

Translating Cities: W. H. Auden and 1940s Chinese Metropolis Poetry

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the creation of the image of cities in W. H. Auden's poetry and how these images relate to Chinese poetry in the 1940s when used archetypally. Mu Dan's poetry is the primary example. The construction of cities in Auden's poems is based on two-dimensional hierarchies, namely, the disparity between ancient Western cities in their heroic glory and modern Western cities in their moral degeneration, as well as the sharp binary opposition between Western cities of colonial powers and the marginalized cities of the Orient. In the context of national salvation in 1940s China, this paper sees the description of cities in Chinese poems, especially those by the Nine Leaves School, as more than a rewriting and translation of Auden's poems. The hybridity both in form and in content, on the one hand, shows the inevitable trend of poetic modernity in urban writings; on the other hand, it also manifests the desire of Chinese poets in search of a discourse that embraces both Western and Chinese culture by focusing on their shared fate under the grand sociohistorical background of World War II.

Keywords

metropolis poetry, archetypal imagery, Auden, Mu Dan, Sino-Japanese War

1. Introduction: The Quest for Chinese Metropolis Poets

W. H. Auden (1907–1973), an Anglo-American poet famous for his wartime poetry and visit to China in the late 1930s, had tremendous influence upon Chinese intellectuals and literary societies during the period of Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), especially the Nine Leaves