



# A Comparative Analysis of English Translations of “*The Book of Songs· Taoyao*” Based on the Aesthetics of Translation

## A Case Study of Xu Yuanchong and James Legge

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**Abstract.** Chinese poetry is a priceless cultural treasure with a distinct artistic appeal and cultural significance. *The Book of Songs*, the first comprehensive collection of poetry in China, serves as the origin of Chinese poetry. However, cross-cultural translation and poetry distribution have challenges and problems. As a result of their origins in various eras and nations, as well as their cultural backgrounds and translation approaches, the two translators, Xu Yuanchong and James Legge, whose English translations were chosen for comparison in this work, have particular research importance and worth. Recent years have seen the emergence of translation aesthetics, combining translation with aesthetics to offer a fresh theoretical viewpoint on poetry translation. This research compares the aesthetic qualities of Xu Yuanchong's and James Legge's English translations from the dimensions of form and content, utilizing Liu Miqing's translation aesthetics as a theoretical framework to demonstrate the beauty of Chinese poetry. Additionally, this research offers some references for the use and advancement of translation aesthetics theory and insights into the translation of classical Chinese poetry.

**Keywords:** The Book of Songs, Translation Aesthetics, Xu Yuanchong, James Legge, English version, Comparative study.

## 1 Introduction

Poetry is an important form of cultural expression in China and has a distinctive charm and a broad impact. In Chinese classical literature, *The Book of Songs* (Anonymity, Zhou Dynasty) is a cultural classic that cannot be ignored. As the first collection of poems in China, it records the early Chinese society and culture and has major historical and cultural values. However, due to language and cultural differences, certain challenges and difficulties in communicating poetry across cultures exist. Poetry's condensed and creative form of information and emotional communication has added to

this challenge. As globalization has progressed, more people are studying and investigating Chinese poetry. However, for the rich cultural information in the poems to be fully conveyed and understood by international readers, the quality of the poetry translation is essential[1].

Facing the challenges, many Chinese Translation Studies scholars have developed theories to help and deal with the translation problems that could be met while translating Chinese poetry into Western languages. Among them, “The Theory of Translation Aesthetics” (Liu, 2007) is one of the most influential and effective ones approved by scholars in the same field of study. The theory contends that translation is not simply a translation convention of language but rather an art involving cultural, aesthetic, and ideological representation, and it has made a significant contribution to the field of Translation Studies. As a result, to translate a text effectively, translators must have a thorough knowledge of the cultural and aesthetic context of the source text(ST).In light of this, this article seeks to analyse the translations of *The Book of Songs·Taoyao*(Anonymity, Zhou Dynasty)by Xu Yuanchong(1993)and James Legge(1871) to examine how the translations have been conducted on the linguistic and cultural levels and to what extent they demonstrate the translators’ understanding and knowledge of Chinese aesthetics and culture. The essay draws on Liu Miqing’s aesthetic theory of translation as an analytical framework to guide the analysis and see whether it functions effectively as a framework that could be used to guide the translation of Chinese poetic texts and examine the translations’ quality[2]. The research hopes to provide enlightenment for the translation of Chinese classical poetry and provide some new thoughts on applying and developing (Chinese) translation aesthetic theory.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Aesthetic Poetry Translation Theories and Discussion

The development of the aesthetic translation theory originates from the unique needs of Chinese poetry translation and the attention to the aesthetic value in the translation process. The translation of poetry needs to maintain the aesthetic feelings of the ST and consider the aesthetic requirements of the target language. At the same time, poetry translation, as a cross-cultural communication activity, also needs to pay attention to the cultural connotation of the ST when being conducted. The development of aesthetic poetry translation theory has explored how to balance aesthetic requirements and cultural communication of literature[7].

Xu Yuanchong and Liu Miqing, two important scholars in Chinese translation, have significantly contributions to the theory of aesthetic poetry translation. Xu Yuanchong pays more attention to the rhyme and image in the poetry translation and emphasizes maintaining the aesthetic feeling and value of the ST in the translation process. Liu Miqing is another important representative of Chinese translation aesthetics theory. He has proposed a theoretical framework focusing on the translation of aesthetic characteristics and cultural values. He believes that translation is a language art and a way of cultural transmission. Translators should have aesthetic consciousness and cross-cul-

tural communication ability. (Yan Min,2018) The research of these two scholars provides important thinking and guidance for the development and practice of aesthetic poetry translation theory[4].

The current research has adopted the theory of Liu rather than Xu as the main theoretical framework mainly for the following considerations: First, the translation aesthetics theory of Liu Miqing offers a more comprehensive research perspective and analytic framework. He emphasizes translation’s artistic qualities and cultural aspects, understanding that it entails more than linguistic alteration and incorporates cross-cultural contact. This all-encompassing viewpoint makes it possible to explore the artistic and cultural aspects of translation in greater detail. Second, translating the Book of Songs involves the dissemination of cultural values and traits because it is a priceless piece of ancient Chinese literature. Liu's theoretical framework emphasizes the significance of translation as a channel for the spread of culture[5]. Using his theory, one can better comprehend how the English translation of the Book of Songs contributes to the original work's aesthetic purpose and historical context. Additionally, Liu Miqing's theoretical studies have made a significant contribution as a well-known academic in China in the area of translation aesthetics. The current study will use his theoretical stances and analytical framework to study the Book of Songs raising the research's practical applicability and contemporary relevance.

## 2.2 The Translation of The Book of Songs

Translators have long cherished the Book of Songs as one of the greatest works of Chinese culture and literature. It has, however, always been difficult for translators to capture its spirit in works that readers from other countries can comprehend and enjoy. The academic discussion on poetry translation, especially the Book of Songs translation, is increasingly connected to translation aesthetics.

This research will follow this path, seeking to make further contributions to the field of poetry translation and the study of translation aesthetics by comparing and contrasting the translations of *The Book of Songs· Taoyao* by the two translators, Xu Yuanchong and James Legge. It will adopt the theory of translation aesthetics by Liu for analysis and evaluation and see its applicability in guiding poetry translation practice and research[3].

Among the research on the translation of the Book of Songs in particular, two points have been stressed in relation to translation aesthetics. The first emphasis point is on how the songbook's linguistic features are transmitted. Among the two translators' studies, Xu Yuanchong is dedicated to bringing the age-old rhyme and beauty of the Book of Songs to audiences through his distinct translation technique. His translation aims to capture the cultural ambience of the original songbook while giving greater weight to rhyme in language expression[6]. In contrast, the translation of James Legge focuses more on the modernity and fluency of linguistic expression to bring the translation closer to the tastes of contemporary readers. These two views partially reflect divergent translation conceptions and translators' objectives.

The second perspective prioritizes cultural significance and readability to a greater extent. Xu Yuanchong's translation aims to adapt and interpret the original work while

favouring the use of more contemporary language and expression modestly. On the other hand, James Legge. Maintain the historical elements of the ST while adopting a more conservative lexical and syntactic approach. Regarding the translation of the Book of Songs, both of these points of view have their proponents and have generated much debate and discussion.

Even if the translation of the Book of Songs has been partially studied in several studies, certain issues and shortcomings still need to be resolved[8]. First off, research that has already been done has focused more on the translation of the Book of Songs as a whole and less on the techniques and styles of individual parts. Second, applying the theory of translation aesthetics, particularly translations, has received less attention than the linguistic components of translation in previous research. Lastly, while previous research has assessed the translations produced by various translators, its examination of the translation theories and techniques employed is quite scant.

This study examines the Book of Songs: Taoyao from the perspective of translation aesthetics theory, focusing on analyzing and comparing the translation strategies and styles employed by Xu Yuanchong and Li Yage. Specifically, this research will investigate how translators handle cultural connotations, make language style choices, and develop an overall translation strategy when working on the Book of Songs Taoyao.

### **3 Data and Methodology**

#### **3.1 Material**

The reason for choosing The Book of Songs·Taoyao as the research object is that it is one of the representative works of Chinese classical poetry, with profound cultural connotations and rich artistic value. It is also one of the works whose multiple translation versions see great variations in their methods adopted, especially the ones by Xu Yuanchong and James Legge[9]. For this reason, these two versions were selected for comparative analysis to explore how the different cultural backgrounds of Xu Yuanchong and James Legge, as well as the aesthetic and philosophical education they received in the East and the West, have influenced their translation decisions.

The two reasons why this study chose The Book of Songs·Taoyao for the case study lies in the fact that The Book of Songs is one of the most representative and influential works in ancient Chinese literature. Taoyao is typically representative and influential because it contains profound cultural connotations and rich artistic value. The translation of Taoyao represents many difficulties. For example, as an ancient literary work, the classical Chinese language used in Taoyao and the socio-cultural background it is based on are far from those of modern English readers. Examining how the linguistic, aesthetic, and cultural features of Taoyao are rendered when it gets translated into English could represent the general difficulties met by translators when translating ancient Chinese poems into a largely different language and culture. It also helps to examine whether Liu's translation aesthetic theory could effectively guide and solve the translation difficulties met on the linguistic and cultural levels when doing such translation practices. At the same time, because The Book of Songs has been retranslated multiple

times, many translated versions exist for comparison and analysis, which makes the study practical.

In the study, two translators were chosen, namely Xu Yuanchong and James Legge. Xu Yuanchong is a famous translator in China. Readers deeply love his translation style, and he also has a high reputation in the translation industry. James Legge is a famous translator in the West. His translation works are well known in Western literary circles. Their versions have been selected as the objects of comparison among the other translation versions(e.g.), mainly because the two versions see great variations in their translation methods and style. Comparing the two versions helps to see how the different cultural backgrounds of Xu Yuanchong and James Legge, and the aesthetic and philosophical education they received in the East and the West have influenced their translation decisions.

### 3.2 Methods Used for Analysis

Comparative textual analysis will be conducted between the ST of *The Book of Songs·Taoyao* and each of the two translations, focusing on how the translators acted on the levels of aesthetics in the form and aesthetics in the content, which are the two levels of translation aesthetics theory, as proposed by Liu Miqing. Through the analysis, the paper will also test the efficacy of Liu’s theory in guiding and examining the translation of poetic text.

Firstly, the strategies and effects of the two translations in maintaining the rhyme of the original poem will be analyzed, with special attention to the application of techniques in the aspects of the sense of rhyme. Secondly, it will explore how the two translators deal with the imagery and rhetorical devices in the original poem, including how to convey rhetorical effects and choose appropriate vocabulary and expression in the target language[10]. In addition, it will compare the two translators' handling of the poetic style of *The Book of Songs·Taoyao*, including the understanding and reproduction of poetic and other different styles of expression, as well as the choice and application of language style. Finally, the effectiveness of the two translations in conveying the original poem's literary value and aesthetic effects will be evaluated, including how to maintain the aesthetic and aesthetic characteristics of the original poem, as well as the triggering and transmission of readers' emotions and meanings. Through a detailed analysis of these perspectives, this paper aims to reveal the contributions and limitations made by Xu Yuanchong and James Legge to the translation of *The Book of Songs·Taoyao* under the framework of Liu Miqing's aesthetic poetry translation theory and provide examples and enlightenment for aesthetic poetry translation[2].

## 4 Analysis

### 4.1 Aesthetics in the Form

The transmission of rhyme in poetry is a crucial link that directly impacts the aesthetic quality of rhyme and the poetry-reading experience—Alternating between odd lines

that do not rhyme and even lines that do, rhyming at regular intervals. The Book of Songs most frequently uses this rhyme scheme.

The translation by Xu Yuanchong treats rhymes more supply manner. He made the necessary alterations in accordance with the rhyme of English poetry rather than rigidly adhering to the ST's rhyme. Although this approach compromises some of the original beat, it produces a more organic and fluid rhyme in the translated English poetry. For instance, the ST of Tao You has the rhyme foot "华, 家, 实, 室, 蓁, 人," which Xu Yuanchong translates as "brilliant", "nuptial bowers", "plentiful", "family's root", "lush and green", "household". It is clear that when translating, Xu Yuanchong did not entirely adhere to the rhyme foot of the ST but instead made alterations in accordance with the rhyme elements of English poetry(see table 1).

**Table 1.** lists the ST and translation of rhymes in *the Book of Songs* by Xu Yuanchong

ST	TT
灼灼其 <b>华</b>	How <b>brilliant</b> are its flowers!
宜室其 <b>家</b>	Good for the <b>nuptial bowers</b> .
有蕢其 <b>实</b>	How <b>plentiful</b> its fruit!
宜其 <b>家室</b>	She's the <b>family's root</b> .
其叶 <b>蓁蓁</b>	Its leaves are <b>lush and green</b> .
宜其 <b>家人</b>	On <b>household</b> she'll be keen.

In terms of rhyme, James Legge's translation comes as close as she can to the original. He did his best to keep the rhyme and rhyme of the ST in the translation, resulting in translated English poetry that was remarkably consistent in rhyme. For instance, the ST rhyme for "Tao You" is "华, 家, 实, 室, 蓁, 人". In contrast, James Legge's translation reads "brilliant", "chamber and house", "abundant", "house and chamber", "Luxuriant", and "family." Although the rhyme of the ST is preserved by this method, the translated English poetry reads stiffly since Chinese and English poetry rhyme differently(see table 2).

**Table 2.** lists the ST and translation of rhymes in *the Book of Songs* by James Legge

ST	TT
灼灼其 <b>华</b>	<b>Brilliant</b> are its flowers.
宜室其 <b>家</b>	And will order well her <b>chamber and house</b> .
有蕢其 <b>实</b>	<b>Abundant</b> will be its fruit.
宜其 <b>家室</b>	And will order well her <b>house and chamber</b> .
其叶 <b>蓁蓁</b>	<b>Luxuriant</b> are its leaves.
宜其 <b>家人</b>	And will order well her <b>family</b> .

Comparative research reveals that James Legge and Xu Yuanchong used several rhyme techniques in the English translation of the Tao You (The Book of Songs). The translation by Xu Yuanchong emphasizes the English poetry's innate rhyme more while preserving the original aesthetic intent. James Legge's translation attempts to adhere as closely as possible to the ST. However, it reads stiffly. It also serves as a reminder that when translating poetry, rhyme problems must be handled flexibly according to the

circumstances, respecting both the ST and the translation's intelligibility and aesthetic intent.

#### 4.2 Aesthetics in the Content

An important link in the translation of poetry related to the transfer of poetic emotion and aesthetic worth is the transmission of artistic conception. When translating the Book of Songs·Taoyao, two translators, Xu Yuanchong and James Legge, each have their different approaches to comprehending and handling the poetic conception.

Using words and sentence structures, Xu Yuanchong's translation focuses on adapting to the aesthetic preferences of contemporary English readers. He used the words "brilliant" and "beams" in the first phrase to describe the beauty of peach flowers, a brilliant and sparkling description that aligns with the goal of contemporary aesthetics. In the second sentence, he chose the word "plentiful" to describe the peach's fruit, highlighting its richness in accordance with contemporary conceptions of prosperity and wealth. He refers to the leaves of peach trees as "lush and green" in the third sentence, a vivid description that mirrors the desire for the beauty of nature. In the present day, he rendered "宜其室家" and "宜其家人" as "nuptial bowers" and "On household she will be keen," respectively. He was bringing poetry closer to the aesthetic inclinations of contemporary readers(see table 3).

**Table 3.** lists the ST and translation contents of *the Book of Songs* by Xu Yuanchong

ST	TT
桃之夭夭	The peach tree <b>beams</b> so red;
灼灼其华	How <b>brilliant</b> are its flowers!
有蕢其实	How <b>plentiful</b> its fruit!
其叶蓁蓁	Its leaves are <b>lush and green.</b>
宜其室家	Good for the <b>nuptial bowers.</b>
宜其家人	<b>On household she'll be keen.</b>

James Legge's translation emphasizes on preserving the original work's classical allure and aesthetic qualities, as well as its feeling and artistic conception. In the opening sentence, he described peach trees as "young and elegant" to communicate their youth and refinement, keeping with the classical poets' veneration of nature's beauty. He keeps "宜其室家," "宜其家人," and "宜其家室" as the source work's terms, upholding the value of family in traditional culture. In some passages, he kept the original poem's imagery and feelings while maintaining the translation's aesthetic of classical poetry(see table 4).

**Table 4.** lists the ST and translation contents of *the Book of Songs* by James Legge

ST	TT
桃之夭夭	The peach tree is <b>young and elegant;</b>
宜其室家	And will order well her chamber and house.
宜其家人	And will order well her house and chamber.
宜其家室	And will order well her family.

The translation by Xu Yuanchong and James Legge combines aesthetic theory and, in terms of phrase choice and sentence expression, appeals to both contemporary and traditional aesthetic habits. The translation by Xu Yuanchong is more in accordance with the aesthetic preferences of contemporary readers, and it enhances the visual and symbolic appeal of poetry through vivid images and inventive formulations. James Legge's translation preserves the allure of classical poetry and pays close attention to preserving the traditional aesthetic elements of the source works. Depending on the readers' desire for aesthetic style and the goal of translation, both ways, to some extent, convey the passion and creative conception of the *Book of Songs·Taoyao*. In general, the two translators successfully communicated the source work's aesthetic sense to readers of the target culture in various ways under the supervision of the aesthetic habits theory.

It is found that Xu Yuanchong and James Legge have different strengths and benefits when it comes to translating poetry ideas by contrasting their translations. Xu Yuanchong focused on enhancing the poetic nature of the poems in his translation of the *Book of Songs* by transcreating some of the ST to make the poetry more literary and aesthetically beautiful. On the other hand, James Legge emphasises the faithful restoration and presentation of the poems' ST, and his translations may be more conservative. He tries to accurately capture the sentiments and meanings of the ST in his translations to more closely approximate the poetic nature of the poems. Both approaches are efficient translation techniques, according to Liu's translation aesthetic theory, depending on the translator's individual style and translation goal. Whichever approach you use, it captures the sentiment and artistic conception of the *Book of Songs·Taoyao*. This implies that while translating poetry, we should be flexible in employing translational techniques to capture best the aesthetic intent and emotional resonance of the original. These two translation approaches have benefits and give us a fresh viewpoint on translating poetry.

## 5 Conclusion

This study chose two translations by Xu Yuanchong and James Legge for the comparative analysis of the English translation of the *Book of Songs*. Both translators are significant figures in translating traditional Chinese literature, and the translations they have produced significantly impact academic communities. Comparative research found that when translating the *Book of Songs*, Xu Yuanchong and James Legge try to capture the mood and linguistic style of the ST to the greatest extent feasible to uphold the original poetic conception.

However, there are several glaring disparities between the two translators' particular translation methodologies and strategies. The translation by Xu Yuanchong places more emphasis on poetry's formal elegance. To translate as similar to the ST in form as possible, he tries to preserve as much of the ST's rhyme and cadence during the translation process. This translation approach contributes to the positive reception of Xu Yuanchong's translation by English readers.



Contrarily, James Legge's version emphasizes how poetry conveys meaning. To make the translation more meaningfully similar to the original language, he carefully excavates and interprets the pictures and symbols of the ST during the translation process. James Legge's translations are now more easily understood by English readers because of this translation approach.

A comparison of their translations of the Book of Songs reveals that Xu Yuanchong and James Legge both applied the translation aesthetic theory. They skillfully combined their methodologies and techniques to translate as accurately to the ST as possible in form and meaning. This was done out of respect for the original material. This serves as a useful case study and aids in our understanding and application of translation aesthetic theory.

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