

Cultural Loss and Transmission in Poetry Translation: A Quantitative Corpus Study of Li Bai's Translations by Waley and Xu Yuanchong

Zan Tan*

Chengdu Neusoft University, Chengdu 611844, Sichuan, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: Li Bai, a leading poet of the High Tang period, filled his poems with elements that embody traditional Chinese artistic tastes, scholarly values and folk customs. This study builds a closed parallel corpus to examine two influential English translations of Li Bai's poems by Arthur Waley and Xu Yuanchong. Drawing on translator subjectivity^[1] as well as Venuti's domestication and foreignization framework^[2], the research combines quantitative statistics and qualitative analysis. All culture-laden terms are sorted into four categories: natural imagery, spiritual temperament, philosophical notions and folk cultural symbols. The data point to distinct differences in the two translation styles. In pursuit of higher readability, Waley applies domestication widely. Consequently, the original cultural implications are simplified, readers may misunderstand the text, and much cultural content is lost^[3]. In contrast, Xu Yuanchong balances domestication and foreignization effectively, guided by his Three Beauties theory^[4]. His work preserves most original cultural implications while retaining poetic rhythm and accessibility^[5]. This paper confirms how translator subjectivity shapes cross-cultural transfer and offers practical references for promoting classical Chinese poetry and traditional culture across the globe within digital humanities research.

Keywords: Li Bai; Cultural loss; Cultural transmission; Domestication; Foreignization

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1. Introduction

Li Bai, famously called the "Poet Immortal", towers over all Tang poets. His verses reflect his inner beliefs, chivalric virtues and local customs, making them a key way to share Chinese culture internationally. Among numerous English renderings of his works, versions by British sinologist Arthur Waley and Chinese translator Xu Yuanchong have exerted lasting influence on Western readership^[6].

Waley put together the first reliable English collection of Li Bai's poems. Rather than adhering to stiff Victorian poetic forms, he aimed to deliver the original artistic appeal. His reader-friendly translations helped Li Bai gain wide popularity in the West, yet limited understanding of Chinese culture prompted him

to simplify culturally unique expressions, resulting in an inevitable loss of original meaning. Xu Yuanchong, a leading scholar of classical poetry translation, strove to integrate beauty in meaning, sound and form. He retained core cultural features while adapting expressions to English linguistic conventions.

Existing studies on Li Bai's translated poems mostly focus on qualitative analysis of a single translator. Few efforts adopt corpus-based quantitative methods to systematically compare Waley's and Xu Yuanchong's work or measure cultural distortion and information transfer of culture-specific words^[7]. Adopting a digital humanities approach, this study constructs a closed corpus to categorize and count translation strategies for four types of cultural terms^[8]. It further explores how translator identity influences translation choices and cross-cultural communication effects, seeking viable approaches for the international dissemination of Li Bai and Tang poetry^[9].

2. Theoretical framework and research methodology

2.1. Core theories

Two theoretical pillars underpin this research. The first is translator subjectivity. A translator is an active decision-maker rather than a passive linguistic converter. Personal cultural background, aesthetic preferences and cognitive scope directly shape translation tactics and final texts. Raised within Western cultural traditions, Waley held limited knowledge of traditional Chinese philosophical thought and the value systems of ancient Chinese literati. Xu Yuanchong, deeply immersed in traditional Chinese culture, fully grasped the layered cultural meanings embedded in Li Bai's poetry. Such fundamental differences led to their distinct translation styles.

The second key theory is domestication and foreignization, put forward by Lawrence Venuti. Domestication revises source texts to align with target language and cultural norms for better readability. Foreignization preserves unique elements of the source culture to maintain textual authenticity. These two strategies act as the primary criteria for classifying translation practices in this research.

2.2. Corpus construction and research design

This research creates a closed parallel corpus consisting of 30 representative poems by Li Bai. The selected pieces fully feature natural imagery, spiritual expressions, philosophical ideas and folk symbols, with complete English translations provided by both Waley and Xu Yuanchong to ensure consistent research samples.

First, all culture-loaded terms in the corpus are manually identified and divided into four established categories. Each translated item is tagged according to applied strategies: domestication, foreignization, literal rendering, omission and generalization. Two core quantitative indicators are defined: the proportion of each translation strategy and the cultural retention rate. The latter refers to the extent to which a translation retains original cultural connotations; a lower rate indicates more severe cultural loss.

All collected data are sorted and calculated for combined quantitative measurement and qualitative case analysis, to interpret the roots of cultural loss and disparities in cultural transmission.

To ensure statistical objectivity, every cultural keyword undergoes two rounds of independent manual marking. A translation is classified as domestication when the translator simplifies, generalizes or rewrites Chinese cultural concepts to fit Western cultural habits. Foreignization describes renderings that retain original cultural images, philosophical undertones and folk characteristics from Li Bai's poems.

The cultural retention rate follows this calculation formula:

Cultural Retention Rate = (Number of keywords with complete cultural meaning retained / Total number of keywords in one category) × 100%

The percentage of each translation strategy is calculated by tallying the frequency of domestication and foreignization instances within each category.

3. Classification of cultural keywords in Li Bai's poems

Four major groups of cultural keywords carry distinct symbolic and ideological meanings in Li Bai's poetry.

- (1) Natural images: Key images in this category cover the moon, wine, sword, roc and clouds. The moon conveys homesickness and spiritual comfort, and wine alleviates stress from political letdowns. The sword stands for chivalry and unrealized ambitions. Rooted in ancient Chinese prose, the roc symbolizes lofty goals and spiritual freedom. These natural motifs go well beyond ordinary scenery, serving as emotional and cultural symbols for ancient Chinese intellectuals.
- (2) Spiritual personality: Titles and traits like "Poet Immortal", uninhibited temperament, chivalry and the life of reclusion capture the dual aspirations of Tang literati: they longed for career achievements in officialdom, while also cherishing spiritual freedom. These notions grew out of traditional Chinese scholarly culture, and there are no exact matching expressions in Western culture.
- (3) Philosophical concepts: Descriptions of otherworldly scenery, personal liberation and the bond between humanity and nature show how people in ancient China strove to move beyond everyday earthly worries^[10]. This kind of spiritual outlook differs from the major ideological traditions found in Western societies.
- (4) Folk cultural symbols: Terms such as Yang Pass, Yuefu, Han Palace and Chang'an are closely tied to ancient Chinese rituals, official musical traditions and collective historical memories. They all bear distinctive local and historical characteristics.

4. Data statistics and comparative analysis

4.1. Overall quantitative results

Based on statistical data from a self-built corpus, this section presents the proportional distribution of diverse translation strategies adopted in the two translated versions as well as their average cultural retention rates. The criteria for distinguishing domestication and foreignization, alongside the calculation formula for cultural retention rates, strictly adhere to Venuti's translation theories and the definition of cultural connotations embedded in the source text.

Comprehensive analysis reveals that Arthur Waley prioritized the domestication strategy when rendering four categories of vocabulary. Among these categories, ideological and conceptual terms yielded the lowest cultural retention rate, resulting in the most severe loss of cultural information. In contrast, Xu Yuanchong employed foreignization far more frequently, maintaining consistently high retention rates for all categories of culturally loaded keywords. The distinct numerical gap between the two translators clearly demonstrates that the selection of translation strategies exerts a direct impact on the integrity of cross-cultural information transmission.

4.2. Comparative case analysis

4.2.1. Natural images

When handling natural imagery, Waley mostly adopted literal translation but discarded the layered cultural metaphors behind common objects. Take *Drinking Alone under the Moon* as an example. He retained the basic words "moon" and "wine" in translation, yet failed to deliver the underlying melancholy and homesickness that these two images represent for traditional Chinese intellectuals. For the roc, a classic literary symbol standing for boundless freedom and lofty aspirations, Waley simply rendered it as "a giant bird", stripping

away its profound literary implications entirely.

For the line describing leaving one's hometown with a sword to travel afar, Waley shortened the original expression into the plain wording "traveling far with a sword". This simplification erased the dual implications of chivalric spirit and frustrated political ambition embedded in the original line. In general, Waley prioritized straightforward comprehension over the rich cultural associations carried by natural imagery.

Xu Yuanchong took a different approach. He preserved both the outer form of each image and its inner cultural meaning. When translating the roc, he used poetic phrasing that echoed its symbolic value, rather than reducing it to a generic creature. For swords and wine, he balanced literal meaning and implied emotion, enabling English-speaking readers to grasp not only what the poem describes, but also the feelings and cultural traditions tied to these classic images. His treatment of natural imagery realizes effective and complete cross-cultural transmission.

4.2.2. Spiritual personality

Waley's overuse of domestication severely distorted culturally exclusive concepts related to literati temperament. He translated the honorific title "Poet Immortal" as "an immortal poet", equating the Chinese literary image of spiritual transcendence with divine imagery in Western culture. This conversion reshaped a uniquely Chinese cultural title to fit Western imagination.

The traditional notion of chivalry, which combines benevolence, righteousness and courage, was simplified into the single word "bravery". Such treatment cut off the core ethical connotation of this time-honored Chinese concept. Li Bai's iconic unrestrained personality, a key trait of Tang literati, was softened into the mild description of "ease". Such revisions gradually erased the distinctive spiritual temperament of ancient Chinese scholars, turning vivid cultural traits into bland universal expressions ^[11].

Xu Yuanchong adopted a flexible combination of foreignization and moderate domestication. When translating titles and personality descriptions, he kept the uniqueness of original cultural labels while adjusting wording to suit English reading habits. His interpretation of chivalry and reclusion stayed faithful to their original definitions, presenting a full picture of the inner world and spiritual pursuits of Tang literati to foreign audiences.

4.2.3. Philosophical concepts

Differences between Eastern and Western ideological systems led to the most obvious misinterpretations in Waley's translation of traditional philosophical terms. The phrase describing spiritual elevation and freedom from mortal worries was translated as "ascend to heaven". This directly equated traditional Chinese spiritual pursuits with popular Western notions of transcendence after life, creating fundamental ideological confusion.

Similarly, the term for an abstract and serene spiritual realm was reduced to the plain concrete noun "cave". The intangible philosophical realm was turned into an ordinary physical space, losing all spiritual depth. Constrained by Western ideological frameworks, Waley interpreted traditional Chinese philosophical ideas through a familiar Western perspective, which led to a misunderstanding of their core connotations.

Having an in-depth understanding of traditional Chinese culture, Xu Yuanchong chose foreignization to retain the essential characteristics of these philosophical concepts. Meanwhile, he adjusted sentence structures to conform to English linguistic rules. His translations accurately convey traditional Chinese spiritual pursuits, with only minimal loss of original meaning, achieving a good balance between cultural authenticity and linguistic fluency.

4.2.4. Folk cultural symbols

Waley frequently omitted key details or generalized culturally specific folk symbols. Yang Pass, a landmark

tightly linked to the Chinese tradition of farewell and departure, lost all its cultural background in his translation. Yuefu, the official musical genre and literary form established in ancient imperial courts, was mistakenly translated as “folk song”, confusing an official literary institution with ordinary folk art.

Historical place names such as Han Palace and Chang’an were also generalized into common place references. While such over-domestication made sentences flow more smoothly for Western readers unfamiliar with Chinese history, it caused irreversible loss of historical and folk culture.

Xu Yuanchong kept the distinct features of these historical and folk symbols intact. When translating culturally loaded proper nouns, he mostly stuck to foreignization, while weaving gentle contextual clues into poetic lines. This approach helps Western readers grasp the history and folk traditions behind these terms, successfully preserving the cultural heritage embedded in Tang poetry.

5. Discussion

5.1. Advantages and values of the two versions

Waley’s translations hold important historical significance for the global spread of Li Bai’s poetry. His concise language and reader-oriented domestication tactics broke down cross-cultural barriers, and made Li Bai’s works widely known among ordinary Western readers. For audiences without prior knowledge of Chinese history and culture, his versions are easy to follow and ideal for large-scale cultural popularization.

Xu Yuanchong’s translations strike a fine balance between cultural inheritance and reading accessibility. By alternating between domestication and foreignization according to contextual needs, he preserves the profound cultural essence and poetic charm of the original poems. His work is better suited for academic research and in-depth cultural exchange, helping overseas readers gain a systematic understanding of Tang civilization and the spiritual world of ancient Chinese literati.

5.2. Causes of cultural loss and strategic differences

The difference in translation strategies derives primarily from translator subjectivity. As a Western sinologist, Waley’s thinking was bounded by Western cultural and ideological perspectives. His core goal was to promote the spread of Li Bai’s poetry among ordinary Western readers, so he chose to simplify complex Chinese cultural concepts to match local cognitive habits.

As a translator rooted in native Chinese culture, Xu Yuanchong regarded cultural inheritance and cross-cultural communication as his core mission. On the premise of respecting English language norms, he tried his best to retain original cultural features, so as to realize authentic cross-cultural communication.

Digital humanities offer a valuable perspective for this work. Using corpus data for quantitative analysis turns abstract cultural loss into tangible figures, so we can evaluate translation performance in a more objective way. This research approach works well for a wide range of studies focused on translating classic literature.

6. Conclusion

For this research, we built a closed parallel corpus. We then carried out quantitative analysis to compare the two translators’ strategies and examine how effectively they passed on cultural meanings across four types of key terms.

The data clearly indicates that domestication was Waley’s main translation approach. Thanks to his

efforts, Li Bai's works gained popularity in the West, but many cultural details were simplified or misread, particularly in passages involving philosophical ideas and traditional folk symbols. Xu Yuanchong handled the two translation strategies more tactfully. He managed to preserve the majority of cultural connotations and effectively present the key cultural value behind Li Bai's verses.

A translator's cultural background, translation objectives and targeted readership directly influence translation choices and cross-cultural communication outcomes. For the overseas promotion of classical Chinese poetry, translators should adopt differentiated strategies based on communication goals: moderate domestication works for mass popularization, while foreignization plus necessary contextual explanation fits in-depth cultural dissemination.

This research verifies the practical value of corpus-based quantitative methods in digital humanities translation studies. Follow-up research can expand corpus scale and include more translated versions to summarize universal rules for the international communication of traditional Chinese culture.

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