



A Study on the Translation Strategies of the “Hongyan” (Wild Goose) Image in Xu Yuanchong’s Ancient Poetry Translations from the Perspective of Cultural Translation Theory

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Abstract— “Hongyan” (wild goose) is a core cultural image in ancient Chinese poetry, carrying profound cultural connotations. Its translation involves not only linguistic conversion but also cross-contextual transmission of cultural semantics. From the perspective of cultural translation theory, this study focuses on Xu Yuanchong’s English translations of ancient Chinese poetry. By sorting out the historical and cultural origins and multiple semantic orientations of the “Hongyan” image, it systematically analyzes the translation strategies adopted by Xu, image retention with contextual reinforcement, cultural compensation, aesthetic reconstruction, and strategic omission. The findings reveal that Xu was not a passive transmitter of linguistic content but an actively conscious “cultural mediator” who skillfully employed target-language poetic conventions and reader schemata to effectively transfer the high-context “Hongyan” image from Chinese culture into the English-speaking world, all while respecting the spirit of the source text. His practice exemplifies a dialectical unity of “creative treason” and “cultural confidence,” offering a paradigmatic model for Chinese literary translation that harmonizes aesthetic excellence with cross-cultural communicative efficacy.



Keywords— cultural translation theory, Xu Yuanchong, ancient Chinese poetry, “Hongyan” image, translation strategies, Three Beauties principle

I. INTRODUCTION

Ancient Chinese poetry carries rich cultural images with concise language. As one of the frequently appearing images, “Hongyan” has accumulated multiple cultural semantics such as homesickness, letter delivery, and loyalty, becoming a unique carrier of the Chinese nation’s cultural psychology. With the ongoing implementation of China’s “Chinese Culture Going Global” strategy, the English translation of classical poetry has emerged as a vital channel for intercultural communication. Within this process, the translation of cultural images constitutes a central challenge and a critical focal point. Mr. Xu Yuanchong, the preeminent translator of classical Chinese poetry in the 20th century, crafted English versions guided by his principle of

the “Three Beauties”—beauty of meaning, sound, and form—and demonstrated exceptional cultural insight and poetic creativity in handling the “Hongyan” image.

Cultural translation theory emphasizes that the essence of translation is cultural transmission. It holds that translation is not only the conversion of linguistic symbols but also the communication and dialogue between different cultures. Translators are required to attach great importance to cultural factors in the translation process and realize the effective connection between the source culture and the target culture. Based on this, this study takes cultural translation theory as the theoretical framework, selects poems containing the “Hongyan” image from Xu Yuanchong’s English translations of classic works such as

The Book of Songs, *Chu Ci*, *Tang poetry*, and *Song ci*, and explores the strategies adopted in the translation of the “Hongyan” image, aiming to uncover the underlying cultural stance, poetic choices, and intercivilizational dialogue embedded in his work, thereby providing a new perspective for the translation and communication of cultural images in classical poetry and offering theoretical and practical insights for China’s cultural “going global” initiative.

II. DEFINITION OF CORE CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL BASIS

2.1 Cultural Connotation Origin of the “Hongyan” Image

The cultural connotation of the “Hongyan” image was not formed overnight but gradually accumulated in the long historical development. As early as in *The Book of Songs*, the line “Wild geese fly south with rustling wings” expressed the ancestors’ feelings about separation and reunion through the migratory characteristics of wild geese. With the evolution of history, the cultural semantics of “Hongyan” have been continuously enriched: First, due to the migratory law of wild geese leaving in autumn and returning in spring, it has become a symbol of homesickness. For example, in Wang Wei’s poem *Mission to the Frontier*, the line “Like tumbleweed I leave the Han frontier behind; Homing wild geese cross northern sky.” uses the returning wild geese to contrast the wanderer’s sense of drift. Second, derived from the allusion of “Hongyan delivering letters”, it has become a carrier for delivering letters and conveying thoughts. For instance, in Li Qingzhao’s *A Paper Cut for a Plum Blossom*, the line “Who’ll send me a letter from the clouds above? When wild geese form their lines, the moon fills my western tower” reflects this connotation. Third, due to the neat formation and lofty posture of wild geese when flying, it is endowed with the character connotation of loyalty, nobility, and lofty aspiration. For example, in Fan Zhongyan’s *Fisherman’s Pride – Autumn Thoughts*, the line “Autumn comes to the frontier, scenery strange and drear; Wild geese fly south to Hengyang, no thought to stay here.” implies the soldiers’ perseverance through the resoluteness of wild geese. These cultural connotations are deeply rooted in the soil of traditional Chinese culture and become core elements that cannot be ignored in the translation of the “Hongyan” image.

2.2 Core Essentials of Cultural Translation Theory

Susan Bassnett is a renowned contemporary cultural critic and translation theorist. She has a profound insight into the significance of cultural factors in literary translation and has proposed the famous “cultural translation perspective”.

Cultural translation theory is a translation theoretical paradigm formed under the background of the cultural turn. Its core essence is to break through the limitation of the traditional linguistic school that only focuses on the conversion of linguistic forms and examine translation in a broad cultural context. This theory holds that the purpose of translation is not only to realize the accurate transmission of text meaning but also to promote the understanding and communication between different cultures. As cultural intermediaries, translators need to fully recognize the differences between the source culture and the target culture, and balance the integrity of the source culture and the acceptability of target readers in the translation process to avoid the loss or misunderstanding of cultural semantics.

Susan Bassnett (2001) asserts, “Cultural translation constitutes a complex process that extends beyond linguistic conversion, necessitating a profound comprehension and articulation of the cultural context and connotations embedded within the source text.” Consequently, the perspective of cultural translation mandates that translators thoroughly grasp the cultural contextual factors, achieve linguistic equivalence, and facilitate cultural transformation during the translation process. Furthermore, in the realm of literary translation, translators are required not only to master linguistic techniques but also to comprehend the cultural essence represented by the source text, thereby accurately conveying the author’s intent and emotional resonance.

The cultural translation perspective underscores that the fundamental aim of translation extends beyond the mechanical correspondence of linguistic forms to encompass the attainment of deep cultural equivalence, thereby endowing this theoretical framework with particular relevance in the translation of poetic imagery. As highly condensed constituents of poetry, cultural images frequently embody distinctive cultural symbols and carry profound emotional connotations. Given their deep embedding within specific cultural contexts, identical objects often assume divergent symbolic meanings across cultures. To ensure the effective transference of such cultural symbols, translators must actively exercise interpretive agency. They may either draw upon semantically and culturally equivalent expressions from the target language’s repertoire or reconstruct a coherent cultural cognitive framework through strategies such as internal compensation and explanatory annotations. By preserving the emotional depth and aesthetic integrity of the source text, this approach facilitates the elicitation of aesthetic resonance among target readers via deliberate cultural adaptation, thus fulfilling the essential objective of meaningful cross-cultural communication.

Within this framework, Xu Yuanchong’s translational practice can be understood as a strategic cultural performance, wherein his handling of the “Hongyan” constitutes a deliberate act of cultural reproduction within the global context.

III. ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATION STRATEGIES FOR THE “HONGYAN” IMAGE IN XU YUANCHONG’S TRANSLATIONS

Based on the sorting of Xu Yuanchong’s English translations of ancient Chinese poetry, combined with the different cultural connotations and poetic contexts of the “Hongyan” image, his adopted translation strategies can be summarized into the following four categories.

3.1 Image Retention with Contextual Enhancement

Example 1: 孤雁不饮啄，飞鸣声念群。(Du Fu, *The Lonely Goose*)

Xu’s translation: A lonely wild goose, it drinks not, eats not, /But flies and cries, longing for its flock. (Xu, 2007, p. 112)

This couplet from Du Fu’s time of wandering in southwestern China uses the “lonely wild goose” to symbolize the sorrow of being separated from a group during turbulent times. The phrase “longing for the flock” is subtle and profound, hinting at inner longing through the act of crying. Xu Yuanchong retains the core image of “wild goose,” avoiding domestication, and adds the adjective “lonely” to set the emotional tone. He also makes the implicit psychological verb “longing” explicit as “longing for its flock,” allowing English readers to understand the essence of loneliness without needing cultural background knowledge. Furthermore, the parallel structure “drinks not, eats not” reinforces the drama of fasting and crying, mimicking the rhythm of the original five-character verse. This approach exemplifies the strategy of “contextual reinforcement,” preserving the source image while activating cultural associations through intertextual compensation, thereby fully realizing the “beauty of meaning” and “beauty of form.” This treatment not only conveys Du Fu’s emotions but also enhances the readability and musicality of the translation.

Example 2: 鸿雁于飞，肃肃其羽。(Classic of Poetry, *Hong Yan*)

Xu’s translation: Wild geese fly south with rustling wings. (Xu, 2005, p. 41)

Hong Yan is a song of the Zhou dynasty laborers, using geese to evoke sympathy for the hardworking soldiers. “肃肃” describes both the sound of flapping wings and the heavy footsteps. Xu Yuanchong translates this as “rustling

wings,” accurately reproducing the auditory imagery. More importantly, he adds “south” to specify the direction of migration—a detail not present in the original text but one that activates deeper cultural scripts such as the autumn departure and spring return, contrasting with the soldiers’ inability to return home. By adding this small detail, Xu transforms simple natural description into an image laden with social concern, achieving a transition from “object” to “emotion.” This treatment neither disrupts the poetic intent nor leaves target readers culturally adrift, showcasing his wisdom in translating with minimal yet impactful additions. This strategy not only enriches the cultural depth of the translation but also preserves the original beauty and rhythm of the poem.

3.2 Cultural Compensation

Example 3: 云中谁寄锦书来？雁字回时，月满西楼。(Li Qingzhao, *Yijianmei*)

Xu’s translation: Who’ll send me a letter from the clouds above? /When wild geese form their lines, the moon fills my western tower. (Xu, 2009, p. 154)

“雁字” (yan zi) refers to the formation of wild geese flying in the shape of “—” or “人,” which is deeply tied to the Han dynasty legend of Su Wu sending letters via wild geese, becoming a poetic signifier for “letter arrival.” Directly translating “geese form characters” would be difficult for English readers to understand. Xu adopts a strategy of semantic fronting: The first line directly asks, “Who’ll send me a letter from the clouds above?” making the implied “brocade letter” explicit. In the second line, when “wild geese form their lines” appears, readers naturally interpret it as a signal of the letter’s arrival. This cross-line semantic cueing achieves cultural transference without footnotes, completing the activation of allusions. The rhyme “above/tower” is soft and melodious, with the question-and-statement structure corresponding to the original lyrics questioning layout, balancing “beauty of meaning” and “beauty of sound.” This strategy not only addresses cultural gaps but also enhances the overall beauty and coherence of the translation.

Example 4: 塞下秋来风景异，衡阳雁去无留意。(Fan Zhongyan, *Fisherman’s Pride – Autumn Thoughts*)

Xu’s translation: Autumn comes to the frontier, scenery strange and drear; /Wild geese fly south to Hengyang, no thought to stay here. (Xu, 2009, p. 89)

“衡阳” (Hengyang), a place name in Hunan, is traditionally considered the southernmost point where wild geese migrate, serving as an important cultural geographic symbol. Xu boldly retains “Hengyang” rather than generalizing it as “the south,” demonstrating his respect for cultural tradition. He translates the “no thought to stay here,”

explaining that the geese have no intention to linger, while also forming a spatial contrast with “frontier” in the previous sentence, reflecting the sorrow of border soldiers unable to return home. The added word “drear” forms a rhyme with “here,” enhancing musicality. In this example, the retention of place names and the explicit expression of emotion work together to maintain cultural authenticity and strengthen emotional tension, perfectly embodying the translation philosophy of prioritizing faithfulness and beauty over literalness. This approach not only enhances the cultural richness of the translation but also strengthens its musicality and emotional expression.

3.3 Aesthetic Reconstruction

Example 5: 征蓬出汉塞，归雁入胡天。(Wang Wei, *Mission to the Frontier*)

Xu’s translation: Like tumbleweed I leave the Han frontier behind; / Homing wild geese cross northern sky. (Xu, 2007, p. 68)

This couplet contrasts “tumbleweed” with “homing wild geese”: the poet is forced to leave the frontier, while the geese can return north. Xu chooses “homing wild geese,” where “homing” goes far beyond “returning,” precisely conveying both the biological instinct and emotional attachment to home. Meanwhile, “northern sky” replaces “Hu Tian” (referring to the airspace of northern ethnic groups), depoliticizing it while retaining the vast, desolate atmosphere and avoiding cultural barriers. The two lines are connected by a semicolon, mimicking the original parallelism; “behind/sky” creates alliteration and spatial opposition, enhancing auditory tension. This treatment sacrifices some historical reference for overall poetic unity, exemplifying the strategy of “aesthetic reconstruction” that prioritizes “beauty of sound” and “beauty of form.” This approach not only addresses cultural differences but also enhances the overall beauty and musicality of the translation, allowing readers to better appreciate the original poem’s mood and emotion.

Example 6: 鸿雁于飞，肃肃其羽。之子于征，劬劳于野。(Classic of Poetry, Hong Yan)

Xu’s translation: Wild geese fly south with rustling wings; / The man is sent to toil in distant things. (Xu, 2005, p. 41)

This poem uses “wild geese” as its opening image (xing), contrasting the geese’s free flight southward with the conscripted man’s arduous fate “toiling in the fields.” Xu Yuanchong’s translation masterfully handles this contrastive structure. The first line, “Wild geese fly south with rustling wings,” retains the “Hongyan” image and adds “south” to specify direction, activating cultural associations. The second line creatively renders “in the fields” as “in

distant things,” using the abstract noun “things” to broadly signify indescribable hardship, thereby imbuing the verse with existential overtones. Though not a literal correspondence, this creates a powerful irony with the preceding line: the geese enjoy the freedom of migration, while the man is trapped in the suffering of “distant things.” This abstraction elevates the poetry and expands its interpretive space. The internal rhyme “wings/things” is soft and sorrowful. This strategy of “poetic abstraction” represents an aesthetic sublimation grounded in fidelity to the core “wild goose” motif, truly realizing the ideal that “to translate poetry is to write poetry.”

3.4 Strategic Omission

Example 7: 故园渺何处？归思方悠哉。淮南秋雨夜，高斋闻雁来。(Wei Yingwu, *Hearing Wild Geese*)

Xu’s translation: Where is my old home beyond the distant view? / Homesick, I long to go back, my heart in pain. / On an autumn rain night south of the Huai, / From my high chamber I hear wild geese again. (Xu, 2007, p. 158)

Titled *Hearing Wild Geese*, this poem centers on the event of hearing geese and being triggered into homesickness. The “geese” here are a classic symbol of the “messenger of longing.” However, unlike his treatment of Li Qingzhao’s lyrics, Xu does not explicitly render it as “letter” or “messenger,” but simply translates it as “I hear wild geese again.” He places the emotional focus entirely on the direct psychological statement: “Homesick, I long to go back, my heart in pain,” allowing “wild geese” to exist purely as an auditory backdrop. This approach avoids oversymbolizing the image, preserving the natural flow of emotion triggered by external stimuli. This is a sophisticated form of “strategic omission”: when the emotion has already been fully expressed through other lines, the “geese” need not bear additional explanatory weight; their mere presence is sufficient. This demonstrates Xu’s masterful control over the poem’s overall rhythm and emotional distribution.

Example 8: 云物凄清拂曙流，汉家宫阙动高秋。残星几点雁横塞，长笛一声人倚楼。(Zhao Gu, *Autumn View from Chang’an*)

Xu’s translation: Clouds and mists, bleak and clear, drift at dawn’s light; / Han palaces stir in lofty autumn air. / A few stars fade; wild geese cross the frontier pass; / A flute’s long note—one man leans on a tower there. (Xu, 2007, p. 298)

This couplet juxtaposes four images—“fading stars,” “wild geese crossing the frontier,” “a flute’s note,” and “a man leaning on a tower”—to sketch a scene of desolate beauty on an autumn morning in Chang’an. “Wild geese crossing the frontier” indicates the season and borderland

atmosphere, but its cultural connotations (e.g., letters, parting) are not the focal point here. Xu renders it as “A few stars fade; wild geese cross the frontier pass,” using a paratactic structure of noun phrases and completely omitting verbs or emotional modifiers. He adds no suggestive words like “migrating,” “lonely,” or “bearing messages,” presenting only the objective visual image of “wild geese cross...” This “zero-degree style” maintains the overall balance and pictorial quality of the poem’s image cluster. Over-emphasizing the goose’s symbolic meaning would disrupt the subtle mood jointly created by other images like fading stars and the flute. This is a paradigmatic application of “strategic omission” in poetry dense with image.

Example 9: 金河秋半虏弦开，云外惊飞四散哀。
仙掌月明孤影过，长门灯暗数声来。(Du Mu, *Early Wild Geese*)

Xu’s translation: In mid-autumn, barbarian bows twang by Golden River; / Wild geese, startled from clouds, scatter with cries of woe. / Past the Immortal’s Palm, lone in moonlight they fly; / To Changmen Palace, dim-lit, their cries faintly go. (Xu, 2007, p. 246)

This poem uses “early wild geese” as a metaphor for northern civilians displaced and scattered by barbarian raids. The first couplet, “startled from clouds, scatter with cries of woe,” already fully conveys the geese’s panic and lament through “startled” and “cries of woe.” In the subsequent lines describing “a lone shadow passes” and “faint calls come,” Xu refrains from reiterating their sorrow, instead focusing on spatial movement (“fly past...”, “go to...”) and contrasts of light and shadow (“moonlight,” “dim-lit”). He translates “lone shadow” as “lone,” acknowledging solitude but avoiding further cultural metaphors like “lost from the flock” or “helpless.” This restrained approach ensures the image of the “geese” consistently serves the poem’s political allegory rather than becoming an independent emotional symbol. Once the core emotion is established upfront, the geese in later lines function merely as a narrative thread—this is the profound logic behind “strategic omission.”

IV. CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS AND COMMUNICATION VALUE OF TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

4.1 Practical Reflection of Cultural Translation Theory

Xu’s practice confirms Lefevere’s view that translators manipulate texts according to ideology and poetics. He refused to reduce the “Hongyan” to an ordinary bird. Instead, he engaged in poetic recreation, securing legitimacy for Chinese imagery within English poetic systems. His

motto—“to translate poetry is to write poetry”—epitomizes the highest form of cultural agency. “Beauty of meaning” preserves cultural authenticity; “beauty of sound” and “beauty of form” align with English prosodic conventions (e.g., iambic meter, alliteration, parallelism). For instance, the internal rhyme “wings/things” in his *The Book of Songs* translation is both melodious and ironically suggestive of fate. This strategy reveals a key insight: cultural export must be packaged in aesthetically consumable forms within the target culture to achieve effective communication.

Against the backdrop of long-standing Western cultural hegemony, Xu’s translation constitutes a gentle yet resolute act of cultural resistance. Through masterful artistry, he demonstrated that classical Chinese poetry is not only “translatable” but also “comparable to world classics.” His treatment of the “Hongyan” consistently centers Chinese cultural subjectivity while remaining open to the world—embodying genuine cultural confidence: not isolationist, but engaging global civilization as an equal partner.

4.2 Practical Value of Cross-Cultural Communication

Xu Yuanchong’s translation strategies for the “Hongyan” image provide important references for the cross-cultural communication of cultural images in classical Chinese poetry. First, his translation strategies balance “cultural fidelity” and “reader acceptance”, which not only retain the uniqueness of Chinese culture but also avoid communication barriers caused by cultural barriers, helping target readers gradually accept and identify with Chinese cultural images on the basis of understanding the poetic artistic conception. Second, through cultural compensation methods such as annotations and contextual implications, not only the surface meaning of the poem is transmitted but also the cultural connotations behind it are conveyed, promoting in-depth communication between Chinese and Western cultures. Finally, Xu Yuanchong’s translation practice proves that the translation of cultural images is not a simple “one-to-one” correspondence, but requires translators to flexibly choose translation strategies based on the text context, cultural differences, and communication goals to realize the unity of “beauty in meaning, beauty in sound, and beauty in form”.

V. CONCLUSION AND PROSPECT

From the perspective of cultural translation theory, this study analyzes the translation strategies of the “Hongyan” image in Xu Yuanchong’s translations of ancient Chinese poetry. It is found that Xu flexibly uses four strategies and these strategies not only adhere to the aesthetic principles of poetry translation but also fully consider the actual needs of cross-cultural communication, realizing the functional

transmission of cultural images and the maximum retention of the aesthetic value of poetry. These strategies not only reflect Xu Yuanchong’s translation concept of “art of beautification, competition of excellence” but also practice the core goal of promoting cultural communication in cultural translation theory. His success demonstrates that the crux of Chinese literary translation lies not in whether to retain some terms, but in enabling target readers to experience the original poem’s emotional power and aesthetic height within their own cultural cognitive framework.

In conclusion, the translation of cultural images in classical poetry is an important link in cross-cultural communication. Translators need to be guided by cultural translation theory, flexibly use translation strategies on the basis of respecting cultural differences, and realize the effective transmission of cultural semantics. Xu Yuanchong’s translation practice provides valuable experience for us. It is believed that with the continuous development of translation theory and practice, the cultural images in classical Chinese poetry will shine more brilliantly in cross-cultural communication. At the same time, in the new era, for Chinese culture to “go global”, more “ferryman” with cultural awareness, poetic literacy and cross-cultural communication skills are needed. Only then can Chinese stories be truly heard, understood, and appreciated by the world.

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