

## *Emperor Kangxi's Poetry on Taiwan*

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### **Abstract**

A total of four poems plus a poetic preface collected in *The Complete Works of Emperor Kangxi* (康熙帝御制文集) that deal directly with the emperor's military success of acquiring Taiwan are analyzed and translated into English. They include "Heard the News of Victory on the Day of Mid-Autumn Festival [中秋日聞海上捷音]," "Composed Another Five-Character Quatrain on the Same Night Facing the Moon [是夜對月再成絕句]," "A Poem Given to Shi Lang, with a Preface [賜施琅詩并序]," and "A Narrative about the Conquest of Taiwan in the Sacrificial Ceremony at the Tomb of Emperor Shunzhi [臺灣平告祀孝陵有述]. The translation would base on the conventional English closed forms of fixed meters and rimes while maintaining the distinctive poetic structures, vocabulary, and rhyming schemes of those royal Chinese poems. In addition to the conventional discussions of literary merits, this paper focuses on the comparison and contrast between the emperor's thoughts about acquiring Taiwan as recorded in the historical documents and those as described in his poems, which hopefully could provide more insights into this major military achievement in early Qing dynasty.

Keywords: Kangxi, Shi Lang, Taiwan, Zheng Ke-shuang, Poem, Translation

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## Introduction

During his 61 years of reigning, Kangxi (康熙 A.D. 1654-1722) achieved many military successes, which not only contributed to fortifying the political foundations of Qing's ruling, but also resulted in its territory being expanded to a size never before achieved in China. Yet, of all those military accomplishments, defeating Zheng Keshuang's (鄭克塽) navy off Penghu (澎湖) and consequently claiming Taiwan as part of Qing territory would likely have a special meaning to the Emperor because Zheng's force was closely tied to the loyalists to the Ming dynasty, and his surrender had directly caused the capture of many remaining Ming royalties, which formally signified the end of Ming. There are a total of four poems in The Complete Works of Emperor Kangxi (康熙帝御制文集) that mark his military strategies towards and political thoughts about acquiring Taiwan. In this paper I will try to first, translate them into English in accordance with the conventional poetic forms; second, analyze their merits both as Chinese and English literary works; and lastly, discuss their values as a historical document with regard to this major event in early Qing dynasty.

The first poem to be discussed is entitled "Heard the News of Victory on the Day of Mid Autumn 中秋日聞海上捷音" which is translated as follows:

Bows were hung up early on the hibiscus plants ten thousand miles away;  
The military forces of water rhinoceros pointed at the island's vacant gate.  
They came to the courtyard not necessarily to nurture cultures and virtues;  
I have originally preferred diplomacy to military forces for this remote place.  
The acceptance of surrender was held in a tent beyond the autumnal colors;  
Amidst the bright moon light, the palace guards reported the victorious gains.  
I have long concerned about the hard lives of those islanders across the sea;  
Henceforth harvesting and welling in all nine territories will become the same.

萬里扶桑早掛弓，水犀軍指島門空。來庭豈為修文德，柔遠初非黷武功。牙帳受降秋色外，羽林奏捷月明中。海隅久念蒼生困，耕鑿從今九壤同。（527）

In its original Chinese form this poem is in strict conformity with the seven-character regulated verse (七言律詩) which requires a total of eight lines in parallel structure, seven characters in each line, stipulated tonal sequences, and rhyming at the end of every even line. However, in this work the second line is also rhymed, which is reflected in the English translation. Since it is unlikely to transliterate the seven Chinese characters in the original poem into seven English words, or transliterate the original seven Chinese monosyllabic characters into equal number of English syllables, I have tried to adapt Gerard Manley Hopkins' concept of "sprung rhythm" which utilizes variable sets of sounds instead of traditional accented meters (Abrams 1545). Instead of counting syllables, the translation adopts the similar sets of words as those in the original. For example, in the first line of the original, there are basically four sets of characters: ten thousand miles (萬里), hibiscus plants (扶桑), early (早), and bows hung (掛弓). All of them show up in the translation albeit rearranged according to English syntax. Additionally, in order to mimic the appearance of the Chinese regulated verse form, all lines in the English translation contain equal number of letters and spaces. As the emperor doesn't use any particularly difficult diction in

the original, neither does the English translation. Hopefully all this could help to retain the flavors of the original work.

Like many classic Chinese regulated verses, the major imagery in this poem is natural scenery, which is used as a backdrop in contrast to the political or military actions which are the primary theme of the work. The hibiscus plants are contrasted with the moving navy forces; courtyard with remote military actions; oceans and lands with the hard living conditions of the locals. While not necessarily outstanding by themselves, those images present vivid scenes taken place in those successful attacks over the islands. The most memorable among them is probably the surrender ceremony around autumnal nuances, which the palace guards speedily reported to the emperor under the bright moonlight.

In terms of official history, this poem reveals some insights about the emperor's involvement in the military and political strategies toward Taiwan. First, he was very well informed of the battle plans and overall strategy designed by the commander of the attacking forces, Shi Lang (施琅). According to an official account of the battle: "At seven o'clock in the morning on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day, after sufficient revamping and full rest, the Qing forces started a general attack against the Zheng forces on Peng-hu. After nine hours of fierce battles, the Qing forces won a complete victory. As the sea warfare over Penghu ended, the Qing forces gained huge advantages over the Zheng forces by posting large number of soldiers by their border [二十二日早七時，經過充分休整和準備的清軍向澎湖鄭軍發起總攻。經過 9 小時激戰，清軍取得全面勝利。]" (Ren and Wu). The first couplet of the poem accurately and concisely describes the gist of this narrative. In the next couplet the emperor points out that his forces are not there to nurture the virtues of the locals, nor were they there to exercise militarism, implying that the ultimate strategic guidance is "appeasing through attacking," which is exactly how it took place as recorded in the historic document: "At this time, to fulfill the overall strategy of "appeasing through attacking, Shi Lang gave order to temporarily stop the military attacks so that they could refurbish the troops and ammunition to prepare for the attack of Taiwan on one hand, and on the other hand, adopted measures to move the problem of Taiwan towards political solution [澎湖海战结束后，清军对台湾郑氏集团已形成大兵压境的有利态势。这时，施琅为贯彻“因剿寓抚”的战略方针，下令暂停军事进攻，一面休整部队，补充弹药给养，作好进攻台湾的准备；一面采取措施，推动台湾问题向政治解决的方向发展]" (Ren and Wu). In the third couplet Kangxi visualizes how Zheng Ke-shuan (鄭克爽), the young leader of the Zheng forces, surrendered to Shi Lang, and the news happened to reach him on the day of the mid autumn festival which redoubled his mood for celebration. The history account points out that on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh month, Zheng Ke-Shaun accepted the suggestion of Liu Guo-Zhang (劉國璋), one of his ministers who negotiated with the representatives from Shi Lang, turned in the gold seal of Prince Yen-ping, Superior Conquest General, and formally surrendered to the Qing forces (Li Chun-guang 90; Ren and Wu).

Yet the most important insight of this poem probably lies in the last couplet because it reveals the emperor's real goal for this military action. Immediately following the victory, Li Guang-di (李光地), a ranking cabinet minister, advised the emperor that "standing alone beyond the ocean, Taiwan could easily generate thieves and bandits.

It would be better to move out the local residents, and forfeit our ruling over it” (“一派認為台灣孤懸海外，易生盜賊，應將當地百姓遷出，放棄對它的統治“ Ren and Wu). Shi Lang, on the other hand, strongly urged the emperor to do the opposite. In his “Memorandum regarding Keeping or Abandoning Taiwan” (恭陳台灣棄留疏) submitted to Kangxi in 1865, one year after the war, he explained the major advantages of taking the island permanently under the Qing rule on account of its geological position that could affect the safety of the four southern coastal provinces, and its agricultural and commercial potentials that could financially benefit the central government (Ren and Wu; *Epoch Times Cultural Group*). As a matter of fact, based on the conclusive couplet of this poem the emperor did not need any persuasion in this regard because he had long been concerned about the poor living conditions of the people in Taiwan and had always wanted them to be reunited with the other territories of his empire.

The next poem to be discussed is a quatrain of five characters which is entitled “Composed Another Five-Character Quatrain on the Same Night Facing the Moon 是夜對月再成絕句.” It is translated as follows:

On the mid-autumn festival when the moon is bright,  
A message has arrived speedily from beyond the sea.  
From this day forward along the Milky Way in the sky  
Ten thousand miles of smokes and clouds are cleared.

明月中秋節，馳書海外來。自今天漢上，萬里煙雲開。（527）

As there are only five characters in each line in this Chinese quatrain, the number of words in English translation is naturally shorter than that in the seven-character regulated verse: instead of four sets of words in each line of the previous poem, there are now only two or three sets in each line in correspondence to its Chinese original, such as bright moon and the Mid-autumn Festival in the first line; speeding letter and coming from beyond ocean in the second; time indicator and milk way in the third; and distance indicator and opening clouds and smokes in the last line. While the rhyme scheme in the original is ABCB, in the translation it is ABAB so as to reflect the tradition of an English quatrain. Similar to that of the previous poem, the diction in this work is relatively unsophisticated as seen in the translation.

Classic Chinese literary criticism expects a five-character quatrain to be “more concise than already concise, more simple than already simple, putting together four sentences as if one sentence, transmitting intense emotions into one single word [絕句大旨，則又已精而益求其精，已簡而益求其簡，欲四句如一句，绎稠情于单词]” (Li Xiao-hong). Based on those standards, this poem should get high mark considering its simple imagery not only vividly presents Kangxi learning of the victory on the night of moon festival, but also succinctly expresses his elation over such a military achievement. Additionally, full moon symbolizes the reunification between the Manchu government on the mainland and the Zheng forces on the island of Taiwan. Bright moon beams clearing up the clouds along the Milk Way signifies a peaceful country after the reunification. All those celestial images figuratively give testimony to the emperor’s inner feelings towards this historical event.

The third poem to be discussed in this paper is entitled “A Poem Given to Shi Lang, with a Preface 賜施琅詩 并序.” The preface in its Chinese original shows fine prosaic quality, and it sounds almost like a poem, which is translated as follows:

The atmosphere overseas has not been peaceful.  
Battleships appearing and disappearing,  
Shocked even the high ocean waves.  
The coastal residents have suffered loss of work  
In fishing, salt mining, silk weaving, and farming.  
I have constantly pitied them in my heart.  
Lately, the turmoil in the provinces of Dian, Qian,  
Long, Shu, Hu, Xiang, and Baiyue have all been quelled.  
Only the tiny island of Taiwan remains rebellious,  
Taking advantage of its geographic positions.  
Shi Lang took my orders to march to the conquest,  
Planning and deciding on the attack strategies.  
Wherever the battleships were pointing at,  
All commanders and soldiers shared one heart;  
Then they captured the entrance of the island,  
Forcing close towards its battalions and dens.  
Their bravery robbed the enemy of its spirit;  
Their sincerity prompted the enemy to surrender.  
When the message of victory arrived the palace,  
It happens to be the day of mid-autumn festival.  
While enjoying such an auspicious time,  
I was pleased to hear of the triumphant news.  
Recalling that a pure heart from the coast  
Was allowed to ascend on my platform,  
To relieve me of my worries of the South,  
I took off the coat I am wearing this day,  
Speedily delivered to him with a poem.

海氛之不靖，艦艦出沒，波濤震驚。濱海居民，魚鹽蠶織耕穫之利，咸失其業。朕心恆憫惻焉。邇者，滇黔隴蜀湖湘百粵，悉底收寧。蕞爾台灣，阻險負固爾。施琅銜命徂征，決策進取，樓船所指，將士一心，遂克島門，迫其營窟。勇以奪其氣，誠以致其歸。捷書到闕，時值中秋。對此佳辰，欣聞凱奏。念瀛壖赤子，獲登衽席用紓南顧之憂。惟爾丕績，即解是日所御之衣，馳賜載褒以詩。

There is no rhyming in the original preface, nor is that in the English translation. As the predominant number of sentences in the original consists of four characters, so the lines in the translation are relatively shorter. To maintain the nature of a poem, a couple of sentences with eight or nine characters in the original are broken into two lines as run on sentences in the translation which still shows the parallel structure of the original. William Wordsworth has argued in his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” that there is not that much difference between a fine prose and poetry, which interestingly could be evidenced in this preface by the emperor (Perkins 427).

In addition to the literary merits, this preface could very well serve as a primary source for the historical studies of the recovery of Taiwan. It illustrates, from the emperor's own words, the causes of the attacks, concerns about his subjects, considerations of the overall political conditions, decisions for commander assignment and the military strategies he had made, reasons for the final victory, and actions taken to reward the general. In short, it precisely sums up the background of the military movement as reported in numerous history accounts (Su).

The emperor basically compresses the similar narrative in this poetic work which is translated as follows:

The entire armies have entered the island and  
Captured it by only one siege on the blue sea.  
With imperial edict to dismantle dragon palace,  
They lowered sails and came to the mirage city.  
The admiral was able to give his best to achieve  
The marvelous work to foil the enemy's strategy.  
His fame is equally eminent as Taming Waves;  
Henceforth all southern waters will be in peace.

島嶼全軍入，滄溟一戰收。降帆來蜃市，露布徹龍樓。上將能宣力，奇功本伐謀。撫(伏)波命(名)公(共)美，南紀盡安流。( 527 )

This is a five-character regulated verse which rhymes at the end of all even lines just like the seven-character verse; the similar rhyme scheme is seen in the English translation. Just like the five-character quatrain, the number of words in each line in this verse is shorter than that of the seven-character verse, and they also contain fewer images accordingly. As stated in the preface, this is basically a courtesy poem put together with the gift of a coat that the emperor was wearing delivered to the general as a reward for his great military success. It is little surprise that not many literary merits can be found in this poem; nevertheless, it demonstrates how the emperor was impressed with Shi Lang's military talent, the phenomenal victory, and its long term effects on the peace of the southern coast. It proves that deeply in his mind the emperor never viewed this military action as merely quelling a local rebellion but as a part of his overall strategy to maintain stability of the entire southern regions.

The last poem to be discussed is entitled "A Narrative about the Conquest of Taiwan at the Sacrificial Ceremony in the Tomb of Emperor Shunzhi 臺灣平告祀孝陵有述" which is translated as follows:

Our bequeathed military forces have now calmed the vast seas;  
On an auspicious day I come to the royal tomb to pay respect.  
A thousand layers of mountains hold up the emerald green hills  
As the five benevolent clouds are being condensed by purple air.  
Your saintly virtues have brilliantly left us with great prosperities;  
Displayed in a grand scale are the divinely designed strategies.  
The universe is energized by the powers of opening and closing;  
Rises of the sun and the moon demonstrate the signs of eternity.  
For numerous generations have been gathered songs of praises;  
In numerous locations existed abundant astrology and almanacs.

Foresighted plans already thought to protect their descendants;  
Grandiose accomplishments intended for the dragon to ascend.  
Various plants and grasses all come to enjoy this huge success;  
Hereafter the whale-like soaring monstrous waves will be tranquil.  
Respectfully and immaculately following the old ceremonial rules,  
Ten thousand seasonal sacrificial foods are presented solemnly.

纘武平瀛海，諏辰謁寢陵。翠微千嶂拱，紫氣五雲凝。聖德光垂裕，神謨大顯承。乾坤資翕闢，日月象升恆。奕世謳歌集，多方曆數膺。遠猶思燕翼，盛業想龍興。卉服皆來享，鯨波自此澄。明禋稽舊典，萬禩肅嘗蒸。（529）

This is a long regulated verse of five characters. The original consists of 16 lines. Unlike all the previous verses that uses the same rhyme throughout the poem, the rhyming scheme of this work is ABCB DEFE respectively on each of the octave as shown in the English translation. As an occasional poem presented at a ritual, most of the imagery and narrative simply follow the traditional norms thus lack distinguished literary qualities. However, the picturesque depiction of the green hills surrounded by the chilly air and colorful clouds in the second couplet is beautiful; the references to the military victory which directly ties to the title of the poem provide another first-hand evidence of the emperor's thoughts about the conquest.

## Conclusion

There are altogether four poems collected in *The Complete Works of Emperor Kangxi* (康熙帝御制文集) that deal with the military actions against Taiwan. While those poems composed of various conventional Chinese poetic forms are not necessarily considered brilliant literary works, some of them do occasionally produce outstanding images and narratives. The more important value of those poems is its presentation of the emperor's thoughts and feelings about this historical event. In his detailed review of the studies by scholars across the Taiwan Straights about Emperor Kangxi's reunification of Taiwan with the Qing Empire, Professor Li Xi-zhu (李細珠) emphasizes the need to search for new data to further our understandings of the topic. Studying the emperor's poetry would most likely fulfill this purpose (66).

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