



# Bridging Poetic Worlds: A Systematic Analysis of Xu Yuanchong's Translation Aesthetics and Practice

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**Abstract:** Xu Yuanchong (1921-2021) stands as a distinctive and influential figure in modern Chinese translation history, renowned particularly for his translations of classical Chinese poetry into English and French. This paper systematically examines the core motivations behind his work, his major achievements, and his unique strategic framework. The study finds that his translational drive stemmed from profound cultural confidence and the pursuit of an "art of beautification." His vast corpus spans from the Book of Songs to the poetry of modern. Central to his practice is the "Theory of Three Beauties" (sense, sound, and form) guiding the "Theory of Three Transformations" (deepening, equalizing, and simplifying). Through analysis of specific examples, this paper explores the application of these strategies and discusses the value and inspiration of his theoretical framework for cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** Xu Yuanchong, translation motivation, classical Chinese poetry translation, Three-Beauty Principle, Three-Transformation Principle, translation of Chinese literature

## Introduction

In the constellation of translators who have carried Chinese literature to the world since the twentieth century, Xu Yuanchong undoubtedly shines as a star with a unique brilliance. He was far more than a mere conveyor of words; he was a creator imbued with the boldness to "dare to be the first under heaven" and a passion for "poetic competition." He dedicated his life to transmitting the beauty of classical Chinese poetry into the worlds of English and French through verse translation. The sheer volume of his output, the distinctiveness of his principles, and the profound influence of his work are unmatched in the field of translation. To understand Xu Yuanchong, one must look beyond his self-proclaimed status as "the only one who translates Chinese poetry into English and French rhymes." It is essential to delve into the core of his spirit, to explore the motivations that drove his decades-long devotion to this "project of beauty," to examine the monumental edifice of works he constructed, and to analyze the sophisticated "tools" he employed to bridge the vast poetic chasm between Chinese and English. This paper seeks to provide a systematic examination and interpretation of Xu Yuanchong's translational universe through the three dimensions of translation motivation, major translated works, and translation strategies.

## Literature Review

### *A Review of Domestic Academic Research on Xu Yuanchong's Translation Theory*

Since the 1980s, Chinese scholars have extensively studied Xu Yuanchong's translation theory, especially the "Three Beauties" (sense, sound, and form) and the "Three Transformations" (deepening, equalizing, and simplifying). Early works, such as Liu Zhongde's *On Translation*<sup>[1]</sup>, highlighted Xu's pioneering use of rhymed verse in rendering classical Chinese poetry. Wang Ning<sup>[2]</sup> later situated the "Three Beauties" within the framework of Chinese translation theory, arguing that it challenges traditional equivalence models and reflects a cultural-nationalist agenda. More recent studies have further explored the theoretical underpinnings of the "Three Beauties" in terms of interlingual aesthetic mediation. For example, Zhang Meifang (2020) analyzed the "Three Beauties" in relation to Chinese poetics, suggesting that Xu's theory draws heavily on traditional Chinese literary aesthetics<sup>[3]</sup>.

### *International and Domestic Comments of Xu Yuanchong's Translations*

Internationally, Xu's work has often been discussed in the context of domestication. Lawrence Venuti<sup>[4]</sup> cited Xu as a prominent example of domesticating poetic translation, raising questions about the loss of cultural specificity. In China, some scholars have offered more nuanced critiques. For instance, Hu Gengshen (2019) argued that while Xu's "art of beautification" enhances readability, it may sometimes oversimplify complex cultural images<sup>[5]</sup>.

### *Limitations of Existing Research and the Innovations of This Paper*

Existing research tends to treat Xu's theory and practice separately, lacking an integrated analysis that connects his cultural confidence and aesthetic mission with his strategic repertoire. Moreover, there is insufficient attention to the dynamic interplay of the "Three Beauties" and "Three Transformations" in specific translation cases, and little discussion of the implications of his model for contemporary cross-cultural literary mediation. This study addresses these gaps by examining Xu's motivation, corpus characteristics, and strategic application, arguing that his approach constitutes a



distinctive mode of interlingual aesthetic mediation that reconfigures translation as creative re-imagination rather than mechanical transfer.

### **Motivation for Translation: The Fusion of Cultural Confidence and Aesthetic Mission**

The powerful drive behind Xu Yuanchong's translation endeavors stemmed from a conscious choice rooted in his innate disposition, aligned with the historical currents of his time, and faithful to his genuine convictions.

First, deeply ingrained cultural confidence and a sense of mission to disseminate Chinese culture served as the wellspring of his motivation. Born two years after the May Fourth Movement and maturing during a period of national crisis, Xu's eight formative years at the National Southwestern Associated University shaped him into a profoundly inspired master scholar. He keenly perceived the marginalized status of Chinese culture within Western discourse, which led him to embrace the mission of articulating Chinese culture in global languages and presenting its wonders to the world. He consistently held the aspiration: "Our compatriots must have the ambition for Chinese culture to be embraced by the world."<sup>[6]</sup> This was not narrow nationalism nor blind self-aggrandizement. He viewed translation as a "contest," one aimed at challenging Western centrism, demonstrating that China also possesses distinctive artistic features of global value, and actively facilitating the entry of Chinese literature into the Western cultural sphere.

Second, the pursuit and insistence on beauty constitute the intrinsic rationale behind his "Art of Beautification." The "Art of Beautification" is both a translational philosophy distilled from Xu's own practice and a reflection of the core tenet of his translation theory—that translation is a re-creation of beauty, "using another language to create something as beautiful as, or similar in beauty to, the original" <sup>[7]</sup>. His proposition to "beautify through art, create excellence as in a contest" encapsulates this very idea. For him, "translation is not merely paraphrasing, but a form of creation. The translator should engage in the replication of beauty in competition with other translations, potentially surpassing the original to achieve greater aesthetic appeal." Driven by this conception of translation as an art form, he continually pushed the boundaries of what was deemed "untranslatable."

Furthermore, the romanticism and the spirit of "seeking truth" inherent in his personal character cannot be overlooked. Xu Yuanchong was forthright, boldly confident, even self-assured, and thus unwilling to compromise in the face of any difficulty. He believed that a resilient character was essential for success. The process of translation, for him, was an expression of his own talent and soul, which endowed his work with a distinct personal style. The "truth" he sought was not a rigid, word-for-word fidelity, but a truthful representation that conveys beauty—a higher form of artistic authenticity. As he stated, "Literary translation is a contest between two languages and cultures, an art; and the method to win in this contest is to leverage the advantages of the target language, or in other words, to recreate."<sup>[8]</sup>

### **Major Translated Works: Building an Overseas Corridor for Classical Chinese Poetics**

The corpus of Xu Yuanchong's translations is vast, spanning from the pre-Qin era to the modern period, with a remarkable focus on poetry that demonstrates astonishing systematicity. His monumental endeavors encompass foundational anthologies and individual masterpieces, including *The Book of Poetry*, *Elegies of the South*, *Poetry of the Han, Wei and Six Dynasties*, *300 Tang Poems*, *300 Song Lyrics*, and *300 Yuan Songs*, as well as seminal dramatic works like *The Romance of the Western Bower* and *The Peony Pavilion*. Beyond poetry and drama, he translated cultural classics such as *The Analects*, *Laotzu: The Book of Tao and Teh*, and *Mao Tsetung: The Man and the Poet*, alongside select modern and contemporary literary pieces. His English translations are predominantly rendered in verse, meticulously crafted to echo the rhythmic and tonal patterns of the Chinese originals. Xu's profound mastery of classical Chinese prosody and phonology enabled him to strive for a resonance in English that often rivals, and at times artistically transcends, the formal constraints of the source texts, seeking to reconstruct their musicality and lyrical essence for the English-speaking world.

His contributions to Francophone audiences are equally formidable, evidenced by works such as *Three Hundred Ancient Chinese Poems* and *One Hundred Selected Ci* (Chinese: 词, a genre of classical Chinese lyric poetry set to music, flourished during the Tang and Song dynasties) *Poems from the Tang and Song Dynasties*. Through these, he accomplished the remarkable feat of infusing the essence of Chinese poetry into the two major Western linguistic and cultural systems simultaneously.

Characterized by their distinctive style, consistency, and concentrated focus, Xu's voluminous poetic translations have enabled generations of English-language poetry readers to encounter Chinese verse through his lens. Regardless of divergent critical reception or personal preference, his body of work has undeniably forged a substantial and enduring influence, shaping the Western reception of Chinese poetic tradition.

### **Translation Strategies: The Practice of "Three Transformations" Guided by the "Three Beauties" Principle**

Xu Yuanchong's translation strategies are the most vivid embodiment of his theoretical framework, with the core approach being the flexible application of "deepening, equalizing, and shallowing" (the Three Transformations) under the guidance of the principles of "beauty in sense, sound, and form" (the Three Beauties). The following analysis incorporates specific translation examples to illustrate this practice.

#### ***The Pursuit of "Beauty in Sense" Through Deepening and Shallowing:***

Beauty in sense holds paramount importance among the Three Beauties. To convey the profound artistic conception and cultural connotations, Xu frequently employs "deepening" (excavating implicit meanings beneath the literal surface) or "shallowing" (adapting culture-specific items).

*Example 1 (Deepening):* For the line "寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚" from Li Qingzhao's "Shengshengman," Xu translates: "I look for what I miss; / I know not what it is. / I feel so sad, so drear, / So lonely, without cheer."<sup>[9]</sup> While the original employs reiterated characters as its essence, a literal formal imitation would fail to convey the sense. Xu forgoes formal mimicry, instead deepening and conveying the core emotion of desolate despair through a progressive series of words—"miss," "sad," "drear," "lonely," "without cheer"—demonstrating a "deepening" treatment that "captures the sense while relinquishing the form."

*Example 2 (Shallowing):* In "The Book of Poetry: Guan Ju," the line "关关雎鸠，在河之洲" references "ju jiu," a specific waterfowl. Xu renders it as: "By riverside are cooing / A pair of turtledoves."<sup>[10]</sup> By substituting the culturally specific "ju jiu" with "turtledoves"—a bird symbolizing love in Western culture—the translation, while losing specific ornithological detail, accurately conveys the symbolic meaning of "affectionate birds" and the poem's tone, ensuring the effective transmission of beauty in sense.

### ***The Re-creation of "Beauty in Sound" Through Equalization:***

Xu insists on translating poetry into rhyming verse, creating auditory beauty through rhyme and rhythm.

*Example 3 (Rhyme):* For Li Bai's "Jing Ye Si," Xu's version reads: "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."<sup>[11]</sup> The translation adopts an *aabb* rhyme scheme (light/ground, bright/drowned), making it highly rhythmic. Notably, the word "drowned" not only fulfills the rhyme but also intensifies the overwhelming nature of homesickness through its imagery, exemplifying how beauty in sound enhances beauty in sense.

*Example 4 (Rhythm):* The line "枯藤老树昏鸦" from Ma Zhiyuan's "Tianjingsha: Autumn Thoughts" is a paratactic series of images. Xu transforms it into a grammatically complete English sentence with a subject-predicate structure: "Over old trees wreathed with rotten vines fly evening crows."<sup>[12]</sup> Through alliterative and assonant elements ("old trees," "rotten vines," "evening crows") and a fluid rhythm, it re-creates the desolate audio-visual effect in English.

### ***The Consideration of "Beauty in Form" Through Equalization and Creation:***

Beauty in form concerns visual aspects like lineation and parallelism. Xu often strives for corresponding effects in English.

*Example 5 (Line Correspondence):* Du Fu's couplet "国破山河在，城春草木深" is translated as: "On war-torn land streams flow and mountains stand; / In vernal town grass and weeds are overgrown." The original two lines are maintained as two lines in translation. Furthermore, balance in both visual and auditory aspects is achieved through the rhyme of "land...stand" and "town...overgrown" and a roughly equivalent syllable count.

*Example 6 (Parallelism Handling):* For Li Shangyin's antithetical couplet "春蚕到死丝方尽，蜡炬成灰泪始干," Xu translates: "Spring silkworm till its death spins silk from lovesick heart; / A candle but when burned up has no tears to shed." While strict syntactical parallelism is not achieved, the structural echo between "till its death" and "when burned up," along with the contrast between the verbal structures "spins silk" and "has no tears," approximates the balanced, proverbial force of the original parallelism in English.

### ***Integrated Application of the "Three Transformations" and Creative Translation:***

Facing challenging cultural images or wordplay, Xu often integrates multiple strategies, even resorting to bold creative translation.

*Example 7 (Cultural Image):* In Du Mu's "Farewell," the line "蜡烛有心还惜别" uses "heart" as a pun for the candle wick. Xu translates: "The candle has a wick just as we have a heart, / All night long it sheds tears for us before we part." By adding the explanatory phrase "just as we have a heart," he equalizes the metaphor through explanation, enabling English readers to grasp its cleverness.

*Example 8 (Pun):* Liu Yuxi's line "道是无晴却有晴" uses "qing" (晴, clear weather) to pun on "qing" (情, feeling). Xu translates: "My beloved is as deep in love as the day is fine." He abandons the pun on "qing," instead achieving an equivalence of emotional sense (deepening) through the simile "as deep in love as the day is fine," thus preserving the poetic sense while sacrificing the pun's form.

*Example 9 (Interpretive Translation of Proper Names):* For the title *Water Margin*, Xu translates it as *Heroes of the Marsh*. While not a literal translation of "water's edge," "Marsh" captures the environmental feature of Liangshan Marsh, and "Heroes" clarifies the nature of the characters. This creative shallowing/equalization stays closer to the original's ethos of grassroots heroes than Pearl S. Buck's *All Men Are Brothers*.

*Example 10 (Stylistic Representation):* For Mao Zedong's lines "山舞银蛇，原驰蜡象," Xu translates: "The mountains dance like silver serpents, / The hills on high charge like wax-hued elephants."<sup>[13]</sup> The similes "dance like" and "charge like" vividly reproduce the dynamism and majestic spirit of the original. "Silver serpents" and "wax-hued elephants" accurately convey the metaphorical imagery, achieving a high degree of stylistic equalization to the original's grandeur and magnificence.

## **Conclusion**

Xu Yuanchong has inscribed an indelible mark upon the history of translating Chinese literature into foreign languages, not merely as a prolific translator, but as a theoretician who dared to challenge the dogmas of his time. His legacy is built upon a dual foundation: a profound cultural consciousness that viewed translation as a vehicle for national confidence, and an idiosyncratic artistic sensibility that redefined translation as a form of competitive artistry. His work constitutes a systematic mode of interlingual aesthetic mediation, one that actively bridges the vast poetic disparities between the paratactic structure of Chinese and the hypotactic nature of Western languages.

Guided by the "Three Beauties Theory" (beauty in sense, sound, and form) and operationalized through the "Three Transformations" (deepening, equalizing, and simplifying), Xu's methodology represents a holistic approach to poetic translation. Rather than adhering to the rigid criterion of formal fidelity that dominated early translation discourse, Xu advocated for a dynamic equivalence centered on aesthetic reception. His assertion that translation is a "contest"—a contest between two languages where the goal is to recreate beauty rather than merely replicate text—positions him as a pivotal figure in the shift toward translator subjectivity<sup>[14]</sup>. He transformed the translator's role from a passive conveyor to an active creator, arguing that a successful translation must allow the target reader to "see" and "hear" the original poem anew<sup>[15]</sup>.

It is undeniable that this pursuit of beauty and readability has attracted criticism. Scholars such as Lawrence Venuti might categorize his strategy as a form of extreme domestication that potentially obscures cultural specificity<sup>[16]</sup>. However, such critiques often overlook the communicative efficacy of Xu's work. In the context of cross-cultural exchange, the primary barrier to understanding is not the loss of a specific cultural signifier, but the failure to evoke an emotional or aesthetic response. By prioritizing the "sense" and "sound" of the poem, Xu successfully dismantled the linguistic barriers that had long confined Chinese literature to a niche audience. The fact that his versions of 300 Tang Poems and Mao Tsetung: The Man and the Poet have become staple texts in Western academia and general readership attests to the power of his strategy. Ultimately, the legacy of Xu Yuanchong's translations serves as a profound case study in the theory and practice of literary translation. His career compels us to reconsider the binary opposition between "fidelity" and "treason." He demonstrated that literary translation, particularly of poetry, is never—and should never be—a mechanical replication. Instead, it is a bold act of "re-creation of beauty" that requires deep empathy, cultural insight, and linguistic virtuosity. The debates sparked by his work continue to provoke essential reflection on the nature of translation, the agency of the translator, and the most effective strategies for the global dissemination of Chinese culture.

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