

Original Paper

The Tension and Reconciliation Between the Pursuit of Truth and the Pursuit of Beauty: A Study of Xu Yuanchong's Philosophy of Poetry Translation

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Received: June 18, 2026

Accepted: July 02, 2026

Online Published: July 23, 2026

doi:10.22158/wjeh.v8n3p67

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjeh.v8n3p67>

Abstract

The pursuit of truth and the pursuit of beauty are central concerns in literary translation, particularly in poetry translation. Xu Yuanchong's translation philosophy has received both praise and criticism. Scholars have acknowledged his theory of the Three Beauties, his advocacy of rhymed translation, and his emphasis on translator subjectivity. At the same time, they have questioned whether his strong preference for rhyme, form, and fluency in the target language may lead to semantic embellishment and cultural domestication. Drawing on Xu's writings on translation and relevant scholarship, and supported by analyses of specific examples, this study examines the theoretical meanings of truth and beauty in his translation philosophy, the tensions between them, and the mechanisms through which he attempts to reconcile the two. It argues that Xu does not replace truth with beauty. Rather, he expands truth beyond literal accuracy to include semantic, emotional, artistic, and cultural truth, while defining beauty as an integration of beauty in meaning, sound, and form, together with stylistic beauty in the target language and aesthetic appeal to target readers. His strategies of translating poetry as poetry, making full use of the strengths of the target language, equalization, simplification, and intensification, and grasping the meaning while transcending the form constitute his principal means of reconciling truth and beauty. This reconciliation nevertheless has its limitations. When a translator relies excessively on target-language rhythm, rhetoric, or stylistic effect, the cultural imagery, suggestiveness, and semantic complexity of the source text may still be weakened. Xu therefore does not eliminate the conflict between truth and beauty. Instead, he achieves an effective reconciliation centered on fidelity to poetic meaning, realized through translator creativity, and oriented toward reader reception.

Keywords

Xu Yuanchong, pursuit of truth; pursuit of beauty, Three Beauties theory, translator subjectivity

1. Introduction

Literary translation must accurately communicate the meaning of the source text while enabling the translation to possess artistic power in its own right. In poetry, meaning, emotion, imagery, rhythm, and form are closely intertwined. Fidelity to any single dimension is therefore insufficient to account for the full value of poetry translation. The pursuit of truth and the pursuit of beauty should not be regarded as mutually exclusive objectives; rather, they are two fundamental and mutually constraining dimensions of literary translation.

Xu Yuanchong was an influential translator and translation theorist in the field of English translations of classical Chinese poetry. He proposed “beauty in meaning, beauty in sound, and beauty in form” as the aesthetic criteria for literary translation; “equalization, simplification, and intensification” as translation methods; and “knowing, liking, and delighting in the translated work” as goals of reader reception^{[1][3]}. In his view, literary translation is not the mechanical reproduction of the source text’s meaning but a literary activity involving interpretation, transformation, and recreation.

Xu’s translation philosophy has nevertheless remained controversial. Some scholars praise his commitment to “translating poetry as poetry” and his attention to rhyme and rhythm, arguing that he challenged traditional notions of fidelity centered on literal correspondence. Others maintain that his pursuit of rhyme, formal regularity, and target-language fluency may come at the expense of semantic accuracy and cultural specificity. Xu Jun’s discussion of beauty and truth in translation demonstrates that aesthetic recreation in literary translation cannot be separated from textual meaning or translation ethics^[15]. The scholarly debate between Xu Yuanchong and Xu Jun reflects divergent understandings of fidelity, creativity, and translator subjectivity within Chinese translation studies^[13].

In recent years, Xu Yuanchong’s work has been extensively examined from the perspectives of translation aesthetics, traditional Chinese literary theory, translator subjectivity, and the modernity of translation. Qin Jianghua investigates the intellectual origins of Xu’s philosophy and argues that it is closely connected with classical Chinese literary theory and traditional aesthetics^[7]. Zhu Yishu systematically analyzes its cultural foundations and theoretical characteristics in terms of its “Chinese roots,” the interaction between theory and practice, and Xu’s theory of the Three Transformations^{[8][11]}. Feng Lixia and Lan Hongjun discuss the translator’s subjective consciousness and innovative spirit in Xu’s thought from the perspective of modernity^[14]. International scholarship has also examined the applicability of the Three Beauties theory to the translation of classical Chinese poetry, as well as its effects on imagery, culture, and communicative effectiveness^{[17][18]}.

Two limitations nevertheless remain in the existing scholarship. First, some studies equate truth directly with literal fidelity and understand beauty primarily in terms of rhyme and form, thereby reducing the relationship between the two to a binary opposition. Second, there has been insufficient systematic discussion of how Xu uses specific translation strategies to reconcile the pursuit of truth with the pursuit of beauty.

This article therefore addresses the following questions: What do truth and beauty mean in Xu’s

philosophy of translation? At what levels do tensions arise between them? Through what theoretical and practical approaches does Xu reconcile the two? What are the limits of this reconciliation?

2. The Theoretical Meanings of the Pursuit of Truth and the Pursuit of Beauty

2.1 The Pursuit of Truth: From Literal Correspondence to Fidelity to Poetic Meaning

In traditional views of translation, truth is generally associated with accuracy, fidelity, and the avoidance of mistranslation. Poetic language, however, is highly condensed, and its literal information, emotional implications, and aesthetic form are often inseparable. If the truthfulness of a translation is evaluated solely in terms of word-level correspondence, it becomes difficult to account for the transformation of imagery, the explication of emotion, and the reconstruction of form that frequently occur in poetry translation.

For Xu, literary translation should communicate the beauty of the source text's meaning rather than remain constrained by its literal form^[1]. It should convey not only information but also the source text's artistic and emotional power. Thus, Xu's understanding of truth is not limited to the literal accuracy of individual words. It has several dimensions.

Semantic truth requires translation to convey the source text's basic information and logical structure. It is the foundation of translational accuracy.

Emotional truth requires the translation to reproduce the emotional tone, attitudes, and sentiments of the poem.

The truth of artistic conception requires the translation to recreate, as far as possible, the overall atmosphere produced by the integration of scene and emotion and by the interaction between the concrete and the imagined.

Cultural truth requires the translator to deal appropriately with the source text's historical background, cultural imagery, and collective or national experience.

These four dimensions cannot always be preserved simultaneously. When the compression of classical Chinese poetry conflicts with English syntax and conventions of expression, a translator may need to relinquish a local feature of literal form in order to preserve the poet's emotions and the poem's overall artistic conception. Xu's idea of fidelity to poetic meaning therefore expands the object of fidelity from individual words to the poem as an integrated whole. The translator may adjust local formal features but must not undermine the poem's central meaning, emotional structure, or aesthetic value.

2.2 The Pursuit of Beauty: From Formal Beauty to an Integrated Aesthetic Ideal

The core of Xu's translation theory is the Three Beauties theory: beauty in meaning, beauty in sound, and beauty in form. This theory draws on traditional Chinese poetics and its understanding of emotion, prosody, and poetic form. It was also inspired by Lu Xun's proposition in *From Written Characters to Literature* that "beauty in meaning appeals to the heart, beauty in sound to the ear, and beauty in form to the eye"^[1].

Beauty in meaning primarily concerns the poem's emotion, artistic conception, and spiritual resonance.

It is not merely the sum of lexical meanings but the aesthetic significance generated by the poem as a whole.

Beauty in sound includes rhyme, rhythm, meter, and the effect produced when the poem is read aloud. Xu argues that if a poetic translation completely loses its musicality, it also loses an essential characteristic of poetry.

Beauty in form refers to such features as sentence patterns, structure, parallelism, repetition, and the overall organization of the poem.

Xu's pursuit of beauty also has two practical dimensions. The first is beauty in the target language, which requires the translation to conform to target-language conventions and poetic norms. The second is beauty of reception, meaning that target readers should be able to understand, appreciate, and derive aesthetic pleasure from the translation. Xu's theory of the Three Levels of Reception—knowing, liking, and delighting in a translated work—incorporates reader reception into the value system of literary translation^[2].

Xu's pursuit of beauty is therefore not merely an attempt to embellish the translation independently of the source text. Rather, it seeks to reconstruct an aesthetically coherent poetic structure in the target language. In his study of Xu's English translations of classical Chinese love poetry, Duczek observes that the Three Beauties theory encompasses meaning, form, and reader response and should not be reduced to a technique of rhyming^[17].

3. Manifestations of the Tension Between Truth and Beauty

3.1 *The Tension Between Literal Meaning and Poetic Expression*

The most immediate conflict in poetry translation is the discrepancy between literal meaning and poetic effect. Classical Chinese poetry often uses highly condensed images to express complex emotions, yet English cannot fully reproduce the same suggestiveness and textual gaps. A word-for-word translation may sound awkward and prosaic and fail to convey the source poem's emotional power. Conversely, supplementation and rewriting may exceed the poem's literal scope. Xu's translation of the final stanza of "Cai Wei" from *the Book of Songs* illustrates this tension.

Source text: Final stanza of *Cai Wei*, *Xiaoya*

昔我往矣，杨柳依依。
今我来思，雨雪霏霏。
行道迟迟，载渴载饥。
我心伤悲，莫知我哀。

Xu's translation:

When I left here,
Willows shed tear.
I come back now,
Snow bends the bough.

Long, long the way;

Hard, hard the day.

Hunger and thirst

Press me the worst.

My grief o'erflows.

Who knows? Who knows?

Xu translates “杨柳依依” as “Willows shed tear.” The expression “依依” may refer both to the gentle swaying of willow branches and to an emotional sense of attachment and reluctance to part. A translation such as “willows sway gently” might preserve the visual movement of the branches more accurately but would not necessarily foreground the sorrow of departure. By using “shed tear,” Xu personifies the willows and gives them the emotional capacity to weep.

From a literal perspective, “shed tear” is not explicitly present in the source text and therefore constitutes creative embellishment. From an emotional and atmospheric perspective, however, it intensifies the poem’s sorrow and makes the emotional connection between the willows and “my heart is grieved” more immediately perceptible. This example demonstrates the priority of emotional truth over literal truth.

3.2 The Tension Between Source-Text Form and Target-Language Poetics

Xu advocates “translating poetry as poetry.” In his view, classical Chinese poetry should be translated into rhythmic, rhymed English verse rather than ordinary prose^[2]. This approach preserves the literary character of the poem but also creates difficulties in formal transformation.

The musicality of classical Chinese poetry is based primarily on tones, syllable counts, rhyme categories, and syntactic symmetry. English poetry, by contrast, relies more heavily on stress, meter, end rhyme, and syntactic rhythm. Because the poetic systems of the two languages do not correspond exactly, Chinese tonal patterns and parallel structures cannot be transferred mechanically into English. The translator must instead seek a functionally comparable form within the target language. Xu’s translation of Wang Zhihuan’s *On the Stork Tower* illustrates this tension.

Source text: Wang Zhihuan, *On the Stork Tower*

白日依山尽，黄河入海流。

欲穷千里目，更上一层楼。

Xu’s translation:

The sun beyond the mountain glows;

The Yellow River seaward flows.

You will enjoy a grander sight;

By climbing to a greater height.

The first line of the source poem emphasizes the setting sun disappearing behind the mountains. Xu’s “The sun beyond the mountain glows” instead emphasizes the sun’s radiance behind the mountains. The translation does not fully preserve the finality expressed by “尽,” but “glows” rhymes with “flows”

in the second line. To achieve target-language musicality, Xu modifies the dynamic process represented in the source poem.

The third line, “欲穷千里目,” might be translated more literally as “If you wish to see a thousand miles farther.” Xu instead uses “You will enjoy a grander sight,” transforming the relationship between desire and condition into a direct statement addressed to the reader. In the fourth line, “更上一层楼” becomes “By climbing to a greater height.” The concrete act of ascending another floor of the tower is abstracted into the idea of reaching a greater height. This strengthens the poem’s universal philosophical implications but weakens the specificity of the act of climbing the tower.

Xu’s translation thus represents a characteristic form of reconciliation. When literal information and English versification cannot be fully preserved at the same time, he gives priority to the poem’s overall conception, spatial movement, and philosophical message, supplementing them through the aesthetic resources of English verse.

3.3 The Tension Between Cultural Imagery and Target-Language Acceptability

Images such as the moon, willow, wild goose, and solitary boat in classical Chinese poetry are not merely elements of the natural world; they are culturally resonant symbols. The willow is frequently associated with farewell, while the wild goose often conveys homesickness or longing for distant loved ones. Target readers may not share the cultural knowledge of Chinese readers, and translators must therefore choose among preservation, explanation, and transformation. Xu’s translation of Li Bai’s *Thoughts on a Tranquil Night* illustrates the tension between cultural imagery and target-language acceptability.

Source text: Li Bai, *Thoughts on a Tranquil Night*

床前明月光，疑是地上霜。
举头望明月，低头思故乡。

Xu’s translation:

Before my bed a pool of light.
Can it be hoarfrost on the ground?
Looking up, I find the moon bright;
Bowing, in homesickness I’m drowned.

Xu translates “疑是” as “Can it be hoarfrost on the ground?” This preserves the poet’s momentary uncertainty upon seeing the moonlight at night and also conforms to a familiar interrogative pattern in English poetry. Compared with a declarative expression such as “It is hoarfrost,” the question better represents the instantaneous judgment and psychological pause expressed by “疑.” It allows readers to experience the poet’s slight visual illusion.

The phrase “思故乡” is translated as “in homesickness I’m drowned,” rather than the more literal “I think of home.” Through the noun “homesickness” and the forceful image of being “drowned,” Xu intensifies the poet’s immersion in longing for home. “Homesickness” refers more explicitly to the emotional state of longing than “home” alone. The translation therefore not only preserves the source

poem's sense of nostalgia but also makes the emotion more concentrated and dramatic.

This choice nevertheless creates a semantic shift. In the source poem, “思故乡” is restrained and suggestive, conveying a sudden moment in which the poet thinks of home. By contrast, “in homesickness I'm drowned” externalizes and intensifies that emotion, giving it an overwhelming force not explicitly present in the original. Xu does not pursue literal correspondence here. Instead, he seeks to reproduce the emotional effect of the source poem by drawing on the expressive resources of English poetry.

Xu's strategy thus goes beyond lexical equivalence. He attempts to recreate the source poem's aesthetic effect and emotional intensity in the target language. Through the reorganization of questions, images, and rhythms, he enhances the translation's readability while seeking to communicate the source poem's cultural implications and lyrical atmosphere.

3.4 The Tension Between Translator Creativity and Authorial Intention

Xu argues that “a good translation is equal to creation and may even surpass it,” emphasizing the creative dimension of translation^[2]. This view strengthens translator subjectivity and challenges the idea that a translator can only reproduce the source text passively. His translation of Mao Zedong's *To a Photo of Militia Women* illustrates the tension between translator creativity and authorial intention.

Source text: Mao Zedong, *To a Photo of Militia Women*

飒爽英姿五尺枪，曙光初照演兵场。

中华儿女多奇志，不爱红装爱武装。

Xu's translation:

With rifles in hand they stand brave and bright,

The drill ground bathed in morning light.

Most Chinese daughters have a desire strong:

To face the powder and not powder the face.

The source line “不爱红装爱武装” contains a clear parallel structure and a rhetorical reversal. “红装” does not refer merely to women's clothing or cosmetics; it symbolizes conventional ideals of feminine beauty and traditional gender roles. “武装,” by contrast, signifies military training, social action, and women's identity as active participants in the revolution. Xu uses the noun and verb forms of “powder” to create repetition and contrast between “the powder” and “powder the face,” reconstructing the rhetorical tension of the source line in English.

Formally, the translation makes effective use of English conversion and repetition, producing a distinctive combination of sound and structural beauty. Semantically, it preserves the basic opposition between women's rejection of conventional adornment and their preference for social and military action.

The English word “powder,” however, usually evokes cosmetic face powder, while its meaning does not fully correspond to the cultural implications of “红装.” Moreover, “powder the face” makes military action the opposite of wearing cosmetics, weakening the broader military and sociopolitical

meaning of “武装。” This is therefore an instance of rhetorical and functional equivalence rather than complete equivalence of lexical and cultural meaning.

Translator creativity can effectively address the impossibility of directly transferring source-language forms. Creative translation must nevertheless remain constrained by the source text's meaning and cultural context. If a translator preserves a rhetorical effect while neglecting the source text's sociocultural significance, formal beauty may obscure semantic truth.

4. Xu Yuanchong's Principles for Reconciling Truth and Beauty

4.1 Reinterpreting Fidelity with Beauty in Meaning as the Core

The Three Beauties theory contains a clear hierarchy. Xu places beauty in meaning before beauty in sound and beauty in form, indicating that his aesthetic ideal is not purely formalist. Beauty in sound and form is important, but both should remain subordinate to the poem's emotions and artistic conception.

Xu's translation aesthetics does not abandon the meaning of the source text. Rather, it seeks a higher level of literary representation through aesthetic transformation^[12]. Within this framework, the translator may sacrifice certain literal or formal features but should not sacrifice the poem's central emotion. The translator may restructure the source text but should not destroy its overall artistic conception.

Xu's redefinition of truth thus provides the theoretical foundation for unifying the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of beauty. A local departure from the literal meaning may be regarded as a higher form of fidelity if it serves the poem's overall spirit and artistic conception.

4.2 Regulating Translational Distance Through Equalization, Simplification, and Intensification

Xu's theory of the Three Transformations—equalization, simplification, and intensification, provides the practical methods through which the Three Beauties may be realized.

Equalization does not mean identifying a one-to-one correspondence between dictionary meanings. Rather, it involves finding a target-language expression with a comparable function and aesthetic effect. For example, “不爱红装爱武装” is not translated word for word as “not loving red dress but loving armed dress.” Instead, Xu exploits English polysemy and conversion to reconstruct the source line's parallel structure. This is equalization at the rhetorical and functional levels.

Simplification reduces the difficulty posed by complex expressions and cultural information in the source text. Allusions, highly condensed phrases, and extensive ellipsis may be simplified to improve readability. Such treatment, however, may also result in the loss of cultural information.

Intensification makes implicit meanings more explicit or expands them. Translating “杨柳依依” as “Willows shed tear” transforms an emotion suggested through natural imagery into a more explicit personification. Intensification may help target readers understand the source poem's emotional meaning, but it is also the strategy most likely to lead the translator beyond legitimate boundaries.

The Three Transformations demonstrate the translator's active regulation of the relationship among

source text, target language, and target readers^[11]. They should not be understood simply as techniques of domestication. Rather, they are dynamic strategies selected in accordance with textual characteristics, translation purposes, and reader reception.

4.3 Achieving Aesthetic Compensation Through the Strengths of the Target Language

Xu emphasizes that translators should “follow the desires of the heart without transgressing the rules” That is, they should make full use of the strengths of the target language while observing the fundamental principles of translation^[3]. Rather than mechanically imitating the formal features of Chinese poetry in English, he seeks compensation through the rhetorical and prosodic resources of English itself.

The rhymes “glows–flows” and “sight–height” in the translation of “On the Stork Tower” exemplify target-language aesthetic compensation. Although the requirements of rhyme result in certain semantic modifications, they give the translation the rhythm and formal completeness of an English poem. Similarly, “To face the powder and not powder the face” uses conversion and repetition in English to reconstruct the parallelism of the source line.

Aesthetic compensation must nevertheless remain meaningful and traceable to the source text. If a translation preserves only rhetorical effects and prevents readers from understanding the source text’s basic meaning, compensation becomes rewriting.

4.4 Evaluating Translation Through Reader Reception

Xu’s threefold goal of reader reception—knowing, liking, and delighting in a translated work, incorporates readers into the system of translation purposes. Readers should first understand the translation, then develop an interest in it, and ultimately experience aesthetic pleasure. Xu’s philosophy thus has a clear reception-oriented dimension.

Accordingly, the pursuit of truth no longer concerns only the translator’s responsibility to the source author; it also involves responsibility to target readers. If a translation fully preserves the omissions and culturally specific implications of highly condensed classical Chinese poetry, target readers may find it difficult to enter the poem’s world. A certain degree of explication and textual reorganization may therefore be necessary.

Reader acceptance, however, cannot justify arbitrary alteration. Ease of understanding does not necessarily entail the preservation of the source culture. A more balanced approach is to improve readability while retaining a degree of cultural difference, enabling the translation to sound natural in the target language without erasing the foreign qualities of the source text.

5. Theoretical Contributions and Practical Limits of Xu’s View of Truth and Beauty

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

First, Xu expands the meaning of fidelity in literary translation. He does not restrict fidelity to individual words but extends it to the poem as a whole. This provides theoretical space for rethinking truth in poetry translation.

Second, Xu foregrounds the aesthetic nature of literary translation. Through the Three Beauties theory, he integrates meaning, sound, and form into a single evaluative framework, thereby challenging approaches that reduce literary translation to the transfer of information.

Third, he affirms the translator's creative role. Through such principles as "translating poetry as poetry," "making full use of the strengths of the target language," and "grasping the meaning while transcending the form," Xu grants translators the right to make aesthetic choices and create new linguistic expressions. This reflects the growing emphasis on translator subjectivity in modern translation theory. As Feng Lixia and Lan Hongjun argue, the modernity of Xu's translation philosophy is most evident in its strong emphasis on translator subjectivity and translational creativity^[14].

Finally, Xu attempts to construct a theory of translation on the basis of traditional Chinese literary thought. His philosophy is closely connected with classical Chinese literary theory, traditional aesthetics, and Chinese translation thought^[7]. Research into the "Chinese roots" of Xu's ideas also shows that the Three Beauties, the Three Transformations, and the Three Levels of Reception possess a distinctly Chinese cultural and conceptual structure^[11].

5.2 Practical Limits

First, judgments of beauty are inevitably subjective to some extent. Beauty in meaning, spiritual resonance, and poetic quality is difficult to assess according to a single standard. Without adequate textual evidence, aesthetic evaluation may become merely an expression of the translator's personal preferences.

Second, an excessive pursuit of beauty in sound may result in semantic addition or omission. Rhymed translation requires the translator to make choices among rhyme, rhythm, and meaning, and each choice may alter the semantic emphasis of the source text.

Third, excessive domestication may weaken cultural differences. Fluency may facilitate circulation and reception, but it should not justify erasing the cultural features of the source text. Cultural imagery should be handled in a way that balances intelligibility with a degree of unfamiliarity. Xu's translations must therefore be evaluated at the linguistic, cultural, and communicative levels^[18].

Finally, the boundaries of "grasping the meaning while transcending the form" must be clearly defined. If "grasping the meaning" refers only to what the translator personally believes to be the spirit of the source poem, the principle may become an excuse for arbitrary embellishment. Creative translation must be jointly constrained by the source text's semantic content, emotional orientation, cultural context, and target-language norms.

6. Conclusion

In Xu Yuanchong's philosophy of translation, the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of beauty are not mutually exclusive goals. Rather, they form a dynamic relationship centered on the overall meaning and aesthetic function of poetry. Xu's theoretical contribution does not lie in simply replacing truth with beauty but in redefining truth. Truth in poetry translation includes not only lexical and

informational accuracy but also emotional truth, artistic conception, cultural spirit, and poetic function. Similarly, beauty is not a formal ornament detached from content; it integrates beauty in meaning, sound, and form with beauty in target-language expression and reader reception.

In practice, “translating poetry as poetry” preserves the poetic character of the translation; making full use of the strengths of the target language enables the translation to conform to target-language conventions; the Three Transformations provide methods for semantic transfer and cultural adaptation; and “grasping the meaning while transcending the form” allows the translator to prioritize overall poetic meaning when formal correspondence is impossible. Together, these strategies constitute Xu’s mechanism for reconciling truth and beauty.

Such reconciliation does not eliminate the conflict between them. It creates a conditional balance. When a translator excessively adds to or domesticates the source text for the sake of rhyme, fluency, or rhetorical effect, its semantic layers, cultural imagery, and formal features may still be damaged. Xu’s translation philosophy should therefore not be reduced either to a preference for beauty over truth or to an unqualified integration of the two. It should instead be evaluated within a multidimensional framework.

Xu ultimately advocates an approach centered on fidelity to poetic meaning. Translators may transcend literal form, but they must not depart from the source text. They may exploit the strengths of the target language, but they must not allow target-language conventions to replace the source culture entirely. They may engage in creative transformation, but their creativity must remain constrained by meaning, emotion, and culture. Reconciliation between truth and beauty does not eliminate their differences; it seeks, within those differences, a balance that is both aesthetically valuable and ethically responsible.

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