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Tagore's Localized Construction and Its Implications for Civilizational Dialogue: A Review of *Tagore and 20th-Century Chinese Literature*

Zhao Shuangyue

Abstract: Li Yuejin et al.'s *Tagore and 20th-Century Chinese Literature* is an academic monograph that systematically examines the reception history of Rabindranath Tagore in China. Grounded in rigorous archival research, this work delves into how Tagore and his writings have been translated, interpreted, and assimilated in China over the past century. The study reveals the dynamic evolution of Tagore's image in the Chinese context, demonstrating how shifting sociocultural milieus profoundly shaped the reception of foreign cultural figures across different historical periods. Particular attention is paid to the translation history of Tagore's works. The text analyzes transformations in translation strategies and their role in constructing his perceived identity, while extending this analysis to propose the academic framework of "Localized construction of foreign writers", a contribution that advances the discipline of comparative literature. Emphasizing Tagore's significance as a pioneer in cross-civilizational dialogue, the monograph synthesizes poetic insight with scholarly depth. It not only establishes a pivotal paradigm for Tagore studies but also furnishes theoretical insights and intellectual resources for research on transcultural exchange, literary dissemination, and mutual learning among civilizations.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore; Civilizational Dialogue; Medio-translatology; Localized Construction of Foreign Writers

Author Biography: Zhao Shuangyue, Master's candidate, College of Liberal Arts, Tianjin Normal University; Research Direction: Oriental Literature and Culture. E-mail: 943151255@qq.com.

标题: 泰戈尔本土化建构与文明对话启示: 评黎跃进等的新著《泰戈尔与 20 世纪中国文学》

摘要: 黎跃进等著《泰戈尔与 20 世纪中国文学》是一部系统研究泰戈尔在华接受史的学术著作。该书以详实的文献考据为基础, 深入探讨了泰戈尔及其作品在近百年间如何被中国译介、阐释和接受。研究揭示了泰戈尔形象在中国的动态演变过程, 展现了不同时期中国社会文化语境对异域文化接受的深刻影响。著作特别关注泰戈尔作品的翻译史, 分析了翻译策略变迁及其对形象塑造的作用, 并拓展出“异域作家本土化建构”的学术命题, 推动比较文学学科的发展。著作强调了泰戈尔作为文明对话先驱的意义, 其研究兼具诗性感悟与学术深度, 不仅为泰戈尔研究提供了重要范例, 也为跨文化交流、文学传播及文明互鉴提供了理论启示和思想资源。

关键词: 泰戈尔; 文明对话; 译介学; 异域作家本土化建构

作者简介: 赵双悦, 天津师范大学文学院硕士研究生, 研究方向: 东方文学与文化。电邮: 943151255@qq.com。

1. Introduction

The study of Eastern literature has long been a relatively marginalized discipline. Yet, some scholars have been diligently working in this field, adopting a macro perspective to transcend the limitations of national literature studies. They holistically examine the development and evolution patterns of Eastern literature and strive to construct a disciplinary system for Eastern literature with Chinese characteristics. Professor Li Yuejin is one such scholar. He places greater emphasis on evidence-based research grounded in solid textual criticism, using specific individuals and events as vehicles to explore the collision and integration of literature and culture. From the dimension of mutual learning among civilizations, he reflects on Eastern literature as something that develops dynamically through exchange.

Opening the hefty volume *Tagore and 20th-Century Chinese Literature* (Peking University Press, 2025) is like opening a window to the civilizational dialogues of the twentieth century. The book systematically traces the multidimensional and sustained reception and responses provoked in the Chinese context over nearly a century by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the Indian literary giant who was both a poet and a philosopher. It presents a detailed case study of cross-cultural dissemination and local reception, clearly demonstrating how a foreign writer and his ideas are translated, interpreted, constructed, and gradually integrated into the spiritual landscape of a specific culture.

2. Multi-dimensional Perspectives on Tagore's Image

Tagore was never confined to a single region. This work begins by placing him within the overall modern

world context for a macroscopic examination. This greatly broadens the reader's horizon of expectation, extending from the Indian subcontinent to the exchange and integration of Eastern and Western cultures; and elevating from China's reception of Tagore to reflections on the modern transformation of local traditional culture.

"The Orient is not a natural existence" (Edward Wadie Said, 2019, p.6). In the early 20th century, when globalization was nascent, this Indian poet-philosopher, with his unique Eastern perspective, pioneered a new paradigm for dialogue among civilizations at a time when Western centralism prevailed.

Winning the 1913 Nobel Prize for Literature for his self-translated *Gitanjali* signified Western recognition and acceptance of Eastern civilization. Furthermore, Tagore used Visva-Bharati University as a crucible for cultures, placing various Asian civilizational traditions on a platform of genuine equal dialogue. His vision of an Asian community transcended geographical boundaries, aiming at the essence of civilizational exchange: seeking harmony amidst differences and achieving renewal through dialogue. This wisdom of transcivilizational learning appears remarkably forward-looking today against the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The preface delicately depicts Tagore's visit to China in 1924. Upon setting foot on this land, the elder murmured, "I don't know why, but coming to China feels like returning to my native home" (Li Yuejin, 2025, p.1). These simple words convey a profound sense of kinship rooted in the shared bloodline of Eastern civilizations. Tagore regarded China as a model of "human warmth and spiritual belief" (Li Yuejin, 2025, p.3), an insight both unique and profound. Through intertextual analysis of a wealth of letters, speeches, and literary works, the author reveals how Tagore viewed China as a spiritual homeland and how this sentiment influenced his creative works and thinking. This multidimensional interpretation based on texts makes the historical figure vividly relatable.

The book longitudinally constructs three cognitive frameworks of "Tagore" that show deep insight. Based on over a century of translated texts domestically, and by clarifying the reception and interpretation of Tagore in different periods, the author acutely points out that the conservative and mystical Tagore of the early 20th century, the patriotic and nationalist Tagore of the 1950s-60s, and the Tagore as a successful practitioner of East-West cultural integration in the post-reform era together form a spectrum of Tagore's image in the Chinese view. This diachronic analysis reveals a key issue: our understanding of foreign cultures is a dynamic construction, deeply influenced by the local cultural context and the aesthetic trends of the time. This dialogue between history and the present also elevates the book beyond mere literary research, giving it a dimension of cultural strategic thinking.

3. Balancing Poetics and Scholarship

Academic research often emphasizes rigor and rationality, sometimes struggling to fully encompass the poetic qualities of its subject. However, *Tagore and 20th-Century Chinese Literature* achieves an organic unity of poetic sensibility and scholarly depth. The author analyzes the uniqueness of Tagore's poetic philosophy when examining his philosophical thought; when discussing Tagore's influence on Chinese writers,

the focus remains on the intrinsic texture of literary aesthetics. Tagore “maintained a dynamic creative passion throughout his life” (Zhang Yu, 2004, p.1). Professor Li Yuejin’s choice to study the Indian poet-philosopher Tagore perhaps stems precisely from the unique spiritual appeal found in Tagore’s poetry, the poetic wisdom flowing through his words possesses a beauty and emotion that transcends time and space.

This balance between the poetic and the academic stems from respect for the nature of the subject. As a poet-philosopher, the poetic dimension of Tagore’s thought necessitates a corresponding aesthetic sensitivity in its study. This book avoids letting academic frameworks constrain the subject’s essence, instead using scholarly analysis as a pathway to poetic understanding much like the spirit of Visva-Bharati University, where knowledge is transmitted not in closed classrooms but under the shade of trees where teachers and students sit together in conversation.

True understanding requires the synergy of rational analysis and perceptual appreciation. For instance, when dissecting Tagore’s concept of the “Religion of Man”, the work traces its roots in traditional Indian philosophy while also elucidating its practical significance through characters like Anandamoyi in his novel *Gora*. This multi-faceted analysis gives abstract concepts a concrete and vivid form of expression.

In the current context of increasing academic specialization, *Tagore and 20th-Century Chinese Literature* offers an enlightening path: rigorous scholarly inquiry should cherish the unique value of the poetic spirit. When delving into the study of a poet, a scholar’s analytical ability is needed, but so is the pure heart of a poet. It is this dual attention that has kept the reception of Tagore in China an open and rich space for interpretation, continuously providing new directions for thinking about cross-civilizational dialogue.

4. The Trajectory of Translation and Reception Over a Century

“Literary translation activity is an important pathway for the intercultural exchange and mutual learning of heterogeneous cultures.” (Li Yuejin, 2024, p.45). With a broad academic vision, the author systematically analyzes the century-long journey of translating and introducing Tagore’s works in China. The research focuses on the history of the translation and publication of Tagore’s works in China, clearly outlining its developmental trajectory: from sporadic translations and preliminary explorations in the early 20th century (such as Chen Duxiu’s first translation of selected passages from *Gitanjali* in 1915) to the systematic, large-scale translation practices state-led in the 1950s and 60s (e.g., the *Tagore’s Dramatic Works* published by China Drama Publishing House in 1958) and further to the comprehensive and diversified translation and dissemination efforts in the new period, particularly since the 21st century, which are more source-text-based and aspire to completeness (e.g., the 24-volume *Complete Works of Tagore* by Hebei Education Press in 2000, and the *Complete Collection of Tagore’s Works* by People’s Literature Publishing House in 2015). Despite remaining shortcomings, these efforts have significantly expanded the scope of translation.

The study of this history of translation and reception in *Tagore and 20th-Century Chinese Literature* is supported by solid textual research. Through systematic comparisons of periodical literature archives, translators’ manuscripts, and editions from different periods, coupled with quantitative analysis of dissemination data, it deepens the understanding of the reception process of Tagore’s works in China. This

establishes a referential framework of documents and methodologies for subsequent research.

Simultaneously, the “Tagore” in China is essentially a cultural symbol whose meaning has been reconstructed through translation. With the evolution of translation strategies and focus, progressing from early reliance on indirect translation via languages like English and Japanese towards later efforts to translate directly from the original Bengali; shifting from fragmented, selective translation concentrating on genres like poetry and drama to systematic collections covering all categories including poetry, novels, plays, and essays; and moving from an emphasis on the literary texts themselves to in-depth interpretation of his philosophical thoughts and cultural concepts, Tagore’s image has undergone a process of filtration through the local culture and active shaping by the receptive context. This recognition deconstructs the myth of translation seeking the “original flavor”, revealing the historically creative nature of translation and introduction activities. When Tagore’s poetry gains new aesthetic life within the Chinese linguistic context, its significance transcends mere linguistic transfer, standing as a quintessential practice of cross-cultural engagement.

5. The Academic Implications of “Localized Construction of Foreign Writers”

The “Tagore” in China has undergone three significant image reconstructions: from a defender of Eastern traditions, to a patriotic national poet, and further to a practitioner of cultural fusion. These three images reflect changes in the socio-cultural mindset of China. Beneath these surface-level changes operates an inherent rational mechanism of “localized construction of foreign writers”. The reception of any foreign writer is not a passive transplantation, but an active construction. In this process, factors such as the historical background, socio-political context, cultural needs, and aesthetic trends of the receiving side play crucial roles. As evidenced by the evolution of Tagore’s image in China, the “localization” of a foreign writer is often a dynamic and pluralistic process. This process also prompts readers to reflect on the issue of “authenticity” in cultural exchange. The differences revealed through dynamic changes are not simply “misreadings”, but rather the inevitable result of cultural exchange and “cultural filtering”. The core idea here is not to pursue a singular, absolute, pure definition or “original state”, but to recognize that cultural dissemination is inherently a process of creative transformation, where construction is always in the present continuous tense.

The academic proposition of “localized construction of foreign writers” was gradually developed from the case study of the “Chinese Tagore”. Reflecting on this typical case study, the theoretical framework constructed possesses universal methodological value. The study begins by placing its subject within the broader modern world context. Through a diachronic analyzation of the translation, interpretation, and evolution of a representative figure from a foreign culture within the local context, it reveals the dynamic construction undertaken by the receiving entity throughout history. For graduate students and scholars in related fields who have not yet formed an independent research methodology, undertaking similar projects (e.g., “Natsume Soseki and China”, “Lu Xun in Russia”) can directly draw upon its research model and analytical pathways. This model, on one hand, avoids simplistic comparisons with Western theories; on the other hand, through empirical historical analyzation, it reveals the symbiotic nature of “misreading” and “creative transformation” within the process of “cultural filtering”. This model not only provides a practical

entry point for research but also, through collective scholarly effort, contributes to the theoretical exploration of the “localized construction of foreign writers”, potentially promoting “Eastern Literature studies in China to become a more prominent discipline”. (Wang Xiangyuan, 2007, p.160).

6. Unfinished Topics and Reflections

The book concludes with a valuable appendix. This section, titled “A Basic Bibliography of Tagore Studies”, compiles core literature in Chinese and English (such as Zheng Zhenduo’s early translations and the 24-volume Complete Works published by Hebei Education Press), and also incorporates new achievements from the digital media era, providing a traceable and expandable coordinate system of documents for subsequent research. This systematic integration of academic resources highlights the work’s value as a reference tool and its consciousness of disciplinary construction.

Closing the book, its contents inevitably provoke extended reflections. In today’s world, where globalization and anti-globalization forces contend with increasing intensity, what new challenges does Tagore’s advocated ideal of civilizational dialogue face? Furthermore, can the theoretical framework of the “localized construction of foreign writers” be applied to non-literary fields (such as art dissemination or intellectual history studies), and if so, how? Moreover, the deep development of digital media has significantly reshaped the filtering mechanisms of cultural transmission; its specific manifestations and impact mechanisms require further investigation. Finally, the application of artificial intelligence (AI) technology in academic research presents both a potential methodological innovation and new challenges regarding academic ethics and knowledge production models. Although the book does not directly answer these subsequent questions, its insightful analyses provide inspiration for considering and exploring them.

Overall, *Tagore and 20th-Century Chinese Literature* provides the academic community with a research paradigm exemplified by the “Chinese Tagore”, laying an important foundation for subsequent related studies. It summarizes the academic proposition of the “localized construction of foreign writers”, promoting the development of comparative literature as a discipline and “expanding the research space of world literature” (Li Yuejin, 2024, p.40). Simultaneously, this work is imbued with deep respect and enthusiasm for Tagore, embodying the academic convictions of Professor Li Yuejin and his fellow contributors. For readers, the book contributes not merely knowledge of a specific history of cultural interaction, but also a profound intellectual resource concerning dialogue among civilizations. This substantial scholarly monograph can inspire contemporary readers to think deeply about relationships between different civilizations, to focus on cultural transmission, literary exchange, and mutual learning among civilizations, helping us find that key to transcending cultural barriers.

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ORCID

Zhao Shuangyue ^{ID} <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-9224-7346>

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