

Original Paper

A Study on the English Translations of Culture-loaded Words in

Qing Pingdiao

Fei Yan & Jiayan Xiao

School of Foreign Language, Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, China

Corresponding author: Jiayan Xiao, Professor, Hubei University of Technology, China

Received: August 28, 2025

Accepted: September 30, 2025

Online Published: October 5, 2025

doi:10.22158/jecs.v9n4p20

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v9n4p20>

Abstract

This paper examines the English translation strategies of culturally loaded terms in Qing Pingdiao, a group of poems by Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai. Qing Pingdiao embodies distinct cultural uniqueness, presenting challenges in conveying imagery, explaining background information, and reproducing rhythmic beauty in translation. The paper compares the translation approaches of Xu Yuanchong and Zhao Yanchun, revealing that Xu adopts a foreignization strategy, emphasizing the preservation of the original poem's cultural essence and seeking "form-spirit equivalence," while Zhao employs a domestication strategy, prioritizing cross-cultural poetic resonance and constructing universal aesthetic experiences. These differing strategies highlight the influence of translator subjectivity, suggesting that a diverse range of strategies is essential for the elevation of Chinese poetry from "cultural export" to "civilizational dialogue."

Keywords

Qing Pingdiao, Culture-loaded Words, English translation strategies

1. Introduction

"Qing Pingdiao" is a set of three poems by the Tang dynasty poet Li Bai, renowned for their distinct cultural uniqueness and significant translation challenges. The cultural distinctiveness is reflected in their rich literary imagery, such as comparing beauties to clouds and flowers; their strong imperial cultural elements, depicting royal scenes; and the musicality of the verses, characterized by strict tonal patterns and harmonious rhymes. When translating, difficulties arise in conveying the cultural connotations of the imagery, explaining contextual elements like imperial culture, and recreating the original poem's rhythmic elegance and aesthetic appeal due to differences in linguistic rhythm and structure.

Culture-loaded words (Nida, 2001) refer to words or phrases that carry specific cultural connotations and

meanings in one language but lack direct equivalents in other languages. By accurately translating these words, unique cultural information can be effectively conveyed to international audiences, allowing them to gain a deeper understanding of the essence of Chinese culture. Furthermore, disseminating culturally distinctive vocabulary from Chinese culture through high-quality translations helps showcase the richness of China's cultural heritage, its unique spiritual outlook, and values to the world. This contributes to shaping a positive and constructive national cultural image.

This paper analyzes the culture-loaded words in "Qing Pingdiao" (a set of poems by Li Bai). Using cultural translation theory as the theoretical framework, it compares the English translations of the same culture-loaded words in the poems by translators Xu Yuanchong and Zhao Yanchun, exploring the translation strategies and methods employed by each. By evaluating the completeness of the original poem's information representation and its literary value in both translations, the study concludes by summarizing which translation strategies and methods should be adopted when dealing with culture-loaded words in poetry.

Cultural translation theory (Nida, 2005) is a theoretical approach that integrates translation studies with cultural studies. It emphasizes that translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but, more importantly, a transmission of culture. Translator's subjectivity (Jiang, 2008) is one of its core concepts. It refers to the initiative and creativity demonstrated by translators during the translation process. Translators do not mechanically convert the source text into the target language; instead, they engage in selecting, interpreting, and recreating the original text to a certain extent. Based on their understanding of the translation's purpose and their assessment of the target readers' reception capacity, translators can adopt different strategies, such as foreignization or domestication.

2. Classification of Cultural Loaded Words in "Qing Pingdiao"

In the grand context of cross-cultural communication, different languages carry their own unique cultural connotations, with culture-loaded words shining like brilliant pearls embedded within them, shining with the light of specific cultures. They are the crystallization of the deep integration of language and culture, containing rich symbolic meanings, historical memories, and cultural characteristics. As a poem of exceptional artistic value, "Qing Pingdiao" incorporates numerous culture-loaded words within its brief verses, which can be broadly categorized into three types: natural imagery, historical allusions, and court culture words.

2.1 Natural Imagery

Natural imagery plays a pivotal role in "Qing Pingdiao." Taking "云" and "花" as examples, they are by no means mere depictions of natural scenery in the poem; instead, the poet endows them with profound symbolic meaning. In traditional Chinese culture, "云" often symbolize loftiness, ethereality, and agility, representing both a state of transcendence beyond the mundane world and embodying a philosophical sense of constant change. "花," on the other hand, are frequently associated with beauty, delicacy, and transience; they are not only the ultimate manifestation of natural beauty but also convey the poet's

reflections on life, emotion, and many other aspects. The symbolic meanings carried by these natural images transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, serving as key clues to understanding the poem's deeper connotations.

2.2 Historical Allusions

Historical allusions also form a significant part of the culture-loaded words in "Qing Pingdiao." Words such as "群玉山" and "瑶台" carry profound mythological backgrounds. In legend, these were celestial realms where immortals resided, symbolizing beauty, mystery, and transcendence. By incorporating these allusions, the poet not only enhances the poem's enchanting quality but also elevates it to an extraordinary artistic realm. However, for target readers unfamiliar with Chinese mythology, these allusions can pose a formidable cultural barrier.

2.3 Court Culture Words

Words related to court culture also hold a distinct place in "Qing Pingdiao." The word "沉香亭", as a reference to Tang Dynasty architecture, is far more than a simple locational name. It carries rich connotations of imperial court culture. The architectural style, function, and status of the 沉香亭 within courtly life all reflect the luxury and refinement of the Tang imperial court.

3. Analysis of English Translation Strategies for Cultural-loaded Words in "Qing Pingdiao"

Some words with profound cultural connotations are difficult to translate accurately into English, as direct translation may lead to the loss or misinterpretation of cultural information. So, how can we adopt appropriate translation strategies to ensure that these culturally rich words retain their charm and meaning in an English context? To address this question, this study selects translations by Xu Yuanchong and Zhao Yanchun, which are respectively denoted as TT1 and TT2, comparing and analyzing their different renderings of the same culture-loaded words in three poems. The aim is to explore the translation strategies and methods employed by different translators in handling culturally specific words in poetry.

Example 1:

ST: 云想衣裳花想容,

TT1: Her face is seen in flower and her dress in cloud,

TT2: Her clothes like plumage and her face a rose,

Xu Yuanchong translates "云想衣裳" as "dress in cloud," retaining the literal translation of "云" (cloud) while conveying the ethereal imagery of flowing garments through the conventional English metaphor "in cloud." For "花想容," he renders it as "face seen in flower," transforming the Eastern metaphor of "blossom-like beauty" into a visual Western image associated with "flower." Xu's translation preserves the original Chinese imagery while adapting it grammatically to the target language, maximizing the transmission of poetic ambience. This approach predominantly reflects a foreignization strategy.

Zhao Yanchun, on the other hand, translates "衣裳" as "plumage," introducing a Western mythological image—since "plumage" often evokes the feathers of angels or divine birds—thus replacing the traditional Chinese imagery of flowing sleeves. This adaptation brings the expression closer to Western

readers but may lead to a deviation in cultural associations. For "花想容," he renders it as "face a rose," substituting the broadly defined Eastern floral imagery with the specific Western symbol of a rose. While the metaphorical structure is preserved, the cultural symbol is altered, reflecting an adaptation to the target language's cultural context. Zhao's translation constructs an aesthetic schema aligned with Western poetic traditions, employing extensive domestication strategies. However, this approach results in a certain degree of cultural information entropy, where some original cultural connotations may be obscured or transformed.

Example 2:

ST: 若非群玉山头见，会向瑶台月下逢。

TT1: If not a Fairy Queen from Jade-Green Mountains proud, She's Goddess of Moon in Crystal Hall one sees.

TT2: If not a fairy queen from Heav'n on high, She's Goddess of Moon that makes flowers shy.

In this line, Xu Yuanchong once again adopts a foreignization strategy, combined with liberal translation. He renders "群玉山" as "Jade-Green Mountains," directly preserving the cultural image of "jade" while using the adjectival phrase "Jade-Green" to depict the mountain's characteristics. This allows English readers to associate the mountain with jade, even though such a connection is not inherent in Western culture. Additionally, the phrase "Fairy Queen from Jade-Green Mountains proud" conveys the idea of encountering a fairy in such a beautiful mountain setting. This translation reflects the allusion to "群玉山," traditionally known as the dwelling place of the Queen Mother of the West. Overall, it retains the cultural specificity of the original poem while ensuring readability in English. As for "瑶台", Xu translates it as "Crystal Hall," drawing on the imagery of transparency and purity associated with crystal palaces in Western mythology, thereby achieving cultural equivalence.

In contrast, Zhao Yanchun's translation diverges from the specific geographical imagery of "群玉山," opting instead for the generalized word "Heav'n on high." While this choice sacrifices the concrete cultural symbol of "jade," it successfully preserves the ethereal and lofty ambiance of the celestial realm described in the original poem. The word "Heav'n" holds broad cultural resonance for English readers, facilitating immediate comprehension. Furthermore, Zhao integrates the imagery of "瑶台" (Jade Terrace) into the expression "Goddess of Moon," and enhances it with the added interpretation "that makes flowers shy." This addition endows the moon goddess with a more vivid and tangible presence—her beauty is so profound that it makes flowers blush. Although this approach loses the specific location denoted by "瑶台," it significantly strengthens the visual impact and emotional depth of the translation. By transforming a culturally specific word into a universal emotional expression, Zhao enhances the literary appeal of the text, exemplifying a pronounced domestication strategy.

Example 3:

ST: 一枝红艳露凝香，云雨巫山枉断肠。

TT1: She is a peony sweetened by dew impearled, Far fairer than the Goddess bringing showers in dreams.

TT2: A rosebud red glistens with fragrant dew, Such nymphs, on earth or Heav'n are really few.

Xu Yuanchong does not directly translate "红艳" into a literal depiction like "red and bright." Instead, he elevates the imagery by referring to the entire flower as a "peony." This choice is significant, as readers understand that within this context, the peony symbolizes both the flower itself and the beauty of Yang Guifei. When translating the same line, Zhao Yanchun also employs a combination of foreignization and liberal translation, but with a greater emphasis on direct imagistic correspondence. He renders "红艳" as "rosebud red." While "红艳" does not specifically denote a rose, the phrase "rosebud red" effectively evokes associations of beauty and delicate vibrancy in the English reader's mind, thus aligning with the core semantic and aesthetic quality of the original word.

The phrase "云雨巫山" is an allusion from Song Yu's "Gaotang Fu," which refers to the romantic encounter between the King of Chu and a goddess, symbolizing an ethereal love affair. Xu Yuanchong does not translate the culturally dense imagery of "云雨巫山" directly. Instead, he transforms it into "the Goddess bringing showers in dreams." This is a liberal translation of the original allusion, yet the words "Goddess" and "showers in dreams" effectively convey the poem's mood of lovesick melancholy. Although the specific geographical reference to "Wu Mountain" is omitted, diluting the original imagery, the overall emotional tone and 意境 are preserved. This demonstrates a method of allusion liberal translation and image abstraction, converting a specific historical-cultural image into a poetic expression accessible to English readers.

Zhao Yanchun takes a more adaptive approach in his translation. He also avoids a direct translation of "云雨巫山," transforming it instead into praise for a "nymph," stating, "Such nymphs, on earth or Heav'n, are really few." This strategy employs image substitution and emotional conveyance. By replacing the historical-cultural allusion with admiration for the nymph's beauty and emphasizing its rarity with "really few," he successfully communicates the core emotion of the original line.

Example 4:

ST: 借问汉宫谁得似？可怜飞燕倚新妆。

TT1: Who could equal her in palace of ancient world? Not e'en the newly-dressed "Flying Swallow", it seems.

TT2: The oread Duke Xiang craved couldn't compare, Lady Zhao, to shine, new clothes had to wear.

The word "汉宫" (Han Palace) refers to the Han dynasty court and implicitly invokes a historical frame of reference for comparing beauties—using Zhao Feiyan from the Han dynasty to highlight Yang Guifei's superiority. This use of a dynastic symbol constructs historical depth and reinforces the poem's logic of supreme praise. Xu Yuanchong translates "汉宫" as "palace of ancient world." This is a strategic generalization that removes the specific dynastic information to prevent confusion for readers unfamiliar with Chinese history. The phrase "ancient world" preserves the necessary sense of temporal distance, maintaining the poem's comparative framework. Zhao Yanchun, however, takes a different approach by translating "汉宫" as "Duke Xiang" (the King of Xiang of Chu). This substitutes the original allusion to Zhao Feiyan with the story of Duke Xiang's encounter with the Goddess of Mount Wu. He further reconstructs the mythological context using "oread" (a mountain nymph from Greek mythology),

creating a cross-cultural mythological collage that blends an Eastern monarch with a Greek nature deity. The word "飞燕" alludes to Zhao Feiyan, a renowned dancer of the Han dynasty, symbolizing peerless beauty but carrying a subtle pejorative connotation—her charm is seen as reliant on elaborate adornment ("倚新妆"), thus making her inferior to Yang Guifei's natural elegance. Xu Yuanchong's translation retains the literal imagery of "飞燕" (Flying Swallow) but sacrifices the culture-loaded proper noun "Zhao Feiyan." The use of quotation marks in "Flying Swallow" signals its special referential status, which is significant for introducing Chinese cultural specifics. In contrast, Zhao Yanchun's version uses "Lady Zhao," explicitly indicating the historical figure's surname to enhance authenticity. However, this approach loses the vivid imagery of "Flying Swallow" and may still confuse readers unfamiliar with Chinese history.

Example 5:

ST: 名花倾国两相欢，长得君王带笑看。

TT1: The lady admires and is admired by the flower, The sovereign would gaze upon her with a smile.

TT2: The rose and reigning belle smile each to each; His Majesty's eyes make a happy reach.

The word "名花" specifically refers to the peony, the celebrated flower of the Tang court, symbolizing Yang Guifei's noble status and peerless beauty. Xu Yuanchong translates it as "flower," generalizing the specific type to preserve the fundamental "flower-person" correspondence. He reconstructs the scene of mutual admiration through the chiasmic structure "admires and is admired." The phrase "倾国", originating from the Book of Han, describes a beauty so devastating she could cause the fall of a city or state. Xu renders it simply as "the lady," omitting the historical allusion but relying on the context to convey nobility. For "君王", he uses "sovereign," a generic word for a ruler that retains the symbolism of power while stripping away the specific historical identity of Emperor Xuanzong.

Zhao Yanchun, conversely, translates "名花" as "rose," substituting the Eastern peony with the Western symbol of love to strengthen romantic associations, albeit at the cost of historical specificity. For "倾国," his version "reigning belle" cleverly uses "reigning" to conceptualize beauty as a form of authority, subtly hinting at the consort's political influence, though it weakens the original phrase's destructive connotation. "君王" is rendered as "His Majesty," employing standard English courtly address to enhance acceptability for the target-language reader, yet it further obscures the individual identity of the emperor.

Example 6:

ST: 解释春风无限恨，沉香亭北倚阑干。

TT1: She leans on balustrade north of the Fragrant Bower, The longing of spring wind she knows how to beguile.

TT2: Thus dissolves the melancholy of breeze. Amidst the balm they lean on rail at ease.

In this line, "沉香亭" is a significant culture-loaded word. It was a famous structure in the Tang dynasty's Xingqing Palace, a site witnessing the love between Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei, thus bearing profound historical memory. Xu Yuanchong translates it as "Fragrant Bower," retaining the olfactory imagery of "香" (fragrant) and domesticating the Tang architecture with the poetic word "bower." This

strategy sacrifices geographical specificity in exchange for poetic synesthesia. In contrast, Zhao Yanchun renders it as "amidst the balm," extracting the core element of fragrance ("balm" meaning aromatic ointment) and entirely abandoning the architectural entity to create an atmospheric scene.

Their differing approaches exemplify the spectrum of possibilities in translating Chinese poetry: Xu's version seeks to "convey the spirit through the form," anchoring cultural genes, while Zhao's method "breaks the form to capture the essence," aiming to activate poetic regeneration. This very tension constitutes the intrinsic dynamism driving the global journey of classical Chinese poetry.

4. Conclusion

Following the analysis of translation strategies for culture-loaded words in the English versions of "Qing Pingdiao," this study observes that Xu Yuanchong primarily adopts a foreignization strategy, focusing on preserving the cultural DNA of the original poem. Through methods such as literal translation of images, explicitation of allusions, and transcoding of metaphors, he reconstructs the poetic ambiance within the target language. His approach aims to build a bridge between Chinese and Western cultures, pursuing an equivalent translation that captures both the form and spirit. In contrast, Zhao Yanchun's translation is grounded in domestication, emphasizing cross-cultural poetic resonance. By employing techniques like cultural substitution, abstract purification, and emotional enhancement, he strips away the historical specifics of the original to construct a universal aesthetic experience. This activates the independent literary value of the translation, achieving a creative transformation akin to "breaking the cocoon for rebirth."

There is no superiority between the two translators' versions, only different emphases, reflecting how translator subjectivity influences the outcome. In terms of cultural stance, Xu Yuanchong anchors his work in the source culture, striving for a "facsimile-like" translation with minimal loss. Zhao Yanchun, however, treats the target culture as fertile ground, achieving "transplanted" growth through creative adaptation. On the level of poetic pursuit, Xu Yuanchong prioritizes the reproduction of the original's artistic conception, rebuilding the poetic system of Chinese poetry in English through grammatical adaptation and image transplantation. Zhao Yanchun focuses on poetic self-consistency, prioritizing the independent literary quality of the translation, even at the expense of some cultural details, to enhance the beauty of the verse. In terms of reader orientation, Xu Yuanchong's translations are aimed at academic readers, assuming that readers have the willingness to engage in cross-cultural interpretation and are willing to accept a certain degree of estrangement in expression. Zhao Yanchun's version aims at a general readership, lowering cultural cognitive barriers to attract ordinary readers with fluency and emotional resonance.

The practices of these two translators illustrate the fundamental paradox of translation—the eternal tension between fidelity and creativity. The global dissemination of Chinese poetry requires both "guardians of cultural genes" (exemplified by Xu's translation) and "breakers of poetic barriers" (exemplified by Zhao's translation). Only through the coexistence of diverse strategies can classical

poetry truly transcend mere "cultural export" and evolve into a genuine "dialogue between civilizations."

References

- Guan, B. D., & Xiang, M. Y. (2024). A New Interpretation of the Conceptual Integration in Translation - Taking the English Translation of Cultural Loaded Words in "Dream of the Red Chamber" as an Example. *Foreign language Education*, 45(01), 95-100. (in Chinese)
- Jiang, L. (2008). Postcolonial Perspective: Cultural Translation and the Positioning of Translators. *Social Sciences in Nanjing*, (06), 146-151. (in Chinese)
- Nida, E. A. (2001). *Language and Culture Contexts in Translation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Nida, E. A. (2005). *Language, Culture and Translating*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 90.
- Pan, H. O., Wang, L. L., & Zhou, Y. C., et al. (2024). Research on the English Translation Strategies of Cultural Loaded Words in the Theory of Qi Movement in "Huangdi Neijing" from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication. *Chinese Archives of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, 1-10. (in Chinese)
- Pan, H. O., Zhou, F. Y., & Cui, H. R., et al. (2024). Translation Strategy of Cultural-loaded Words in TCM Classics from Perspective of Medio-translatology. *Chinese Archives of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, 42(07), 44-47. (in Chinese)
- Tan, Z. H., & Tian, X. B. (2018). Research on Chinese-English Translation Strategies of Culture-loaded Words in the Poetry of the Tang Dynasty: A Case Study of "x flower". *Journal of Xiangtan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 42(04), 158-161. (in Chinese)
- Xie, Z. J., & Xiao, Y. H. (1991). On the Translation of the Three Poems in the Melody of "Qing pingdiao" by Li Bai. *Journal of Hunan University*, (06), 98-105. (in Chinese)