember"(Feibai, 1989, p. 661), of which "Remember" is a sonnet.

Regarding her poetic achievements, although some people thought that she was far inferior to Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), she was not unpopular. Poet and critic Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) once read her poems and said: "I have always thought that nothing more glorious in poetry has ever been written."(Woolf, 1980, p. 241) The critic Walter Raleigh (1861-1922) personally believed that she was the best poet living at the time. He himself admitted that after reading Christina Rossetti's poem, "The only thing that Christina makes me want to do, is cry, not lecture."(Woolf, 1980, p. 242) The stream-of-consciousness novelist Virginia Woolf believes that this poetess is "an instinctive poet"(Woolf, 1980, p. 242), while Mr. Feibai(1929-), a well-known Chinese poet and translator, believes that Christina Rossetti can be ranked first among English poetesses, saying that her singing sometimes like a "robin", sometimes like a "nightingale"(Feibai, 1985, p. 204). Christina Rossetti is also loved by Chinese readers. For example, Wu Mi (1894-1978), a master of Chinese culture, said that there were three Western poets he admired, namely Byron, Arnold, and Christina Rossetti, among which Christina Rossetti belongs to the "pure, sensitive and wise" but also "sentimental" in character. She believes in religion in her thinking and has always yearned for the realm of "the truth", "the perfect good," and "the most beautiful" throughout her life (Wu, 1935, "Foreword"). He also believed that Christina Rossetti's poems surpassed another famous British poetess, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), saying that judged on the character of human nature and the true value of poetry, Rossetti is "really above Mrs. Browning"(Wu, 2009, pp. 10-18). He once translated the two poems "A Birthday" and "Remember" by Christina Rossetti into Chinese (Lü, 1992, pp. 86,96). Among them, the translation of "Remember" was published in the journal of *Xueheng* (《学衡》) in the 49th issue of January 1926. Yang Changling, Chen Quan(1903-1969), He Lin(1902-1992), and Zhang Yinlin (1905-1942) were co-translators of this poem. Wu Mi was so enamored with Rossetti's poems that he later claimed that his translation of the two Rossetti poems was one of his own best works (Wu, 1935, "Preface", p.6). Today, Christina Rossetti is considered an important 19th-century British poet who is as famous as Mrs. Browning.

2. Chinese Translation of "Song" in China

At present, a large number of academic papers on Christina Rossetti have been published in China. The author of this paper searched for "Rossetti" in the Chinese Master's and Doctoral Dissertations Database and found 27 relevant dissertations, and searched "Rossetti" in CNKI Database and found more than 1666 related papers. Many of Rossetti's poems have now been translated into Chinese; the most famous of which is "Song: When I am Dead, My Dearest" (hereafter referred to as "Song").

In the 1930s, "Song" had several Chinese translations. The year 1930 was the 100th anniversary of Rossetti's birth and the most important year for the translation and introduction of Rossetti in China. The journal *Truth Beauty and Good* (《真美善》), in October 1930, Vol. 6, No. 6, first published the translation of Rossetti's poem "Song" with the title "When I am Dead" (《当我死了》), translated by Wang Jiayu (Wang, 1930, pp. 1417-1418). Subsequently, the journal *Modern Literature* launched the "World Writer Memorial" (Volume 1, Issue 6 on December 16, 1930) to commemorate Christina Rossetti, which published "The Centennial Commemoration of Female Poet Rossetti" written by Yuan Jiahua (1903-1980), as well as Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" translated by Yuan Jiahua, and other 7 poems of Christina Rossetti translated by Yuan Jiahua and Zhao Jingshen(1902-1985), within which Rossetti's "Song" is included, but the translator Zhao Jingshen translated the title into "After Death" (《死后》)(Zhao, 1930, p. 88). In the same year, *Ta Kung Pao-Literature Supplement* published a special edition commemorating the 100th anniversary of Christina Rossetti's birth in the 154th issue on December 22, 1930. It published two poems by Christina Rossetti translated by Wu Mi(1894-1978), using the archaic poetic form, entitled "A Decisive Farewell" (《古决绝辞》) and "May My Lord Remember Me"(《愿君长忆我》) respectively, and Luo Jialun's(1897-1969) translation of Christina Rossetti's "Song" with the title "When I am Dead" (《当我死了》) which is in modern Chinese. Since then, Christina Rossetti's "Song" (with the translated title "When I am Dead" [《当我死了》]) was also included in the book *Selected Translation of Modern British Poetry* published in 1934 by the compiler Li Weijian(1907-1981) (Li, 1934, pp. 94-95).

The renowned Chinese scholar Xu Yuanchong (1921-2021) has also translated "Song", although he only translated the first stanza. It can be seen in his book, *Nine Songs by an Alumnus of National Southwest Associated University*, which he translated on January 3, 1940. In the book, after analysis of the article "Mortality and Immortality" written by British writer Thomas Brown (1605-1682) and his expression of a view on life, Xu Yuanchong stated that "Brown has a negative view, far less cheerful than that of the poet Christina Rossetti"(Xu, 2008, p.176), and at the same time translated the first stanza of Christina Rossetti's poem to show as proof:

在我死后，最亲爱的，
请不要为我唱哀歌；
也别在墓地种玫瑰，
或者是成荫的松柏；

铺一片如茵的绿草，
常受到雨露的洗礼；
你愿意记得我也好，
不愿意，就把我忘记。
(Xu, 2008, p. 176)

The earlier translation is from Xu Zhimo (1897-1931), one of the most popular modern poets in China. Most readers know that the modern poet Xu Zhimo writes poems well, but he is also good at translating poems, and some of them have become classic translations. For example, his translation of Christina Rossetti's "Song" is one of them. When Xu Zhimo was in his 20s, he took an academic tour between 1920 and 1921 to the University of Cambridge, the University of London, and other institutions of higher learning in the United Kingdom. He wandered around the universities, studied English poetry, and became addicted to the excellent works of British poets. Later, he translated some English poems into Chinese, one of which was Christina Rossetti's "Song". In early June 1928, Xu Zhimo translated "Song", and soon he published the translation in the *Crescent* monthly magazine No. 4; on June 10, 1928, the translator was named "Zhimo"(Xu, 1928, p.133). Three years later, in August 1931, Xu Zhimo's personal collection of poems, *Tiger Collection*, was published by Shanghai Crescent Bookstore, and he also included the translation of this poem in this poetry collection.

There are also some contemporary translators who have translated the "Song", among which the relatively famous ones are Li Jiye (1904-1997), Zhou Yinai (1915-1996), Shi Yingzhou (1919-2013), Fang Ping (1921-2008), Lü Qianfei (1924-1987), Feibai (1929-), Liu Yiqing (1941-), Gu Zixin (1939-), Yu Sumei (1940-2019), etc. The translations of these translators are more or less selected into various poetry and literary anthologies, such as two anthologies of poems published in 1989: *Dictionary of Appreciation of Chinese and Foreign Love Poems* and *Sea of Poetry*, and also others like *Western Love Poems Appreciation Collection*(1990), *The Golden Treasury of World Love Poems*(1992), and such important and widely known anthologies as *The Golden Treasury of Appreciation of World Famous Poems*(1991) and *The Treasury of World Poetry*(1994). Therefore, some of the translations have had a wide range of impacts on readers. According to the information available to the author of this paper, Xu Zhimo's translation is the most frequently anthologized, followed by Fang Ping's and Feibai's translation, which shows the influence of the three translators' translations is greater. So far, there have been about 20 Chinese translations of "Song" published in magazines, newspapers, and other paper media, and more than 20 Chinese translations translated by netizens and posted on the Internet.

3. The Spread and Influence of Chinese translation of "Song" in China

The most well-known translation of "Song" is undoubtedly the translation by Xu Zhimo. Since its appearance, it has been highly praised and reprinted, and included in various anthologies, which has had a great influence. The following is the original text and Xu Zhimo's translation:

歌	Song
我死了的时候，亲爱的， 别为我唱悲伤的歌； 我坟上不必安插蔷薇， 也无须浓荫的柏树； 让盖着我的青青的草， 零着雨，也沾着露珠； 假如你愿意，请记着我， 要是你甘心，忘了我。	When I am dead, my dearest, Sing no sad songs for me; Plant thou no roses at my head, Nor shady cypress tree: Be the green grass above me With showers and dewdrops wet; And if thou wilt, remember, And if thou wilt, forget.
我再不见地面的青荫， 觉不到雨露的甜蜜； 再听不见夜莺的歌喉， 在黑夜中倾吐悲啼； 在悠久的昏暮中迷惘， 阳光不升起，也不消翳； 我也许，也许我记得你， 我也许，我也许忘记。 (Xu, 1931, pp. 83-84)	I shall not see the shadows, I shall not feel the rain; I shall not hear the nightingale Sing on, as if in pain; And dreaming through the twilight That doth not rise nor set, Haply I may remember, And haply may forget. (Rossetti, 2001, p. 52)

The speaker in the poem is not nostalgic for the love of the present world, nor is she afraid of the unknown afterlife. This kind of superficial calmness is similar to the mentality reflected in the lines of "What is more to be said about the dead? Let this body be consigned to the hillside" (Fang, 1984, p. 175) in the poem of Tao Yuanming (365 or 376-427), a famous poet of Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420). Some readers lament the poet's open-mindedness and think that the poet can tell such a sad story in such an elegant and beautiful way, in which there is no "sorrow and resentment", only the "warmness of love" and "joy" in the tranquility (Ni, 2003, pp. 45-46); and also praise the poet's superb poetic art, and admire her amazing ability to distill the palpating passions such as fear, piety, and love into "a pure and peaceful sentiment", and blend it into the lightness and softness of beautiful rhyme and rhythm (Ni, 2003, pp. 46). Xu Zhimo's translation has been widely praised by readers. In 1934, the poet Mu Mutian (1900-1971), in his article "On Xu Zhimo: His Thoughts and Art," pointed out that Xu Zhimo was talented in writing poems, and translation was his self-representation, and therefore is as good as his writing poems: "All Xu Zhimo's translation reflects his own subjectivity. In other words, his translation is also his self-representation." (Mu, 1985, p. 305). Scholar Wu Di (1954-) believes that Xu Zhimo's translation of "Song" "shows both the charm of the original poem, but also the use of the theory of new metrical poetry with rigorous form, lingering rhythm, concise and smooth language, and beautiful melody." (Wu, 2008, p. 76). Scholar and translator Wang Hongyin (1953-2019) considered Xu Zhimo's translation to be an "outstanding example of literary translation" because a good literary translation should be able to take into account as much as possible the use of ingenious literary language, potential literary comparison dimensions, and implicit value of literary criticism, and Xu Zhimo's translation "just happens to have the three." and he believed that Xu Zhimo's translation of "Song" is "a poet's translation of poetry, the language is simple, without pretentiousness" (Wang, 2009, p. 29).

Xu Zhimo himself was undoubtedly obsessed with the attitude of seemingly staying but actually leaving, expressed in the poem, especially in the last two lines of the first stanza: "And if thou wilt, remember, And if thou wilt, forget." and that he re-used it in his own poem "Occasionally": "I am a cloud in the sky, / Occasionally projected on your heart of wave-- / Whether you remember it, / You'd better forget it" (Xu, 1994, p. 168).

Xu Zhimo would not have imagined that his poem "Occasionally", which is related to Rossetti's "Song", was later composed into a song, which inspired the famous writer Wang Meng (1934-), who was once Minister of China Ministry of Culture, to write the novel "It's Difficult to Meet Each Other" which won the second National Novella Award (1981-1982). According to Wang Meng's recollection, when he wrote "It's Difficult to Meet Each Other," he hummed songs of the 1940s and 1950s, imaginatively together with Lan Peiyu and Weng Shihan, the two protagonists of the novel, trying to find inspiration from the songs, including the one composed according to Xu Zhimo's poem "Occasionally". He had almost forgotten about this piece of "Occasionally", but maybe he thought of it because of writing "It's Difficult to Meet Each Other," or maybe it was because he once "accidentally heard a sentence or two" of "Occasionally" when he participated in "China Weekend" in the autumn of 1980 at the University of Iowa in the United States, which triggered his intention to write "It's Difficult to Meet Each Other," and then further reminded him of lyric and melody of the song "Occasionally" which he thought was not very pleasant to listen to (Wang, 1993, p. 407). Wang Meng may not know that the "Occasionally," which had a positive impact on his writing of "It's Difficult to Meet Each Other," was also a result of influence by a poem written by a foreign poetess.

It was undoubtedly the Taiwanese singer Luo Dayou (1954 -) who contributed the most to the spread of the poem "Song" in China. In 1974, when Luo Dayou was a sophomore in the Department of Medicine of Taiwan's private China Medical College, he was invited to write a theme song for the movie "Shining Days", but there were no suitable lyrics. Therefore he used the translation of "Song" translated by Xu Zhimo as the lyrics and made only a few modifications to the translation. When regarding the situation at that time, a person familiar with the matter said: "After the melody emerged, the author had been unable to think of suitable lyrics until he read Xu Zhimo's translation of 'Song' by accident and found it to be quite useful, and so took it as the lyrics of the song" (Ma, 2000, p. 54). This is Luo Dayou's first composition, which was sung by Liu Wenzheng (1952-) in the movie "Shining Days" and soon became widely known, and was subsequently sung by such singers as Zhang Aijia (1953-), Sun Yue (1930-) and Lin Huiping (1963-), which touched the hearts of more listeners. Singer Zhang Aijia's album "Haply" (1980) also included Luo Dayou's "Song". Luo Dayou's "Shining Days," released in 1989, is an album of love songs, which also includes this song, and he also performed the unplugged version of this song in 1995.

Since its appearance, Luo Dayou's "Song" has been universally loved by the Chinese audience and has been widely sung, which has had a lasting and huge impact. Some people commented on Luo Dayou's "Song", thinking that the tone of the song he composed was warm, and coupled with Luo Dayou's emotional voice; it seemed to depict a warm and grainy picture that made the audience feel peaceful and sweet, and felt that "sorrow is gone," and death turned out to be "such a passionate and beautiful thing." (Qinka, 2001, p. 78) Someone wrote an article in a newspaper to comment on Luo Dayou's singing skills, thinking that Luo Dayou's strong nasal sound and dumb low voice while singing was a perfect match with the connotation expressed in the lyrics, which is Xu Zhimo's translation of Christina Rossetti's poem, that the passing of years indicated in the lyrics was displayed through

his singing style of turning back and forth with refrains, that when the audience listened, Christina Rossetti's melancholy face seemed to appear in audience's mind, which is indescribable, and all of this was mainly due to Luo Dayou's brush-like voice, which wiped waves of emotion of the poem to become clearly and vividly (Wang, 2004). Some fans compared the original Rossetti's poem, Xuzhimo's translation, and Luo Dayou's song and felt that they preferred the way of expression in Luo Dayou's song. They thought that the composition of the music, like the original poem and the translation, was permeated with a kind of blandness, which was the most real experience of death. Therefore, they "prefer the composer's version"(The Look of You, 2006). As for the two versions sung by Luo Dayou, some people commented that the 1989 version was characterized by rich layers and profound artistic conception, reflecting a free and easy attitude towards life and death; by contrast, the unplugged version of 1995 contained more of people's feelings of vicissitudes in their middle age, which inevitably reflected an "infinite sadness" in the lowly singing tune (Xiaofei, 2000, p. 240). Fans also expressed their feelings about Luo Dayou's "Song" in brief. Someone said, "I love 'Song' " and would use it to practice piano(Like Come and Go, 2011); some people said: "When I think of this song in the dark, the stars open their eyes"(Qiao, 2000, p. 326). It was also said that the feeling of "Song" was "sad and beautiful" rather than just sad (Xiaoxuan_021, 2012). Others felt that it was "extremely desolate", which conveyed "a sense of wantlessness"(Enjoy, 2000, p. 192). There were also fans who shared videos of their guitar playing "Song" on the Internet(Climbing→Snail, 2012).

Similar to Rossetti's 'Song' that inspired Xu Zhimo's "Occasionally" and "Occasionally" inspired Wang Meng's "It's Difficult to Meet Each Other," Luo Dayou's "Song" also inspired audiences' associations. After listening to Luo Dayou's "Song", some fans think of the poem "Haply: A Funeral Song" written by the patriotic poet Wen Yiduo (1899-1946) to his deceased daughter, thinking that Luo Dayou's "Song" can be regarded as the "best interpretation" of this poem (Shanzi, 2010). The following is Wen Yiduo's poem and its translation:

也许——葬歌	Haply: A Funeral Song
也许你真是哭得太累，	Haply, you are really too tiredly crying
也许，也许你要睡一睡，	Haply, haply you should get some sleeping
那么叫夜鹰不要咳嗽，	Then tell Nighthawk not to cough
蛙不要号，蝙蝠不要飞，	No frogs croak, no bats flying
.....
(Zhang, 2003, pp. 175-176)	(Translated by the author of this paper)

According to a survey and statistics on the Douban website(Douban.com), there are more than 10 of Luo Dayou's songs, such as "Shining Days", "What You Look Like", "Red Dust Billowing", "Wild Lily Has Its Spring", "Time Story", etc. which have made netizens cry after listening, and "Song" is also among them (Luo Dayou Group, 2010). It can be seen that this "Song" has a wide range of influence. As scholar Li Liwei has pointed out, this song, which uses Xu Zhimo's translation of Rossetti's poems as lyrics, has been most familiar to Chinese people after the 1970s(Li, 2004, p. 167).

Moreover, Luo Dayou's beautiful "Song" also appeared in the hit TV series and was heard again by the majority of TV audiences. At the end of episode 149 of the Taiwanese TV series "Unforgettable Renewal • Part Two", the protagonist Jianzhi listened on his mobile phone to a song sent by his lover Tingting before her death. It was Luo Dayou's "Song" which made him cry like rain and hence grabbed the hearts of millions of audiences. CCTV on mainland China broadcast the show in 2009, and it became popular in Mainland China. After the 149th episode was broadcast, many viewers discussed the origin of the "Song" online, and netizens responded and discussed it one after another. CCTV continued to broadcast "Unforgettable Renewal" in the following years, and certainly, Luo Dayou's "Song" continued to stir millions of audiences' hearts

The translation of "Song" has also been included in textbooks or recommended extracurricular readings in colleges, middle schools, and primary schools and is familiar to the majority of Chinese students. For example, *College English Recitation Essays: Band Four Volume* contains Xu Zhimo's translation(Li, 1999, p. 27); *Chinese Textbook of New Curriculum Standard • Primary School Volume* published by East China Normal University Press includes Feibai's translation of Christina Rossetti's "Song" (Wang, 2009, pp. 109-110); *The Essence of English Reading: University Volume* edited by Yang Ziwu (Yang, 1998, p. 153) and *Extracurricular Reading Library for Middle School Students: Foreign Poetry Classics* edited by Qiu Yi (Qiu, 2000, p. 59) both included Feibai's translation of Christina Rossetti's "Song". The translation of "Song" also appeared in *100 English Recitation Essays for Junior High School: Junior High School Volume* (Xia, 2009, p. 179); and calligraphy lovers wrote "Song" as a copybook and included it in the published copybook, *English Copybook: Poems and Letters* (Li, 2002, p. 79). In this way, "Song" turned out to be a calligraphy template for others to copy. In addition, there are many posts, reposts, translations, and discussions of "Song" on the Internet. Xu Zhimo's translation is the most frequently copied and reposted, which can be found in Douban, Baidu Space, Baidu Post Bar, Tianya Community, and many foreign literature forums. Luo Dayou's "Song" is the one most discussed. The reposted translations

translated by other Chinese poetry lovers have both new styles and archaic styles. Netizens exchanged views on translation techniques, and the atmosphere was enthusiastic, which expanded the influence of “Song”.

It can be seen that since “Song” was translated into Chinese at the beginning of the 20th century, in the past 100 years, “Song” was first loved and recommended by scholars and literary lovers in China, and then with the emergence of popular translation by the renowned translator as well as popular music composition by famous singer, it has entered literary anthologies, school textbooks, music albums, and TV programs in the form of text, audio, and video, and thus spread widely in the land of China. Today, it is well known and loved by thousands of Chinese students, poetry lovers, fans, and TV viewers. This is an interesting and noticeable phenomenon that cannot be ignored in the history of the Chinese translation of foreign poetry. It is a legend of an English poem in China.

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ORCID iD (if any)

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