

Cultural Imagery Transmission in Wang Fanglu's Vernacular English Bilingual Translation of The Book of Songs: Ya and Song from a Cultural Translation Perspective

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Abstract: *Drawing upon cultural translation studies theory, this paper examines Wang Fanglu's vernacular English translation of The Book of Songs: Elegies and Odes. It explores strategies for conveying core cultural imagery—including ritual objects, natural imagery, and ceremonial terminology—across linguistic boundaries, thereby revealing the dual mediation mechanism constructed by the translation between “cultural fidelity” and “reader reception.” However, the translation process confronts three tensions: the fluctuation between sacredness and accessibility, the conflict between poetic condensation and explanatory expansion, and the paradox between cultural specificity and cross-cultural circulation. While vernacular interpretation strategies effectively bridge comprehension, they incur losses in cultural connotation transmission. Consequently, this article proposes that future Book of Songs translations should explore adding an independent cultural annotation layer, establishing a three-dimensional complementary translation system integrating vernacular, English, and cultural interpretation to better achieve the classic's regeneration and dissemination across cultural contexts.*

Keywords: Cultural Translation Studies; Book of Songs; Cultural Imagery; Dual-Language Edition.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a vital wellspring of Chinese civilization, the “Ya” and “Song” sections of the Book of Songs embody the profound essence of Zhou dynasty ritual-music systems and serve as spiritual totems for ancient Chinese people. Professor Wang Fanglu's work Explorations in Vernacular Chinese-English Dual Translation of the Book of Songs: Ya and Song employs vernacular Chinese translation as the primary approach, followed by English retranslation, thereby establishing a unique cultural transmission mechanism. Grounded in cultural translation studies, this paper examines the cross-linguistic transformation of core cultural symbols—such as ritual vessels, natural imagery, and ceremonial terminology—within this translation. It explores how the translator balances “cultural fidelity” with “reader reception,” while revealing the translation's effectiveness and limitations in cross-cultural communication. By analyzing the dynamic negotiation of translation strategies between cultural specificity, poetic aesthetics, and reader accessibility, this paper further contemplates the potential pathways and constraints for the regeneration of classic texts in cross-cultural contexts.

The perspective of cultural translation studies was proposed by Bassnett, who contends that translation is not merely a linguistic operation but a process of communication within and between cultures. She emphasizes that equivalence in translation should be “cultural-functional equivalence” rather than mechanical correspondence of linguistic forms, arguing that translation must consider the crucial factor of “receiving culture” to ensure the target text aligns with the cultural expectations and cognitive habits of readers in the target language. Though her advocated domestication strategy did not reach the political level, it incorporated cultural adaptability as a core consideration in translation strategy. Cultural translation studies underscores that translation's essence lies in cultural transplantation, not mere linguistic conversion (Bassnett, 2002). From this perspective, translation constitutes a recoding process of deep cultural structures. The texts of the “Odes” and ‘Hymns’ possess immense cultural density. Ritual vessels like “tripods,” “yi vessels,” “you vessels,” and “gui and zhan” were not merely utilitarian objects but material carriers of ritual sanctity, their forms and decorations implicitly embodying hierarchical order. Natural imagery like “millet and sorghum,” “yellow birds,” and “lush grass” crystallizes the agrarian worldview of “heaven-human resonance,” imbuing phenological phenomena with moral metaphor; ritual terminology such as “yè sacrifice,” “zhēng sacrifice,” and “sacrificial priest” reflects the Zhou dynasty's rigorous patriarchal system and religious protocols. Such imagery is highly condensed. In “Zhuci” from the Minor Odes, the line “Zhi cuan zhi zhi, wei zu kong shuo” uses “zhi zhi” to describe reverent footsteps and “kong shuo” to

emphasize the grandeur of the sacrificial altar. Just eight characters sketch the solemn movements of the kitchen official during ritual and the symbolic scale of the ritual vessels, posing significant decoding challenges for translators. Similarly, in “The Birth of the People” from the Great Odes, the character “庇” (pǐ) in the line “Placed in narrow lanes, cattle and sheep shelter them” carries both the action meaning of ‘sheltering’ and the symbolic connotation of “maternal womb.” This semantic layering represents a core difficulty in translating cultural imagery. Such textual characteristics demand that translators possess not only philological expertise but also cultural decoding abilities. The intertextuality inherent within the Book of Songs (Zhou Chu, 2016) further increases the systemic complexity of translation.

Professor Wang Fanglu's translation strategy manifests as a dual mediation mechanism between the vernacular layer and the English layer. The vernacular layer first provides an interpretive rendering of the original text, while the English layer subsequently achieves poetic transformation, striving to establish a kind of “cultural buffer” mechanism. Take the line “龙旂承祀” from “Bi Gong” in the “Lu Songs” as an example. The vernacular layer interprets it as “inheriting sacrificial rites with dragon banners,” deconstructing the archaic structure of ‘承祀’ and laying the groundwork for the English translation “He succeeded in sacrificial affairs.” This enables English readers to grasp the fundamental meaning. This strategy proves particularly effective with certain natural imagery. For instance, “昔我往矣，杨柳依依” (Xī wǒ wǎng yǐ, yáng liǔ yī yī) from “Cai Wei” in the Minor Odes is rendered in vernacular Chinese as “Recalling when we marched forth, willows swayed tenderly in the breeze,” and further transformed into English as “When I recall the time we march out, Willows billow in wind passionate.” This preserves the imagery while conveying the atmosphere of parting. However, when dealing with symbols of high cultural specificity, this approach reveals three tensions, with its structural limitations becoming particularly evident in conveying core cultural concepts.

2. SACREDNESS AND TENSION

The tension between sacredness and accessibility is notably evident in the translation of “Qing Miao” from the “Zhou Songs.” In the original text, the interjection “於” (wū) successfully evokes religious reverence, “肃雝” specifically denotes the solemn and measured posture of assistants adhering to ritual propriety, while ‘显相’ explicitly points to the participating feudal lords and ministers—together constructing the sacred space of the Zhou dynasty's “integration of ritual and governance.” In Professor Wang's vernacular translation, “肃雝” is rendered as “harmoniously dignified,” potentially broadening its connotation beyond specific ritual conduct; the political identity implied by ‘显相’ is not fully highlighted, replaced instead by an aestheticized description of the temple: “What a splendid...”. This tendency persists in the English translation: “gracefully harmonious” may transform specific religious rituals into a more universal aesthetic experience, while the static description “It looks” risks shifting the dynamic human ritual actions in the original text into mere contemplation of the appearance of objects. Semantically, terms with specific ritual connotations are transformed into relatively commonplace adjectives. Functionally, expressions of religious-political practice show a tendency toward decontextualized aesthetic experience. The “political sacredness of ritual behavior” emphasized by Hong Tao (2015) may be somewhat diluted here.

Similar treatment is evident in “I Will” from the Zhou Songs. The phrase “rituals and regulations followed King Wen's way” simplifies the original three consecutive verbs “仪” (ritual), “式” (form), and “刑” (enforce) – which emphasized active emulation of King Wen's exemplary model – into “rules and regulations were King Wen's way” in vernacular Chinese. This is further rendered as “Rules and regulations were King Wen's way” in English, where the original sense of ritual and authority is simplified to “following.” Professor Wang's translation enhances readability through aesthetic popularization, though this may introduce interpretive shifts. English readers might tend to perceive the temple imagery through broader architectural aesthetics rather than grasping its essence as a symbol of Zhou dynasty power. This reflects a deeper dilemma in cultural translation: when the institutional and political sacredness embedded in the source text lacks direct conceptual equivalents in the target culture, translators sometimes must substitute cultural specificity with more accessible expressions. While this strategy holds value in enhancing communicative effectiveness, it carries the risk of diluting specific cultural codes during transmission. As Chen Jia (2019) cautions, the application of domestication strategies requires careful deliberation, with preserving the equilibrium of cultural ecosystems as the fundamental principle.

3. POETIC CONDENSATION AND INTERPRETIVE EXPANSION

The tension between poetic condensation and interpretive expansion is particularly evident in the transformation of metaphorical techniques during translation. In “The Crane’s Cry” from *The Minor Odes*, the original line “The crane cries from the ninth marsh, its voice heard across the wilds” uses the crane as a metaphor for the virtuous, evoking profound imagery. The vernacular translation employs an interpretive expansion strategy, rendering “九皋” as the descriptive phrase “deep and vast marsh” in “The white crane cries in the deep and vast marsh.” It is worth noting that “nine” in Chinese culture represents the ultimate yang number, signifying not only spatial depth but also the pinnacle of moral attainment. This rich numerological symbolism is not fully conveyed in the translation, somewhat flattening the original’s poetic depth. The subsequent line “Its cry, loud and clear, reaches the four suburbs” enhances the sound’s intensity with “loud and clear,” while substituting ‘suburbs’ for the vastness implied by “field,” making the distant resonance of “sound heard in the wild” more concretely conveyed. This treatment becomes more pronounced in the English translation: “In big swamp a crane’s crying, / To field round is cry reaching.” The phrase “big swamp” is relatively straightforward, diminishing the unique, archaic elegance of the character “皋.” Similarly, “field round” confines the boundless expanse of the original “野” to a more specific spatial scope. Particularly when the original “sound heard in the heavens” is rendered as “To high sky is cry reaching,” the sacred symbolism of “heaven” diminishes, thereby lessening the philosophical resonance of the crane’s cry piercing the sky as a metaphor for virtue encompassing heaven and earth.

Similar tensions emerge in the treatment of the metaphorical structure. The second stanza of the original poem, “Some fish live in deep water, / Fish float in part shallower,” cleverly uses the fish’s submerging and surfacing to metaphorically represent the hidden and revealed talents of people, echoing the crane’s cry. The vernacular translation, “Some fish live in deep water, / Fish float in part shallower,” adds the dynamic verbs ‘live’ and “float,” making the metaphor lean more toward a concrete depiction of the fish’s activities. The English translation, “Some fish live in deep water, / Fish float in part shallower,” employs stative verbs like ‘live’ and “float,” further solidifying the literal meaning and making the metaphorical technique function more like a straightforward description of scenery. Ultimately, the original line “乐彼之园” —which embodies both pastoral ideals and governance aspirations—is rendered as “It’s very fine of that garden,” where aesthetic appraisal supplants the original’s transcendent connotations. This demonstrates that while vernacular interpretations build bridges of understanding, expansive explanations may dilute the original poem’s poetic density. The English layer, in pursuing fluency, also faces the challenge of conveying the dual-coded cultural imagery.

4. CULTURAL SPECIFICITY AND CROSS-CULTURAL CIRCULATION

The paradox between cultural specificity and cross-cultural circulation is particularly evident in handling ritual terminology. These terms are deeply rooted in the institutional and religious context of Zhou dynasty ritual-music culture, possessing high cultural specificity that often makes finding equivalents in the target language difficult. The greater the need to accurately convey their unique value, the more likely they are to become distorted or lost in transmission, creating a dilemma. The translation process of “Xin Nanshan” from the *Minor Odes* vividly illustrates this dilemma. Core sacrificial terms such as “peeling pickled vegetables” (剥菹), “clear wine” (清酒), “red bull” (騂牡), “phoenix-decorated knife” (鸾刀), “blood-soaked sacrificial meat” (血膋), “steamed offering” (烝享), and “ancestral deities” (祖考, 皇祖) carry the unique sacred connotations and institutional norms of Zhou dynasty ritual-music culture. These terms function as highly culturally specific “codes,” their meanings deeply rooted in particular historical contexts, religious beliefs, and social structures.

In cross-linguistic translation, translators often favor more universal expressions to balance the fluency of the translation with the target audience’s comprehension. While this enhances readability and communicates the existence of sacrificial rituals, However, this comes at the cost of diluting or simplifying the rich culturally specific information embedded in the original terms—such as sacrificial standards, ritual vessel symbolism, ceremonial solemnity, and the underlying cosmology and patriarchal concepts. The sacred, institutionalized “ritual” is to some extent interpreted as more mundane ‘actions’ or “objects.” This precisely reflects the deep paradox faced in translation: to ensure the target audience grasps the fundamental concept of “sacrifice,” translators must sometimes balance faithfully conveying the source culture’s intricate details with ensuring the acceptability of the translation—especially when no direct equivalent exists. This balancing act can make it difficult to fully transmit the sacredness of the ritual system and its specific cultural connotations.

5. CONCLUSION

Professor Wang Fanglu’s translation strikes a balanced compromise between academic rigor and accessibility. Its

merit lies in constructing a bridge of understanding and cultural transition for the English text through its vernacular explanatory layer. Take “The Odes of Shang: The Mysterious Bird” as an example. The vernacular layer interprets “The heaven ordered the sacred swallow, /It gave birth to Qi who founded Shang,” effectively avoiding the potential ambiguity that might arise from a literal translation like “mysterious bird” as seen in the Ryūgaku version. However, when certain cultural concepts lack direct equivalents in modern Chinese, the limitations of the vernacular layer itself may constrain the cultural transmission in the English layer. In translating “Reins are beautifully decorated” from Zhou Song: Zai Jian, the vernacular layer renders ‘絳革’ as “the reins are exquisitely adorned,” which the English layer further renders as “Reigns are beautifully decorated.” This translation struggles to fully convey the material properties of bronze ritual vessels implied by the original term and the auditory imagery of the “鸛” (luan) bell's chime. Compared to Mr. Richard J. E. Grantham's meticulously researched and extensively annotated scholarly translation, Professor Wang's version prioritizes depth in presenting specific cultural exclusivity; Compared to Mr. Xu Yuanchong's poetic rendering of “鼓瑟吹笙” (playing the zither and blowing the panpipe) in “The Deer Calls” from the Minor Odes as “With lutes we make melody sweet / And organs blow to greet,” seeking rhythmic beauty, Professor Wang's translation “We play music harmoniously” prioritizes restoring the collective harmony within the ritual context and embodying the solemn atmosphere of ceremonial activities, resulting in a relatively plain rhythm. This balanced approach positions Professor Wang's translation as a unique bridge connecting scholarly depth with public accessibility.

Professor Wang Fanglu's vernacular Chinese and English dual-language translation of *The Book of Songs: The Elegies and Odes* represents a courageous exploration in cultural transmission. Its dual-layer translation mechanism provides a pathway for ancient cultural symbols to reach contemporary understanding. However, in conveying core cultural imagery, translators still face the balancing challenge among “semantic precision,” “poetic aesthetics,” and “cultural integrity.” Particularly when handling specific imagery laden with profound historical and cultural connotations, the dual-translation model may struggle to fully convey the deep cultural associations embedded within.

Professor Wang's practice offers valuable insights for future translations of the *Book of Songs*. For academic translations, greater emphasis on preserving cultural specificity through detailed annotations could safeguard cultural DNA; For translations aimed at the general public, emphasis could shift toward evoking shared sensory resonance through imagery. If employing a dual-translation approach, adding an independent “cultural annotation layer” might be considered, creating a three-dimensional complementary system of vernacular interpretation, English conversion, and cultural exposition. Such explorations may uncover a translational fulcrum for classics like the *Book of Songs*—bearers of profound civilization—that respects their cultural depth while revitalizing contemporary engagement. This approach could ensure the ritual and musical spirit from three millennia ago continues to resonate across linguistic boundaries.

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