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Original Paper

A Comparative Study on the English Translation of Reduplicated Words in Chinese Poetry Based on Eco-translatology

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Abstract

As a highly expressive rhetorical device in classical Chinese poetry, reduplicated words possess unique aesthetic value in semantic connotation, phonological rhythm and morphological presentation. However, due to the fundamental differences between Chinese and English linguistic systems, the English translation of Chinese reduplicated words has long been a difficult task in translation practice. This paper looks at two English translations of the famous reduplicative opening in Li Qingzhao's Slow, Slow Tune. Using eco-translatology as its theoretical lens, it compares the translators' choices, examining how each navigated the constraints of language, culture, and communicative effect. What emerges is a picture of translation as a dynamic balancing act—a process in which the translator constantly adjusts, compromises, and seeks the best fit within a complex web of forces. The findings offer a systematic way of thinking about how reduplicated words in classical poetry might be translated and evaluated more thoughtfully.

Keywords

reduplicated words, eco-translatology, three-dimensional transformation, Slow, Slow Tune

1. Introduction

Reduplicated words, the repeated Chinese characters or phrases, play a key role in classical Chinese poetry. Ancient Chinese poets use them to echo sound and connect their emotions with the outside world. As shown in the famous Chinese lines "The ospreys cry and cry, on the islet in the river (关关雎鸠，在河之洲)" from *The Book of Songs*, the poet uses duplicated mimetic words to combine music, feeling and image all at once. Ancient poets favored these words for three main reasons. First, they amp up emotion and paint scenes that hit deep. Second, they make the rhythm and melody woven right into

the language. Third, repetition brings balance and symmetry; the lines just look and feel right.

Here's the snag: these effects spring straight from Chinese itself, and they don't slip easily into English. English uses repetition too, but English style usually frowns on copy-pasting the same words over and over. This basic fact creates an old headache for translators. When they try to bring Chinese reduplication into English, something always gets lost—rhythm, feeling, the sweep of the original art.

Eco-translatology has been an innovative way for translation studies. Professor Hu Gengshen set it out in 2001, arguing that translation should be seen as a process—dynamic, adaptive, and always balancing between source and target languages. It's not just about swapping words; it's about shaping meaning in an ecosystem of languages, cultures, and readers. The key words that best describe this theory could be translator dominance, three-dimensional transformation, and holistic adaptation and selection (Wang, 2026).

This paper digs into how multiple translators tackled the reduplications in Li Qingzhao's *Slow, Slow Tune*. Taking eco-translatology's three-dimensional transformation as its base, it compares their choices, weighing the strategies they used to render those repeated words. This paper aims to offer concrete, practical insight for future translation and critique of reduplicated expressions in classical poetry.

2. Adaptability of Eco-translatology in Translating Chinese Poetry

Hu Gengshen's ecological translation studies flips the old script: translation isn't just a fixed procedure but a lively process, always adapting and selecting. This point of view fits classical Chinese poetry like a glove, especially poems that lean on repetition, because translation here can't clamp down on just language. It has to juggle form, culture, and effect all at once.

2.1 Theoretical Framework of Eco-translatology

Eco-translatology approaches translation from an ecological angle, inspired by Darwin's ideas of adaptation and selection. Translation, it argues, happens inside a big, interconnected system, or a translation ecosystem, with the source text, source language, target language, culture, society, author, and reader all tangled in the process (He, 2022).

At its core lies the three-dimensional adaptive transformation, looking at translation through three lenses: linguistic, cultural, and communicative. This is especially useful for poetry using repetition. Translating those lines means more than swapping words. It means carrying over cultural weight and making sure the poem still clicks with readers in a different language.

First, translators have to rebuild elements. They need to choose words, tweak syntax, shape rhythm, and always keep in mind the differences between Chinese and English. With poetic reduplication, the challenge is to bring the rhythm and balance of the original into English without sounding forced.

Next, a good translation needs to reproduce the cultural connotation of the source text in the target language. Repetitive expressions in classical poetry often embody unique Chinese emotional and aesthetic qualities. For example, the phrase "凄凄惨惨" ("melancholy and desolation"), for example, isn't just about a bleak landscape. It's about the quiet, inward grief and the unique aesthetic of the

Chinese literati. So, a good translation doesn't just carry the image It brings the feeling, steeped in its old cultural context.

Finally, the communicative dimension is concerned with fulfilling the original text's pragmatic purpose. That is, enabling target-language readers to experience an affective response comparable to that evoked in source-language readers. Since the expressive force of reduplicated words is achieved precisely through phonic repetition and reverberation, the success of any translation ultimately rests on whether English readers can register a similar degree of emotional impact.

2.2 Applicability of Eco-Translatology in the Translation of Poetic Reduplications

Eco-translatology proves especially well-suited to the analysis of poetic reduplication translation, for several reasons—three of which are particularly worth noting.

One such reason is that the translation of these reduplicative expressions is shaped by a range of interlocking constraints. The translator must simultaneously reproduce the rhythm and formal features of the Chinese original (the linguistic dimension), communicate culture-specific meanings to an audience unfamiliar with the source tradition (the cultural dimension), and evoke an aesthetic and emotional response commensurate with that of the original readership (the communicative dimension). The interplay of these three facets creates the full ecological context within which reduplication translation takes place (Ali, Abu, & Yuit, 2013).

A further reason lies in eco-translatology's emphasis on flexible adaptive selection over mechanical rule-following—a principle that resonates with the inherently creative character of poetic translation. Depending on their individual translation philosophies, their perceptions of target readers, and the broader cultural milieu in which they operate, different translators will inevitably arrive at different choices, producing versions that diverge markedly in tone and texture.

Finally, the notion of "the degree of holistic adaptation and selection" furnishes a comprehensive and workable yardstick for comparing multiple translations. By assessing how effectively a given version adapts across the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, this framework avoids the pitfalls of single-criterion evaluation and supplies a robust theoretical underpinning for comparative inquiry.

3. Aesthetic Features and Translation Dilemmas of Poetic Reduplicated Words

This section turns to the poetic reduplicative form, examining both its distinctive aesthetic appeal and the translational difficulties it presents.

3.1 Aesthetic Functions of Reduplicated Words in Chinese Poetry

The aesthetic value of reduplication in classical verse can be approached from three angles: how it sounds, what it means, and how it looks on the page.

Phonetically, reduplication generates a pronounced musicality through syllable iteration. Because Chinese is a monosyllabic, tonal language, this repetition naturally yields both crisp rhythms and circular cadences. The successive "xun" sounds in "寻寻觅觅 (searching and seeking)," for instance, produce a drawn-out, meandering effect, while the clipped, hollow echo of "冷冷清清 (cold and quiet)"

creates a stark and desolate auditory impression.

Semantically, reduplicative forms serve several purposes at once. They intensify meaning, add descriptive precision to scenes, and can even mimic sounds from the natural world. What stands out most, however, is their capacity to carry subtle, often elusive, emotional undercurrents. Consider the opening of Li Qingzhao's *Slow, Slow Tune*: each successive reduplicative pair deepens the poet's loneliness and grief, layering despair upon despair until it becomes almost too much to bear.

Morphologically, the visual dimension of reduplication is equally striking—and uniquely Chinese. Since each character occupies a square, uniform space, placing identical graphs side by side creates a symmetrical, orderly visual rhythm. This is a distinctly calligraphic aesthetic that is largely lost when converted to alphabetic scripts.

3.2 Restrictions of Linguistic Differences on Reduplication Translation

Repeated words integrate aesthetic dimensions such as semantics, phonetics and morphology, but the differences in structure and phonetics between Chinese and English have brought great challenges to the reproduction of such aesthetics.

The fundamental limitation comes from the difference of voice system. As a tonal language, Chinese relies on tonal changes and the repetition of initials and finals to create a sense of rhythm; In contrast, English is a stressed rhythmic language, and its intonation is determined by the stress position and syllable arrangement. The rhetorical devices in English, such as alliteration and rhyme, operate on a completely different principle from the repeated syllables in Chinese, so they cannot accurately reproduce the unique phonetic effects of Chinese.

Grammatical differences make the situation worse. English tends to avoid lexical repetition. The continuous occurrence of the same words is usually regarded as a grammatical deviation, unless it is to achieve a specific rhetorical effect. Chen (2012) pointed out that in English translation, mechanical direct repetition often appears stiff and unnatural, but weakens the text effect rather than enhances it.

Cultural psychological differences constitute deeper and more subtle constraints. The repeated expression of Chinese is deeply rooted in the tradition of paying attention to implicit, euphemistic and multi-level emotional expression. In contrast, English culture tends to be direct and concise, which makes it difficult for English readers to fully understand the long and fluctuating aesthetic aftertaste contained in the rhetorical repetition in Chinese poetry tradition.

4. Three-dimensional Comparative Analysis of English Translations of Reduplicated Words in Slow, Slow tune

The repeated words at the beginning of Li Qingzhao's Slow, Slow Tune is widely known as the art peak of reduplicated words in classical poetry. These words are arranged in seven pairs, which gradually strengthens the poet's deep loneliness in the face of the collapse of his country and his family and personal separation (Zhang, 2016). As an outstanding representative of lyric creation, this widely discussed poem is very challenging in translation, has attracted the attention of many translators for a

long time, and has become an important case in translation studies. This study makes a three-dimensional comparative analysis of the two authoritative English versions translated by Xu Yuanchong and Lin Yutang.

4.1 Comparison of Adaptive Selection at the Linguistic Dimension

Based on the above three-dimensional transformation theoretical framework, this section will make an in-depth comparison of how different translators deal with the language level issues when translating Li Qingzhao's reduplications. In eco-translatology, the translation at linguistic level requires translators to make adaptive choices in terms of vocabulary, syntax and pronunciation, so as to make the target text conform to the customary expression norms of English, while preserving the form and rhythm characteristics of the source text as much as possible. Given the significant structural differences between Chinese and English, this level often poses the most direct and obvious challenges. The following analysis will examine the two authoritative versions of Xu Yuanchong and Lin Yutang, and explain how different adaptation strategies at the language level produce different translation effects.

Xu Yuanchong version

I look for what I miss,

I know not what it is.

I feel so sad, so drear,

So lonely, without cheer.

Xu Yuanchong adopted the rhyme compensation strategy at the language level. Instead of mechanically copying the morphological repetition features of Chinese reduplication, he adapted to the idiomatic expressions of English and reproduced the original phonetic rhythm through tail Rhymes (such as miss/is, drear/cher) and juxtaposed syntactic structures (such as the repeated I... I... Mode). In addition, the pronoun repetition "so" in "so sad, so drear, so lonely" effectively imitates the cumulative rhetoric effect achieved by the repeated use of adverbs in Chinese. Xu is fully aware of the differences in basic structures between Chinese and English, so he avoids rigid literal translation and instead makes use of English phonetic resources to make up for the inevitable loss of form and form beauty. Therefore, his version shows a high degree of adaptability at the language level.

Lin Yutang's version

So dim, so dark,

So dense, so dull,

So damp, so dank,

So dead!

Lin Yutang adopted a completely different language strategy. He used seven parallel "so+adjectives" structure to correspond to seven groups of repeated words in the original text. At the same time, he created the alliteration effect through the repetition of all adjectives' initial consonants/d/. This dual strategy not only retains the quantitative correspondence in the original structure, but also reproduces the similar musicality through voice repetition. However, this strategy also has obvious limitations. The

adjectives chosen, namely, dim, dark, dense, dull, damp, dank, and dead, are obviously chosen mainly for their alliterative harmony rather than being faithful to the original meaning. Therefore, the final translation pays more attention to the phonetic effect than to accurately convey the original meaning, sacrificing the accuracy of meaning in exchange for the impact of sound.

4.2 Comparison of Adaptive Selection at the Cultural Dimension

After discussing the different strategies adopted at the language level, this section turns the focus to the cultural dimension, which is the second key axis in the three-dimensional framework. According to the concept of eco-translatology, the cultural dimension requires translators to pay attention to the transmission and mediation of specific cultural meaning, so as to ensure that the target text will not distort or cover up the social, historical and aesthetic values contained in the source text. This dimension is particularly important for poems such as slow, slow notes, which are deeply rooted in the author's personal and historical trauma: repetitive phrases not only have descriptive power, but also carry complex emotional and cultural networks, which are difficult to copy directly. The following analysis will compare how Xu Yuanchong and Lin Yutang deal with these cultural undercurrents in their respective translations. Xu Yuanchong interprets "寻觅（search and pursuit）" as "I search for what I am missing, but I don't know what it is". This interpretative explanation clearly puts the poet's search behavior into a specific frame of reference. This poem, written in the late years of Li Qingzhao, concentrates the pain of her broken life due to the collapse of the dynasty, the bereavement of her spouse and the loss of materials. Therefore, the "search" in the original poem not only means the physical search for specific objects, but also a more profound exploration related to the spiritual support and emotional comfort of existence, while this desire is deliberately left out of the poem. Xu's translation makes it easier for English readers to understand its surface meaning, but at the same time, it also weakens the deliberately vague expression of the original text and dilutes the sense of loss and loss that permeates the emotional core of poetry.

The structure of Lin Yutang's seven "so+adjectives" successfully reflects a general desolate atmosphere, which roughly reproduces the sad cultural tone in the original work. However, a close reading reveals a subtle but important shift in focus. The adjectives he chose (dark, dark, dense, dull, damp, gloomy and dead) mainly described the external environment, rather than the subjective psychological picture of the poet. In contrast, in the original work, the seven pairs of repeated words are completely introspective, presenting the subjective emotional state by not relying on the external scene description. Therefore, Lin's version shifts the expression axis from the internal emotional narration to the external atmosphere description. Although this transformation has internal coherence in poetry, it weakens the strong personalized and self-referential emotional tone of the original to a certain extent.

4.3 Comparison of Adaptive Selection at the Communicative Dimension

The core of the communicative dimension lies in whether translation can arouse the perceptual and aesthetic reactions of the target language readers comparable to the original. The main communicative power of repeated words lies in their cumulative repetition, which creates an endless and ubiquitous

sense of sadness. Xu Yuanchong's translation has a distinctive rhythm and repetitive sentence patterns, which endows it with a strong musicality, so that English readers can not only feel the poet's deep pain, but also feel the elegance of the form of poetry. However, he compressed seven pairs of repeated words into four lines of English poetry, which failed to retain the original multi-level and progressive emotional development track. The translation successfully conveys the core emotion of sadness, but it has lost the gradual sense of sadness.

Lin Yutang's seven parallel "so+adjectives" structure is highly consistent with the repetition rhythm of the original text. The repeated emphasis of the Adverb "so" enables English readers to feel the accumulation of emotional intensity in each line of poetry. However, the use of some rare adjectives, such as "dank" is a typical example, may temporarily hinder readers' immediate understanding, thus weakening the overall communication effect to a certain extent.

4.4 Comprehensive Comparison and Evaluation

The two versions have different emphases on three-dimensional transformation. See Table 1 for details:

Table 1. Translation Bias of Three-dimensional Transformation in the Two Translated Versions

Dimension	Xu Yuanchong's Version	Lin Yutang's Version
Linguistic Dimension	Compensating reduplication with rhyme, utilizing English phonological resources	Adopting alliteration and parallel structure to realize formal correspondence
Cultural Dimension	Interpretative translation with clear meaning but weakened artistic charm	Effective atmosphere restoration but deviation between subjective and objective expression
Communicative Dimension	Excellent rhythmic beauty but insufficient progressive emotional sense	Highly consistent rhythm but limited readability of individual words

According to the criteria of eco-translatology, "the degree of overall adaptation and selection", the two versions have not reached the optimal level of adaptation in three dimensions. Xu Yuanchong's translation shows great strength in language expression and emotional communication, but it fails to fully restore the cultural connotation contained in the original in this process. Although Lin Yutang's translation faithfully reproduces the syntactic structure and rhythm pattern of the original text, it fails to restore the subjective emotional resonance carried by repeated words, resulting in semantic deviation in a certain sense.

This comparison reveals the inherent tension in the translation of overlapping images in poetry.

Translators inevitably have to make trade-offs between language form, cultural connotation and communication effect. Strictly following the repetition of Chinese morphology will inevitably weaken the cultural implication of the text; While paying too much attention to cultural transmission may dilute the aesthetic rhythm of the translation. Finally, all translation adjustments are adaptive responses to the overall translation ecological environment, and no translation can claim absolute authority or accuracy.

5. Conclusion

Based on the theoretical framework of eco-translatology, this paper makes a comparative analysis of different versions of repeated words in Slow, Slow Tune, aiming to explore the three-dimensional transformation mode of overlapping words in classical Chinese poetry translation. The research draws the following conclusions:

First, eco-translatology is highly applicable to the study of the translation of overlapping words in poetry. Reduplicated words have phonetic, semantic and morphological aesthetic dimensions, and their translation needs to achieve a balance between language form, cultural connotation and communicative effect, which is fully consistent with the three-dimensional analysis framework at the core of eco-translatology.

Second, different translators make different adaptive choices according to the ecological environment of translation. Xu Yuanchong uses English Rhyming structure to make up for the lack of charm of overlapping words, giving priority to language and communicative effect; Lin Yutang, on the other hand, paid attention to the reduction of form, using alliteration mode and parallel structure. These different methods not only reflect the different priorities of translators in the three dimensions, but also reflect the impact of their personal translation ideas and assumptions on the target audience.

Third, no single translation can excel across all three dimensions simultaneously. Given the linguistic and cultural disparities at play, translating classical poetry is inevitably a matter of negotiation and compromise—a process that reveals both the creative possibilities and the inherent limits of literary translation.

What eco-translatology offers, then, is a coherent, wide-angled lens for examining how Chinese poetic reduplications are rendered into English. It reframes translation less as a mechanical exercise in language replacement and more as a decision-making process carried out by translators who are constantly responding to a complex set of environmental pressures. This perspective, I think, helps us assess existing translations more fairly and comprehensively, while also pointing the way for those who take on similar challenges in the future. Further work could usefully broaden the textual base and bring in a wider array of translated versions—only then can we really see whether eco-translatology's explanatory power holds up in the broader landscape of classical poetry translation.

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