

RESEARCH TITLE

Diamond in the Rough and the Oriental Myth: Shaping Arab Cultural Identity in Early Translations of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*

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Abstract

This study explores the shaping of Arab cultural identity through early translations of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, with a focus on how the work has been received and interpreted in Western and Chinese contexts. It examines how Antoine Galland's French translation introduced the text to a global audience while simultaneously framing Arabo-Islamic culture as a cultural "Other" through an Orientalist lens. The paper contrasts this with the reception in China, where the work, despite translation inaccuracies and cultural misinterpretations, was celebrated for its literary artistry and imagination. Drawing on translation theory and historical-cultural analysis, the study identifies four main factors influencing these divergent receptions: Orientalism, the sociopolitical context of novel translation in China, the integration of Islam and Confucianism, and shared anti-colonial sympathies. Ultimately, the research calls for a critical reassessment of the global translation and circulation of Arabic literature, advocating for a reassertion of authentic cultural identity within the framework of world literature and alternative modernities.

Key Words: *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, Arabo-Islamic culture, Orientalism, translation, cultural identity, Chinese reception

الكنز المدفون والأسطورة الشرقية: تشكيل الهوية الثقافية العربية في الترجمات المبكرة لألف ليلة وليلة

المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة تشكُّل الهوية الثقافية العربية من خلال الترجمات المبكرة لكتاب *ألف ليلة وليلة*، مع التركيز على كيفية استقباله وتفسيره في السياقين الغربي والصيني. تستعرض الدراسة كيف أن الترجمة الفرنسية لأنطوان غالان قد أدخلت هذا العمل إلى الجمهور العالمي، وفي الوقت ذاته ساهمت في تصوير الثقافة العربية-الإسلامية كـ"آخر ثقافي" من خلال عدسة الاستشراق. وتقرن الدراسة هذا النهج بالاستقبال الصيني، حيث حظي العمل، رغم أخطاء الترجمة وسوء الفهم الثقافي، بتقدير كبير لجماله الأدبي وخياله الواسع. ومن خلال توظيف نظرية الترجمة والتحليل التاريخي-الثقافي، تحدد الدراسة أربعة عوامل رئيسية أثرت في هذا التباين في التلقي: الاستشراق، والسياق الاجتماعي والسياسي لترجمة الروايات في الصين، واندماج الإسلام والكونفوشيوسية، والتعاطف المشترك في مواجهة الاستعمار. وتدعو الدراسة في الختام إلى إعادة تقييم نقدي لترجمة الأدب العربي وتداوله عالمياً، مع التأكيد على ضرورة استعادة الهوية الثقافية الأصيلة ضمن إطار الأدب العالمي والحدائق البديلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ألف ليلة وليلة، الثقافة العربية-الإسلامية، الاستشراق، الترجمة، الهوية الثقافية، التلقي في الصين.

I. Introduction:

Integrating extraordinary imagination with reality, the completion, translation and acceptance of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* implies self-edification through drawing upon other cultural traditions for wisdom and inspiration, building its own cultural identity and artistic value while nurturing and enriching the diversity of world literature. Antoine Galland's French version brought this masterpiece of medieval Arabic literature into global cultural horizon as it is translated into almost all major languages, offering new thinking paths for the cultural turn and mutual learning between civilizations. An intriguing phenomenon is that the translation and circulation of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* in the west has resulted in deep-rooted bias against the Arabo-Islamic culture, shaping a "cultural other" subject to gazing and judgment and in urgent need of indoctrination and enlightenment. On the other hand, when the work was first introduced into China in the late Qing and the early Republican period, despite the spontaneity of translation activities through which immature, even erroneous translations were produced, the work nonetheless gained remarkable literary fame in China. This article investigates into this phenomenon from the perspectives of historical and cultural context and the traits of the translated texts, proposing four possible reasons--nature of Orientalism, social environment of the translation surge of novels into Chinese, confluence of Islam and Confucianism and mutual empathy felt by China and the Arab world in the struggles against colonialism. These analyses aim at eliminating biases and misrepresentations in the translation and cultural capital circulation of Arabic literature and the Arabo-Islamic civilization, shedding new light on the national identity in a global context.

II. Early Manuscripts of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*

Reputed as the gem of medieval Arabic literature, *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* (ألف ليلة وليلة) is recognized not only for the marvellous imagination and ingeniously designed plot but also for the refraction and manifestation of national identity in the horizon of world literature as well as the hermeneutic interpretation and shaping of the national image by the universality of literature. It is generally believed that the history of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* can be traced back to the 8th or 9th century A.D. and essentially became a fixed text in the 16th century. Since Antoine Galland's French translation made its debut in Europe from where its world travels started, the social mores and folk customs, geographical traits, religious landscape and poetic traditions of the Arab world have entered the global horizons ever since. Dai Le, Chinese scholar in State University of New York at Binghamton called it "an epitome of success in moving from the margin to the center".¹ Yet disputes still persist around questions such as the origins of the earliest manuscript, the identity of author(s) and the authenticity of the tapestry of branches and versions, with its Persian or Arabic origins, collective or single authorship at the center of the debate.

Including those in China, most scholars draw the conclusion from accounts about *One Thousand Khurafa* in *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems* (مروج الذهب ومعادن الجوهر/ Muruj Al-Zahabwa Ma'adin Al-Jawhar) that *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* is originated from a medieval Persian collection of narratives known as *Hezar Afsaneh* (هزار افسانه) and was later supplemented by folk tales in the Abbasid caliphate and the Bahri Mamluk sultanate. Yet dissenters are numerous. Sheikh Ahmed Schirwani, a professor in Arabic who played a major role in publishing Calcutta I from 1814 to 1818 argued that the author of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* was an Arab in Syria who, intending to offer reading materials for learners of the

¹ Dai Le. (2021). From the Margins to the Center: *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* and National Identity of World Literary Classics. Study and Exploration. Vol.6, No.311, p.188.

Arabic language, compiled this collection of folk stories.² This opinion was cited by Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy, a French linguist and Orientalist most renowned for his research in Rosetta Stone, in his *Mémoire sur l'Origine du Recueil des Contes Instulé Les Mille et une Nuits*, where he proclaimed the existence of a single Arab author and that the so-called Persian origins of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* cannot be true based on literature research, adding that any alleged pre-Islamic roots of the book was fallacious. He refuted M. de Hammer's statement in *Contes inédits des Mille et une Nuits* about the existence of a certain Persian manuscript based on *A Thousand Khurafas* described in *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*, in which, according to Silvestre de Sacy, any evidence related to *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* was but "modern interpolation" ("interpolation moderne"), while de Hammer's statement was "an imagined conjecture to rectify the anachronism resulted simply from the reconciliation of the dates" (une conjecture imaginée pour sauver l'anachronisme qui résulte du simple rapprochement des dates).³ Even if some compilation called *A Thousand Nights* did exist, it would have been totally irrelevant had it not been for the fact that *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* borrowed the framework of the former.

In *History of Alf Laylah wa Laylah* (تاريخ ألف ليلد و ليلة), Iraqi scholar Hamza Hassan Al-Araji (حمزة حسن الأعرجي) examined the subtleties of the wording based on historical accounts with a linguistic approach similar to what Abu Hayyan Al-Tawhidi (أبو حيان التوحيدي) applied in his research, arguing strongly that *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* was authored by an Arab. Hady Hasan Hammoodi (هادي حسن حمودي), another Iraqi scholar and faculty member in the University of London, published *Alf Laylah wa Laylah, the Author and His Work* (ألف ليلة و ليلة: الكاتب والمكتوب) in 1981 where he claimed the existence of a certain Hyderabad Manuscript (نسخة حيدر آباد) transcribed in Kufa in ancient Iraq in 422 A.H. (1031 AD), of which, however, no substantial evidence was ever released in public. This has aroused much suspicion from the academia. Ibrahim Akel (إبراهيم عقل) of Sorbonne Université in Paris, for example, called it a "pseudo-manuscript" ("pseudo manuscrit") and sarcastically questioned: "Would this Arab intellectual take pleasure in fabricating a pseudo-manuscript of the Nights the same way as J. C. Mardrus?" (Le lettré arabe serait-il amusé à créer un pseudo manuscrit des Nuits érotisé à la manière de J. C. Mardrus?)⁴ According to extensive literature research by philologists, a total of 114 manuscripts have made their way into the Arab world and were hence arabicized, of which 15 manuscripts are confirmed to have been lost or extensively responded with skepticism, leaving nearly 100 manuscripts currently as part of museum, library or private collections.

Debates over the origins and the authenticity of manuscripts are still continuing today, which, over a long historical period, used to be a "niche" field of research dominated by philologists, historians and Arabists. It was the French translation completed from 1704 to 1717 by the French Orientalist Antoine Galland that was the magic sesame opening the door for *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* towards international prominence, an Arabic literary classic that embarked on its interlingual journey of being gazed upon and interpreted in a Eurocentric logical framework like an illusionary Arab chronicle with literary exquisiteness and hedonistic sensuality intermingled until its image of the Arabo-Islamic "cultural other" was

² See De Sacy, Antoine Isaac Silvestre. (1833). *Mémoire sur l'Origine du Recueil des Contes Instulé Les Mille et Une Nuits*. Mémoires de l'Institut de France. Tome 10, p.37. Originally in French "Il faut savoir que l'auteur du livre des Mille et une Nuits étoit un homme habitant de la Syrie, et dont l'arabe étoit la langue naturelle. Son but, en composant ce livre, a été que quelques personnes qui désiroient apprendre à parler arabe, acquérant par la lecture une certaine facilité à s'exprimer, parvinssent à parler cette langue".

³ De Sacy, Antoine Isaac Silvestre. (1833). *Mémoire sur l'Origine du Recueil des Contes Instulé Les Mille et Une Nuits*. Mémoires de l'Institut de France. Tome 10, p.49.

⁴ Chraïbi, Aboubakr, Akel, Ibrahim and Marzolph, Ulrich. (2016). *Arabic Manuscripts of the Thousand and One Nights: Presentation and Critical Editions of Four Noteworthy Texts Observations on Some Osmanli Translations*. Paris, France: Espaces & Signes. p.107.

fixed in the western cultural context. Yet its encounter with the Chinese readership was a different story as *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* was introduced to China amid the “Eastward Spread of Western Learning”, which helped to establish its unique prestige in the unprecedented horizon of “revolution in short stories and novels as the start of improvement in social governance” in the late Qing and the early Republican period,

III. Literary Influence in Making and Cultural Identity Being Made: Early Translations of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* in the West

An interesting fact is that the literary value of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* had been underestimated in the Arab world for a considerably long period of time. “Islamic people regard the Rubayat (and, one might add, the Thousand and One Nights) as quite inferior morsels of what their rich literature contain.”⁵ Indeed, having been shaped throughout centuries, this narrative was brought into the limelight of world literature through Galland’s translation, touching countless hearts with its timeless artistic appeal ever since. In *Translation Practices(s) and the Circulation of Cultural Capital, Some Aeneids in English*, André Lefevere classified the objectives of translation into communication of information, circulation of cultural capital, entertainment and call to action.⁶ From this perspective, the emergence of Galland’s translation was undoubtedly a pivotal point in the global circulation of the cultural value of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* by ushering this overlooked masterpiece into the sanctuary of Weltliteratur (world literature) in two dimensions, namely universal value and humanism.

A widely accepted proposition is that Galland’s translation of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* tends to represent a combination of medio-translation, reframing and rewriting. Though based on the Syrian manuscript, the translation was the result of audacious additions and deletions and was therefore called by many as “French adaptation” rather than “French translation”. *The Story of Sindbad the Sailor* can be traced back to a lost Arabic manuscript; while some stories with which contemporary readers are most familiar such as *Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, etc. are based on oral narrations by Hanna Diyab (حننا دياب), a Syrian Maronite storyteller.⁷ Numerous scholars claimed to have identified Arabic texts from their literature research which were arguably the origins of these stories, only to discover that what they believed to be the textual evidence were in fact back translations from French. Paulo Lemos Horta, a professor of New York University, Abu Dhabi and author of *Marvellous Thieves: Secret Authors of the Arabian Nights*, acknowledged the contribution of Diyab, among other key figures that remained largely anonymous behind the canonization of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, while arguing strongly for the collective authorship of these intriguing tales.⁸

Galland had a most rewarding and adventurous life apart from his feat of the translation of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*: he was appointed to a diplomatic post and later became a numismatist until commencing his academic career in Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. Interestingly enough (and not without a pinch of sarcasm), his scholarly achievements, such as the French translation of the Holy Qur’an, the authorship of *The Remarkable Sayings, Apothegms, and Maxims of the Eastern Nations* (Les Paroles

⁵ Kritzcek, James (ed.). (1964). *Anthology of Islamic Literature*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston. p.3.

⁶ Lefevere, André. (2001/2007). *Translation Practices(s) and the Circulation of Cultural Capital, Some Aeneids in English*, in Bassnett, Susan and Lefevere, André. *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. 1st Edition printed in April 2001, 6th Edition reprint in February 2007. p.41.

⁷ Doyle, Laura. (2020). *Inter-imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance*. U.S.A: Duke University Press. pp.68-94.

⁸ Horta, Paulo Lemos. (2017). *Marvellous Thieves: Secret Authors of the Arabian Nights*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

remarquables, les bons mots et les maximes des Orientaux) and the engagement in the compilation of *The Oriental Bibliography* (Bibliothèque orientale) as a successor of the Orientalist Barthélemy d'Herbelot after his decease, were almost eclipsed by these “contes arabes” which entitled him to the reputation of the “Orientalist who show a serious interest in secular literature of the Middle East”.

Galland's French version was regarded mediocre in terms of literary expressiveness by many a critic. Borges in his *Translators of the 1001 Nights* (Los Traductores de las 1001 Noches) commented that “Galland's version was literally the worst written, the most unfaithful and the feeblest of all” (Palabra por palabra, la versión de Galland es la peor escrita de todas, la más embustera y más débil).⁹ Yet such “unfaithfulness” would not in the least jeopardize Galland's French translation in the world history of literature. To be exact, the value of Galland's translation lies not in the exactitude and fineness of language but in its fundamental role in its secondary translation and textual reproduction. For example, a research project known as Encounters with the Orient in early modern European scholarship funded by HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) aimed at collecting and classifying authors and literary works influenced by *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* in the 18th century. These works include not only translations and commentaries but also exotic fairy tales and metaphorical philosophical stories by Diderot, Montesquieu and Voltaire, etc., as well as parody and pseudo-translation. What is different from post-modernist attempts to eliminate textual authority and to reduce “meaning” to fragments is that the “parody” of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* by western authors offered another perspective into the acknowledgement of its literary reputation and the attempts to maximize its value. From mid- and late 18th century to the dawn of the 19th century, “Orientalizing” was phenomenal in the European literary circles. German Romanticist poet and Orientalist Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866) was one of the luminaries of “Orientalisierende Dichtung” (Orientalized poetry), who, like his contemporaries Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and August Graf von Platen, sought inspirations from the exoticism and fantasy of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*.¹⁰ The ideal of “Weltpoesie allein ist Weltversöhnung” (world poetry is world reconciliation)¹¹ was therefore achieved. Scholars such as Claire Gallien even coined the word “pseudo-orientalism” as a rebellion against Orientalism in its original sense with fantasy literature outside the discursive system of power.

This marked the embarkation of the literary peregrination of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* from a fantasy to a fantasized epitome of the Arab society. The first complete English translation was completed by one (or more) anonymous translator(s) based on Galland's French version from 1706 to 1721 under the title of *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* when it was published in London. Commonly known as the Grub Street version, it claimed in its Preface to be “...an original work, descriptive as they are of the manners and customs of the East in general, and also of the Arabians in particular”¹², a citation from *Observations on the Passage to India through Egypt* published by Colonel James Capper in 1783. Historian James Dallaway also mentioned in his *Constantinople Ancient and Modern* that the scenes from *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* were brimming with “romantic air which pervades the domestic habits”¹³.

⁹ Borges, Jorge Luis. (2005). “Los Traductores de las 1001 Noches”, en *Historia de la Eternidad*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Emecé Editores. p.111.

¹⁰ Tamer, Georges and Yıldırım, Cüneyd. (2003). “Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866) and His Poetic Translation of the Qu'ran”, in Tyeer, Sarah R. Bin and Gallien, Claire (ed.). *Islam and New Directions in World Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. p.195.

¹¹ Kong, Qiu, Shi-King. (1833). *Chinesisches Liederbuch*. (trans.) Rückert, Friedrich. Altona: Hammerich. p.6.

¹² Anonymous (tr.). (1842). *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment, Embellished with Nearly One Hundred Engravings*. a New Edition. Philadelphia: Thomas Wardle. p.A2.

¹³ Anonymous (tr.). (1842). *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment, Embellished with Nearly One Hundred Engravings*. a New Edition.

These Orientalists who were diplomats, historians and travelers at the same time waged enormous efforts in search of the faintest clue to prove that the folk customs and ethos portrayed in the narrative were veristic depictions of everyday life of Arabs. Through publications and correspondence as well as citations and cross-references of these writings, their observations and personal experiences in the Arabo-Islamic world eventually built a closed loop dominated by apparently authoritative historical evidences, a deleterious illusion in its nature. In more exact terms, this boils down to a Foucaultian system of power and discourse gradually taking shape in the ideological lens of politics and religion, which, nourished by travel experiences, romantic imagination and fictitious narration, might have emerged as a construct from an innocent scholarly motive and solidified through hermeneutic textual interpretation, hence forging an “Orient” defined by the Occident and is subject to its criticism, scrutiny and judgement. Western translators of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* might never have expected that these texts and sub-texts (such as preface, annotation, etc.) intended as chronicles and encyclopedias of the Arab society would be penetrated by the Orientalist discourse gradatim in decades that followed until evolving into an instrumentalized way of thinking.

In the wake of the Grub Street version, the period from 1802 to 1838 saw the publication of translations by Edward Forster, Jonathan Scott and Henry Torrens respectively, which, though relatively less influential in the European history of literature in the beginning of the 19th century, were a continuation of Galland’s undertaking in shaping the cultural image of the Arab world. Scott claimed in the Preface of his translation published in 1811 that *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* was “presenting true pictures of oriental opinions, habits and manners. This is a fact fully ascertained by many who have visited the Moosulmanun dominions.”¹⁴ To prove his point, he cited comments from Capper, Dallaway and Russell (author of *History of Aleppo*). A rather shocking observation in the Introduction part was that the translator, led astray possibly by his superiority complex, wrongfully claimed as he expounded on polygamy that the legislator of the Arabs was guided by Jewish rabbins to limit the number of wives one can legally marry to four¹⁵. And he lamented that little, if any, scientific achievement was made in the Arab world since the reign of the Khalif Al Mamoon.¹⁶ Such dual denial in the morality and rationality of the Arabo-Islamic culture has further aggravated the institutionalization of the stereotype, ready to produce from the disdainful arrogance of Orientalists a feeble, uncivilized image as a result of “Versachlichung” (objectivation), thus in urgent need of enlightenment and salvation.

Featuring a writing style characteristic of the Victorian era, Edward Lane’s English translation completed from 1839 to 1841 was the first English version directly translated from Arabic. As a “purified” version of “selective translation based on moral principles”, Lane’s version is distinctive for its omission of vulgarities and sensuality as well as scenes that are deemed inconsistent with the translator’s impression of the Arab society.

A key feature of Lane’s version is the level of details and meticulousness of his annotation, which is a rare case in the entire history of translation. The Introduction, i.e. frame story alone contains 41 notes and 110 footnotes, covering fundamental teachings of Islam (basic belief, five tenets of Islam, prophets, civil law and criminal law, the view of the

Philadelphia: Thomas Wardle. p.A2.

¹⁴ Scott, Johnathan (tr.). (1911). *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*. London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brows, Paternoster-Row. p.iv.

¹⁵ Scott, Johnathan (tr.). (1911). *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*. London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brows, Paternoster-Row. p.xxxiii.

¹⁶ Scott, Johnathan (tr.). (1911). *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*. London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brows, Paternoster-Row. pp.xxvi-xxvii.

universe and the world, important concepts such as jinni [genie], etc.), daily life in the Arab world portrayed in the stories (living environment, correspondence, travels, hospitality, attitude towards women, etc.) as well as meanings of proper words such as people's names and official titles. Strict and detailed guidelines have even been established for the translation of proper nouns and the romanization of Arabic words.

Some scholars disapprove of Lane's fascination of orientalized expressions and his bigoted pursuit for accuracy in the translation of proper nouns, making the work more of a compendium of the institutional system of religion and morality in the Arab world, or a traveler's encyclopedia of folk customs and social life in Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad than a narrative fiction. This extraordinary translation strategy is attributable to the fact that Lane consciously placed his translation in a framework of history and sociology, believing that the value of these stories were in "complete and faithful description of the personality, manners and customs"¹⁷. For Lane, translation is not limited to literary features and aesthetic values but operates on the level of social studies or Islamic civilization studies. It is generally believed that Lane's translation shows a clear tendency towards ethnography or anthropology and that his notes are built on its self-sufficient narrative logic, which, even if published separately, would be recognized for its irreplaceable value, a point proven by the publication of the notes under the title of *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages* in 1883.

In fact, it is *Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians*, a book published in 1938 about customs and daily life in Egypt. The book, comprised of 28 chapters and numerous illustrations, aims at providing a systematic and comprehensive introduction of the climate, the architecture, the social hierarchy and codes of conduct in social interactions, Muslims' daily prayers and the interiors of mosque, as well as clothing, entertainment, weddings and funerals, etc. According to Lane's recollections, Egyptians took great pleasure in listening to recitations of stories as an entertainment, including stories from Romance of Antar and *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, and that due to the scarcity of the books, the legend known as Seyf Zul-Yezen (commonly known as Seyf El-Yezen or Seyf El-Yezel) were seldom told, while stories from *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* gradually faded into anonymity simply because the book was so expensive that most story-tellers could not afford it. Instead, "the modern Muslims of Egypt have sufficient remains of Bedawee feeling to take great delight in hearing tales of war"¹⁸. It is clear that Lane preferred the role of Orientalist or sociologist portraying social phenomena and offering explanations from an objective and neutral stand, rather than an eloquent story-teller or a writer known for its masterly wording.

An intriguing observation is that from the choice of themes for his writings to the voluminous annotation, Lane arguably spared no efforts in manifesting the environment and customs of the Arabo-Islamic society; however, among all stories in *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, what would have been most helpful in accomplishing this commendable goal--the Tale of Tawaddud, which in itself could be viewed as a pocket catechism of Islamic culture--is completely omitted from Lane's translation for it is "too seriously engaged with jurisprudence and Islamic law in general"¹⁹. "It would not only require a volume of commentary, but be extremely tiresome to most readers"²⁰, a quotation from Lane, trying to justify his decision by insinuating that the interest of target readers constituted a key factor influencing translator's decision.

Yet the pretext would seem untenable when placed in a synoptic observation with other

¹⁷ Marzolph, Ulrich and Leeuwen, Richard van. (2004). *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*. Vol.1. California: ABC-CLIO, Inc. p.29.

¹⁸ Lane, Edward William. (1908). *Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians*. London: J. M. Dent&Sons. p.420.

¹⁹ Al-Musawi, Muhsin Jasim. (2009). *The Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights*. New York: Columbia University Press. p.75.

²⁰ Al-Musawi, Muhsin Jasim. (2009). *The Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights*. New York: Columbia University Press. p.75.

writings of Lane. The editor of *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages* made it very clear in the Preface that the lengthy notes featuring a scholarly style and authoritative tone were attributable to Lane's awareness that the manners and ideas there described required a commentary if they were to become intelligible to the learned reader.²¹ Rather than entertaining his readers with exotic novelties, Lane was more interested in producing a faithful translation "to make readers more familiar with the manners, customs and beliefs of the Arabs".²² Therefore a more logical assumption is that like other Orientalist scholars, Lane subconsciously tried to reserve the power of explanation of the Arabo-Islamic culture as Orientalism evolved from shaping the Orient in an Occidental discourse to replacing the Oriental parole with the Occidental discourse, which became increasingly assertive and imperious.

John Payne completed his English translation titled *The Book of The Thousand Nights and One Night* from 1882 to 1884. What distinguished him from Lane was that Payne was more interested in producing a work of translated literature than engaging in the grand narrative as a mission. One of the remarkable traits of Payne's translation is that he rendered the poetry, adding up to 10,000 lines approximately, fully into English poetry with meters and stanzas. In a sense, this courageous move indicates that compared with his predecessors, Payne placed *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* and the medieval Arabic literature as a whole at a more esteemed position, as the decision that something is "worth translating" in itself implies recognition of the artistic value of the source text, representing the "decisive leap" of text and its cultural value or cultural capital into visibility. Compared to Payne's translation, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night: A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments* completed by Burton from 1885 to 1888 was like "an Arabic writing in English" in terms of style. Yet Burton's translation is probably the most controversial in the history of translation and circulation of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, the focus of controversy being the astonishingly true representation of "vulgarity" in language and plot, to which his peers reacted with disdain. From the frame story on, a world brimming with sensual desires and hedonistic fantasies was unabashedly reconstructed in the target language, partially as an intellectual rebellion against the prudish and hypocritical literary circles and even the entire social life in Europe in the 19th century. The exotic "Other" thus became the subject while the pompous Occident was reduced to *Gegenständlichkeit* (objectivity) being scrutinized, judged and subverted.

Burton might have been well prepared for these moralistic reproaches as he cited from Titus 1:15 "To the pure all things are pure"/"Puris omnia pura" in Arabic, English and Latin. Besides, he signed the cover page in Arabic "الله عبد الحاج" (al-Hajju Abd Allah), where "الحاج" (al-Hajju) refers to a Muslim who has completed his or her pilgrimage to Mecca. Burton once disguised himself as an Afghan Muslim for Hajj, which inspired him to author *Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Mecca* based on his experience and observations during the trip.

There is no clear evidence whether Burton was converted to Islam as claimed in some historical records. Yet he took extra caution in his choice of words to avoid substitution of cultural concepts, for example, "الله" is rendered as "Allah" rather than "God"; while interjections with religious implications are transliterated rather than translated, with "إن شاء الله" rendered as "insha-allah" rather than "if Allah wills" and "الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ" as "al-hamdu-lillah"

²¹ Lane-Poole, Stanley (ed.). (1883). *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages: Studies from the Thousand and One Nights*. London: Chatto and Windus. vii.

²² Schacker-Mill, Jennifer. (2000). "Otherness and Otherworldliness, Edward W. Lane's Ethnographic Treatment of the Arabian Nights". *The Journal of American Folklore*. Vol. 113, No.448, p.170.

rather than “all praise belongs to Allah”. Besides, Burton specifically mentioned in the Translator’s Foreword that he intentionally avoided the analogy between stories in *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* and European folklore or mythical legends, however interesting such coincidences might be. From the perspective of the evolution of translation theories, Burton’s proposition was over a century before concepts such as translator’s subjectivity and foreignizing strategy emerged since the cultural turn. Burton tried to break away from the Victorian squeamishness and prudishness while subverting the conventional poetics with exotic texts. However, observations of how the cultural image of the Arab world has been shaped in an Orientalist context would easily lead to the conclusion that the “subversion” was but a flash in the pan. In fact, Burton’s translation has been a catalyst rather than an antagonist in the distortion of the Arab cultural image in the eyes of the Occident. The intoxication, indulgences and indecencies accounted in the stories have portrayed the Arab world as a cultural object submissive to western moral and ethical system by which it is judged and enlightened.

Many of the myths about the Arab world are gradually clearing up today as a result of the globalization of knowledge and the booming mass communication industry; however, the translation and publication of Arabic literature in Europe and North America never truly managed to disentangle itself from the stereotype crafted and strengthened by Orientalists from the beginning. To a certain degree, modern publishing industry, as a medium of the global circulation of cultural capital, plays a dual role in shaping the image of the Arabo-Islamic world in global cultural context. On one hand, Arabic literature is moving from a marginalized position towards the center through translation and dissemination, thus offering both scholars and the general readership an opportunity to arrive at their contemplated and personalized conclusions from reading, which of course helps to break free from the slavish adherence to stereotypes. On the other hand, based on Lefevere’s theories on refraction and rewriting, literary translation is manipulated by ideology, poetics and patronage.²³ Mainstream ideology, canonized poetics and the economic and social status of patrons as well as the translator’s value are interwoven in the relations between culture and power, and the shaping of a cultural “Other” in mainstream discourse essentially starts from the choice of works to be translated.

In 2025, results from a research on 655 works of Arabic literature were published in *Boom in Arabic-English Literary Translation: A Contextual Analysis of Geopolitics and Patronage [2003-2020]* by Raidah Al-Ramadan *et. al.*, with the conclusion that regardless of the hidden agenda of the patronage, these translations have played a constructive role in the introduction and acceptance of Arabic literature in western countries, and that politics above all is the primary factor influencing the selection and acceptance of translated literature.²⁴ Fährndrich blames the multiple myths, clichés and reproaches encountered by Arabic literature in the West on the impact of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* as it “...degraded the perception of Arabic literature into a cliché, making it difficult to promote contemporary Arabic literature as it does not correspond to that cliché”²⁵, for which the work is unjustly accused as the formation of a country’s cultural image is never the result of a single factor but derives from the game and mediation between a series of factors such as geopolitics, economy, aesthetic values, ideologies, etc. Needless to say, cultural image is both the refraction of its own traits and the result of gradual objectification in an unbalanced cultural power relationship, where it is

²³ See Lefevere, André. (2005). *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. pp.11-72.

²⁴ Al-Ramadan, Raidah, Sayaheen, Bilal and Malkawi, Mona. (2025). *Boom in Arabic-English Literary Translation: A Contextual Analysis of Geopolitics and Patronage (2003-2020)*. Research Journal in Advanced Humanities. Volume 6, Issue 1.

²⁵ Al-Ramadan, Raidah, Sayaheen, Bilal and Malkawi, Mona. (2025). *Boom in Arabic-English Literary Translation: A Contextual Analysis of Geopolitics and Patronage (2003-2020)*. Research Journal in Advanced Humanities. Volume 6, Issue 1, p.9.

shaped into the “other” through parole. As Edward Said pointed out in *Orientalism*, “the Orient was Orientalized...also because it could be--that is--submitted to being--made Oriental.”²⁶

Most Arabic literature translated into English and other mainstream languages in Europe and North America focuses principally on diasporic conditions, dilemma between religious traditions and individual freedom and “awakened” women entangled in the subsequent identity crisis and social struggles. In principle, these humanistic concerns are not to be avoided by any intellectual in good conscience, yet oftentimes these themes are unfortunately simplified or even intentionally misrepresented as portrayals of violence, suppressed corporal desires and manipulated feminism, hence producing an inadequate representation of the current status of the Arabic world even to the point of collusively fortifying the stereotype of “backward, irrational, suppressing human nature, in need of enlightenment and salvation” constructed by the Occident. Behind this surging trend is not only the impetuous materialism with “best-selling” as the dominant criterion for contemporary popular literature but also the hidden agenda of the Occident to constrain the question of cultural identity within the paradigm of “conflict between civilizations”, attempting to dissolve the value consensus in the Arab world through cultural nihilism.

According to Richard van Leeuwen, Dutch translator of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, the significance of translation extends far beyond interlingual conversion on a textual level, nor is it constrained within the dichotomy in cultural, political and ideological dimensions, but points to the cultural identity and the self-awareness of such. Leeuwen has noted the precarious state of identity in the dominion of western discourse as he remarked that it “prevented the emergence of an authentic discourse on Arab identity, since the problem of identity was wholly seen through the prism of European conceptions.”²⁷ The dual effect of “being made visible” and “being constructed as Other” would remind contemplative minds of how Galland’s French translation and the subsequent translations of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* into European languages have ushered these “Contes Arabes” onto a world literature odyssey. On one hand, it is through translation that the artistic appeal of this masterpiece in oblivion becomes visible in world literary circles; on the other hand, as the circulation, understanding and hermeneutic interpretation of the text is not in a vacuum but in constant collision, interrogation and fusion with pre-existing mental constructs (*vorsicht*) in a historical context, i.e. “Horizontverschmelzung” (fusion of horizons). The problem, however, lies in that a horizon permeated and domesticated by Orientalism would inevitably leave its imprint on the text that enters it by marring the pattern of which the text is understood and interpreted, leaving both authors and translators in a defenseless state of watching the texts they have constructed out of innocent curiosity or scholarly idealism being distorted or manipulated. Early translations of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* into European languages serve as an appropriate example. Translators such as Galland and Burton as well as Jean-Charles Mardrus and Weil Gustav in later years are remarkable for their erudition, meticulous choice of style and words and profound understanding of the Arabo-Islamic culture exceeding their contemporaries by leaps and bounds, yet their translations have failed to stay unblemished from being molded into a hotchpotch of abridged versions of Arab cultural encyclopedia, travel records of adventurers braving into the Orient and sensual fictions tinted with exotic passion, all in an Orientalist context. The West in a culturally dominant position has equated the fictitious narratives of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* -- tantalizing romances and exotic fantasies brimming with legendary figures and dazzling desires -- with the Arab world in reality, on which basis the

²⁶ Said, Edward W. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books. pp.5-6.

²⁷ Leeuwen, Richard van.(2004). “The Cultural Context of Translating Arabic Literature”, in Said, Faiq (ed.). *Cultural Encounters in Translation from Arabic*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters. p.16.

Orient as a “cultural other” is constructed under the gaze of the Occident, an object in want of enlightenment and indoctrination in its uncultured naïveté.

III. *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* amid Eastward Spread of Western Learning: Religious Features Understated and Artistic Values Understood

Compared to the West, China is a latecomer in the research on *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* despite the long history of exchanging envoys and presenting gifts as a token of friendship between China and the Arab world. From the Central Plains westward to Suyab, Arsacid, Tazi and the Byzantine Empire, the Silk Road has witnessed thriving trading activities since the Tang Dynasty. The earliest historical evidence of exchange in literature can be traced back to the Abbasid Dynasty and the flourishing period of the Tang Dynasty. In *Tong Dian* (a Chinese encyclopedic record of institutions) authored by Prime Minister Du You in the Tang Dynasty, a chapter was dedicated to Tazi (Volume 193) with citations of 1,775 Chinese characters from *Jing Xing Ji*, the irretrievably lost travelogue by Du Huan, a traveler and man of letters in the Tang Dynasty who was held captive during the Battle of Talas (معركة طلاس) and spent twelve years in Tazi. The same citations also appeared in other historical records and anthologies including *Tai Ping Yu Lan*, *Tai Ping Huan Yu Ji* and *Wen Xian Tong Kao*. The statement that “Tazi has its own literature which is distinctive from Persia” indicates that Du Huan had mastered both Arabic and Persian languages to a considerable degree that allowed him to comment on the literature of the two peoples. Yet no solid evidence indicating Du Huan’s knowledge of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* is found in this citation in *Tong Dian*.

The debut of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* in China is attributable to its translation from Persian (with possible reference to Arabic) into the Uyghur language by Muhammed Binni Abudulahan Mahtum²⁸, a Chinese Uyghur scholar and translator of ancient literature. From what little information there is about the translator’s life, it is inferred that the translation was most probably completed from the late 18th century to the early 19th century. Zhou Guisheng, on the other hand, is believed to be the first translator of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* into Chinese, who started this laudable endeavor in the 26th year of Emperor Guangxu’s reign (1900). His translation was serialized on *Cai Feng Bao* from May 6th, 1903²⁹ before it constituted part of *First Tome of Translated Works by Xin’an (Xin An Xie Yi Chu Bian)* edited by Wu Jianren (also known as Wu Woyao) in 1903³⁰. In the same year, 10 stories from *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* were published in serial in *The Continent (Da Lu)*. According to Zhi Puhao in *A Companion for Chinese Translators, Alf Laylah wa Laylah (Yi Qian Ling Yi Ye)* and *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments (Tian Fang Ye Tan)* translated by an anonymous translator were published by The Continent Press in 1903³¹, but no consensus is yet achieved on the relations between these two books and the serialized publications on *The Continent*. In the same year, Qian Kai’s *Adventures on the Sea (Hang Hai Shu Qi, i.e. Sindbad the Sailor)*, translated from *Kaikan Kyouki: Arabia Monogatari (かいかんきょうきあらびあものがたり)*, Japanese translation of Arabian Nights by Hideki Nagamine in 1875. In 1904, Zhou Zuoren, who was a student at the time, published in serial *A Chivalrous Girl-Slave (Xia Nv Nu)*, a translation from Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, in *Women’s World (Nv Zi Shi Jie)* under the pen name of Lady Pingyun, in an effort to “admonish those born with an obsequious nature”³² as Zhou claimed in the 1905 publication as a monograph.

²⁸ Telat Ibrahim. (2014). “On the Translation of Ethnic Literature: the Case of the Earliest Uyghur Translation of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*”. Xinjiang: Minority Translators Journal. September 30, 2014. Vol. 3, p.52.

²⁹ Ge Tieying. (2007). *Book Reviews from the Arab World--Arabic Literature in China*. Beijing: Capital Normal University Press. p.266.

³⁰ Du Jian. (1980). *Night Voyages Across the Sea of Books (Shu Hai Ye Hang)*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company. pp.191-192.

³¹ Lin Huangtian (ed.). (2005). *A Companion for Chinese Translators*. Hubei: Hubei Education Press. p.835.

³² Zhou Zuoren (tr.). (1905). *A Chivalrous Girl-Slave (Xia Nv Nu)*. Shanghai: Xiao Shuo Lin Press, in Shi Zhecun (ed.). (1991). *Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*. Translated Literature Tome III, Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House. p.359.

The above were but a few examples of the surge in Chinese translation of this collection of medieval Arabic fantasies during the “Eastward Spread of Western Learning” alongside with detective stories and mysteries, political fiction and romances translated into Chinese from Europe, North America and Japan, as part of the cultural climate represented by the statements “This is the epoch where civilizations come into contact with one another, where fictions encounter and influence one another”, “Fictions alone stand out and thrive”.³³ No particular emphasis was placed on their Arabic literary features, let alone the shaping of Arabo-Islamic cultural image among Chinese readers.

Translated by Xi Ruo, the first relatively complete Chinese version of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* was serialized on *Xiu Xiang Xiao Shuo* and *The Orient* from 1903 to 1905 under the name of *Tian Fang Ye Tan* (The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments) which contained 17 stories and were later published as a monograph titled *Tian Fang Ye Tan: A Collection of Fantasies* in 1906 as part of the *Novel Series*. The monograph comprised of 50 stories was “translated by Xi Ruo from Yuanhe; revised by Jin Shi from Shaoxing”; the latter, in the Foreword, stated that “the translation, once completed, was discussed and polished lest there should be any excessive or inadequate translations, vulgarities or imprudence. The work is therefore presented to the cultured class.”³⁴ It is therefore clear that Xi Ruo’s translation, featuring archaic daintiness and smooth elegance in its style, was intentionally made palatable to the taste of “the cultured class”, i.e. civil officials with good education background and esteemed social status. Xi Ruo’s translation was reprinted by the Commercial Press in 1924 and included in *All-Encompassing Library (Wan You Wen Ku)* edited by Wang Yunwu in 1930 as a 4-volume collection, for which Ye Shengtao (also known by his style name Shaojun) made revisions and annotations while expressing his appreciation in the Foreword for Xi Ruo’s style of writing, “this translation features a skilful mastery of ancient Chinese without being pedantic; it shows profundity and elegance in style and creativity and smoothness in constructing sentences.”³⁵

An intriguing fact is that Xi Ruo was a Christian with a western education background of which theology was part of the curriculum, yet when addressing the text originating from a completely different cultural context and religious discourse, he decided to minimize the religious traits in the translation which featured a “dual acculturation”: the Islamic cultural elements were weakened due to the influence of the target culture when the source text was translated from Arabic into English, and all religious traits were removed or replaced by religious elements characteristic of Chinese beliefs. For example, “But this God was not pleased to grant me”³⁶ was in itself a result of acculturation as الله (Allah) in Islamic culture was rendered as God in Forster’s translation, while in the Chinese translation “孰知事有与予愿大相背戾者”³⁷ (literally “but the development of the events were against my wish”) where the religious element was completely omitted and the angle of narration shifted from Allah to man. A more typical example is “He gave considerable alms to the poor, and very large donations to the holy men of his religion, instituting, moreover, for their benefit...in order to obtain by their prayers what he so ardently desired”³⁸, which Xi Ruo translated as “复博施力赈，吁福于天，并命缙流代祷焉。” (literally “he gave

³³ Huang Ren. (1907). “Inaugural Editorial of Xiao Shuo Lin”. Shanghai: Xiao Shuo Lin.

³⁴ Xi Ruo (tr.). (1906). *Tian Fang Ye Tan: A Collection of Fantasies*. Jin Shi. Foreword, *Tian Fang Ye Tan: A Collection of Fantasies*. Shanghai: The Commercial Press. pp.1-3.

³⁵ Xi Ruo (tr.). (1930). *Tian Fang Ye Tan: A Collection of Fantasies*, Ye Shengtao. Foreword, *Tian Fang Ye Tan: A Collection of Fantasies*. Shanghai: The Commercial Press. p.18.

³⁶ Forster, E. (tr.). (1810). *The Arabian Nights*. Volume 5. London: William Miller. p.74.

³⁷ Xi Ruo (tr.). (1906). *Tian Fang Ye Tan: A Collection of Fantasies*. Shanghai: The Commercial Press. p.44.

³⁸ Forster, E. (tr.). (1810). *The Arabian Nights*. Volume 1. London: William Miller. p.291.

considerable alms to the poor, made supplications to the Heaven and ordered the Buddhist monks to pray for him.”) Here ”緇” means black and metaphorically refers to Buddhists who were usually donned in black gowns at the time, hence the word “緇流”, meaning Buddhist monks and nuns, came into being from an allegory dated back to the Northern Wei Dynasty. According to Yang Xuanzhi in *Samgharama of Luoyang: Hutong Temple in the City*, “(Buddhist nuns) paid frequent visits to the Palace to speak with the Queen on Buddhist doctrines. The Queen was unparalleled in her generosity in providing for monks and nuns.” Similarly, Forster chose the terms “holy men of his religion” and “prayers” to dilute the Islamic cultural features. Yet in Xi Ruo’s translation, the scene of Muslims making duaa for a generous man who never hesitated in giving alms was replaced by Buddhist monks chanting sutra and pleading the Heaven for blessings. While early translations in Europe either offered an overview or went into great lengths in introducing Islamic concepts in *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, these Islamic cultural elements were completely invisible in Xi Ruo’s translation, let alone any endeavors to build an Arabo-Islamic cultural image through translation.

In fact, translators actively engaged in the eastward movement of Western learning in the late Qing and early Republican period were mainly open-minded civil officials or intellectuals having received Western education or returned from overseas, who were more of traditional literati than modern scholars. Pursuing enlightenment and rationality, they attempted to introduce Western academic theories, methodologies and scientific achievements into China through translation while inspiring people’s minds and intellects through literature and eventually initiating positive social changes. This indicates a moral idealism and academic pragmatism in essence. Since its spread into China, Islam has never attempted to rewrite the mainstream values; instead, the confluence of Islam and Confucianism has paved the way for its integration into the Chinese culture, i.e. localization of Islam in China. For a considerable period of time, the interaction between the Arab world and China was predominantly on the level of tributary trade and maritime trade administered by authority, while cultural exchanges were far less active. Therefore it was only natural for these patriotic intellectuals who desired to find solutions for national rejuvenation by “following Chinese learning as the essence and adopting western learning for practical purposes” to have little knowledge about Islam or the Arab culture.

While Xi Ruo’s translation is noted for the obscurity of religious traits in the source text by acculturating the stories taking place in medieval Arab society into a Chinese local context, Wang Yuanfang’s translation of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, published in 1930 under the title of *The Thousand and One Nights (Yi Qian Ling Yi Ye)*, has left much room for scrutiny due to misunderstanding of the Islamic culture. Based on *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments: Stories from The Thousand and One Nights Told for Young People* by Martha A. L. Lane, Wang’s translation consists of 21 stories in total. To show respect to the original work, the translator decided to translate the Foreword by Martha Lane into Chinese. Yet in terms of understanding of the Islamic cultural concepts, the translation of the Foreword is not free from erroneous information. For example, “The sacred book of the Mohammedans is the Koran, in which they are taught that Allah has revealed himself to various prophets”, “Mohammed is considered the latest and most divine of the prophets” and “the pilgrimage to their sacred city of Mecca” are respectively rendered as “回教有一部经典，叫做科仑（Koran）。这部经典里说阿难曾受许多先知先觉的启示” (literally “The classic book of Muslims is known as Koran, in which they are taught that Allah received revelations from many prophets”), “他们承认马罕默得是先知先觉的后起者” (literally “Mohammed is considered a latecomer

among prophets”) and “跑到圣都米喀 (Mecca) 去朝山进香” (literally “flock to Mecca, their sacred capital, for praying rituals in the mountains with incense sticks offered”), which have not only misrepresented the source text in sentence structure in defiance of common sense but also substituted “al-Hajj” (pilgrimage) with “praying rituals in the mountains with incense sticks offered”, a practice found in local religions in China. The religious context of the source text is lamentably distorted in the translation.

What is indeed surprising is that these excessive acculturation, misrepresentations and erroneous translations have never masked the brilliance of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, which has been applauded and appreciated for its literary and artistic values since it first entered China. One can hardly imagine an anthology or monograph on China-Arab cultural exchange--whether focused on the intertextuality of literary works or addressing the grand theme of mutual learning between civilizations--without referring to *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* as “a splendid flower of China-Arab exchange in literature”. What is remarkably different from the “cultural Other” gazed upon and manipulated by Orientalism is that the cultural connotations of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* for most Chinese people is not even remotely associated with religious conceptions or national image, but unharnessed imagination, story time in sweet reminiscence of childhood, the magic lamp and flying carpet of Aladdin, Sindbad the undaunted sailor on his voyages... “Like a diamond in the rough”, judiciously commented Li Weizhong in the Foreword of his unabridged translation.³⁹

IV. Conclusion: National Literature in Global Horizon and “Alternative Modernity”

Western scholars have made relentless endeavors in expanding *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* as an account of Arab customs and an Islamic cultural encyclopedia firmly grounded in theoretical foundation and empirical evidences, intermingling fiction with colonists’ travelogue and sketchbook of daily observations in translation, hence shaping the image of the Arabo-Islamic world as a cultural “Other” characterized by enticing sensuality, naïveté, and exoticism in the want of enlightenment and civility. The consequences of such a falsified stereotype are still felt in international publishing business today. The history of Chinese translation of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, on the other hand, started two centuries behind Galland’s French version as spontaneous and fragmented efforts by open-minded civil officials and new intellectuals aspiring to enlighten people’s intellect and revolutionize their mind. Due to insufficient knowledge of Arabo-Islamic culture and mental entrenchment in the Chinese traditional cultural context, these translations are oftentimes marred by obscurity or misunderstanding of cultural significance of the source text through excessive acculturation or misuse of concepts. These misrepresentations and erroneous translations, however, did not result in cultural misunderstanding or distortion. This apparent dilemma is, in fact, attributable to at least four hidden factors.

First, in the power-discourse system on which Orientalism is built, texts are almost inevitably manipulated out of the superiority complex of the “advanced” civilization. The Occidental imagination of the Orient is “based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections.”⁴⁰ Any stakeholder in this discursive system, be it text itself, its author or translator, might be reduced to a pawn in constructing the culture “Other”.

³⁹ Li Weizhong. (2005/2019). *The Thousand and One Nights (Yi Qian Ling Yi Ye)*. Translator’s Foreword. Haikou: Nan Hai Publishing Co., p.5.

⁴⁰ Said, Edward W.. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books. p.8.

The second factor is the historical context in which *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* was translated into Chinese. Inferior to Confucian classics in solemnity and magnificence and eclipsed by poetry and rhymed prose in literary fineness, stories and novels had been marginalized in the literary system in China. In the late Qing and early Republican period, however, the influence of the “Eastward spread of Western Learning” has associated translation of foreign novels with “progress in society, salvation of the nation and functioning where moral education fails”, while these translation practices were believed to have “brought new paradigms, devices and conceptions of literature”⁴¹, hence highly appreciated by the authorities as well as the general public. *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* was well received for its childlike candidness, unpremeditated art and picturesque imagination, and the “Arabian land” portrayed in the work is undoubtedly positive and appealing.

Third, as is mentioned above, throughout its long history of feudal dynasties, China, as a secular country built upon agrarian civilization and Confucian institutions for social governance, has been characterized by utmost reverence of mainstream discourse and authority in terms of social institutions while demonstrating extraordinary cultural inclusiveness “like the ocean encompassing all rivers and streams”. For this reason, Islam never constituted a challenge to the mainstream belief or instigated ideological debates since its introduction into China. On the contrary, Islam “pursues perfection in the five fundamental interpersonal relations, which is consistent with the five institutions and five moral standards in *The Book of Zhou* with no contradiction”⁴², indicating commonalities in moral ideal and ethical orientation with Confucianism. Such commonalities have further evolved into an awareness in the context of cultural diversity with “reinterpreting Islam with Confucianism” and “confluence of Islam and Confucianism” in the Ming and the Qing Dynasties. The local interpretation of Islam has significantly reduced the foreignness of Islamic cultural elements in Chinese literary context, hence omissions and misinterpretations of religious concepts in the translation would not arouse excessive attention or deemed offensive.

Another element not to be neglected is the intervention of mainstream ideology. In the struggles against colonialism, the Arab world and China were sympathetic towards each other’s situation, hence voicing strong support for each other and learning from each other in ethos and cultural strategies. Threats from imperialism and colonialism have brought Arab countries and China into profound understanding of each other’s situation, laying an ideological and social basis for the Arab culture to build a positive image in China. Such ideological influence has survived historical vicissitudes and culminated in the 1950s and 60s, of which Xiao Bolun’s remarks in the Translator’s Foreword in his abridged translation published in 1956 is a fitting example, “The Chinese people read *Tian Fang Ye Tan* not only out of fondness... (The Arab people) are fighting unrelentingly for national independence and freedom as well as lasting world peace. Deeply we feel for them and support them in their endeavors”⁴³, a stark contrast to the condescending attitude typical of the Orientalist paradigm where “schools of thought that took the *Nights* as a field of ethno-theological study happened to operate within a colonial script where colonial desire proliferates in expansion, exploitation, manipulation of power, and also the reproduction of a self-image outside the metropolitan centre.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Yang Naiqiao.(2014). *Introduction to Comparative Literature*. 4th Edition. Beijing: Peking University Press. p.356.

⁴² *Rebuilding of the Mosque*, composed and inscribed in cinnabar by Yang Shouyi, county magistrate and Aurg of Anxi County, Zhongshan Prefecture (now Ding County in Hebei Province) in 1348 (8th year of Emperor Zhizheng’s reign), now in Dingzhou Mosque, Hebei. See also: official website of Shanghai Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau, https://mzzj.sh.gov.cn/2021xwzx_rdyw/20240311/fad2899a6e7245a3a9aa80e195bc4b6b.html.

⁴³ Xiao Bolun (tr.). (1956). *Tian Fang Ye Tan*. Beijing: Popular Literature and Art Publishing House. p.3.

⁴⁴ Al-Musawi, Muhsin Jasim. (2023). “The ‘Islamic’ *Arabian Nights* in World Imaginaries”, in Tyceer, Sarah R. Bin and Gallien, Claire

With translation becoming “one of the most representative paradigms of the clash between two cultures”⁴⁵, the competition for the discursive power of culture is bound to inspire deeper reflections on the world image and national identity shaped through literature. The myth of “singular modernity” veiled in Western ethnocentrism is debunked through Chinese scholars’ efforts in constructing modernity in the Chinese context, thus laying the cornerstone for “alternative modernity” with Chinese characteristics⁴⁶. Similarly, to resist the marginalization and misinterpretation of the Arabic literature and even the Arabo-Islamic civilization in the literary and art circles over a painfully long period, the one and only solution lies the Arabic literature itself. Thus it is the mission of Arabic scholars to guide our national literature towards the global horizons of comparative literature and world literature research while restoring our identity in this beguiling era marked by cosmopolitan pluralism and universal values. Such return by no means indicates conformism or refusal of change, but is all about reconstruction of cultural identity and a sense of belonging that guards the spiritual home of the Arab people with true faith.

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