



Xu Yuanchong's Translation Aesthetics in Practice: A Systematic Study of the Three Beauties and Three Transformations

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Abstract: This study examines Xu Yuanchong's translation aesthetics and practice through a qualitative analysis of his theoretical writings, representative translations, and major scholarly discussions. Rather than treating theory and practice as separate domains, the study relates Xu's aesthetic commitments to his concrete handling of imagery, rhythm, parallelism, and condensed poetic syntax in selected renditions of classical Chinese poetry. It argues that Xu's translation project is driven by two intertwined aims: the international circulation of Chinese literary culture and the re-creation of poetic beauty in the target language. The analysis further shows that the Three Beauties principle—beauty in sense, sound, and form—functions less as a rigid checklist than as a dynamic decision-making framework, while the Three Transformations—deepening, equalizing, and simplifying—operate as practical procedures for dealing with semantic density, cultural imagery, and formal asymmetry between Chinese and English. Close reading of representative examples indicates that Xu consistently privileges aesthetic reception and poetic readability, even when this requires interpretive intervention or partial domestication. His practice therefore expands the translator's creative agency while also inviting criticism concerning cultural attenuation and over-interpretation. By integrating motivation, corpus, method, and reception, this article repositions Xu not simply as a prolific translator, but as a major architect of cross-lingual poetic mediation in modern Chinese translation studies.

Keywords: classical Chinese poetry translation; Three Transformations; translation aesthetics; cross-cultural mediation

I. Introduction

Among twentieth- and twenty-first-century translators of Chinese literature, Xu Yuanchong occupies an unusually visible and contested place. He is celebrated for bringing classical Chinese poetry into English and French through highly crafted verse translations, yet he is equally known for a forceful theoretical position: literary translation should not be reduced to lexical transfer, but should strive to recreate the aesthetic force of the original in another language. This insistence on poetic re-creation distinguishes Xu from more literalist or documentary models of translation and helps explain both the admiration and controversy surrounding his work ^{[1], [5]}.

The scholarly importance of Xu lies not only in the scale of his translated corpus, but also in the conceptual vocabulary he developed to justify his decisions. His best-known formulations—the Three Beauties of sense, sound, and form, and the Three Transformations of deepening, equalizing, and simplifying—have become standard reference points in Chinese discussions of poetic translation ^{[2], [3], [7]}. These terms are often invoked as if they constituted a fixed doctrine. Yet in practice, Xu uses them far more flexibly: they function as a set of priorities and procedures through which the translator negotiates semantic compression, formal mismatch, and audience reception.

At the same time, Xu's translations raise broader theoretical questions that extend beyond one translator's oeuvre. How much liberty may a translator take in the name of aesthetic effect? To what extent should culturally specific imagery be preserved, explained, or replaced? When translating poetry across typologically different languages, is formal imitation desirable, or should aesthetic equivalence take precedence? These questions are central to translation studies more generally, but Xu's work renders them unusually concrete because his translations repeatedly foreground the translator's creative agency ^{[4], [5], [13]}.

This article reconsiders Xu Yuanchong through an integrated analytical framework that links motivation, corpus, theory, and practice. It asks three questions: (1) What cultural and aesthetic commitments structure Xu's translation project? (2) How are the Three Beauties and Three Transformations operationalized in representative translations? and (3) What are the gains and limits of Xu's model for cross-cultural literary mediation? By answering these questions together, the article moves beyond the common separation of theoretical exposition from textual analysis.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section II reviews the main strands of scholarship on Xu Yuanchong. Section III clarifies the analytical materials and method. Sections IV through VI analyze Xu's motivation, corpus orientation, and translation strategies. Section VII discusses the broader implications and limitations of his approach, and Section VIII concludes.



II. Literature Review

Research on Xu Yuanchong has been substantial in Chinese-language scholarship since the 1980s. One influential line of study focuses on his formal and aesthetic innovations, especially his defense of rhyme and rhythmic patterning in the target text. Liu Zhongde identified Xu as an important advocate of verse translation and highlighted his determination to render classical Chinese poetry as poetry rather than as annotated prose [1]. Later studies moved from description to theoretical positioning. Wang Ning, for example, situated the Three Beauties within a broader debate on cultural representation and argued that Xu's theory challenges narrow equivalence-based models by foregrounding literary value and cultural self-articulation [2]. Zhang Meifang further connected Xu's poetics to classical Chinese aesthetic thought and treated his approach as a mode of interlingual aesthetic mediation [3].

A second strand of scholarship evaluates Xu's translations through the lens of readability, domestication, and target-language effect. In this line of inquiry, Xu is often praised for producing English versions that are memorable, musical, and accessible to non-Chinese readers. At the same time, this praise is accompanied by criticism. Hu Gengshen notes that Xu's art of beautification can at times flatten cultural density or over-determine interpretation in order to increase readability [5]. Similar concerns appear in broader translation theory. Venuti's critique of domestication is frequently mobilized to question whether Xu's search for poetic fluency may mute the foreignness of the source text [4].

Compared with domestic scholarship, international discussion of Xu remains relatively limited and often fragmentary. He is usually cited as an example in larger debates on poetic translation, domestication, or translator subjectivity rather than examined as a fully theorized case. As a result, one persistent limitation in the secondary literature is the tendency to separate Xu's theoretical vocabulary from the textual mechanisms of his practice. Another is the tendency to evaluate individual lines in isolation without asking how his decisions are shaped by a larger translation philosophy.

This article addresses those gaps in two ways. First, it treats Xu's motivation, corpus selection, theory, and case-based practice as mutually constitutive rather than as detachable topics. Second, it reads the Three Beauties and Three Transformations not as abstract slogans, but as operational tools whose value becomes visible only when tested against specific translation problems. The aim is therefore not simply to praise or criticize Xu, but to explain the logic of his translational decision-making more precisely.

III. Analytical Framework and Materials

This study adopts a qualitative, text-centered approach. Its primary materials include Xu Yuanchong's theoretical writings, prefaces, and memoir-like reflections [6],[9], together with representative translations drawn from his English renderings of canonical Chinese poetry [10],[12]. The analysis also engages major critical discussions in translation studies in order to situate Xu's practice within broader debates about domestication, aesthetic equivalence, and translator agency [4], [13].

The analysis is selective rather than exhaustive. Instead of attempting a full corpus survey, the article focuses on representative cases that illuminate recurrent translation problems: reduplication, cultural imagery, rhyme, syntax, lineation, parallelism, and punning. The cases were chosen because they are frequently cited in discussions of Xu's practice and because they demonstrate clearly how the Three Beauties and Three Transformations interact in concrete textual decisions.

Methodologically, the article proceeds in three steps. It first reconstructs Xu's declared translation aims from his own writings. It then maps the orientation of his translated corpus in order to show what kinds of texts his method is designed to serve most effectively. Finally, it conducts close reading of selected examples, comparing source-text features with Xu's target-text solutions. This design makes it possible to examine not only what Xu says translation should do, but also what his translations actually do on the page.

The study does not claim to resolve all questions of value or fidelity. Rather, it aims to provide a more analytically integrated account of Xu's poetics, one that recognizes both the creative power and the interpretive risks of his method. In that sense, the article is both descriptive and evaluative.

TABLE

Core Analytical Vocabulary in Xu Yuanchong Studies

Concept	Primary Focus	Analytical Function in This Article
Beauty in sense	Semantic and affective resonance	Examines how Xu preserves or intensifies imagery, mood, and implication.
Beauty in sound	Rhyme, rhythm, cadence	Explains Xu's preference for verse translation and audible patterning.
Beauty in form	Lineation, balance, visible structure	Assesses how Xu recreates parallelism and visual proportion without rigid imitation.
Deepening / equalizing /	Operational procedures	Shows how Xu intervenes when direct equivalence is blocked

Concept	Primary Focus	Analytical Function in This Article
simplifying		by linguistic or cultural asymmetry.

IV. Cultural Motivation and Aesthetic Mission

Xu Yuanchong's translation project is anchored in a strong sense of cultural mediation. Throughout his writings, he presents translation as a way of enabling Chinese literature to enter world literature on more equal terms [6], [8]. This orientation should not be reduced to a simple rhetoric of cultural pride. More precisely, it reflects a conviction that the aesthetic resources of Chinese poetry can and should be legible to readers working in other literary systems. Translation, in this view, is not secondary transmission but active cultural presentation.

This cultural mission is inseparable from Xu's aesthetic program. In *The Art of Translation*, Xu repeatedly argues that literary translation must recreate beauty rather than merely transmit information [7]. That claim redefines the translator's task. Fidelity remains important, but it is no longer conceived narrowly as verbal correspondence. Instead, fidelity is reframed as responsibility to the poem's aesthetic effect: its emotional force, musical energy, and formal balance. Xu's famous formulation that translation should create in another language something "as beautiful as" the original expresses precisely this shift [7].

Xu's personal critical style also matters. He often writes with unusual confidence, and at times with deliberate provocation, insisting that poetry translation is a site of creative competition rather than passive service. Such statements have sometimes been read as self-dramatizing, but they also reveal an important theoretical premise: the translator is not an invisible relay, but a historically situated literary maker. This emphasis on agency helps explain why Xu is willing to alter diction, add connective logic, or reconfigure syntax when he believes such interventions are necessary to produce an aesthetically effective target poem.

At the same time, Xu's mission has limits. When aesthetic recreation becomes the highest value, the translator may risk pre-empting the reader's encounter with the source text's ambiguity or foreignness. Xu's model is therefore most persuasive when read not as a universal rule for all translation, but as a strong poetics designed for literary texts—especially lyric poetry—in which condensed affect, musical patterning, and formal design are integral to meaning.

V. Corpus and Translational Orientation

Xu's translated corpus is exceptionally broad, extending from early canonical materials such as the *Book of Poetry* to Tang poetry, Song lyrics, Yuan songs, and selected dramatic and philosophical classics [10],[12]. What unifies this corpus is not chronology but genre preference. Xu repeatedly gravitates toward texts in which compression, imagery, and sonic patterning are central. This preference is important, because his theoretical apparatus is most fully realized in precisely those genres where literal transfer is most evidently insufficient.

A defining feature of Xu's corpus is his commitment to translating poetry as poetry. Instead of presenting classical Chinese verse in unrhymed prose paraphrase, he typically seeks target-language forms that preserve or recreate lineation, cadence, and rhyme. This preference has major consequences. It increases the literary readability of the target text and makes Chinese poetry available to readers as an aesthetic experience rather than as a philological object. Yet it also constrains lexical choice and encourages compensatory shifts in imagery or syntax, because rhyme and rhythm must be built within the target language rather than mechanically copied from the source.

His corpus also reveals an orientation toward outward circulation. Xu's bilingual and, in some cases, trilingual work suggests that he viewed translation not simply as national pedagogy, but as participation in an international literary space. The ambition to make Chinese poems resonate in both Anglophone and Francophone contexts distinguishes his practice from models aimed primarily at classroom explanation. He does not translate in order to preserve the source text behind glass; he translates in order to make it live in another literary environment.

That said, the corpus is not neutral evidence of universality. Xu's method is especially well suited to highly lyric texts, and less obviously suited to documentary prose, heavily allusive scholarly writing, or texts whose resistance and opacity are themselves central values. Recognizing this genre-specific strength is essential to a fair evaluation of his legacy.

VI. The Three Beauties and the Three Transformations in Practice

A. Beauty in Sense: Deepening and Simplifying

Xu places beauty in sense at the center of poetic translation, but he does not equate sense with dictionary meaning. For him, sense includes tone, emotional trajectory, and the latent associations carried by culturally situated images. This broader definition explains why he often chooses semantic expansion or selective simplification when literal transfer would leave the English line inert.

A representative example appears in Li Qingzhao's "Shengshengman," where the opening line "寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚" is rendered by Xu as "I look for what I miss; / I know not what it is. / I feel so sad, so drear, / So lonely, without cheer" [9]. The source text's affective force depends heavily on reduplication, a formal resource that cannot be reproduced straightforwardly in idiomatic English. Xu therefore abandons surface repetition and instead deepens the emotional progression through a chain of increasingly explicit affective descriptors. The result is interpretive rather than literal, but it captures the poem's escalating desolation more effectively for an English reader than a formal mimicry would.

A different strategy is visible in Xu's translation of "关关雎鸠，在河之洲" from the Book of Poetry as "By riverside are cooing / A pair of turtledoves" [10]. The bird *jujiu* is replaced by "turtledoves," a culturally legible sign of paired affection in English. Here Xu simplifies a source-specific image in order to preserve the poem's erotic and tonal function. Critics may regard this move as domestication, and rightly so; yet the decision also demonstrates Xu's practical premise that semantic effect sometimes depends on symbolic recognizability rather than taxonomic accuracy.

B. Beauty in Sound: Rhyme, Rhythm, and Equalization

Xu's best-known and most controversial commitment is his insistence that poetry should be translated into verse rather than into chopped-up prose. In his practice, beauty in sound is not ornamental. It is a core component of reception, because rhythm and rhyme shape memorability, mood, and rhetorical closure [7], [11].

His translation of Li Bai's "Jing Ye Si" is illustrative: "Before my bed a pool of light; / Is it hoarfrost upon the ground? / Eyes up, I see the moon so bright; / Head bent, in homesickness I'm drowned" [11]. The English poem introduces end rhyme and a more regular cadence than the original line-by-line structure would automatically provide. The word "drowned" is especially revealing: it satisfies sonic design, but it also intensifies the emotional weight of homesickness. This is a characteristic Xu move. Sound is not pursued independently of sense; rather, a sonically useful word is chosen because it can simultaneously amplify the poem's emotional completion.

The same principle appears in Xu's handling of compact imagistic sequences such as Ma Zhiyuan's "枯藤老树昏鸦," rendered as "Over old trees wreathed with rotten vines fly evening crows" [12]. The original is radically paratactic, while English generally requires greater syntactic articulation. Xu equalizes the structural difference by introducing an English sentence that preserves compression while generating internal acoustic patterning through repeated consonants and balanced stress. The line is more grammatical than the original, but it remains imagistically dense and atmospherically bleak.

C. Beauty in Form: Structural Recreation Rather Than Mechanical Imitation

Beauty in form is often misunderstood as visual imitation. Xu's actual practice is more elastic. He attempts to preserve lineation, proportion, and structural balance, but he does not insist on formal sameness when the typological distance between Chinese and English makes strict replication awkward or unreadable.

Du Fu's couplet "国破山河在，城春草木深" offers a useful example. Xu's version-"On war-torn land streams flow and mountains stand; / In vernal town grass and weeds are overgrown"-retains the bipartite structure and recreates a visible and audible balance through paired clauses and echoing cadence. The English is not a word-for-word copy of the source syntax, yet it preserves the antiphonal relation between devastation and persistence that gives the couplet its force.

A similar strategy appears in the treatment of parallelism. For Li Shangyin's line "春蚕到死丝方尽，蜡炬成灰泪始干," Xu produces "Spring silkworm till its death spins silk from lovesick heart; / A candle but when burned up has no tears to shed." The English cannot reproduce every formal feature of the Chinese antithesis, but it recreates a matching architecture of condition and completion. The visual and rhetorical equilibrium of the line pair survives through structural analogy rather than direct duplication.

D. Integrated Operations: Puns, Metaphors, and the Limits of Transfer

The interaction of the Three Beauties becomes most visible when Xu confronts poetic devices that are notoriously resistant to transfer. Puns and culture-bound metaphors expose the limits of direct equivalence and therefore reveal most clearly how his operational procedures work.

In Du Mu's line "蜡烛有心还惜别," the "heart" of the candle simultaneously evokes the wick and an affective human center. Xu renders this as "The candle has a wick just as we have a heart, / All night long it sheds tears for us before we part." The explanatory phrase "just as we have a heart" is not present in the source text as such, but it allows the metaphorical link to survive in English. This is equalization through interpretive clarification: a compact source pun is unfolded into a more explicit target formulation.

The strategy becomes even clearer in Liu Yuxi's famous pun "道是无晴却有晴," where qing may suggest both "clear weather" and "feeling." Xu abandons the phonetic pun itself and opts for semantic compensation: "My beloved is as deep in love as the day is fine." Here the formal pun disappears, but the emotional doubleness is redistributed into the simile. The example demonstrates both the strength and the limit of Xu's method. He is highly effective at preserving communicative and affective force, yet the linguistic strangeness of the source is frequently normalized.

Taken together, these cases show that the Three Beauties are best understood as a hierarchy of aesthetic goals, while the Three Transformations are tactical responses to translational obstacles. Xu's practice is therefore neither arbitrary embellishment nor stable equivalence. It is a disciplined mode of creative rewriting that seeks to maximize poetic effect under conditions of structural asymmetry.

TABLE

II

Representative Translational Operations in Xu Yuanchong's Practice

Translation Problem	Representative Case	Dominant Operation	Main Gain / Main Risk
Reduplication	Li Qingzhao, "Shengshengman"	Deepening	Gain: affective escalation; Risk: interpretive overstatement
Culture-specific image	"关关雎鸠" → "turtledoves"	Simplifying	Gain: symbolic legibility; Risk: cultural attenuation
Rhyme and cadence	Li Bai, "Jing Ye Si"	Equalizing	Gain: poetic memorability; Risk: lexical reshaping
Pun and double meaning	"无晴却有晴"	Compensatory equalization	Gain: emotional continuity; Risk: loss of verbal ingenuity

VII. Discussion: Contribution, Tension, and Contemporary Relevance

Xu Yuanchong's importance to translation studies lies in the fact that he theorizes and practices literary translation as aesthetic mediation rather than as semantic bookkeeping. This move has at least three enduring implications. First, it expands the role of the translator from a passive mediator to an accountable re-creator. Second, it shows that poetic translation must negotiate multiple forms of value simultaneously—semantic, sonic, formal, and cultural. Third, it demonstrates that readability in the target language is not a secondary matter of style, but part of whether the translated poem can function as literature at all.

At the same time, Xu's model is marked by a productive tension. The more fully the target text is shaped into a poem that lives in English, the greater the possibility that the source text's alterity will be softened. In this sense, Xu's work sits at the unstable border between aesthetic success and cultural reduction. This is why his translations continue to provoke disagreement: they succeed precisely by refusing a strictly documentary ideal of translation, yet that refusal also exposes them to the charge of domestication [4], [5], [13].

A balanced assessment should therefore resist two extremes. It is inadequate to dismiss Xu as merely ornamental or insufficiently faithful, because such criticism overlooks the formal impossibility of simply carrying Chinese poetic effects intact into English. It is equally inadequate to celebrate all creative intervention as a triumph, because some interventions inevitably narrow semantic openness or suppress culturally specific texture. Xu's importance lies not in solving these contradictions once and for all, but in making them visible and artistically consequential.

For contemporary scholarship, Xu remains valuable for at least two reasons. He offers a historically influential Chinese-language account of poetic translation grounded in literary practice, and he provides a rich case for rethinking translator subjectivity in global literary circulation. His work also suggests a broader methodological lesson: translation criticism gains precision when it moves from abstract debate to the granular analysis of textual decisions. It is at the level of individual choices—whether to rhyme, whether to explain, whether to substitute an image—that large theoretical disagreements become concrete.

VIII. Conclusion

This article has reconsidered Xu Yuanchong's translation aesthetics through an integrated analysis of motivation, corpus, theory, and representative practice. It has argued that Xu's translation project is driven by a dual commitment: to enlarge the international visibility of Chinese literary culture and to recreate poetic beauty in the target language. Within that project, the Three Beauties provide an overarching aesthetic orientation, while the Three Transformations function as practical responses to recurrent translational obstacles.

The case analyses show that Xu consistently privileges poetic reception over lexical literalism. He is willing to deepen emotion, simplify cultural imagery, regularize syntax, and redesign sonic structure when such changes allow the translated poem to achieve greater intelligibility and aesthetic force in English. This approach has undeniable strengths: it makes

Chinese poetry more legible as poetry to non-Chinese readers and highlights the translator's creative responsibility. At the same time, it also carries recognizable risks, especially the attenuation of cultural specificity and the reduction of source-text ambiguity.

Xu's legacy should therefore be understood neither as a model of unrestricted freedom nor as a deviation from fidelity. More usefully, it may be understood as a strong theory of poetic translation in which fidelity is redefined through aesthetic effect, genre sensitivity, and readerly experience. Precisely because his work remains open to debate, it continues to matter. It compels translation scholars to confront a central question that has by no means disappeared: when a poem crosses languages, what must be preserved, what may be transformed, and who gets to decide?

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