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Study on the Three-dimensional Transformation of Li Qingzhao's Incense-related Ci Poetry from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

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Abstract:

The "Three-Dimensional Transformation" theory in eco-translatology requires adaptive choices across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, which helps translations to integrate into the target-language ecosystem effectively. Based on this theory, this paper focuses on the image of incense burning in the works of the Song Dynasty female poet Li Qingzhao. Li depicted Chinese ancient incense materials, implements, and settings from her boudoir perspective to reveal subtle emotion. However, translating these elements faces challenges as most Western readers are unfamiliar with these cultural symbols. By comparing the English translations by Xu Yuanchong and Zhu Manhua, this paper explores strategies for comprehensively conveying the cultural connotations of incense burning. This paper calls for translators to organically integrate three dimensions and flexibly employ techniques such as literal translation, free translation, and annotation when dealing with profound image absent in the target culture, therefore spread the aesthetic essence of classical Chinese culture and the health-preserving value of incense burning.

Keywords: Eco-translatology, Ci Poetry, Li Qingzhao, Incense Burning

1. Introduction

Ecological Translation Studies constructs an entire ecology within translation research. Absorbing Eastern wisdom and relying on the theory that "translation is adaptation and selection," it explores how translations achieve compatibility, interactivity, and dynamic equilibrium within the ecosystems of source and target languages [1]. Unlike theories focused on meeting target readers' linguistic habits, ecological translation studies emphasize transmitting the source culture while enriching the target language ecosystem. For instance, compared to Westerners' use of perfumes or essential oils, ancient Chinese heated

solid aromatic materials over charcoal for incense, which not only delights the sensem but was also regarded as an aesthetic and spiritual activity. When translating such cultural images, translators must bridge the cultural gap by preserving the original cultural symbols to help target readers grasp their connotations accurately and comprehensively. Thus, the "three-dimensional transformation method" offers a viable framework for translating classical poetry with a specific cultural image.

The Song Dynasty marked the heyday of Chinese poetry and incense culture [2]. Li Qingzhao, a female poet born into a upper-class family at that time, was deeply influenced and educated by poetry composition and the aesthetics of incense. Her thirteen incense-related poems correspond to four distinct stages of her life: maidenhood, marital separation, exile in the south, and wanderings in widowhood. As her life grew increasingly tragic, the emotional resonance of incense images in her poems deepened into profound melancholy [3]. Considering that, analyzing the translation strategies of incense culture in Li Qingzhao's Ci poetry not only reconstructs her life trace but also reveals how Song Dynasty literati employed incense culture as a medium in both daily life and artistic creation for foreign readers.

The three-dimensional transformation theory has been frequently used by contemporary scholars to investigate, in general, the methods of translating traditional Chinese poetry into English by a certain translators. For instance, Gu Yufei and Li Xia analysed Xu Yuanchong's translation of The Peony Pavilion [4]. Other scholars have conducted detailed interpretations of individual poems by comparing multiple translations, such as Zhang Xinghua and Wang Xing's study of two English versions of Sheng Sheng Man [5]. So far, the symbolic significance of incense in Li Qingzhao's ci poetry has been noted by numerous Chinese scholars for understanding the emotional landscapes of her life's different stages and for exploring Song dynasty incense culture [6]. However, the existing English translations reveal a notable lack of research into the culturally specific domain of 'incense burning'. To satisfy mainstream poetic aesthetic and enhance readability in the target language, many translations omit or simplify relevant cultural terminology. This paper aims to propose a comprehensive approach designed to provide accurate and polished English translations for advanced readers interested in aesthetic culture as well as academic study of traditional Chinese poetry. In this way, the aesthetic appeal and health value of Chinese ancient incense could be promoted to global audience, assisting them in appreciating Ci poetry and incense culture not only as poetic art but also in a broader perspective.

2. Application of the Theory

This study adopts the "three-dimensional transformation" theory from ecological translation studies, selecting two representative texts from each of the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions for analysis. It further explores how specific transformation techniques can adapt source-language cultural elements to the target-language context [7]. This process aims to integrate the translation into the target language's ecosystem and generate mutual influence. Beyond the translation process, it involves compatibility, interaction, and dynamic balance between the ecosystems of the two languages.

Adaptive selection and transformation at the linguistic level require translators to modify linguistic forms such as vocabulary, syntax, rhetorical devices, and phonetic rhythm. The cultural dimension emphasizes cultural differences, cultural gaps, and cultural connotations, focusing on the target language's overall cultural system. It stresses the transmission and interpretation of ideas and values within the bilingual ecosystem to prevent target-language readers from misinterpreting the original text's intended meaning. The communicative dimension concerns the adaptive choices and transformations made during translation to effectively achieve bilingual communicative intent and function [8].

3. Material and Methodology

3.1 Research Text

As a prominent figure in C-E translation studies, Xu Yuanchong has translated almost all of China's classical poetry into English and maintained a lasting influence overseas. To address gaps in the source language's cultural and aesthetic expressions, he adopts a "supplementary translation" strategy, emphasizing the beauty of sound, form, and sense within the target language context. For this study, Xu's 1998 English translation of 60 Poems from Selected Ci Poetry of Li Qingzhao is selected as a reference, for it covers the translation of Li Qingzhao's 13 incense poems, serving as a typical example of simplifying the translation of incense culture to align with the readers' linguistic and cultural background. In contrast, Zhu Manhua's 2018 work Complete English Translations of Li Qingzhao's Ci Poetry is a more comprehensive collection. It covers 96 poems, including works with disputed authenticity. Zhu's translation reflects the comprehensiveness of the three-dimensional conversion theory in classical poetry translation, and also pays special attention to the representation of incense culture.

Xu's translation prioritizes the target audience's recep-

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tivity, particularly focusing on “recreating” the charm of Li’s works through phonetic and syntactic beauty, yet downplays cultural barriers and contains some mistakes in incense-related cultural terms. Twenty years later, Zhu Manhua achieved a balance between fidelity and readability in his translation, emphasizing textual comparison for bilingual readers while preserving the cultural details of the original poems. However, his interpretation of a deeper cultural image still warrants further exploration.

3.2 Research Methodology

3.2.1 Comparative analysis

This study first compares the overall translation strategies in Xu’s and Zhu’s versions of Li’s Ci poetry, and then examine the adaptation choices and transformation strategies employed in the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions of both translations. After that comes the employment of a comparative framework integrating the aesthetic of traditional classical Chinese poetry translation, such as linguistic elements like rhythm and meter, while exploring strategies for achieving the equivalent communicative intent. The core focus lies in exploring how to optimize cultural dissemination mechanisms.

3.2.2 Case analysis

This study will analyze challenging aspects of Li’s incense-related Ci Poetry translation with microscopic precision. To be specific, it will examine translation difficulties and practical solutions, including: the successful recreation in the target language ecosystem of words like “ 袅 ” (curling lazily) within the linguistic dimension; the profound implications of cultural terms like “ 拨火 ” (adjusting the fire) in the cultural dimension; and the imagery of time passage subtly conveyed through incense in the communicative dimension.

4. Literature References Translation Strategy

4.1 Adaptive transformation at the linguistic level:

Example 1:
归鸿声断残云碧 , 背窗雪落炉烟直。
——《菩萨蛮》
Translation 1:
Returning swans not heard, clouds break in azure skies;
Snow falls from window-sill, straight I see incense rise.
(Translated by Xu Yuanchong [9])
Translation 2:
The wild geese call, gradually vanishing in the blue sky,
Outside the window, snow falls as smoke rising up high.
(Translated by Zhu Manhua [10])

In existing translations of classical Chinese poetry, the naming of incense materials in Chinese is often omitted due to constraints of word count and rhythmic structure. However, this approach somewhat diminishes the cultural identifiers of the source language. Furthermore, verbs describing the burning state of incense (such as “ 残 ”, “ 断 ”, “ 袅 ”, “ 消 ”, “ 空 ”) carry rich connotations and also require attention. Therefore, achieving an adaptive transformation at the linguistic level in translating Li Qingzhao’s incense-burning Ci poetry necessitates not only a comprehensive consideration of vocabulary, syntax, sound, and rhythm as traditionally emphasized in poetry translation but also a maximal restoration of the original work’s informational delivery, emotional resonance, and aesthetic value.

The line “ 背窗雪落炉烟直 ” vividly depicts an indoor incense scene: Snow falls while incense smoke rises straight upward, forming a visual contrast. Juxtaposing the two images of “snow falling” and “incense smoke rising” presents two concise images with crisp phrasing, reflecting the hypotactic nature of Chinese: The connections between ideas are loose with few linking words and the focus is on internal logic and meaning, requiring readers to understand from context. Xu’s translation adapts to English grammar as it adds the subject-predicate structure “straight I see incense rise” to connect the context. It employs a less rigid iambic rhythm and end-rhymes to achieve melodic resonance, thereby compensating for the untranslatable, concise, and vivid phonetic beauty of the original work.

On the other hand, Zhu’s translation employs “as” in a subtle yet controversial way: in the line “snow falls as smoke rising up high,” the semantic forms before and after “as” are inconsistent. Here, “as” does not function as a conjunction indicating “simultaneously” or “at the same moment” (which would require translating as “snow falls as smoke rises up high”. Instead, it serves as a preposition conveying a metaphorical relationship—” the falling snow resembles rising incense smoke.” This interpretation forcibly transforms the original poem’s parallel structure into a metaphor, making the translation seem rather strained.

When translating “ 炉烟 ,” both Xu Yuanchong and Zhu Manhua used only a single word, “incense” and “smoke” respectively, to maintain the symmetrical structure of the lines in the English ecosystem. Xu’s translation clarifies that the smoke originated from burning incense. However, constrained by metrical requirements, he omitted the tangible elements of “incense burner” and “smoke,” abstracting it merely into the fragrance produced by incense. In contrast, Zhu’s version diverged from the context of

incense burning. Without additional explanation, simply translating it as "smoke" may confuse readers of its source.

To fully convey the original meaning without omission, it would be necessary to disrupt the identical word count of the two lines in the English translation. This could be achieved by using phrases such as "incense smoke" or "fragrant smoke" to restore the contextual scene, or by adding a footnote to clarify that the smoke is produced by burning incense in a censer.

Example 2:

淡荡春光寒食天 , 玉炉沉水裊残烟。

——《浣溪沙》

Translation 1:

Spring sheds a mild and wild light on Cold Food Day ① ;
Jade burner spreads the dying incense like a spray.

① Cold Food Day marked the end of the three-day period when Chinese families refrained from starting cooking fires at home. This lyric describes the nonchalance of the poetess in her maidenhood.

(Translated by Xu)

Translation 2:

Spring sunshine is with vividly light on Cold Food Day,
Out of the censer residual incenses' smoke curl lazily.

(Translated by Zhu)

The line " 玉炉沉水裊残烟 " is entirely about incense and a typical example of inversion or modifier-fronting in Chinese. In Xu Yuanchong's translation, the word order is skillfully adjusted to better conform to English logic. He used personification, turning the adverbial "in the jade censer" (where the aloeswood burns) into the subject; then the word "dying" is used to capture the lingering sensation of smoke jointly conveyed by " 裊 " and " 残 ". In this way, Chinese, a language emphasizing parallel structures, has developed an expression equivalent to English, a language of syntagmatic cohesion, which emphasizes the integrity of sentence structure and the rigor of grammatical form. English sentences are typically relatively complex, containing multiple clauses and phrases, and these components require connection through explicit grammatical forms. Notably, jade has poor thermal conductivity, so it cannot function as an incense burner. The "jade censer" (玉炉) is merely a beautiful name for the celadon incense burners popular among the Song Dynasty people, for its greenish-blue, warm, and smooth texture is quite similar to jade [11]. To prevent misunderstandings, alternatives like "cyan-china burner" can be used, or additional explanatory notes can be added.

In this line, Zhu's translation establishes a clear subject-verb relationship and clarifies the adverbial role of "jade censer" (玉炉) by inserting prepositions, skillfully transforming the "image juxtaposition" in the Chinese poem into the linear logic of English. It also modifies the parts of speech of " 裊 " and " 残 ": " 残 ", the adjective, is translated as the verb "residual", while " 裊 ", a verb that describes the leisurely way incense smoke rises, becomes the adverb "lazily". In the original line, " 裊 " is a dynamic imagery word unique to Chinese. It not only describes the form of smoke "rising elegantly and curling upwards" but also implies the manner of "slowness and laziness". In the English translation, the verb "curl" is chosen as the equivalent, which could successfully capture the meaning of that character, allowing the form of "smoke" in the original text to be recreated. Although the translation does not directly convey the "gentleness" implied by " 裊 , " it supplements this manner through the adverb "lazily," forming a combined expression of "action + state." This aligns with the English linguistic convention where "verbs express actions and adverbs express states." Furthermore, the personification rhetoric in the original text is thus fully integrated into the target language context.

4.2 Adaptive transformation at the cultural level:

Example 1:

香冷金猊 , 被翻红浪 , 起来慵自梳头。

——《凤凰台上忆吹箫》

Translation 1:

Incense in gold
Censer is cold;
I toss in bed,
Quilt like waves red.
Getting up idly, I won't comb my hair,
Leaving my dressing table undusted there.

(Translated by Xu)

Translation 2:

Gold censer with burning incenses were getting colder,
My quilt like red waves thrown upside in disorder,
Getting up, still I felt too sleepy and lazy to comb hair.

(Translated by Zhu)

Besides incense names, incense-burning utensils also carry rich cultural connotations. For instance, many of them are crafted in the shape of animals: their bellies are hollow to hold incense, allowing the scented smoke to drift out from their mouths. There are two types of animal-shaped burners appear repeatedly in Li Qingzhao's ci poems: the suan ni and the duck. The suan ni is a mythical creature in ancient Chinese legend, and also the fifth son among the "Nine Offspring of the Chinese Loong". Resembling a lion, it is said to enjoy tranquility and sitting still, have a fondness for smoke and fire, and also bear the meaning of "Dharma protector" in Buddhism. Duck-shaped incense

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burners were commonly used in women's boudoirs. Being small animals frequently seen in daily life with their round bellies, flat beaks, and cute, naive appearance, ducks are more approachable to people than other mythical beasts (such as the Loong and phoenixes) [12]. However, such cultural images do not exist in the English linguistic context. While words like "censer" or "burner" can achieve functional equivalence in terms of meaning, there remains a gap in cultural imagination and aesthetic perception. Therefore, it is advisable to add explanatory notes when translating these culturally specific utensils into English.

The two translations adopt very similar strategies for rendering " 香冷金猊 ": they retain the "golden" color and the core meaning of "censer," while omitting the culturally specific form implied by " 猊 " (suan ni). Considering that ordinary readers may have a limited understanding of those Chinese cultural images, translators may choose to simplify the image of " 狻猊 " (suan ni), and this kind of method caters to the general audience's need to grasp the poem's meaning. However, to provide more comprehensive information for historical and cultural researchers, the original cultural connotations and symbolic meanings of " 狻猊 " should still be preserved in annotations. So a combination of "adaptation + footnote" can be used. For example, translations like "lion-shaped censer" or "golden beast censer" can restore the mythical beast image of suanni to the greatest extent. Yet, since Chinese and Western cultures evoke different core associations with "lion-like" creatures, translators could use a footnote such as: lion-shaped censer (suan ni): a Chinese auspicious mythical lion-like beast who has an affinity for fire and smoke.

Example 2:
记得玉钗斜拨火 , 宝篆成空。
——《浪淘沙》
Translation 1:
I still remember stoking the censer with my hairpin,
But now the incense disappears.
(Translated by Xu)
Translation 2:
I recall my hairpin used to adjust incenses burning,
Incense ashes remained but left nothing.
(Translated by Zhu)

The line " 记得玉钗斜拨火 , 宝篆成空 " evokes memories of the happy days spent in tender affection with her husband in the past, reflecting the sorrowful mood of "things remaining while people are gone".

The term " 宝 篆 " is an elegant name for incense that produces smoke curling like calligraphic strokes when burned, or it refers to incense pressed into specific shapes from powdered fragrance using a mold [13]. The latter, being made by compressing powdered incense, is prone to burning out abruptly. According to the context, it is clear that the incense requiring adjustment by "stirring the fire" should be the "incense pressed into specific shapes from powdered fragrance using a mold." Beyond cherishing the incense itself, this detail also carries the wish for the husband-wife bond to last long and for the couple to grow old together. Otherwise, the incense would become " 断头 烟 " (Incense that stopped burning halfway through), a folk term implying that a couple cannot remain affectionate for life. Similar cultural connotations can also be found in Su Shi's "Incense-Turning Tune": "Cherishing the incense, I further turn it with my treasure hairpin... For the sake of deep affection, I fear the incense might burn to a broken end [14]." Such connotations are also present in The Romance of the Western Chamber and The Palace of Eternal Life. This shows that the relevant descriptions in Li Qingzhao's Ci poetry echo the symbolic understanding of incense and conjugal love held by ancient literati.

4.3 Adaptive Transformation at the Communicative Level

Example 1:
故乡何处是 ? 忘了除非醉。
沉水卧时烧 , 香消酒未消。
——《菩萨蛮》
Translation 1:
Where is my native town?
I can't forget it unless drunken down.
I lit the incense when I went to bed;
The taste of wine outlasts the smoke of incense spread.
(Translated by Xu)
Translation 2:
I slept, the fragrant wood burnt,
While the smell disappearing,
I am still in a drunk state.
(Translated by Zhu)

In ancient China, incense burning was used to measure time, so scenes involving incense might also imply the passage of time. Li Qingzhao loved to burn incense when she went to sleep and would habitually notice its lingering scent upon waking, making it a carrier of her emotions. Having endured the destruction of her homeland and the loss of her husband, she fled southward, living a life of displacement, her heart filled with endless sorrow. At such moments, she could only seek solace in wine. The line " 沉水卧时烧 , 香消酒未消 " implies a logical relationship interpreting the author's state of mind: the agarwood lit before sleep has already dissipated, yet the effects of the wine persist. Such profound intoxication was the only way she could forget the pain of the loss of her nation and family! The poet uses the imagery of the dissipated incense smoke to convey the prolonged duration of her inebriation

and the considerable amount of wine consumed, thereby highlighting her profound nostalgia and grief for her perished homeland. In Xu Yuanchong's translation, the verb "outlast" manifests the comparative relationship in the original text, indicating that the state of drunkenness persists longer than the burning and lingering of the incense. Meanwhile, Zhu's version captures the implied temporal significance of the incense. The use of "while" juxtaposes the "incense" and "wine" within the same spatial context, thereby introducing the sense of time crucial to the subsequent lines. The word "still" reflects the Li's melancholy and helpless state of mind when losing herself in deep intoxication and sorrow, while "in a drunk state" describes the continuous nature of the author's inebriation.

Both translations successfully preserve the original text's tone, emotional intensity, and the sense of time implicitly associated with the culture of incense-burning. They effectively convey the mournful atmosphere of incense burning, intertwined with drunkenness and bitterness, into the target language, successfully achieving compatibility with the original work's intended message.

Example 2:

瑞脑香消魂梦断 , 辟寒金小髻鬟松。

——《浣溪沙》

Translation 1:

The incense burned, my dreams vanish in lonely bed;
My golden hairpin can't hold chignon on my head.
(Translated by Xu)

Translation 2:

The borneol fragrance lost, my lovesick dream broken,
The small gold ornament in my hair-bun, easily loosen.
(Translated by Zhu)

This Ci poem captures the emptiness and loneliness that wash over Li when she woke from a deep dream, only to find herself still alone. The line " 瑞脑香消魂梦断 " infers that as she drifted off to sleep, the warm fragrance from the incense burner lingered around her; yet by the time she awoke and rose, that wisp of sweetness had already vanished.

This subtly weaves a logical contrast between the warm ambience of her sleep and the cold stillness of her wakefulness. Since the borneol incense is used to comfort, its role is certainly more than just "the incense burned out" (as rendered in Xu's version). By comparison, "the borneol fragrance lost" in Zhu's translation better grasps the original's deeper meaning: it not only identifies borneol as a favorite incense of Li Qingzhao, but also tells readers whether its aura lingers or fades. In this way, readers could sense the disappearance of the scent, the coldness and loneliness of the moment, and the poet's silent sorrow.

5. Argument

Li Qingzhao mentioned " 瑞 脑 " (borneol) many times in her 13 incense-related Ci poems. This incense material was precious and favored by the upper classes, and it also held medicinal value for nourishing the body and clearing the mind, proving highly effective during times of mental agitation. Thus, readers can sense her specific preferences in incense and interpret the psychological activities and mental health reflected by these scents [15]. When translating Li Qingzhao's Ci Poetry into English, the translator could appropriately depart from the phonetic constraints (such as rhythm and meter). By considering her communicative intent, the translator can find corresponding ecological niches for incense names like borneol for " 瑞脑 " and agarwood for " 沉香 " in the target language. Those expressions retain the cultural and emotional functions of the incense beyond mere material terms, offering foreign readers greater resonance and enhancing the translation's scholarly value.

The existing translation practice always avoids rendering incense-related cultural terms to enhance the accessibility of classical Chinese poetry and preserve its rhythmic structure, despite cultural gaps in the target language ecosystem. By doing so, the international comprehension and dissemination of Chinese incense may be hindered, not to mention the added aromatic medicines and poetic imagery. Considering that, translators can employ creative literal translation or adapt their works with annotations to visually restore the form of culturally loaded terms like " 金猊 " and " 宝篆 ," while providing clear and comprehensive explanations of the cultural imagery behind them.

6. Conclusion

This study applies the three-dimensional transformation framework of eco-translatology theory to analyze and refine the translation methods for Li Qingzhao's incense-related Ci Poetry by comparing Xu Yuanchong's and Zhu Manhua's English translations. Findings indicate that within the paradigm of classical Chinese poetry, translating specific cultural images requires balancing multiple dimensions to achieve adaptive conversion across linguistic, cultural, and communicative levels. Existing translations exhibit gaps in rendering incense culture, failing to meet the demands of academic research and sophisticated cultural enthusiasts. The study proposes that verbs, adverbials, and attributives related to incense may be creatively rendered through free translation, while cultural nouns require literal translation that restores the object's form, supplemented by footnotes.

This study also validates the feasibility, normative nature,

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and comprehensiveness of eco-translatology theory for translating classical poetry and specific cultural images. Translators should exercise agency, achieving adaptation, selection, and transformation within dual linguistic ecosystems to realize dynamic equilibrium and cultural mutuality. In advancing the dissemination of Chinese culture, translators must preserve its unique charm while considering the acceptability and expressive impact of the translation. Only by doing so could ensure the enduring vitality of Chinese literature, wisdom, and stories on the global stage.

However, this paper is limited to Li Qingzhao's individual pieces on incense, which are not sufficiently numerous. The depth and breadth of incense culture's popularity in the Song Dynasty could definitely support expanding the scope of inquiry, as figures like Su Shi and Yan Shu also liked to compose related texts. Furthermore, the settings for incense burning in Li Qingzhao's Ci Poetry are confined solely to the family room, whereas in reality, incense was also present in ceremonial sacrifices, court assemblies, banquets, and other occasions. The further researchs could explore incense-related contexts, examining its multifaceted uses, connotations, and philosophical implications across different situations.

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