



# The Aesthetic Reproduction of the English Translation of Lu Zhai Based on Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties" Theory

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**Abstract.** The translatability of classical Chinese poetry has long been discussed by scholars because of the its challenged reproduction in aesthetic qualities across languages. This essay analyses three English translations of Wang Wei's Lu Zhai "鹿柴" based on Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties" theory, with a particular focus on the reproduction of beauty in sense, beauty in sound and beauty in form. Through comparative textual analysis, the study examines how different translators handle imagery, rhythm and poetic structure. The findings show that different translators may adopt distictive strategies in response to linguistic and cultural differences. These differences illustrate the complexity of translating and emphasize that translating classical Chinese poetry is a process of creative rewriting shaped by cultural and aesthetic priorities. Based on these findings, the article suggests that translators should prioritize the reconstruction of original works while flexibly balancing meaning, sound and form to achieve an effective cross-culture communication.

**Keywords:** Chinese Poetry, Lu Zhai, "Three Beauties" Theory, Translation

## 1 Introduction

Classical Chinese poetry is typically characterized by its rich cultural connotations within condensed language and musical rhythm, which poses challenges for translators while translating. Because of this, the translatability of classical poetry has long been debated among scholars. According to Jakobson, "poetry by definition is untranslatable" because of the complexity of grammar in poetry [1]. While others such as Xu Yuanchong believe that poetry is translatable and can be a process of aesthetic reproduction if translators can achieve a balance among images, sound and structure. Hence, different translations may demonstrate distinctive ways of reconstructing poetic beauty within the target language. Lefevere further argues that translation can be understood as a process of "rewriting" which establishes "a changeable and changing poetics" [2]. Wang Wei is one of the representative landscape poets of the Tang dynasty, who is deeply knowledgeable and influenced by Chan Buddhism. His poem Lu Zhai ("鹿柴") is written during his seclusion in

Sichuan which subtly blends images, sound and structure together and explores the philosophical expression of Chan thought through natural images. This essay will comparatively analyze three representative English translations of Lu Zhai based on Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties" theory and illustrate that translating Chinese poetry is a process of creative rewriting and culture exchange which requires a balance between fidelity to the resource language and the aesthetic reproduction in the target language.

## 2 Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties" Theory

Xu points out that poetry translation should not only convey the original meaning accurately but also recreate its aesthetic qualities in terms of the three beauties, which are beauty in sense, beauty in sound, and beauty in form [3]. Since the theory is rooted in classical Chinese philosophy, which combines the traditional aesthetic value with a creative and reproduced practice, translation can also be understood as reconstruction of traditional thoughts [4]. To restore the original work to the greatest extent, the translation should reshape the three beauties as far as possible rather than just convey the literal meaning.

Beauty in sense refers to the reconstruction of the ideological connotation and artistic conception of the original work. Xu emphasizes that the beauty in sense is the "soul" of a poem, which should be given priority in the process of translation. Yeh suggests that the imagery of Chinese poetry is always "metaphorical, allusive, or symbolic" which may convey deeper cultural meanings over the literal images. Since the imagery plays a crucial role in shaping the setting and atmosphere of a poem, translators should pay attention to the deep implication and historical background while expressing the original meaning of images [5].

As for beauty in sound, Xu highlights the importance of rhythm, rhyme, and musicality. Chinese poetry is an art of sound that relies on tonal patterns and rhyme to create its musical beauty and enhance emotional resonance. Xu claims that translators should adopt similar pronunciation rules with methods such as alliteration and end rhyme to recreate the musical effect of the original poem. Although it is difficult to preserve the tonal patterns of Chinese poetry completely, Xu insists that translators should make creative efforts to make up for the loss of the original phonetic features.

Lastly, beauty in form is to reproduce the structural and visual features of the original text. Classical Chinese poetry, such as Tang poetry is generally divided into *lǔshi* and *jueju*, both of which are characterized by strict structure regulations such as fixed number of lines and prescribed syllabic patterns. Xu emphasizes that the external formal aesthetics of Chinese poetry, such as parallelism and textual structure, should be maintained. Translators should make appropriate adjustments to reproduce a similar structural effect on the basis of preserving the original message and emotional expression.

### 3 A Comparative Analysis of Three English Versions of Lu Zhai

This essay focuses on three representative English versions of Lu Zhai from Weinberger's *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, respectively translated by Chang Yinnan and Lewis C. Walmsley (1958), James J. Y. Liu (1962) and Gary Snyder (1978).

#### 3.1 The Reproduction of Beauty in Sense

Pursuing of "emptiness" is regarded as the supreme state in Chan Buddhism, which shapes an aesthetic view characterized by tranquility and indifferent. Therefore, emptiness and solitude frequently serve as major themes in poetry. Such emptiness is not a deadly stillness. Instead, it is filled with the vitality of life [6]. Wang Wei is a devout Buddhist whose faith influenced his works profoundly. The comparison of the two versions below clearly reveals how different translators convey poetic imagery.

##### Version 1

James J. Y. Liu, 1962:

On the empty mountains no one can be seen.  
But human voices are heard to resound.  
The reflected sunlight pierces the deep forest  
And falls again upon the mossy ground.

##### Version 2

Chang Yin-Nan & Lewis C. Walmsley, 1958:

Through the deep wood, the slanting sunlight  
Casts motley patterns on the jade-green mosses.  
No glimpse of man in this lonely mountain,  
Yet faint voices drift in the air.

In the first line, Liu rendered kong as "empty", which perfectly reflects the Chan essence and cultural meanings. "Empty" means "not containing anything or people". It not only fits the literal scene "empty but not void", but also conveys the openness and freedom in Chan thought. Empty is a neutral adjective that only describes the objective state without adding translator's subjective emotions, which can accurately express the poetic ideorealm. In version 2, the translators chose the word "lonely" to translate kong. Lonely means "unhappy because you are not with other people", which carries intense subjective emotions of bleakness. It would evoke negative emotion in Western readers and ruin the original poetic conception of serene emptiness rather than desolation. Weinberger claims that the translators wrongly believed that lonely is empty, which is the typical Western prejudice that contradicts Wang Wei's Buddhist beliefs [7].

In the third line, both versions use "but" and "yet" to express contrast, yet the original character "dan" does not carry such a meaning, which is a misinterpretation. Furthermore, conjunctions such as "but" and "yet" conventionally shift focus to the latter line, which runs counter to the poet's core aim: to highlight the empty mountain in the first line [8]. Version 2 appears to the serene atmosphere of the empty mountain. The word "faint" perfectly captures the slight, ethereal quality of the sound,

while "drift" expresses the way voices move randomly without control over direction, according with the intangible feeling of human voices echoing through a remote mountain valley.

### 3.2 The Reproduction of Beauty in Sound

According to Xu and Liao, Chinese is a tonal language. Its four-tone system creates a unique cadence and rhythm through the variation of pitch levels and contours, endowing the Chinese language with distinct musical characteristics [9].

The Pingshui Rhyming Scheme stands as a representative rhyming system of Middle Chinese. Compiled during the Jin Dynasty, it became one of the most influential rhyming standards for Chinese poetry after the Tang Dynasty and was adopted as the official norm in subsequent dynasties. According to the traditional Pingshui rhyme system, the words "xiang" and "shang" at the end of line 2 and line 4 both involve "ang", which belongs to the same rhyme group "Yang yun". The original version of Lu Zhai achieves distinct musicality through its rhyming scheme and rhythm. The lines are cadenced, fluent, and easy to recite, full of phonetic beauty.

The rhyme mentioned above is effectively reproduced in the translation by Liu. Although Chinese has four tones, it is sufficient to roughly divide tones into ping and ze tones. To achieve cadence and tonal variation, ping and ze tones need to be used alternately to avoid monotony. Since English does not possess a tonal system like that, he employed rhyme to compensate for the loss of tonal beauty.

Line2:

But human voices are heard to resound.

Line4:

And falls again upon the mossy ground.

The two words "resound" and "ground" create perfect rhyming. English is a stress-timed language. When the poetry is translated, the ping ze system can't be shifted, but James keeps the rhyming structure intact, which is a compensation that allows readers can still perceive the musicality of the poem.

Although Snyder didn't reproduce the ending rhyme of the original poem, it also creates the same sense of rhyme through deliberate pauses.

Gary Snyder, 1978 :

Empty mountains:

no one to be seen.

Yet- hear-

human sounds and echoes.

Returning sunlight

enters the dark woods;

Again shining

on the green moss, above.

Original text:

空山/不见人,

但闻/人语响.

返景/入深林.

复照/青苔上.

Lu Zhai is a representative poem of the Chinese five-character "cut shorts". When reading it, they can be divided into two-word and three words. This natural pause makes poetry full of rhythm [9]. The English version creates the same accurate pause by using colons, dashes and line breaks, such as "Empty mountains" corresponds to "

空山", "Yet- hear-" corresponds to "但闻". It restores the sense of intonation of the original text.

### 3.3 The Reproduction of Beauty in Form

The formal beauty of classical Chinese poetry lies in its structural symmetry, concise language and pictorial expression. According to Zhu, a successful Chinese shanshui poem should evoke a vivid painting, while a painting should also embody the quality of poetry [10]. Therefore, formal beauty in Chinese poetry can be not only reflected in its external structure but also in its ability to construct visual and spatial imagery through minimal language.

The original poem presents a highly condensed structure with symmetrical couplets and minimal words, while creating a deep sense of emptiness in a visual framing. The interaction between silence and space contributes to a poetic scene that resembles to a landscape painting. The integration of structural balance and painting expression is therefore shown through the poem and conveys a sense of formal beauty. To reproduce this beauty in form, different translators may adopt different strategies in reconstructing the structure, visual arrangement, and spatial balance of poetry. Take the contrast between Snyder's version and that of Chang and Walmsley as an example; it clearly illustrates these differences in reshaping the formal beauty of the original poetry.

Snyder's version represents a modern form of the American poem with a symmetrical structure. By fragmenting lines and inserting pauses, as in:

Empty mountains:  
no one to be seen.

he creates a strong sense of visual space to showcase the spatial emptiness and silence. Rather than reproducing the classical parallel structure, Snyder reshapes the form through rhythm and pauses. By doing so, Snyder achieved this implicit expression and presents the beauty of form as a minimalist visual structure. However, despite the effective construction of visual space, this version translates the original poem directly in a literal way without any extension or interpretive elaboration. As Liu notes, Weinberger's discussion of this version as a transformation of the original into American poetic form is not a critique of a translator's infidelity to the classical one [11]. Instead, Weinberger and Paz argue that a good translation should be not only "a leap from dictionary to dictionary" but also a creative "reimagining" of the original work [7].

In contrast, Chang and Walmsley's version focuses on the pictorial expression. Wang Wei's works have long been praised as "there is poetry in his painting, and painting in his poetry" by Su Shi (1037-1101 A. D.). To reflect this aesthetic, Chang and Walmsley expand the condensed Chinese syntax into descriptive English expressions, such as "slanting sunlight" and "jade-green mosses". These extensions effectively enhance the visual imagery and painting quality of the poem, which extends its formal beauty into a more elaborate description of loneliness. However, this expansion also has some limitations. The addition of modifiers lengthens the poetic line and weakens the structural compactness of the original jueju. The clear symmetry between the two couplets is weakened, and the reversal of their order

further alters the formal structure of the poem. As argued by Weinberger, this rearrangement reveals a kind of "unspoken contempt" for the foreign poet, which privileges English lyrical conventions over preserving the original form [7].

## 4 Discussion

The translation of Chinese poetry is a negotiation between semantic fidelity and aesthetic reproduction rather than a simple transfer of linguistic meaning. Zhang combines deconstructionism with the "Three Beauties" Theory and suggests that translation should preserve the main meaning and aesthetic qualities of the resource language while leaving space for multiple interpretations [12]. Xu further claims that poetry is a spiritual style which cannot be copied by equally replicating all features [13]. Translators should make decisions based on the dominant poetic function of the source text. According to Zhang, different cultural background will also influence translators' interpretation and reconstruction of poetic imagery, which leads to varying degrees of transformation and recreation of poetic mood in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, poetry translation is essentially an interpretive recreation rather than mere semantic transfer, whose core lies in seeking a dynamic balance between textual fidelity and the representation of artistic conception [12].

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has made comparative analysis about different English translations of Lu Zhai through the framework of Xu's "Three Beauties" theory. The study found that translators adopted completely different strategies to reproduce the beauty of sense, sound and form. The flexible handling of translation fully proves that Chinese classical poetry is not untranslatable. On the contrary, poetry translation is a process of creative rewriting: the translators reconstruct the artistic mood, rhythm and form so that the aesthetic characteristics of the original poem can be understood by the target language readers. At the same time, this kind of translation has also become a bridge for cross-cultural communication, passing on Chinese Chan aesthetics, natural philosophy and traditional poetics to the Western world. Therefore, the aesthetic reinventing of classical Chinese poetry requires not only accurate communication, but also creative adaptation and processing, so that the translation can effectively convey the spiritual connotation and cultural value of the original poem, promoting deeper cross-cultural understanding.

## Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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