



# Interpreting the English Translation of Plant Images in *The Songs of Chu* from the Perspective of Eco-translatology— Taking Xu Yuanchong's Translation as an Example

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## Abstract

*Xu Yuanchong's translation of The Songs of Chu into English is acclaimed for its nuanced adaptation. Xu Yuanchong has adopted a flexible translation strategy in the English version based on the balance of "faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance", so as to meet the reading habits of English readers and develop the outstanding traditional culture. This paper explores Xu Yuanchong's multi-dimensional adaption and translator-centeredness, particularly for the rich plant imagery in the text, through the lens of eco-translatology. By examining how Xu Yuanchong maintains the original's spirit and cultural essence, the analysis reveals the translator's role in facilitating cross-cultural understanding. This paper contributes to the discourse on translation by illustrating the preservation of Eastern wisdom in English renderings, enhancing global appreciation of ancient Chinese literature.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The growing environmental crisis and the urgent need for ecological protection have prompted a surge of interest in exploring the ecological wisdom embedded within literary works. This paper delves into the translation of plant imagery in *The Songs of Chu*, a seminal text of Chinese classical poetry, through the lens of eco-translatology. While existing research on *The Songs of Chu* has primarily focused on its literary value and translation strategies, this study aims to shed light on the

ecological significance of the plant imagery and its interpretation in English translations. By adopting an eco-translatological approach, this paper analyzes the translation strategies employed by Xu Yuanchong, a renowned translator of Chinese poetry, in his English version of *The Songs of Chu*. Specifically, it examines how Xu's translation navigates the complexities of cultural differences and linguistic constraints while conveying the ecological themes and aesthetic appeal of the original text. This study contributes to the field of eco-translatology by providing a nuanced

analysis of the translation of ecological imagery in classical literature and offers valuable insights for translators and scholars interested in the intersection of literature and ecology. It demonstrates the potential of eco-translatology as a theoretical framework for promoting the dissemination and appreciation of ecological literature across cultural boundaries and emphasizes the role of translators in conveying ecological messages and fostering environmental awareness.

## II. THE SONGS OF CHU AND ITS ENGLISH TRANSLATION WORK

### 2.1 Overview of *The Songs of Chu* and Its Value

*The Songs of Chu* is the first collection of romantic poetry in the history of Chinese literature, serving as a source of Chinese literary tradition and an important foundation for the studies of the early religion. It incorporates the images of fantasy, mythology and celestial world [1]. Written in the 3rd century BC, *The Songs of Chu* depicts the region of the Yangtze River basin in southern China, showcasing strong local characteristics through its language characteristics and descriptions.

Furthermore, as a literary creation of its time, *The Songs of Chu* employs extraordinary imagination and exquisite language to portray the fairies and gods of the local area. It embodies the wisdom and creativity of the native people towards natural landscapes, offering great insight into the mythological legends and customs of the Chu region's inhabitants. In terms of literary value, often referred to as the "Twin Gems" alongside *The Book of Songs*, *The Songs of Chu* represents a monumental achievement in Chinese romantic classical poetry. It stands as a treasure not only in ancient Chinese literary history but also in world culture [2].

### 2.2 The Dissemination and Reception of *The Songs of Chu* in the English-Speaking World

The dissemination and reception of *The Songs of Chu* in the English-speaking world can be traced back more than a century. Since the 1980s, with the continuous development of China's economy and increasing openness to the outside world, the international

dissemination of *The Songs of Chu* has been on the rise. For instance, a comprehensive introduction to *The Songs of Chu* was featured in the first volume of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* in 2010. However, despite the growing influence of *The Songs of Chu*, it still lags behind classics such as *The Analects of Confucius* and *The Book of Songs* in terms of global reach.[3] The quality of translation work is closely linked to this phenomenon.

### 2.3 Translation Work on *The Songs of Chu*

The current main English translations of *The Songs of Chu* by authors such as David Hawkes, Xu Yuanchong, and Yang Xianyi have played a significant role in the development of the translation field of *The Songs of Chu*. In the field of cross-cultural communication, the use of cultural foundations as metaphors for culture and the utilization of relational analysis as a method of cultural analysis, those are required to address the complexity in this field [4].

The translation of *The Songs of Chu* faces challenges due to the antiquity of the language within the work itself, as well as the presence of specific metaphors and imagery characteristic of that time period. The language is often obscure, requiring translators not only to ensure that the translation conveys the meaning of the original text, but also to combine the implied meanings in *The Songs of Chu* with their literal significance.

Translating *The Songs of Chu* necessitates stringent requirements on the translation capabilities and cultural literacy of the translators. They must possess exceptional translation skills and a profound understanding of the original text's language style and cultural connotations, which proposed to effectively present them in the translated target language. Thus, translating *The Songs of Chu* involves more than simple linguistic conversion; it is about a profound understanding and expression of literary art, historical culture, and the profound thoughts of the original author.

In the realm of cross-cultural communication, utilizing the cultural foundation as a metaphor for culture and employing relational analysis as a method of cultural analysis can aid in unraveling the complexities of cross-cultural

transmission, promoting wider recognition and dissemination of the precious cultural heritage of *The Songs of Chu* on the international stage.

#### 2.4 Xu Yuanchong's English Version of *The Songs of Chu* and Its Advantages

Xu Yuanchong, known as the "sole translator of Chinese poetry into English and French", specializes in translating ancient Chinese poetry. With a profound understanding of traditional culture, he skillfully integrates the unique cultural images of *The Songs of Chu* with foreign cultural backgrounds and environments in his translations. This allows the charm of *The Songs of Chu* to be conveyed in the English-speaking world through the translator's work. Furthermore, Xu Yuanchong's translations prioritize the aesthetics of the text itself. He not only considers the literal meaning of the text, but also delves into the implied meanings beneath the words, conveying the spiritual power inherent in the text.

#### 2.5 Plant Imagery in *The Songs of Chu* and Its Translation

The plant imagery in *The Songs of Chu* conveys diverse meanings, serving to enhance the poems with an ethereal and dynamic beauty derived from the plants' own graceful forms, as well as to express the poet's rich emotions through the special connotations formed by combining the plants' characteristics with Chu culture. In terms of rhetoric, the author often employs intricate and obscure metaphors to depict their own mental state, with the internal structure of the poems containing a series of overlapping and merging elements [5]. For example, in the poem "Nine Songs: The Goddess of the Mountain", the line "In mountains deep, oh, looms a fair lass, In Ivy leaves oh, girt with sweet grass." Directly translating sweet grass into English as *Ficus pumila* and Chinese *Usnea* would be too esoteric and difficult for readers to grasp, resulting in a loss of the aesthetic and phonetic values pursued in the translation, unable to achieve the same beauty as the original text. In Xu's translation, these two images are simplified to "ivy leaves" and "sweet grass," capturing the core meanings of these images for better alignment with the English cultural ecosystem.

Secondly, authors often use plant imagery to reflect their inner emotional world, as seen in "Sorrow for Departure," with the line "At dawn I gather mountain grass, oh, at dusk I pick secluded one", "secluded one" in original contexts refers to the grass on a small sandbar, symbolizing the author's exile and reflecting the poet's subtle and ambiguous psychological activities. Xu's translation renders this as "secluded grass," conveying the meaning of "quiet and private," "not used or disturbed by other people," "without much connect with other people," indicating seclusion, without explicitly translating the words. However, upon closer examination, this translation is remarkably intricate, effectively capturing the tranquil atmosphere of the small sandbar at dusk, not only preserving the imagery expressed in the poem but also reflecting the essence of the work, subtly alluding to the author's inner activities, providing a more vivid expression for Western readers who carefully delve into the text [6].

### III. OVERVIEW OF ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

#### 3.1 A Groundbreaking Theory Blending Ecology and Translation Studies

Eco-translatology was proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen, from Tsinghua University. It is a brand-new translation theory that emerged and developed based on the theory of translation as adaptation and selection.

The ideological roots of eco-translatology are composed of three concepts: traditional Chinese wisdom of ecology, ecological holism and adaptive selection. Eco-translatology represents the flexible integration of ecological thinking and translation as it gradually matures. As a consequence, a completely new and progressive perspective has been manifested aiming to maintain the diversity of translation languages and perpetuate the pluralism of translation cultures, so as to promote the protection of the ecological environment and the progress of ecological civilization. To put it in another way, eco-translatology is an interdisciplinary research theory and discussion path that combining ecology and translatology. It focuses on conducting comprehensive and macroscopic

studies on literary translation works from an ecological perspective.

### 3.2 The Significance of Eco-translatology

Clive Scott proposed that the "eco-translation" refers to a translation that describes the translator's "psycho-physiological" involvement [7]. It can be said that it can be achieved by sensing the presence of the reading subject and multi-sensory reactions. As Scott has stated in his articles, eco-translatology focuses not only on the ecological characteristic of the text, but more importantly on the ecological characteristic in the reader's perceptual/conceptual contact. He further explained, "(This ecological characteristic) is not an ecocriticism, but a reading [8]." In Scott's view, we can understand that for an excellent translator, the translation should provide the target language reader with an immersive experience while reading, not hindered by language differences. This is also the purpose of eco-translatology.

Michael Cronin, a professor of translation studies at City University Dublin, presented his understanding of eco-translatology in his book *Eco-translation: translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene*. Cronin defined "eco-translation" as "all forms of translation thinking and practice that knowingly engage with the challenges of human-induced environmental change [9]". That is to say, Cronin believes that eco-translation is a translation theory and practice with a sense of mission, aimed at making academic contributions to the current ecological crisis and environmental protection.

### 3.3 The Application of Eco-translatology

According to the theory of eco-translatology, translators study the translational eco-environment and selectively engage in translation activities. Furthermore, how translators apply their academic skills to adapt to the translation environment is crucial for a successful translation. Eco-translation requires a high degree of adaptation between the final translation and the original, while also naturally integrating into the cultural environment of the target language. Translators need to apply their complete ideological system to deal with translation smoothly. Based on this, from the

perspective of eco-translation, the purpose of translation activities is to adapt and choose.

Poetry translation is a process that follows the principle of multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection, constantly adapting to the translational eco-environment, and conducting "multi-dimensional adaptation (linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions)". Eco-translation provides a new perspective for poetry translation as well as maintains its ecological balance.

## IV. THE IMAGERY OF PLANTS IN XU'S VERSION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

The eco-translatology initiated by Chinese translation scholars contains simple but profound Eastern ecology wisdom. The starting point of Chinese culture is "to pay attention to life [10]". The mainstream of Chinese cultural thought is "the appreciation of life", including the understanding and awareness of life, survival, and ecology. Therefore, the classical ecology wisdom in traditional Chinese culture has become an important theoretical support and ideological component [11]. The literary masterpiece *The Songs of Chu*, written during the Warring States period, highlights traditional Chinese ecological thinking. Hence, the study of Xu Yuanchong's translation of *The Songs of Chu* from the perspective of eco-translatology is of great significance. *The Songs of Chu* contains a large number of unique vocabularies that reflects traditional Chinese culture, among which plant specific vocabulary is a challenge that translators should pay attention to during the translation process. Under the theoretical guidance of eco-translatology and translator-centered paradigm, through analyzing the translation of the plant-words in Xu's *The Songs of Chu*, this essay will interpret the idea of translation as adaptive selection, study the translation method of linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions.

### 4.1 Multi-Dimensional Adaptation

Xu's English version of *The Songs of Chu* is popular both domestically and internationally—given that he has taken a different approach in the collision between the original and translated works, as well as in terms of form and content.



He conducted creative translation. Apart from that he adhered to multiple-adaptation and adaptive selection, especially in terms of linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions [12].

#### 4.1.1 Linguistic dimensional adaptation

The linguistic dimensional adaptation helps guide translators to make proper translation of adaptive selection. Based on this, when translating texts, translators need to focus on language patterns from various perspectives and directions. In the translation process, the translator must first understand and adapt to the translational eco-environment. Secondly, it is necessary to fully consider the comprehensiveness and balance of the translational eco-environment, appropriately choose and modify vocabulary, then adjust the expression form of language. At this stage, the translator needs to attend to both conforming to the characteristics of the original text and adapting to the habits of the target language.

As a senior translator, Xu Yuanchong flexibly utilized rhyme, reduplication and other rhetorical devices unique to reserve artistic characteristics of ancient Chinese poem. This also reflects his advocacy of the "Three Beauties". It is composed of "Beauty of Sense", "Beauty of Sound" and "Beauty of Form". "Beauty of Sense" is to reflect the beauty of the original content in translation; "beauty of Sound" requires the translated text to rhyme, be fluent, and sound pleasant; "Beauty of Form" refers to the neat length of the lines in a poem and the neat alignment of the sentences. The "Three Beauties" corresponds exactly to the translation theory of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance". Based on it, Xu Yuanchong's translation ideas and methods also coincide with the linguistic dimensional adaptation.

In the English version of "Li Sao", from *The Songs of Chu*, Xu translated "余既滋兰之九畹兮，又树蕙之百亩，畦留夷与揭车兮，杂杜衡与芳芷" into "I grow spring orchids in fields nine, oh! And a hundred acres of clover. I plant peonies line by clover. I with fragrant grass all over". "兰" and "蕙" both means "orchid". However, the translator translated "兰" into "spring orchids"

according to the annotation of "余既滋兰之九畹兮"—I have planted many cymbidium georingii (a long-standing orchid variety that blooms in spring). This kind of translation can not only express the beautiful artistic conception of poetry through giving prominence to the season, but also showcase the beauty of language. To avoid repetition, he translated "蕙" as "clover", which is also a plant that thrives in spring. Xu intended to shift the focus of the target language reader from the plants themselves to the poetry-conception of "planting flowers in spring" that the original text aims to convey. In addition, considering the effect of poetic rhyme, he cleverly made "clover" and "over" rhyme to create catchy style. Moreover, the translator paid attention to the structure of the translation and emphasized translating "兮 (a common exclamation in Chinese poetry)" into "oh!". The literal translation method preserved the emotional expression of Qu Yuan in order to manifest a prominent language effect. In the English version of the poem *The Mountain Spirit*, Xu translated "石磊磊兮葛蔓蔓" as "Here rock on rock, oh! There vine on vine". He started the first and second half of the sentence with "here" and "there" respectively with the rhetorical device of antithesis before and after. In light of the language effect of reduplication in the original text, the translator translated "石磊磊" as "rock on rock", which could evoke images of stones piled together for target language readers. He translated "葛蔓蔓" as "vine on vine", which corresponded to the scene of vine entanglement. Such kinds of strategies are in line with the linguistic dimensional adaptation, reflecting the translator's profound literary attainments.

#### 4.1.2 Cultural dimensional adaptation

Cultural dimensional adaptation emphasizes that translators should pay heed to the transmission and interpretation of bilingual cultural connotations. From a cultural perspective, translators need to clarify the differences in ideological backgrounds between the source language culture and the target language culture [13].

Cultural dimensional adaptation focuses on the essential differences and cultural connotations between the source language environment and

the target language environment at the cultural level. This also puts forward higher requirements for the translator's translation level to prevent them from misunderstanding or over interpreting the original text based on the target language culture. Besides, it is necessary to avoid target language readers having difficulty understanding the original content due to cultural variation. Translators should also convey the cultural connotations of the source language and preserve the excellent cultural characteristics.

In the English version of "Li Sao", Xu translated "荃不察余之中情兮，反信谗而齎怒" into "To my loyalty you' re unkind, oh! You heed slander and burst in fire". In the sentence, "荃" means herb or sweet grass. Nevertheless, Xu didn't adopt a literal translation. According to the former text, the poet questioned and accused the King of Chu, Xu continuously used "You" instead of a literal translation. Because "荃" in the sentence is the metaphorical meaning of the King. Based on the cultural dimensional adaptation, if the translator translated directly, the target language readers may not be able to understand the intended meaning of the original text due to cultural variation. Therefore, the translator translated the word "荃" into the second person "you", which is beneficial for the target language readers to understand the meaning of the poem and poet's loyalty. This translation strategy demonstrates the translator's ability to adapt flexibly to the translational eco-environment and select the translation on the basis of translational eco-environment, which is called "adaption/selection".

In the English version of the poem "Mountain Spirit", the translator still hasn't translated "三秀" into "glossy Ganoderma" with a literal translation. If it is translated directly according to the scientific name, it will cause great trouble to the target language readers. In order to facilitate the understanding of the target language readers, the translator refers it to the ecosystem of the source language culture. "三秀" here refers to the miraculous fairy grass. In order to adapt the original meaning of poetry to the culture of the target language environment, the translator adopted a free translation

strategy, allowing the target language readers to understand the profound cultural heritage in the source language. That means the translator has conformed to the cultural dimensional adaptation. In a nutshell, the translator maintains an ecological balance between the source and target languages from a cultural perspective, thereby achieving the ultimate goal of acculturation.

#### 4.1.3 Communicative dimensional adaptation

Communicative dimensional adaptation refers to the translator's need to pay attention to the adaptive selection of bilingual communicative intention during the translation process. This kind of adaptation requires translators to smartly transform the cultural connotations that the original content needs to convey [14]. In addition, communicative dimensional adaptation entails conscious transformation of translated content. As evidenced by the communicative dimensional adaptation, the information of the original text needs to achieve a unified communicative intention.

In the English version of the poem "Xiang Jun", from *The Songs of Chu*, Xu translated "薜荔柏兮蕙绸，荪桡兮兰旌" into "Ivy behind, oh! lotus before, Orchid for convey [ for oar". The translator translated "薜荔" as "ivy" based on its evergreen vine genus, rather than translating it as the scientific name. This is more in line with the language habits of the target language readers. "薜荔柏兮蕙绸" can be interpreted as the meaning of using ivy as a curtain and lotus as a sparver". The translator translated this Chinese sentence into "Ivy behind, oh! lotus before". There were no "curtain" "sparver" or other words related to hanging" in the English version. The translator merely used "behind" and "before" to create a vivid and graphic image of the poet being surrounded by ivy and lotus like hangings.

When translating, translators need to transform the cultural heritage between the source language and the target language, in an attempt to achieve the transformation of bilingual communication intention. In poetry translation, communicative intention is often manifested in both content and emotion. So, translators need to have a high level of translation proficiency and literary attainment to convey correct

communicative intentions and provide a good reading experience for target language readers. For instance, Xu didn't translate "菉草" as "sweet grass" directly, but instead replaced it with "cedar". In essence, the words "Ivy" "lotus" "orchid" "cedar" in the English version represents the four seasons of "spring" "summer" "autumn" and "winter", withal, these four plants are metaphors of noble qualities. This translation strategy can enable target language readers to simultaneously feel the noble personality charm and ambition of Qu Yuan. And per the communicative dimensional adaptation, the translator not only owned a profound understanding of Chinese poetry culture, but also fully considered the reading experience of Western readers. In demonstrating excellent translation skills, Xu achieved communicative goals perfectly.

#### 4.2 Translator-Centeredness

The concept of translator-centeredness was proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen, emphasizing the translation phase grounded in "during translating" within the translation chain. In the triad of source text-translator-target text, the "translator-centered" approach should coexist with the other two poles, namely "source text-centered" and "target text-centered," creating a "triadic complementarity" to form an organic "community"[15]. This approach highlights the importance of translators' abilities and creative labor in enhancing text quality. By establishing the translator's central role in the translation process, providing ample space for their creativity, and encouraging their subjective initiative, translators' significance in the translation process is elevated. This focus on translators aims to enhance their status, reducing the oversight of their labor and creativity during translation.

However, with the solidification of the translator's role, higher expectations are placed on translators in the actual translation process. Translators are required to rely more on their own understanding and interpretation of the text to match their abilities with their translator-centered position. This necessitates literary cultivation, intellectual creativity, and flexibility on the part of translators to fully

leverage their comprehensive qualities and present their translations effectively. Only through these efforts can translators harness the superiority of the translator-centered theory.

The translator-centered theory emphasizes the affirmation of translators involved in the translation process. From a macro perspective of translation ethics, translators are responsible for coordinating the relationships among the translation text, translation environment, and translation community [16]. They also have the duty to adapt to the translation ecology, focusing on the acceptance, dissemination, and survival of their translations. In different historical and societal development periods, with varying cultural environments, different perspectives on the study of *The Songs of Chu* emerge, necessitating translators to assert their subjectivity in the translation process. They must integrate the current era's background into the translation of *The Songs of Chu*.

During the translation of *The Songs of Chu*, translators should leverage their central role based on domestic and international contexts. Due to the cultural, social, historical, and geographical differences between the two countries, translators need to consider these factors when translating *The Songs of Chu*. Particularly in the aspect of plant imagery, *The Songs of Chu* features elaborate language and incorporates numerous plant symbols to metaphorically convey emotions.

For example, in *Nine Songs*, the line "Jade weights fasten, oh, his mat divine, adorned with gems, oh, and flowers sweet" the flowers sweet in original context means fragrant flowers. In *Nine Songs*, the line "I pluck sweet flowers, OH, on the island, and give them to maids, oh, inferior hand" where "sweet flowers" represents the *Polia japonica*. Although the referenced items differ, their broad meaning points to beautiful flowers. Additionally, *Polia japonica* are typically found in China, Korea, and Japan, making this plant imagery challenging to understand in English-speaking environments. Therefore, based on the shared meanings and context of the two instances, the translator respectively rendered them as "flowers sweet" and "sweet flowers."

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper provides additional evidence with respect to is supposed to study the imagery of plants in Xu Yuanchong's translation of *The Songs of Chu* from the perspective of eco-translatology, which mainly analyzes the translation through multi-dimensional adaptation and translator-centered paradigm. The findings clearly indicate that the application of eco-translatology combined with multi-dimensional adaptation plays a significant role in promoting the development and dissemination of ecological literature. This paper also points out new ways for translators to optimize their translation work, arousing the attention of target language readers to the importance of ecological protection today based on the theory of adaptation and transformation and the translator--centeredness. Throughout the research on Xu Yuanchong's meticulous translation skills and mature translation ideas, we also strive to contribute to the rapidly expanding field of eco-translatology, making further academic dedication to the construction of ecological civilization in China. Finally, several limitations to this study need to be considered. First, eco-translatology is a rather new branch of translation, and this paper cannot conduct more in-depth and extensive research on it. Secondly, as a representative of traditional Chinese literary works, there are many ecological images and ideas in *The Songs of Chu*. It is difficult for us to make a comprehensive statistical analysis of these images. In general, therefore, it seems that more research on the translation of ecological literature and discussions on eco-translatology will emerge, in line with the development of the new era and the needs of environmental protection.

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