



Research Article

The Early Reception of Heinrich Heine in China (1901–1914)

Xiaodong Qian* 

Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

Abstract

Heinrich Heine's poetry began to enter China in the early twentieth century, yet the initial phase of this reception remains underexplored. This article examines the translation and introduction of Heine's works in China between 1901 and 1914. Employing a historical and philological approach, the study analyzes primary sources including published translations, prefaces, postfaces, and critical essays from Chinese journals and books of the period. It reconstructs the activities of key figures who pioneered Heine's reception: Gu Hongming, who first cited Heine in 1901; Hu Shi, who translated “Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam” in 1913; Ying Shi, who published the first direct German-to-Chinese translations in his 1914 bilingual volume *German Poems Translated into Chinese*; and Lu Xun, whose early renderings from his Japanese years appeared in 1914. The analysis reveals that this early phase was characterized by indirect translation through intermediary languages, cultural adaptation of poetic imagery to resonate with Chinese sensibilities, and the crucial role of Western-educated intellectuals as cultural mediators. These features shaped Heine's initial image in China and established patterns for subsequent cross-cultural literary transmission. By illuminating this foundational period, the study deepens understanding of how Heine, as a representative foreign literary figure, was introduced, interpreted, and transformed in a new cultural context.

Keywords

Heinrich Heine, Translation History, Reception Studies, Late Qing, Early Republic, Sino-German Literary Relations

1. Introduction

Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), one of Germany's most influential poets, has enjoyed a rich and complex reception history both in his homeland and abroad. His poetry, which bridges the sensibilities of Romanticism and the incisiveness of political modernity, has been translated into numerous languages and has resonated with readers across diverse cultural contexts. In China, the reception of Heine's works began in the early twentieth century and has since evolved through multiple phases, reflecting the changing intellectual and cultural landscape of modern China.

Looking at the overall landscape of Heine studies in China,

it is clear that scholarly achievements in this field have accumulated into a rich and diverse body of work. These achievements are primarily concentrated in the area of foreign literary studies and exhibit a trend of evolving from textual analysis to theoretical interpretation, and from a single perspective to interdisciplinary approaches. Some scholars have conducted in-depth analyses of the aesthetic qualities and ironic poetics of Heine's poetry. For instance, Liu Wenyu, a master's student at Beijing International Studies University, completed her thesis “Irony and Politics in Heine's Poetry: A Case Study of 'Germany: A Winter's Tale'” in 2014, which systematically explores the profound connection between Heine's unique ironic

*Correspondence: Xiaodong Qian (shirley8372@163.com)

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rhetoric and his political critique. Other scholars have focused on excavating the philosophical and social ideas embedded in Heine's works. For example, Dr. Zhao Leilian from Peking University, in her 1999 paper "On Heine's Social Critique in *Lutetia*", offers a focused analysis of Heine's late political thought. Furthermore, various studies on Heine have employed contemporary theories such as New Historicism for close textual readings. A case in point is the 2019 paper "The Interaction between History and Text: Heine's Harz Journey from the Perspective of New Historicism" by Wang Runji, a master's student at Southwest Jiaotong University, which examines Heine's Harz Journey by investigating the complex relationship between historical-cultural context and literary construction. However, when examined through the broader and more systematic frameworks of translation studies and reception theory, it becomes evident that current scholarship in China still lacks a comprehensive, historically coherent synthesis of Heine's reception history in the country. For instance, the earliest phase of his reception in China, which covers the period from the late Qing to the early Republic, remains comparatively underexplored. Yet, this period is crucial for understanding the initial contours of Heine's image in the Chinese literary consciousness.

To illuminate this foundational period, the present study draws upon a range of primary sources, including published translations, prefaces, and critical essays from contemporary journals and books of the era (1901–1914). By analyzing these materials, the research traces the first encounters of Chinese intellectuals with Heine's oeuvre. It focuses on the seminal contributions of pioneering figures such as Gu Hongming, who first cited Heine in 1901; Hu Shi, who rendered "Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam" into Chinese in 1913; Ying Shi, who published the first direct translations from German in his 1914 bilingual volume *German Poems Translated into Chinese*; and Lu Xun, whose early renderings from his Japanese sojourn appeared in the same year. This study also situates these translation efforts within the broader context of German literary reception in China during the same period.

As the subsequent analysis will demonstrate, this initial phase of reception was distinctively marked by specific translational and interpretive practices. The reliance on indirect translation through intermediary languages, the conscious adaptation of poetic imagery to align with Chinese aesthetic sensibilities, and the pivotal role of Western-educated intellectuals as cultural gatekeepers were particularly salient. These early strategies not only defined Heine's initial persona in the Chinese literary world but also prefigured enduring modes of cross-cultural appropriation in the decades that followed. By reconstructing this foundational period, this article aims to illuminate the complex processes through which Heine's poetry was first received, interpreted, and ultimately redefined within the new cultural context of early twentieth-century China.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Primary Sources

This study draws on primary sources collected from Chinese journals, newspapers, and books published between 1901 and 1914. These materials include published translations of Heine's poems, prefaces and postfaces written by translators, critical essays and commentaries on Heine and his work, as well as relevant editorial notes and announcements in literary periodicals.

2.2. Source Collection

The primary sources were identified through systematic searches in major Chinese periodical databases and library catalogues, including the National Library of China's digital collections and university library special collections. Key search terms included various Chinese transliterations of Heine's name (亥纳, 海涅, 哈英南) and titles of his major poems. Additional sources were located through bibliographic references in existing scholarship on the history of translated literature in China, particularly the work of Xie Tianzhen and Zha Mingjian.

2.3. Analytical Approach

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, a chronological reconstruction establishes the sequence of translation events and identifies the key figures involved. Second, close reading and comparative analysis examine how individual translators rendered Heine's poetry, with particular attention to choices of poetic form, imagery, and diction. Third, these translation practices are contextualized within the broader framework of German literary reception in early twentieth-century China, drawing on contemporaneous commentaries and reviews. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how Heine's poetry was first introduced to Chinese readers and how initial translation choices shaped the poet's early image in China. By combining textual analysis with historical contextualization, the study aims to illuminate both the specific practices of individual translators and the broader patterns of cross-cultural literary transmission during this formative period.

3. Results

3.1. The Earliest Trace: Gu Hongming's Citation of Heine (1901)

The introduction of Heinrich Heine's works into China can be traced back to the final years of the Qing Dynasty. In late 1901, a Shanghai-based publishing house, Kelly & Walsh, re-

leased an English-language book entitled *Papers from a Viceroy's Yamen: A Chinese Plea for the Cause of Good Government and True Civilization*. Its author was Gu Hongming (1857–1928), a renowned scholar often regarded as a pioneer of Sino-Western comparative studies and one of the most eccentric intellectuals of the late Qing period. Gu Hongming was born in Penang, Malaya, in 1857. At the age of seventeen, he travelled to Europe to pursue his education, eventually obtaining an MA from the University of Edinburgh. He later continued his studies in Germany and France. In 1885, he joined the staff of Zhang Zhidong, a prominent Qing official, serving as his foreign language secretary for two decades. In 1917, he began teaching at Peking University. Gu was a remarkable polyglot, mastering nine languages including English, French, German, Latin, and Greek, and was said to have earned thirteen doctoral degrees. He became widely known as the “eccentric genius of the late Qing” [1].

In *Papers from a Viceroy's Yamen: A Chinese Plea for the Cause of Good Government and True Civilization*, Gu Hongming included a passage quoting Heine's poetry. The quoted verses read: “We want to enjoy happiness on earth, and no longer endure poverty; the lazy belly shall not squander the fruits of the industrious hand's labour. For all the children of humanity, let there be enough bread prepared in the world, and roses and myrtle, beauty and joy, and equally plenty of sugar peas. As soon as the peas are planted, everyone shall have a share!” [2].

These lines are drawn from Heine's political-satirical narrative poem *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen*. In the same work, Gu also mentioned that Heine referred to himself as “a knight in the war for the liberation of humanity” (*ein Ritter in dem Menschheit-Befreiung's Kriege*), and further cited a passage from Heine's *Harz Journey*: “Look at me, my child, kiss me, look at me boldly; for I am a knight of this holy spirit.” [2].

This citation, dating from 1901, represents the earliest verifiable instance in which a Chinese intellectual translated and quoted Heine's work. The timing is significant. It occurred at a critical juncture in Chinese history, when the Qing Dynasty was in decline and the nation was grappling with profound internal and external crises. The Boxer Rebellion had recently been suppressed, and in 1901 the Qing government was forced to sign the Boxer Protocol, marking a severe erosion of Chinese sovereignty. It was against this backdrop of national humiliation and intellectual soul-searching that Gu Hongming chose to invoke Heine's words.

What is particularly noteworthy is Gu's emphasis on Heine's self-identification as a “knight fighting for the liberation of humanity.” This choice may reflect Gu's own desire to convey a message of national awakening and resistance through the medium of a foreign poet. The critical spirit embedded in Heine's poetry, along with its celebration of freedom and individuality, likely resonated deeply with Gu Hongming's reflections on China's cultural heritage and the nation's uncertain future. In quoting Heine, Gu was not merely introducing a German poet to Chinese readers; he was

also enlisting Heine's voice in a broader conversation about China's path forward.

3.2. The Broader Context: German Literature in China (1901–1910)

After Gu Hongming's 1901 citation of Heine, the following decade witnessed few verifiable translations or introductions of Heine's works in China. This scarcity was not unique to Heine but rather reflected the broader pattern of German literary reception in China during this period.

Between 1903 and 1904, *Der Schweizerische Robinson* (*The Swiss Family Robinson*), an adventure novel by the Swiss German writer Johann Rodolf Wyss (1782–1830), was serialized in several Chinese journals and attracted considerable attention. In 1905, it was formally published as a book by The Commercial Press in Shanghai, becoming one of the earliest German-language literary works to be translated into Chinese. However, it is important to note that this translation was not made directly from the German original but was instead rendered through intermediate versions in other languages. A similar pattern can be observed with other works. In 1904–1905, a novel by the prominent German writer Hermann Sudermann (1857–1928) was serialized in the journal *Illustrated Fiction* (*Xiuxiang Xiaoshuo*). In 1906, *Die Abenteuer der Neujahrsnacht* (*New Year's Eve Adventure*), a work by the Swiss German author Heinrich Daniel Zschokke (1771–1848), was published in Shanghai. Both of these translations were mediated through Japanese versions rather than being rendered directly from the original German [3].

This reliance on indirect translation, especially through Japanese, was a common practice during this period, reflecting the specific pathways of cultural exchange and the diversity of translation practices in early 20th-century China. Overall, during the decade following 1901, the few verifiable translations of German literature into Chinese were almost without exception produced through intermediate languages. This phenomenon not only reveals the indirect and limited nature of China's engagement with German literature at the time but also highlights the difficult circumstances facing the early reception of German literary works. It was likely due to these constrained channels of translation, combined with the lack of an established readership for German literature in China, that Heine's works failed to gain wider circulation and recognition during this period. This situation underscores the broader obstacles to cross-cultural literary transmission in early 20th-century China.

3.3. Hu Shi's Translation of “Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam” (1913)

With the flourishing of the study-abroad movement and the increasing frequency of cultural exchanges in the early Republican period, the translation and introduction of Heine's poetry in China encountered unprecedented opportunities. In 1907,

the United States government officially announced that it would “return” a portion of the Boxer Indemnity to the Qing government, designating these funds specifically to support Chinese students studying in America. This initiative opened a new chapter in Sino-American cultural exchange. Against this backdrop, in 1910, after a rigorous selection process, more than 400 Chinese students were awarded the opportunity to study in the United States. In August of that year, these aspiring young scholars embarked on their journey to America. Among them was Hu Shi (1891–1962), who would later become a pivotal figure in the New Culture Movement [4]. Hu Shi was one of the most influential thinkers and scholars in modern China, as well as a prominent literary figure and philosopher [5].

Three years later, in 1913, the Shanghai-based publication *The Chinese Students' Monthly* (Liu Mei Xuesheng Nianbao) featured in its second issue a translation by Hu Shi entitled “A Translation of a Poem by the German Poet Heine” (Yi Deguo Shiren Haina Shi Yizhang). This made Hu Shi the second verifiable translator of Heine’s work in China, following Gu Hongming.

The poem Hu Shi translated was Heine’s well-known lyric “Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam” (“A Pine Tree Stands Alone”). His translation read: “高松岑寂羌无欢，独立塞北之寒山。冰雪蔽体光漫漫，相思之梦来无端。梦中东国之芭蕉，火云千里石欲焦。脉脉无言影寂寥，欲往从之道路遥。” (A tall pine stands silent and joyless, alone on the cold northern mountain. Ice and snow cover its body in endless light; a dream of longing comes without reason. In the dream, there is a banana palm in the eastern land, with fiery clouds for a thousand miles, scorching the stones. Silently, wordlessly, its shadow lonely; I wish to follow it, but the road is far.) [6].

In addition to the translation, Hu Shi also included the original German text of the poem. In his preface, he briefly introduced Heine’s birth and death years and offered the following commentary: “He excelled in short lyric poems; his poetry is both gentle and deeply moving, most capable of touching the heart, as in this poem of longing. The tall pine in bitter cold is the poet’s self-representation; the southern banana palm symbolizes the object of his longing; the ice, snow, and fiery clouds represent obstacles. This bears considerable resemblance to the Chinese poetic tradition of *bi* (analogy) and *xing* (evocation). Yet a certain warmth and sincerity flow naturally from the page.” [6].

Hu Shi’s treatment of the German word *Palme* (palm tree) is particularly noteworthy. He chose to render it as *ba jiao* (a type of plant often translated as “banana palm” or “plantain”), a decision that was far from arbitrary. In the long tradition of classical Chinese poetry, this plant had long been established as a symbol of longing and yearning. Whether through the sound of raindrops gently striking its broad leaves or the plant’s erect yet somewhat solitary posture, poets had frequently employed this image to evoke feelings of loneliness, parting, and homesickness. Hu Shi explicitly acknowledged in

his preface that he understood Heine’s use of the palm tree as “symbolizing the object of longing.” Based on this interpretation, he characterized the poem as a “poem of longing,” thereby making the translation more emotionally resonant with the original while also aligning it with the aesthetic sensibilities and cultural psychology of Chinese readers.

It is also worth noting the grammatical specificity of the German language, which differs significantly from Chinese in its treatment of gender. In German, every noun is classified as masculine, feminine, or neuter, and this classification affects not only the noun itself but also the choice of articles and pronouns that refer to it. In Heine’s poem, *Fichtenbaum* (pine tree) is grammatically masculine, while *Palme* (palm tree) is feminine. Accordingly, when describing the northern pine, the poet uses the personal pronoun *er* (he), while the palm tree, the object of longing, is referred to with the pronoun *sie* (she). This grammatical structure creates a personified gender correspondence at the linguistic level, which has led many readers to interpret the poem as a love poem. As the Chinese-American author R. F. Kuang writes in her novel *Babel*: “A pine tree yearns for a palm tree, symbolizing a man’s longing for a woman. But translating this into English is quite tricky, because English does not have the grammatical gender distinctions of German, and thus cannot convey the binary opposition between the masculine noun *ein Fichtenbaum* (pine tree) and the feminine noun *einer Palme* (palm tree).” [7] Hu Shi’s translation, by rendering *Palme* as the culturally resonant *ba jiao* and interpreting the poem as an expression of longing, navigated these linguistic and cultural complexities in a way that made Heine’s poetry accessible and meaningful to early 20th-century Chinese readers.

3.4. Ying Shi’s German Poems Translated into Chinese (1914)

In January 1914, a significant milestone in the history of German-Chinese literary translation was reached with the publication of Ying Shi’s *German Poems Translated into Chinese*, a bilingual edition printed by the Zhejiang Printing Company in Hangzhou. This work is the first anthology of German poetry in the history of Chinese translation, and also the first anthology organized by national origin in the history of modern Chinese translated literature. [8].

As scholar Ye Jun has noted, Ying Shi’s contributions, though little known to history, deserve reassessment for their pioneering role in the translation of German literature into Chinese. Ying studied in Europe from 1907 to 1910, first in England and then in Germany, where he not only convalesced but also studied the German language. In 1914, he published this volume of German poems in Chinese translation—the first work of its kind to be translated directly from German into Chinese [9].

Ying Shi himself described the circumstances surrounding his translation project: “In the third month of the Xinhai year (1911), I returned to China. In Shanghai, I met Mr. Tian Beihu.

We talked about the charm and meaning of German poetry. Mr. Tian was overjoyed and happy to support me. I therefore selected eleven poems and translated them into Chinese. My role was merely to fulfill the task of translation; for revisions and polishing, I relied entirely on Mr. Tian. By the sixth month of that year, the manuscript was completed. I stored it away in my trunk, awaiting correction and refinement.” [10].

In this volume, Ying Shi included a portrait of Heine—whom he rendered in Chinese as “Ha Yingnan”—and translated one of Heine’s most famous poems, “Die Grenadiere” (“The Grenadiers”). Ying’s translation of this poem, which he titled “Fu Lu Zhong Fen”, reads in part: “两兵偕徙法兰西，彼俘于俄反旆倪。邮亭出宿德意志，俯首无语各凄凄。飞来警报摧心肝，似闻故国正凋残。核心上将坏长成，系颈名王辱可汗。” (Two soldiers journey together from France; they were captured by Russia and now pass through German territory. Stopping at a post station in Germany, they bow their heads in silence, each filled with sorrow. A warning arrives, piercing their hearts; it seems they hear that their homeland is in ruins. The core general has fallen, the famous king is humiliated, his neck bound like a Khan.)

These lines depict the tragic fate of two French soldiers who, after being captured by the Russians, find themselves on German soil and eventually learn of France’s defeat, the collapse of its army, and the capture of its emperor.

Unlike Hu Shi’s translation of Heine, which was mediated through other languages, Ying Shi’s version was rendered directly from the German original. What is particularly commendable is that Ying appended to his translation an important document entitled “A Sourcebook of German Poetry” (“De Shi Yuanliu”), which provided detailed historical background and analysis. He also compiled a Table of German Poets’ Names and Places of Residence, which not only facilitated readers’ understanding and reference but also demonstrated the translator’s meticulous scholarly attitude and profound academic foundation [10]. Ying Shi’s work represents a significant advance in the Chinese reception of German poetry. By translating directly from German, providing bilingual texts, and supplementing his translations with scholarly apparatus, he set a new standard for the translation of German literature into Chinese and opened the way for more systematic engagement with German poetry in China.

3.5. Lu Xun’s Early Translations

Lu Xun, also known as Zhou Shuren, was born in Zhejiang Province, China, in 1881. He was a distinguished writer, thinker, and revolutionary, and is widely regarded as one of the founding figures of modern Chinese literature [11]. In 1914, the second issue of the journal *Zhonghua Xiaoshuo Jie* featured an article entitled “Random Notes on Literature and Art” (Yiwen Zahua) by Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967). Zhou Zuoren, the younger brother of Lu Xun, was a significant figure in the history of modern Chinese culture, renowned as an essayist, translator, and literary theorist in modern China [12].

In his article, Zhou offered a distinctive assessment of Heine: “Heine is a German poet who can express profound thoughts in ordinary language, making his words bright and clear, while his lines remain warm, elegant, and refined—such that imitators cannot achieve the same effect.” [13].

More importantly, Zhou Zuoren revealed in this article that his elder brother, Lu Xun (1881–1936), had previously attempted translations of Heine’s poetry. Zhou included two of Lu Xun’s translated poems in the article: “Aus meinen Tränen sprießen” (“From My Tears Spring Forth”) and “Die blauen Veilchen der Äugelein” (“The Blue Violets of Her Little Eyes”).

These translations were likely produced during Lu Xun’s years as a student in Japan. Lu Xun studied in Japan from 1902 to 1909, during which time he extensively explored various literary classics. In his later memoir *Lu Xun’s Old Home* (*Lu Xun de Gujia*), Zhou Zuoren provided further context: “In Tokyo, although German books were not abundant, the German classics were easy to obtain and quite inexpensive. Lu Xun owned only one collection of Heine’s poetry. Those two translated poems—‘the eyes are blue violets, the cheeks are red roses’—were probably written during his time in Sendai. This shows that he had considerable fondness for this Jewish poet.” [14].

From this account, we can infer that Lu Xun’s interest in Heine’s poetry and his translation efforts were closely connected to his literary activities during his stay in Japan. It is noteworthy that Lu Xun’s translations of Heine likely predated Ying Shi’s 1914 volume of German poems. Unfortunately, these valuable translations were not published immediately; they remained in manuscript form until 1914, when Zhou Zuoren retrieved and published them, finally bringing them to the attention of Chinese readers. Lu Xun had systematically studied German, a linguistic foundation that would have greatly facilitated his direct engagement with Heine’s original texts. It is therefore reasonable to assume that his translations of these two Heine poems were rendered directly from the German originals, rather than through intermediate languages.

Lu Xun’s early engagement with Heine, though limited in output, is significant for several reasons. First, it demonstrates the reach of Heine’s poetry among Chinese intellectuals studying abroad during the late Qing and early Republican periods. Second, it reveals the role of personal literary networks, namely the fraternal relationship between Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren, in preserving and disseminating translations that might otherwise have been lost. As the younger brother of Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren had an intimate understanding of him, despite the ideological differences that later arose between them over family matters—differences that remained unresolved for the remainder of their lives [15]. Finally, it provides further evidence of the growing interest in German literature among Chinese intellectuals in the first decades of the 20th century, even if such interest did not always result in immediate publication.

3.6. The Historical and Cultural Significance of Heine's Early Reception in China

From the foregoing analysis, it becomes clear that the early phase of Heine's reception in China began during the critical transitional period from the late Qing to the early Republic. The significance of this phenomenon extends far beyond the mere transmission of literary texts; it carries profound cultural symbolism, marking China's initial engagement with and active response to Western thought during its own process of transformation.

The introduction of Heine's works during this period did more than open a window for Chinese intellectuals to understand a German Romantic poet and his rich ideas. It also provided a unique and valuable frame of reference for the complex construction of "self" and "other" within the context of indigenous Chinese thought.

However, the early translation efforts were inevitably constrained by multiple factors, including the translators' linguistic competence, their cultural backgrounds, and the specific socio-historical context in which they worked. When translators sought to understand and convey the essence of Heine's poetry, they faced numerous challenges that made it difficult to fully capture the rich ideological tensions and profound aesthetic connotations embedded in his texts.

In certain translations, due to the translators' insufficient understanding of German cultural history, the symbolic traditions carried by specific cultural images, or the evolution of poetic styles after European Romanticism, the final translations sometimes fell short in stylistic reproduction and interpretive accuracy. These translations struggled to convey the full artistic meaning contained in the original works. The "misreadings" or "simplifications" that resulted from cultural differences and cognitive limitations inevitably narrowed the interpretive space for Heine's works during this early phase of reception, affecting readers' ability to fully grasp the complexity of his creative spirit and artistic vision.

It is noteworthy that the early practice of translating Heine in China was primarily driven by a group of intellectuals who had studied abroad or possessed deep knowledge of Western learning. Many of these intellectuals had travelled to Europe, America, or Japan, immersing themselves in foreign cultures and experiencing firsthand the collision and fusion of different cultural traditions. It was precisely this cross-cultural experience that naturally positioned them as important cultural mediators between China and the West.

In introducing Heine from the German literary tradition into the Chinese literary sphere, these translators accomplished more than linguistic transfer. Based on their unique cultural perspectives and keen aesthetic judgments, they actively undertook the mission of transmitting ideas and facilitating cultural communication. In a sense, these translators transcended the role of mere linguistic conveyors; they were not only transmitters of textual content but also profound interpreters and creative reconstructors of meaning.

At every stage of selection, translation, and annotation, the translators' own knowledge structures, emotional tendencies, and even potential political positions inevitably permeated and influenced the process of textual regeneration. Thus, the early translation of Heine was not simply an exercise in literary translation but a dynamic and creative cultural practice. It was a complex product of continuous dialogue, negotiation, and fusion among the translator's subjectivity, the cultural needs of the target language, and the multiple meanings embedded in the source text.

4. Discussion

4.1. Indirect Translation and Cultural Mediation

One of the most significant findings of this study is the prevalence of indirect translation during the 1901–1914 period. With the sole exception of Ying Shi's 1914 volume, all translations of Heine's poetry identified in this research were mediated through intermediate languages, primarily Japanese and English. This pattern reflects the broader structure of China's engagement with Western literature in the late Qing and early Republic, when Japanese translations often served as a crucial conduit for European texts.

This layered mediation had significant consequences for how Heine was understood. Japanese translators and critics operated within their own interpretive frameworks, shaped by Meiji-era literary debates and the particular needs of Japanese modernization. When Chinese readers encountered Heine through Japanese versions, they were not receiving the "original" Heine but a version already interpreted and adapted for a Japanese audience. This finding complicates any simple notion of "direct influence" and calls attention to the complex cultural negotiations that characterize cross-cultural literary transmission.

The profiles of the early translators themselves, Gu Hongming, Hu Shi, Ying Shi, and Lu Xun, reveal a shared characteristic that is itself significant. All were intellectuals with substantial experience of study or residence abroad, positioning them as natural cultural mediators. Their cosmopolitan background equipped them with the linguistic competence and cultural knowledge necessary for translation, while their exposure to multiple traditions shaped the distinctive perspectives they brought to their work.

4.2. Cultural Adaptation and Image Construction

Another key finding concerns the active role of translators in adapting Heine's poetry to resonate with Chinese cultural sensibilities. Hu Shi's rendering of *Palme* as "banana palm" (ba jiao) provides the most striking example. By choosing an image deeply embedded in the Chinese poetic tradition, the

banana palm as a symbol of longing, Hu Shi made Heine's poem emotionally accessible to Chinese readers while inevitably departing from the literal meaning of the original.

This practice challenges traditional translation theories that evaluate translations primarily in terms of “fidelity” to the source text. The early Chinese translators of Heine were not simply conveying words across linguistic boundaries; they were actively constructing an image of the poet for a new audience with different literary expectations and cultural reference points.

These translation choices had lasting consequences. The features identified in this early phase, indirect translation, cultural adaptation, and the mediator role of Western-educated intellectuals, not only shaped Heine's initial image in China but also established patterns of cross-cultural reception that would persist in subsequent decades. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for any comprehensive account of how foreign literary figures are introduced and transformed in new cultural contexts.

Future research might usefully explore whether similar patterns characterize the reception of other German authors in China during this period, and how the Japanese translations that mediated Heine's entry into China shaped the specific transformations that occurred at each stage of transmission.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Summary of Main Findings

This study has examined the early reception of Heinrich Heine's poetry in China from 1901 to 1914, reconstructing the first encounters between Chinese intellectuals and the German poet's work. Through analysis of translations, prefaces, and critical essays from this period, three main findings emerge.

First, the early reception was characterized by indirect translation. With the exception of Ying Shi's 1914 bilingual volume, all translations of Heine identified in this study were mediated through Japanese or English versions. This pattern reflects the broader structure of China's engagement with Western literature in the late Qing and early Republic. Second, translators actively adapted Heine's poetry to resonate with Chinese cultural sensibilities. Hu Shi's rendering of *Palme* as “banana palm” (*ba jiao*) exemplifies this practice. Third, the early translators, Gu Hongming, Hu Shi, Ying Shi, and Lu Xun, shared a crucial characteristic: all were intellectuals with study-abroad experience. This cosmopolitan background positioned them as natural cultural mediators between China and the West.

5.2. Significance and Future Research

These findings contribute to a fuller understanding of cross-cultural literary transmission. They demonstrate that the introduction of foreign literature into China was not a simple process of direct influence but a complex negotiation involving multiple intermediaries, cultural adaptation, and the active

agency of translators. Future research may explore whether similar patterns appear in the reception of other German authors in China during this period, and how Japanese translations shaped the specific transformations that occurred at each stage of transmission.

Author Contributions

Xiaodong Qian: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the outcome of this research work has been reported in this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Xiaodong Qian is a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature and Cross-Cultural Studies at Shanghai International Studies University (2022–2026). She received her MA in Literary Studies from the University of Stuttgart, Germany (2018–2021). Her research focuses on the reception of German literature in China.

Research Field

Xiaodong Qian: Comparative Literature, Cross-Cultural Studies, Sino-German Literary Relations, Translation History, German Literature in China