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English Translation and Cultural Transmission of Culture-Loaded Plant Words in *The Book of Songs*—A Case Study of Xu Yuanchong's Version

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Abstract

Plant words constitute a large lexical category in *The Book of Songs* with profound cultural connotations. They perform multiple functions, including bi-xing (metaphorical and associative narration), representation of rituals and customs, and emotional symbolism, making them typical culture-loaded words. Centering on Xu Yuanchong's English translation of *The Book of Songs* and drawing on cultural translation theories and his "Three Beauties" principle, this paper selects seven sets of plant-related examples—peach, millet and sorghum, xingcai, Chinese quince, reeds, willow and daylily—and examines the cultural transmission effects of four translational strategies adopted by the translator, namely explicitation, domestication, generalization and deepening. It analyzes how the nomenclature, ritual-custom, and affective layers of cultural information are preserved, transformed, or sacrificed under each strategy, and further discusses their merits and demerits as well as their implications for the English translation of Chinese classics. The findings indicate that Xu prioritizes affective transmission while frequently simplifying botanical nomenclature, and that annotations and other paratexts can complement what the verse itself cannot carry.

Keywords

The Book of Songs; culture-loaded words; Xu Yuanchong

1. Introduction

Plants are widely deployed in the bi-xing structure of *The Book of Songs*, introducing themes of love and marriage, symbolizing rituals and social conventions, and embodying sentiments of farming and homesickness. Such plant words not only designate vegetation but also carry rituals, emotions, and values, posing major challenges for the English translation of Chinese classics.

Xu Yuanchong is a representative translator who systematically renders classical Chinese poetry into English verse; his Chinese-English bilingual edition of *The Book of Songs* reproduces the rhythm and rhyme of the originals and enjoys extensive influence at home and abroad (Xu, 2009). Taking this version as its focus, this paper conducts close readings of seven plant-related examples to investigate the strategies Xu applies to culture-loaded plant words and their effects on cultural transmission.

To assess these choices, this paper distinguishes three layers of cultural information carried by plant words: the nomenclature layer (botanical identity), the ritual-custom layer (the social institution in which the plant participates),

and the affective layer (the emotion the plant evokes in its poetic context). The examples below show how these three layers are preserved, transformed, or sacrificed under different strategies.

2. Literature Review

The concept of culture-loaded words was first introduced into Chinese research by Xu Guozhang in 1980 (Xu, 1980). In Explorations in Contemporary Western Translation Theories, Liao (2000) defines culture-loaded words as culture-specific units with no ready cross-linguistic equivalents, stressing that translation requires both linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness. Pan's (2003) *Illustrated Handbook of Plants* in *The Book of Songs* sorts out the confusing correspondence between ancient plant names and modern botanical classifications, offering critical philological references for interpreting original cultural connotations. In Western translation studies, Venuti's (1995) *The Translator's Invisibility* formulates domestication and foreignization, two core notions for classical translation. Wang (2023) examines the imagery of classical Chinese poetry and its English translation strategies, and Hu and Chen (2023) show how paratexts in Xu Yuanchong's translation construct Chinese cultural images, complementing Xu's (1984) own account of the "Three Beauties principle". Xu's (1984) *The Art of Translation* proposes the "Three Beauties" principle plus translation techniques of deepening, equalization, and simplification, which guide his bilingual rendering of *The Book of Songs*. This study uses his edition based on the popular Mao Commentary version as the source text. Few existing studies closely examine seven plant-related culture-loaded words against three-layer cultural information, leaving room for further case-based exploration.

3. Theoretical Framework

The concept of culture-loaded words was introduced into Chinese academic discussions by Xu (1980), and Liao (2000) defines such terms as "words, phrases and idioms designating things unique to a given culture". Because such terms grow out of the material and social life of a particular culture, they rarely have ready-made equivalents in other languages, demanding both linguistic competence and cultural awareness. In *The Book of Songs*, this loading manifests on three levels: nomenclature (Pre-Qin plant names are hard to align with modern botanical denominations), ritual-custom (plants such as peach and plantain are associated with marriage and childbirth), and affective (plants acquire fixed emotional connotations once deployed in bi-xing).

The "cultural turn" in translation studies advocates situating translation within the socio-cultural context of the target culture: translation is not a neutral transfer of meaning but an act of cultural negotiation, in which the norms of the receiving culture shape what can be conveyed and how it is received. Venuti (1995) systematically formulated the distinction between domestication and foreignization: domestication eliminates the foreignness of source-language texts, while foreignization preserves their heterogeneous features. Both orientations have justifications, and most translations move flexibly between them.

Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties" principle offers a localized theoretical reference for this framework: poetic translation pursues beauty in sense, beauty in sound, and beauty in form, with beauty in sense as the priority. Beauty in sense preserves meaning and mood, beauty in sound reproduces rhythm and rhyme, and beauty in form matches line length and stanza shape. To reconcile these goals, Xu adds three methods, "deepening, equalization and simplification": deepening enriches sense through associations available to target readers, equalization seeks formal or semantic correspondence, and simplification condenses what cannot be carried over (Xu, 1984). These concepts serve as analytical tools for the case studies that follow.

4. Representative Culture-Loaded Plant Words in *The Book of Songs*

From the perspective of cultural functions, plant words in *The Book of Songs* fall into three groups. The first relates to rituals and fertility, exemplified by the peach in *Ode to the Peach Tree* (Zhou Nan), which celebrates marriage and domestic harmony. The second covers romantic themes, including xingcai (water-plant) in *The Guan Cries* (Zhou Nan), which sets off the gentleman's longing. The third concerns homeland and military service, represented by millet and sorghum in *Millet Ruins* (Wang Feng), evoking grief over a fallen homeland. In each group, the plant serves a distinct cultural function that often matters more than the botanical referent.

Considerable discrepancies exist between ancient and modern plant denominations, complicating nomenclature identification. Faced with such ambiguity, the translator must choose whether to follow modern botanical knowledge, preserve the ancient name, or let the poetic image prevail at the expense of precision. The seven examples below illustrate four translational strategies in Xu's rendering: explicitation, domestication, generalization, and deepening.

5. Case Analysis

This section conducts close readings of seven plant examples from Xu's translation, examining how each strategy transmits or attenuates the three layers of cultural information. The examples correspond to the four strategies: explicitation, domestication, generalization, and deepening. They were selected on three grounds: they represent the three cultural-function groups identified above; they jointly cover all four strategies; and each plant's cultural function differs markedly from its botanical referent, placing the greatest strain on the translator's choices.

5.1 Peach

Ode to the Peach Tree opens with the peach as an associative metaphor:

> The peach tree stands so young and fair,
> How brilliant bloom its flowers!
> The maiden goes to her new home,
> Blessing her household with happy hours.
> From blossoms to fruits and foliage, the poem progressively celebrates the bride's beauty, fertility and domestic bliss. Xu's translation of the first stanza reads:
> The peach tree beams so red,
> How brilliant are its flowers!
> The maiden's getting wed,
> Good for the nuptial bowers. (Xu, 2009)

The translation retains the peach imagery: "Beams so red" reproduces the radiance of "yao-yao" (vigorous and youthful) and "zhuo-zhuo" (bright and blooming), while "The maiden's getting wed" and "nuptial bowers" explicate the implicit marital context. The peach's cultural symbolic meaning is retained and its ritual connotation supplemented through explicit statement, though the subtlety of bi-xing rhetoric is somewhat weakened, reflecting the priority of beauty in sense (Xu, 1984). In the later stanzas, "abundant fruit" and "manifold leaves" keep associations of fertility and domestic harmony implicit without further explicitation. The ritual-custom layer is thus safeguarded by direct statement, while the affective layer conveyed through allusion is somewhat flattened.

5.2 Millet and Sorghum

Flourishing millet and sorghum set off the desolate ruins of a former capital in *Millet Ruins*, originating the literary motif of "grief over millet ruins". The original opens with:

> The millet grows in luxuriant rows,
> The sorghum pushes forth its shoots.
> Xu entitles the poem *The Ruined Capital*. His rendering of the first stanza is:
> The millet drops its head;
> The sorghum is in sprout.
> Slowly I trudge and tread;
> My heart is tossed about. (Xu, 2009)

"Shu" (broom-corn millet) and "ji" (sorghum) become "millet" and "sorghum", a rare instance of accurate literal rendering of the specific names. The title The Ruined Capital makes the implicit grief for the lost homeland explicit from the outset, preserving the most culture-laden dimension through title-level explicitation while the plant terms recede into the background. Across the three stanzas, "in sprout", "in the ear" and "in grain" trace sorghum's shoots, ears and grains, running parallel to the sorrow of "heart shaken", "heart intoxicated" and "heart choked". The parallel between plant growth and emotional turbulence is fully preserved: the reader follows the same course from germination to ripening and from unease to grief.

5.3 Xingcai (Water-Plant)

In *The Guan Cries*, gathering xingcai (a water-cress-like aquatic plant) functions as bi-xing, metaphorically suggesting the gentleman's pursuit of the virtuous maiden. An aquatic plant of the gentian family with edible tender stems,

it is one of the early plant images in *The Book of Songs*.

Long and short grows the water-plant;
Left and right we gather it.
Xu's translation of the second stanza reads:
Water flows left and right,
Of cress long here, short there;
The youth yearns day and night,
For the good maiden fair. (Xu, 2009)

Xingcai is translated as "cress", which in English refers to watercress and similar aquatic edible herbs, botanically distinct from the original plant—a typical domestication substituting familiar imagery for an unfamiliar proper noun. Botanical precision is sacrificed for accessible imagery, though antithetical pairs "left and right" and "day and night" maintain rhyme and rhythm, compensating through beauty in sound (Xu, 1984). Readers enjoy fluent verse and can imagine scenes of aquatic gathering, yet remain unaware of xingcai's Pre-Qin ritual associations; botanical and cultural information is diluted (Pan, 2003). The gathering sequence of the original—"plucking", "gathering", "selecting and cooking"—becomes "gather" and "cooked till tender", so the narrative chain of labour survives, and the reader perceives the rhythm of courtship through the rhythm of gathering.

5.4 Chinese Quince

The Quince depicts token-exchange as symbolic betrothal and observance of ritual reciprocity. The original reads:

She throws a quince to me;
I repay her with fine jade.
Not merely for repayment,
But for everlasting friendship between us.
Xu entitles the poem *Gifts*. His first-stanza translation:
She throws a quince to me;
I give her a green jade,
Not in return, you see,
But to show acquaintance made. (Xu, 2009)

"Mugua" (Chinese quince) becomes "quince", and the subsequent "mutao" and "muli" are rendered "peach" and "plum"—common fruit denominations exemplifying domesticated approximation. The ritual logic of "Not in return, but to maintain everlasting affection" is made explicit through "acquaintance made" and "love for e'er", articulating the cultural meaning of token-exchange directly. This case combines domestication and explicitation: plant names are domesticated into familiar fruits while the social logic of giving is spelled out. Nevertheless, the real-world "mugua" corresponds to Chaenomeles speciosa (flowering quince); "quince" captures only its broad fruit-family attribute, abandoning room for philological-botanical investigation, as accuracy yields to rhythm and readability (Pan, 2003).

5.5 Reeds

Reeds presents one of the most celebrated autumnal *bi-xing* scenes. The original reads:

Green grow the reeds,
White dew turns into frost.
The one I yearn for,
Stands somewhere by the stream.
"*Jian-jia*" collectively denotes reeds: "*jian*" is miscanthus and "*jia*" is common reed, jointly referring to waterside reed vegetation. Xu's first-stanza translation:
Green, green the reed,
Dew and frost gleam.
Where's she I need?

Beyond the stream. (Xu, 2009)

The compound "jian-jia" is generalized to the singular "the reed", erasing specific taxonomic distinction; "cang-cang" (lush green) is reproduced by the reduplicative "Green, green", and "White dew turns into frost" becomes "Dew and frost gleam". Abandoning botanical particulars and seasonal detail, Xu reconstructs the melancholy cadence through reduplication, alliteration and an ABAB rhyme scheme, preserving the atmosphere of frustrated longing—compensating sense through sound (Xu, 1984). Among all examples examined, this version carries the least botanical information yet best preserves poetic mood, suggesting that for a purely lyrical image, generalization may serve the poem better than precision.

5.6 Willow

In *Home-Coming after War*, "willows wave soft and slow" evokes the parting sorrow of soldiers. The original reads:

When I departed long ago,
Willows waved soft and slow.
Now I journey home again,
Snowflakes fall in swirling rain.
The phrase "*yi-yi*" describes both willow branches and human reluctance to depart. Xu's rendering reads:
When I left here, willows shed tear.
I come back now, snow bends the bough.
Long, long the way. Hard, hard the day. (Xu, 2009)

Instead of translating "yi-yi" literally, Xu draws on the English trope of the "weeping willow", deepening the original implication of reluctant separation into the personified "willows shed tear"; heavy snow is intensified into "snow bends the bough". Xu himself calls this practice "deepening" rather than strict equivalence, evoking analogous associations through target-culture resources. Emotional-affective connotations are fully safeguarded while botanical nomenclature yields entirely to poetic effect. The willow is thus no longer a plant observed from outside but a participant in the soldier's grief, an effect the target culture's association with the weeping willow makes immediately legible.

5.7 Daylily

My Lord Is Away depicts a longing wife seeking the "forget-care herb". The original reads:

Where can I get the forget-care herb?
To plant it behind the northern hall.
"*Xuan-cao*" refers to daylily, anciently believed to dispel sorrow. Xu translates:
Where's the Herb to Forget?
To plant it north I'd start.
Missing my lord, I fret:
It makes me sick at heart. (Xu, 2009)

Rather than transliterating or literally rendering the plant name, Xu paraphrases its cultural function as "the Herb to Forget", unfolding the semantic root "xuan" (to forget). English-language readers may remain ignorant of the daylily's botanical identity, yet grasp its cultural role as a sorrow-dispelling plant and understand the grieving wife's wish. This is a rare "meaning-for-name" approach for culture-loaded words: botanical identity recedes while cultural significance comes to the fore. Of the three layers, the affective layer survives intact while the nomenclature layer is deliberately set aside for immediate intelligibility.

6. Merits, Demerits, and Enlightenments

The seven examples demonstrate four strategies in Xu's translation of culture-loaded plant words: explicitation (peach, millet-sorghum, Chinese quince), domestication (water-plant, Chinese quince), generalization (reeds) and deepening (willow, daylily). All four obey the hierarchy "beauty in sense first, beauty in sound second, beauty in form appropriately considered" (Xu, 1984) and constitute re-creations oriented toward target-language poetics,

aligning with the cultural-turn view that translations should function meaningfully within receiving cultures.

Measured against the three dimensions, Xu's choices follow clear priorities: affective information receives primary protection, ritual-custom content is supplemented by explicitation, and botanical nomenclature is most frequently sacrificed for rhythm. This prioritization originates in his philosophy of "understanding, appreciation and delight": conveying basic meaning is the minimum requirement, transmitting emotion the higher objective. The weakness lies in the factual-scholarly dimension: specialized plant names and philological-botanical specifics are considerably simplified, so the translation cannot fulfill the ancient ideal of "learning much about birds, beasts, grasses and trees". A feasible remedy is to distinguish the poetic layer from the scholarly layer and supplement botanical proper-noun information through annotations or illustrated appendices, so that aesthetic merit and factual accuracy can coexist.

For translators of Chinese classics, the practical implication is twofold. First, the trade-off between poetic and scholarly fidelity should be deliberate rather than accidental: when a plant name is simplified for rhythm, the translator ought to know exactly what has been given up. Second, paratextual apparatus—annotations, illustrated appendices, and translator's prefaces—can carry the knowledge the verse itself cannot absorb, so that beauty and accuracy need not be mutually exclusive. In this sense, Xu's translation is not merely an English counterpart of the original poems; it exemplifies a mode of cultural transmission in which the text and its apparatus share the burden of meaning.

7. Conclusion

Xu Yuanchong's translation of *The Book of Songs* illustrates that translating culture-loaded plant words involves choices between cultural stances and poetic ideals. Flexibly negotiating domestication and foreignization, Xu applies explicitation, domestication, generalization, and deepening to these terms, offering a useful reference for the practice of "rendering poetry as poetry". Its merits and defects also raise an open question: when poetic charm and factual knowledge cannot both be fully achieved, toward which pole should translators incline, and can paratextual tools make both present? The present study suggests that translators would do well not to choose one pole once and for all, but to calibrate the balance text by text and to let the apparatus of the translation carry what the verse itself cannot.

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