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**Wang Liang,  
Beijing Culture and Language University,  
BeiJing, China  
Xu Biying,  
Beijing WeMedia Group, BeiJing China**

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**A STUDY ON THE RUSSIAN TRANSLATIONS OF LI SAO**

**ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ПО РУССКИМ ПЕРЕВОДАМ ЛИ САО**

## **Abstract:**

*Li Sao*, the representative work of Chinese romantic poet Qu Yuan, is invaluable and unique in the garden of Chinese classics. It has not only been enormously influential to Chinese literature and culture, but also gained its fame worldwide, repeatedly translated by admiring Sinologists into Russian, English, French and many other foreign languages. With an eye to the promotion of the Chinese culture soft power, this paper investigates the charm of *Li Sao* by comparing four Russian versions of the book. The author of the article highlights the importance of Skopos theory. It assists in preserving Chinese cultural heritage, and interpreting it in a correct way. Therefore, it is vital to consider the peculiarities of Chinese and Russian poetic systems, building mutual understanding.

**Keywords:** *Li Sao*, Russian translations, four versions, poetic system, Chinese classical poetry, Chinese verse, the theories of translation, Skopos theory

## **Introduction**

*Li Sao* is a Chinese literary classic which, alongside with such classics as *The Book of Poetry*, has been recognized as one of the “romantic masterpieces that will remain immortal in all times”. With overflowing emotions and unchecked imagination, Qu Yuan creates a new poetic genre called “Sao” that is full of artistic life and appeal, representing the peak of Songs of Chu.

The strength of *Li Sao* not only lies in the artistically powerful 373 lines but also in the author’s love of country and of the people, and his courage to defend social justice, which has always been an integral part of the Chinese character. Wang Yi, a man of letters in Eastern Han Dynasty, remarked on *Li Sao* like this: “Drawing on such literary devices as metaphor and analogy which originated from *The Book of Poetry*, *Li Sao* compares upright gentlemen to fragrant herbs and fine birds, and small men to evil winds and dark clouds. Its diction is refined and elegant, while its meaning, sublime and crystal clear. Upright people in later generations all admire Qu Yuan’s moral standards and literary talents, and deplore his baffled ambition to serve his country.” It is justifiable to say that *Li Sao* was the expression of the author’s indignation against court strife. His solitary, epical voice hovered like piercing wind over the corrupted dynasty, finding no echo. Fortunately, he resonates with readers of later generations who repetitively reconstruct his lines. Here are some examples:

I could pull mountains down, oh! with main and might. — “Xiang Yu’s Last Song”

Where will I find brave men to guard the four corners of my land? — “A Great Wind”, Emperor Liu Bang.

I'm miles and miles away, oh! / When's my home-going day? —“Thinking of the Eastern Stream”, Zhang Han.

These lines implicitly echo the spirit of *Li Sao*. Besides, the cultural images created by Qu Yuan have been recurring in later works of the authors such as Cao Zhi, who expressed his grief and indignation using the images of “fragrant herbs and belles”, Guo Pu, who conveyed his rue at failing to find seclusion in a fairyland by deploring the absence of “concubine Ling” and “Jian xiu”, and Xie Lingyun, who signed: We'll never meet again now. I sit beside/ A stream, sun drying my hair for nothing.

Once the flower of literature blooms, it spreads its fragrance across the world. Up till now, *Li Sao* has been translated by French, English and Russian scholars who recommend Qu Yuan for his literary talent and moral character. As an initial thinking on Russian translation of Chinese classical poetry, the present paper investigates four Russian versions, respectively by Anna A. Akhmatova in 1954, by Альфред<Александр>Иванович Балин in 1959<sup>①</sup>, by Aleksandr I.Gitovich in 1962<sup>②</sup>, and by Валерий Вранцевич Перелешин in 1975<sup>③</sup>.

## II. Background information of the four versions

The earliest Russian version of *Li Sao*, a literal translation, was from the hand of Sinologist Nikolai Fedorenko (Николай Трофимович Федоренко, 1912-2000). In 1937, he graduated from Chinese Department of Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies, where he worked on Chinese classical literature with Soviet sinologist Aleksyev. While he worked at Russian Embassy in Chongqing, he began to study Qu Yuan with Chinese writer Guo Moruo. Nikolai Fedorenko translated *Chinese Poetry* and *A Concise History of Chinese Literature*, and composed essays such as “Qu Yuan, the Great Chinese Poet”, “A Few Questions Concerning Qu Yuan” and “Poems of Qu Yuan”. He then summarized his researches on Qu Yuan in his 1986 monograph *Qu Yuan, His Time and Literary Career*<sup>④</sup>.

The first formal Russian version of *Li Sao* <sup>⑤</sup>, however, was published by Anna A. Akhmatova (1899-1966), who was honored “moon of Russian poetry”. In a paper entitled

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<sup>①</sup> Anthology of Chinese Literature: Ancient Time, Middle Ages, and Modern Era, Moscow Education Press, 1959.

<sup>②</sup> Selected Works of Classical Chinese Poems, A New Translation, Leningrad Press. 1962.

<sup>③</sup> Qu Yuan: Russian Translation of *Li Sao*, Frankfurt Press. 1975.

<sup>④</sup> Yan Guodong, Three Hundred Years of Sinology in Russia. Academy Press, 2007, p.142.

<sup>⑤</sup> Gu Yu, Four Russian Versions of *Li Sao*, China Reading Weekly, Jan. 14, 2007 (018)

“Qu Yuan—A Few Questions Concerning Literary Creation and Inspiration” (1986), Nikolai Fedorenko observed, “I am fortunate because Ахматова Анна Андреевна based her work on my literal translation. It may be presumptuous of me to say that hers is a classical version, although she made no essential alterations to my version, but only added some words which she thought appropriate. Such changes made the translation more poetic and closer to the original. Anna A. Akhmatova is the only person who is capable of such work.”<sup>⑥</sup>

In a letter she wrote in the 1950’s to her son Lev N. Gumilev (1912 -1992), Anna A. Akhmatova mentioned that she had come across the English version of Qu Yuan published by Foreign Languages Press (Beijing) in 1954. To make her translation as close to the original as possible, she managed to obtain literature on Chinese poetry with the help of Nikolai Fedorenko and other scholars. Besides, she asked Fedorenko for several times to recite *Li Sao* to her in Chinese to help her “appreciate the sounds and rhymes of Qu Yuan”<sup>⑦</sup>, to understand Chinese poetics, and the metrical rhythm and tones and the intonation of Chinese poetry.

Not only Anna A. Akhmatova was a translator of Qu Yuan, but also her family members were ardent lovers of Chinese culture. Her son Lev N. Gumilev (1912—1992 ) was a scholar in oriental history and culture. She read and translated some Chinese classical literature into Russian as a way to facilitate his research, and to enhance her perception of Chinese poetry and culture. Besides, her first husband, poet Nikolaj S. Gumilev (1886--1921) was another influence upon her. He read Li Po and Tu Fu in French and rewrote them with a free hand in a book entitled *Museum of Porcelain: Chinese Poetry*<sup>⑧</sup>. His work laid a foundation for her translation of *Li Sao*.

As the “moon of Russian poetry” and a representative of the “Silver Age”, Anna A. Akhmatova doubtlessly possessed extraordinary sense of language and taste for poetry. Fedorenko thus commented on her translation: “She successfully revived the voice of the ancient Chinese singer, which is innocent and not hypocritical, full of passion and melancholy of the soul. She made the unfamiliar foreign poems so intimate to us as if they were our own. They have thus found their second life on the Russian land.”<sup>⑨</sup>

Fedorenko had actually entrusted the translation work to Aleksand I. Gitovich (1909—1966) besides Anna Akhmatova. Out of personal preference and certain objective

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<sup>⑥</sup> Wang Jiezh, Ахматова & Other Poets and Chinese Poetry Culture, Russian Art and Literature

<sup>⑦</sup> Museum of Porcelain: Chinese Poetry, С.-Петербург, Изд. Гиперборей. 2003 (2).

<sup>⑧</sup> Ibid

<sup>⑨</sup> Fedorenko Translating Li Sao with Ахматова , Trans. Уранхан, World Literature. 1993 (3). p. 204.

reasons, the editor chose to publish the latter's version. Gitovich was another zealous lover of Classical Chinese poetry and an outstanding translator of many achievements, including the translations of *Selected Poems of Tu Fu*, *Selected Poems of Li Po*, and *Classical Chinese Lyrics*, to name a few<sup>10</sup>. He translated *Li Sao* with a spirit of "pushing forward and never turning back" within four days and four nights, "I do not brag. I couldn't stop myself-- couldn't stop until I finished with it. I slept less than ten hours."<sup>11</sup>

He then mailed his manuscript to Anna Akhmatova, who replied in a telegram, "congratulations to you for the great work of *Li Sao*. The translation is perfect and cannot be overpraised." Gitovich's version was included in *Classical Chinese Lyrics—A New Translation*<sup>12</sup>, along with works by other Chinese poets such as Lu Zhi, Tao Yuanming, Yuan Shen, Su Shi, and Lu You, also translated by Gitovich. Only two thousand copies of that book were printed, so it soon went out of stock. Chronically, however, this version was actually the third in Russian, preceded by the one included in *Selected Reading of Chinese Literature*<sup>13</sup>, published by Soviet Union Education Press in 1959. The translator was Siberian poet Альфред <Александр>Иванович Балин (1925-1988), who graduated from Moscow Local Normal University and joined the army in World War II to defend his motherland. His *Weeds* and *Primitive Tenderness* extolled his country and his people, for whom he cherished profound love and affinity.

The fourth Russian version of *Li Sao* was produced by Russian expatriate Валерий Вранцевич Перелешин (1913-1992) and published in Germany in 1976. When he was 7 years old, Перелешин was forced to leave Russia, a country plighted in warfare and famine, and come to China—"a country of silk and tea, lotus and folding fans". He lived in China for 32 years, firstly in Ha'er bin, where he received formal Russian education, then in Shanghai. He also visited many other Chinese cities. This experience made him a qualified translator of Chinese literature. It is justifiable to say that he had been kissed by the Russian Muse, and picked up the writing style as a result of exposure to the time-honored Chinese culture. He wrote in a poem, "I grew up in the lap of my stepmother, the country of yellow colour. I make friends with the yellow-skinned people of medium size. The country is a unique fairytale that fills me with ecstasy. The summer stars even twinkle to me in a mystical way."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Лисао.- СПб.: ООО "Издательский Дом "Кристалл"", 2000

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Selected Works of Classical Chinese Poems, A New Translation, Leningrad Press, 1962.

<sup>13</sup>Anthology of Chinese Literature: Ancient Time, Middle Ages, and Modern Era, Moscow Education Press,1959.

<sup>14</sup> Li Yanlin, Selected Works of Russian Expatriates in China, Russian Art and Literature 2000 (3). p.4

“I was impressed by the monosyllabic language (isn't it the language of the Angels?)/ I fell in love with my second motherland/ a love which was simple and not complex.” This love he invested in the texture of his own poems on China, such as “At the Shanhai Gate”, “A Night at West Lake”, “Huqin” (a fiddle-like musical instrument invented and played by the nomads), “China”, and “The Middle Sea”, etc. The special culture and images are especially difficult to foreign readers, but Перелешин could successfully employ the cultural images in his own works. In Chinese culture, lotus is a special image which symbolizes an upright gentleman. His “Last Lotus Flower” depicts the last lotus flower standing upright in the chilly autumnal blasts, above the dying plants. In “Pavilion in the Middle of the Lake”, a poem composed after he visited the West Lake, makes use of the lotus image and the Buddhist notion of “life is short, but the heart is far-reaching”.

As an exile, though given warmth and consolation by his “stepmother”, he often felt a dismal and grievance that assailed his marrow: “Russia, Russia! My nostalgia arises like a bleak star/ in this desolate and thoughtful night!”<sup>15</sup> He was also concerned about his compatriots who lived in plight, “My free soul pushes forward like wind, for the noble and kind people who are weeping, and sighing, and hears their powerful calls to me.”<sup>16</sup> The pain of the heart, a good command of the Chinese language and culture, and his expatriate life motivated Перелешин to translate many Classical Chinese poems in a way of “letting out the repressed feelings through others’ works”. As early as in the mid-1930’s, he translated a poem by Li po which was published at *Boundary*<sup>17</sup>. In the 1940’s, he published his translated Chinese poems (such as “Ode to Mulan”) at such Shanghai-based journals as *Today* and *Times*<sup>18</sup>. He then compiled a book entitled *Song of the Chinese uchiwa* (a title borrowed from Ban Jieyu, a poetess in Han Dynasty) which included his translated works of Li Po, Tu Fu, Bai Juyi, Tu Mu, Wei Yingwu, Li Yu, Ouyang Xiu, Su Shi, Liu Yong, and Li Shangyin, etc. That book was published in Frankfurt in 1970<sup>19</sup>. Перелешин also translated Lu Xun’s essays and short stories. He started translating *Li Sao* when he lived in Shanghai and finished it when he moved to Brazil. It was published in Frankfurt in 1975<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Li Meng, *A Literary History Neglected, Literature of Russian Expatriates in China*, Peking University Press. 2007. p. 322.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> *Boundary* («Рубеж») was the most famous weekly of expatriate culture in Ha'er bin. It was founded in 1926 and closed in 1945.

<sup>18</sup> Diao Shaohua, *A Russian Poet Nourished by China's Land*, *Seeking Truth Journal*. 2001 (1).

<sup>19</sup> *Song of the Chinese Uchiwa: Anthology of Classical Chinese Verse*, Frankfurt Press, 1970.

<sup>20</sup> *Li Sao*, Frankfurt Press. 1975.

Sinologist В.Марков commented on Перелешин's version of *Li Sao* like this, "He combines the talent as a sinologist and the talent as a poet, which is a rarity, and which makes his version unique."<sup>21</sup> Ю.Иванск regarded Pereleshin's works as the best Russian version"<sup>22</sup>. However, there are actually some minor drawbacks with his translation, such as imagery fallacy.

### III. Thoughts on the four versions

*Li Sao* is a pearl of literature for the world as well as for China, a culture power which has seeped into the collective unconscious of the Chinese people. The Russian translations of the book present the integrated image of Qu Yuan to the Russian readership. He represents the Chinese moral character, patriotism, and the spirit of self-sacrifice.

#### Methods

As we all know, any translation of literary work involves form and content. In terms of content, a good translation must reconstruct the writing style of the origin and conciseness of the subject. In terms of form, however, when they recite the poems, the translator is supposed to convey the musical level that is felt by the original readership to the targeted readership because Chinese poetry and Russian poetry have different poetic systems-- different syllabic and stanza patterns, different metrical and tonal schemes, etc.

Chinese poetry and Russian poetry also have much in common. From the very beginning, music had gone with Chinese poetry to facilitate its recitation so that poetry couldn't do without music. Russian culture also stresses the importance of music. As Александр Александрович Блок (1880-1921) pointed out, Romantic poetry communicates infinite cultural charm by means of musical power, which gives the reader sensory pleasure. The musical level of poetry is a combination of internal emotions and external metrical rhythm, the latter referring to the level of sounds, such as tones, rhythm, and rhyme. Poetry, therefore, is an essential form of music. For that reason, the Russian translators and sinologists turned to poetic translation as a strategy with which to translate the classical Chinese poetry, rather than word-to-word translation with extensive notes and a focus on details<sup>23</sup>.

In China, it is held that "the poet is larger than poetry", which means that the unique charm of poetry is ascribed to the author's life experience, personal emotions or historical and cultural significance. The translator, therefore, must fully understand

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<sup>21</sup> В.Марков, *Russian Sinologists*, 1973(92)

<sup>22</sup> Diao Shaohua, A Russian Poet Nourished by China's Land, *Seeking Truth Journal*. 2001 (1).

<sup>23</sup> *Lyrics of Bai Juyi*, Moscow Press. 1965. p.77.

the author's personal feelings and ideology, in addition to that nation's culture. An ideal translator is one who can write in the target language. As an outstanding sinologist and translator, Alekseev V. Mikhailovich (1881-1957) observed that it requires extraordinary talents and efforts to reproduce the mysterious musical signs, the unspeakable beauty which the Chinese believe transcend poetry itself, through translation.

Translation on this level relies much on the translator's cultural cultivation and emotional experience, so every translator's version is from all the others'. The evaluation of the translation, on the other hand, is related to the reader's response, which is unique in itself. Accordingly, a reader's evaluation is different from all the others'. For that reason, we haven't intended to discuss which is the best version, but to discuss the cultural and aesthetic impacts of the four versions.

## Results

The four Russian versions of *Li Sao* treat the form and content of the original text in different ways and have their own advantages. Here is an example:

Without delay the sun and moon sped fast,

In swift succession spring and autumn passed;

The fallen flowers lay scattered on the ground,

The dusk might fall before my dream was found.

Let's compare the four versions in terms of images (content) and metrical rhythm (form).

The discussion of image(s) can trace back to *The Grand Commentary (Xi Ci)* of *I Ching*, in which it is said: "The saints created images to fully convey the meaning". The image can be interpreted as "an artistic world which unites the sensory picture depicted and thoughts and emotions expressed, and which compels the reader to imagine and associate, to be emotionally affected as if he experienced the picture in person." "The belle", an typical image first created in *Li Sao*, referred to King Huai of Chu in the first place, and later any wise man or king. In this stanza, the poet gives the exhortation that that if "I" (King Huai) do not seize the time to achieve some goals while "I" am in "my" prime, "my" talent may fall in disuse forever. The rhyme scheme is ABAB; the stanza is highly musical and neatly-cut, with seven Chinese characters in the first and third lines, and six in the second and fourth lines. To quote from Liu Xie "The beauty of sound relies on the recitation and chant, and the spirit of the lines emerges from the arrangement. Efforts must be made on harmony and rhyme."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Liu Xie, *Dragon Carving and the Literary Mind-Prosody*

The sound system of Russian poetry consists of such elements as meter, rhythm, rhyme scheme, lines and stanza, etc<sup>25</sup>. In terms of metrical rhythm, a vowel sound constitutes a syllable, a specific sequence of syllable types — such as relatively unstressed ( ) /stressed ( )—is called a foot. The meter of a verse can be described as a sequence of feet. The dimeter includes the trochee and the iambus. A trochee is a metrical foot consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one while an iambus is a foot consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. The trimeter includes Anapaest ( \_ \_ ), dactyl ( \_ \_ \_ ), and amphibrach ( \_ \_ \_ ). The five types are the basic meters of Russian verse, but with some variations such as spondee and tribrach.

The rhyme scheme of Russian verse can be divided into masculine rhyme and feminine rhyme, etc. A masculine rhyme is a rhyme that matches two or more syllables, usually at the end of respective lines, in which the final syllable or syllabication are stressed. In the feminine rhyme, the last but second syllable or syllabication is stressed. A rhyme in which the last but third syllable or syllabication is stressed is called dactylic rhyme, while a rhyme in which the syllable or syllabication before the last but third is stressed is called hyperdactylic rhyme. According to the distribution of the matching syllables in different lines, a rhyme can be AABB, ABAB, or ABBA, etc. A line is a unit of language into which a poem is divided while a stanza is a grouped set of lines within a poem, usually set off from other stanzas by the content, rhyme scheme or tone<sup>26</sup>.

Let's look at Anna Akhmatov's version of the above stanza:

Стремительно текут светила в небе,  
И осенью сменяется весна.  
Цветы, деревья, травы увядают,  
И дни красавца князя сочтены.

Anna Akhmatova has given up the rhyme scheme of the Chinese poem and stressed poetic expression based on faithfulness to the original meaning, giving consideration to the aesthetic tendency of Russian readers. This stanza consists of four lines that reduce the use of verbs, with two “и” at the beginning of the second and fourth lines, creating balance and harmony. The dominant rhyme scheme is trochee, with the variation of spondee. The third and fourth lines have neatly done metrical rhythm. The first and third lines rhyme in a feminine rhyme while the other two lines rhyme in a masculine one, making the stanza quite easy to recite.

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<sup>25</sup> Huang Mei, *Prosody and Meaning: A Study on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russian Poetics*, People's Press. 2005. p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> Zhang Xuezheng, *Metrical Rhythm of Russian Poetry*, Commercial Press. pp. 101-13.



Но дни царя,                    \_ ˘ \_ / ˘  
 Боюсь я, сочтены.            \_ ˘ ˘ / \_ ˘ ˘

The lines are brief and lively, employing a quite free metrical rhythm to communicate the author’s indignation and discontentment. The two lines in each couplet alternatively use amphibrach trimeter and half meter. The ABAB rhyme scheme, feminine-feminine rhyme, trimeter masculine-feminine- feminine-masculine-masculine rhyme, also contributes to the musical power of the translation. The octave alters the original rhythm as pauses are required in recitation.

Here is the version of Pereleshin:

Солнце или луна никогда не замедлит бега,  
 И весна и осень свой помнят чин.  
 Вот опять засохли трава и листва опала.  
 А любимый где — то медлит, и я один.

The original text is translated in four-line stanzas, with faithfulness to the sound features of classical Chinese verse, such as ABAB rhyme scheme, coordinated metrical rhythm, the use of modal particles, conjunctions, prepositions, and non-monosyllabic words.

˘ \_ \_ / \_ ˘ \_ / \_ ˘ \_ / \_ ˘ \_  
 \_ \_ ˘ / \_ ˘ / ˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ / ˘  
 \_ \_ ˘ / \_ ˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ / \_ ˘ / \_ ˘  
 \_ \_ ˘ / \_ ˘ / ˘ ˘ / \_ ˘ / \_ ˘

Anapaest pentameter and tetrameter are alternatively employed in a unique way. It is a mistake, however, to translate “belle” into “lover”. Some Chinese scholars attributed this mistake to Перелешин’s homosexual orientation, which made him impose homosexual tendency on Qu Yuan.

### Discussion

We have compared the four versions to identify their deviation or difference from the original, but the deviations or differences are not equal to mistakes. Some of them are innovation of the translator, and in some cases, it is a deviation or difference that makes the translation particularly wonderful, and *The Book of Jade* is a perfect example. Some deviations or differences are neutral, a result of free translation that is permitted by the original and targeted texts.

The four Russian translators each emphasize metrical rhythm, resemblance of form or closeness of meaning to portray their own image of Qu Yuan. Success or failure, the translations help to promote Chinese culture, since “translation” aims to translate a nation’s mind to another nation<sup>27</sup>. The need for cultural communication is the mother of translation activity. To some extent, culture and social economy are mutually complementary; when a nation is growing stronger and more important in the world, other nations will be interested in its cultural roots, tradition and classical works.

### Implication

There are various theories about the translation of classical Chinese verse, such as the theory of untranslatability, the theory of formal resemblance, and the theory of faithfulness to the original meaning, etc. Whatever theory they uphold, the translators may have the same goal of representing the spirit, form and artistic world (ching chieh). Based on skopos theory, the author of this paper holds that the translation of classical Chinese verse serves two skopos: 1) promoting the soft power of Chinese culture. The essence of Chinese culture can be conveyed by translated works, especially illustrated and adapted ones, as a way of cultural transmission; and 2) promoting the academic exchange and cooperation between Chinese and Russian scholars and translators. For this purpose, a possible strategy is to substitute the literal translation, representation theory, or foreignization and domestication theories, for a liberal translation of replacing the images, and using refined and intimate language to communicate the archaic charm of *Li Sao* to the foreign readers who may be drawn to the exotic pleasure. The focus of this practice is to naturally introduce the Russian readers into the world of *Li Sao*, to understand and appreciate this great book. As poet Xin Qiji<sup>28</sup> comments:

The immortal words of *Li Sao*

Remain fragrant till today

Ask not way, but quaff this liquor

Like the dew dropping from the lotus leaves.

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<sup>27</sup> Yan Chensong, *Translation Studies in China*, Shanghai Foreign Language Teaching Press. 2001. p. 233.

<sup>28</sup> Xin Qiji (Southern Song Dynasty), A Reply to Zhao Jinchen.

**Information about the author:**

**Wang Liang**(BeiJing, China)-Instructor, Beijing culture and language university, 100038, 15 Xueyuan Road, Haidian District, Beijing; [E-mail:wangliang777@163.com](mailto:wangliang777@163.com);

**Xu Biying**(BeiJing, China)-Editor and Journalist, Beijing WeMedia Group, Zizhuyuan Road, Haidian District, Beijing,[E-mail:xubiying@brtn.cn](mailto:xubiying@brtn.cn)

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