

On Translation Strategies for the Grass Imagery in Classical Chinese Poetry: A Cultural Semiotic Perspective

REN Rui, LI Yutong, SUN Yujingjing
Northeastern University, Shenyang, China

Grass constitutes a vital poetic imagery in classical Chinese poetry, embodying multifaceted symbolic connotations ranging from the tenacity of life to sentiments of separation and nostalgic longing. The translation of this botanical motif necessitates not merely lexical equivalence, but more importantly, the transmission of its profound cultural resonance and aesthetic essence. This study posits that effective rendition of grass imagery should adopt an integrative approach synthesizing the objectives of cultural translation with the intrinsic aesthetic characteristics of classical poetry. Through systematic analysis of the cultural semiotics embedded in grass symbolism, the research investigates practical translation techniques at lexical, syntactic, and stylistic dimensions. The findings aim to contribute to the theoretical framework of cultural image translation in Chinese poetic tradition while providing methodological references for cross-cultural interpretation of classical verse. By bridging cultural semiotics with translation praxis, this investigation seeks to advance the intercultural communication of Chinese poetic heritage through nuanced treatment of its botanical symbolism.

Keywords: classical Chinese poetry, grass, translation strategies, cultural image

Introduction

The civilization of the Chinese nation has a long and profound history, and classical Chinese literature, a shining gem within this tradition, is imbued with rich cultural connotations of grass imagery. Poets have endowed grass with diverse emotions, using it as a medium to express their feelings through its form and symbolism. They have infused grass with themes of parting, longing, resilience, and sorrow, as well as notions of reclusion, nobility, and the passage of time. For instance, Bai Juyi of the Tang Dynasty wrote, “Wild grasses spread o’er ancient plain; With spring and fall they come and go,” to convey the enduring vitality of life symbolized by grass. Fan Zhongyan of the Song Dynasty expressed his homesickness through the line, “Unfeeling grass grows sweet beyond the setting sun,” while Wang Wei of the Tang Dynasty depicted the sorrow of parting with, “After bidding farewell in the mountains, I close the wooden gate at dusk. Year after year, the spring grass turns green, but will the wanderer ever return?” Such works, which use grass to express separation, depict resilience, convey melancholy, and evoke nostalgia, are too numerous to count. With its rich symbolic meanings, grass imagery has become an indispensable emotional vehicle in classical Chinese poetry, carrying poets’ profound reflections on life, nature, and human existence.

REN Rui, M.A., associate professor, Foreign Studies College, Northeastern University, Shenyang, China.
LI Yutong, MTI candidate, Foreign Studies College, Northeastern University, Shenyang, China.
SUN Yujingjing, undergraduate, Foreign Studies College, Northeastern University, Shenyang, China.

The cultural accumulation of imagery allows it to flourish with unique vitality in different cultural contexts. “Over the long history of various nations, these images have continually appeared in language and artistic works, gradually evolving into cultural symbols with relatively fixed and distinctive cultural meanings” (Xie, 1999, p. 193). From the Cultural Semiotic Perspective, “Translation should take culture as its unit, rather than remaining at the level of text. Translation is not merely a process of decoding and restructuring, but more importantly, an act of communication. Translation should not be confined to describing the source text but should aim for functional equivalence in the target culture” (Liao, 2004, pp. 364-365). This paper explores the English translation of grass imagery from three aspects: grass and vitality, grass and emotional states, and grass and the sorrow of parting.

Grass and Vitality

In classical Chinese poetry, grass is often used to symbolize the tenacity of life and the cycles of nature. The growth, withering, and regeneration of grass not only reflect the laws of the natural world but are also employed by poets as metaphors for the ups and downs of life and human resilience. When translating such imagery, it is essential to highlight the vitality and cyclical nature of grass while preserving its natural imagery.

Literal Translation

Example 1:

Source text: 离离原上草，一岁一枯荣。（白居易《赋得古原草送别》）(Bai Juyi, *Grass on the Ancient Plain in Farewell to a Friend*)

Xu Yuanchong's (2006, p. 123) translation: Wild grasses spread o'er ancient plain; With spring and fall they come and go.

Witter Bynner's translation: The grasses on the plain are lush and green; Each year they wither and then grow again.

Xu Yuanchong directly translates “草” as “wild grasses”, preserving the natural imagery of grass. Through the phrase “come and go”, he conveys the cycle of withering and flourishing, highlighting the vitality of grass. Similarly, Witter Bynner's translation also directly renders “草” as “The grasses”. However, the difference lies in the fact that Xu's use of “wild grasses” better captures the resilience and vigor of the grass on the plains, which aligns more closely with the next line, “Fire tries to burn them up in vain;/They rise again when spring winds blow”, further emphasizing the grass's exuberant vitality. Additionally, in Xu's translation, the line “With spring and fall they come and go” naturally divides into two parts, “With spring and fall” and “they come and go”, creating a rhythmic pause that makes the verse flow smoothly. Although there is no strict end rhyme, the words “fall” and “go” form a subtle phonetic resonance, particularly with their vowel sounds (/ɔ:/ and /oʊ/), enhancing the musicality of the line. Moreover, the words “spring” and “fall” both begin with the consonants /s/ and /f/, creating a slight alliterative effect that adds to the rhythm and aesthetic appeal of the language. Xu Yuanchong's style of poetry translation is reflected in his fascination with rhyme. In his view, “the musical beauty of Tang poetry lies first and foremost in its rhyme. If a translation does not rhyme, it cannot preserve the style and charm of the original poem” (Xu, 1983, p. 68).

Cultural Adaptation

Example 2:

Source text: 空山不见人，但闻人语响。返景入深林，复照青苔上。（王维《鹿柴》）(Wang Wei, *The Deer Enclosure*)

Xu Yuanchong's (2018, p. 35) translation:

In pathless hills no man's in sight,/But I still hear echoing sound.

In gloomy forest peeps no light,/But sunbeams slant on mossy ground.

In Xu Yuanchong's translation of Wang Wei's "Deer Enclosure", the phrase "复照青苔上" (shining again on the green moss) is rendered as "But sunbeams slant on mossy ground". This translation employs imagery intensification and cultural adaptation strategies to enhance the poem's aesthetic and emotional depth. By using "sunbeams slant", Xu emphasizes the interplay of light and shadow, capturing the fleeting and delicate nature of the sunlight as it touches the moss. This not only preserves the original imagery but also enriches it, evoking a sense of tranquility and timelessness. Additionally, the choice of "mossy ground" aligns with the cultural connotations of moss in English, which symbolizes quiet, ancient beauty and a connection to nature. This cultural adaptation ensures that the translation resonates with English-speaking readers while remaining faithful to the original text.

The strength of this translation lies in its ability to balance fidelity to the source text with artistic creativity. Xu's use of "slant" and "mossy ground" creates a vivid and evocative image, enhancing the poem's meditative tone. The rhythmic structure and careful word choice, such as "peeps no light" and "slant on mossy ground", contribute to the musicality of the verse, making it both accessible and aesthetically pleasing.

Grass and Emotional States

Literati and poets are often skilled in "observing the world through the eyes of nature and expressing emotions with the voice of nature." They infuse nature with their lofty aspirations, lingering sorrows, transcendent optimism, and the tranquility of a reclusive life in the wilderness. For example, in *Spring View*, Du Fu writes, "On war-torn land streams flow and mountains stand;/In vernal town grass and weeds are o'ergrown," using the lushness of plants to contrast the decline of the nation, subtly conveying a sense of helplessness toward the passage of time. In *Return to Nature*, Tao Yuanming writes, "I sow my beans' neath Southern Hill,/ Bean shoots are lost where weeds o'er grow," using the abundance of grass to depict the peace and freedom of rural life, reflecting the poet's yearning for a reclusive existence. The natural world serves as a medium for poets to express emotions and convey philosophical ideas. Objective elements of nature are closely linked to human thoughts and emotions, and certain natural phenomena have become unique cultural symbols within the Chinese national consciousness, with grass culture being one such example. A distinct cultural psychology has been cultivated in people's minds, and literature and art have infused it with immense vitality. The following methods can be employed to illustrate the poets' states of mind.

Amplification

Example 3:

Source text: 国破山河在，城春草木深。（杜甫《春望》）(Du Fu, *Spring View*)

Xu Yuanchong's (2006, p. 147) translation:

On war-torn land streams flow and mountains stand;

In vernal town grass and weeds are o'ergrown.

In this translation, Xu Yuanchong employs the amplification strategy to enhance the imagery of grass. By adding "weeds" to "grass", he creates the phrase "grass and weeds", which not only enriches the natural imagery but also emphasizes the overgrown and neglected state of the city. This amplification captures the deeper meaning

of “草木深” (the lush growth of plants), conveying a sense of desolation and abandonment. The addition of “weeds” strengthens the emotional impact of the scene, aligning with the poem’s themes of loss and resilience, while making the imagery more vivid and accessible to English readers.

Cultural Substitution

Example 4:

Source text: 种豆南山下，草盛豆苗稀。（陶渊明《归园田居》）(Tao Yuanming, *Return to Nature*)

Xu Yuanchong’s (2021, pp. 86-87) translation:

I sow my beans ‘neath Southern Hill,

Bean shoots are lost where weeds o’er grow.

In the original text, “草” (grass) is translated as “weeds” rather than “grass”. This choice reflects a cultural substitution strategy, as “weeds” in English culture often carry negative connotations, symbolizing unwanted or overgrown plants. This translation aligns more closely with the cultural perceptions of English readers, directly conveying the sense of oppression and desolation in the phrase “草盛豆苗稀” (the grass is lush, but the bean sprouts are sparse), where the weeds overwhelm the bean shoots. However, this translation might mislead readers into thinking that Tao Yuanming is dissatisfied or helpless about rural life, whereas in reality, he is expressing a life attitude of conforming to nature and accepting one’s circumstances. Translating “草” as “weeds” conveys the image of overgrown grass but does not fully capture Tao Yuanming’s leisurely and content state of mind. By using neutral vocabulary (e.g., “grasses”) and emphasizing a peaceful language style, the translation can better convey Tao Yuanming’s love for rural life and his transcendent attitude. This strategy aligns more closely with the original poem’s artistic conception and better reflects Tao Yuanming’s state of mind.

Xu Yuanchong’s decision to use “weeds” is particularly effective because it captures the emotional tone of the original poem. By choosing a word that evokes a sense of neglect and overgrowth, Xu emphasizes the contrast between the thriving weeds and the struggling bean sprouts, highlighting the theme of nature’s indifference and the poet’s resigned acceptance of life’s hardships. This approach not only preserves the imagery of the original but also enhances its emotional impact, making the translation resonate deeply with English-speaking audiences. Xu’s skilful use of cultural substitution ensures that the poem’s essence is communicated clearly and powerfully, bridging the gap between Chinese and English literary traditions.

Grass and the Sorrow of Parting

In classical Chinese poetry, grass is often used to express emotions of parting, longing, and nostalgia. The spreading and boundless nature of grass makes it an important imagery for poets to convey feelings of separation and sorrow. When translating such imagery, it is essential to emphasize the spreading and endless characteristics of grass to communicate the profound and infinite nature of these emotions. For example, in Li Yu’s “Yumeiren”, the line “The sorrow of separation is like spring grass, growing ever farther and sprouting anew” uses the spreading of spring grass as a metaphor for the endlessness of the sorrow of parting, expressing deep and poignant grief.

Free Translation

Example 5:

Source text: 山映斜阳天接水，荒草无情，更在斜阳外。（范仲淹《苏幕遮》）(Fan Zhongyan, *Tune: Waterbag Dance*)

Xu Yuanchong's (2007, p. 184) translation:

Hills steeped in slanting sunlight, sky and waves seem one;

Unfeeling grass grows sweet beyond the setting sun.

Xu Yuanchong's translation of the poem is a perfect example of free translation. This strategy focuses on capturing the essence and emotional tone of the original text while allowing flexibility in word choice and structure to suit the target language. In his translation, Xu does not adhere strictly to a word-for-word rendering of the Chinese text but instead emphasizes the poetic atmosphere and the vivid imagery of the original.

For instance, the phrase “山映斜阳” is transformed into “Hills steeped in slanting sunlight,” a more fluid and poetic expression in English that evokes a similar visual image. Likewise, “荒草无情” becomes “Unfeeling grass grows sweet,” which shifts slightly in meaning but retains the emotional weight of the original. Xu's approach allows the English reader to experience the same emotional depth and beauty, making it accessible and engaging without losing the original poem's core spirit. This enhances the perlocutionary effect of the translation, which refers to “the impact of the discourse on the reader's emotions, thoughts, or actions” (Austin, 1975, p. 109). This adaptation showcases the strength of free translation in bridging cultural and linguistic gaps.

Blending

Example 6:

Source text: 春草明年绿，王孙归不归。（王维《山中送别》）(Wang Wei, *Parting in the Hills*)

Xu Yuanchong's (2018, p. 36) translation: When grass turns green in spring next year,/Will my friend come with spring once more?

Xu Yuanchong's translation of “春草明年绿，王孙归不归” (Wang Wei's *Parting in the Hills*) demonstrates a blending strategy, particularly in the translation of “春草”. In the original, “春草” is a concise phrase meaning “spring grass”, capturing the essence of renewal and the fleeting nature of time. However, Xu splits this into “grass turns green in spring”, which expands the meaning and adds a more descriptive touch. This blending technique not only maintains the core imagery of spring's rejuvenation, but also adds fluidity and clarity to the English version. By breaking down the phrase, Xu allows the reader to more vividly visualize the changing seasons.

Xu's translation also shines in its ability to balance faithfulness with poetic expression. While maintaining the essence of Wang Wei's melancholy tone, Xu's “Will my friend come with spring once more?” transforms the original brevity into a flowing, reflective question. This captures the deep emotion of the original text while making it accessible and engaging to English readers. The success of Xu's translation lies in his ability to preserve the emotional impact of the Chinese poetry while adapting it to the aesthetic sensibilities of the English language.

Conclusion

The imagery of grass, as an important cultural symbol and a key component of poetic artistic conception, is deeply intertwined with the overall artistic conception of a poem. Translators are often pulled by two competing forces: on one hand, they must remain faithful to the subtle and implicit artistic conception of the original text; on the other hand, they must consider the aesthetic norms and psychological expectations of the target-language readers, as well as the poet's deep cultural psychology, while also taking into account the readers' comprehension and receptivity. However, by paying attention to the contextual coherence and fully grasping the nuanced meanings—both overt and covert—we can adopt appropriate translation strategies to capture the essence of any

imagery, whether it be grass, trees, flowers, or water, in classical poetry. To paraphrase what Pope said, “As long as we are willing to humbly follow Homer, he will impart this secret to us” (Amos, 1973, p. 173). As long as we are willing to humbly follow poets like Li Bai, Du Fu, and Bai Juyi, they will reveal the secrets of translation to us. This allows the translated work to resonate deeply with readers, evoking a profound emotional response.

References

- Amos, F. R. (1920). *Early theories of translation*. New York: Columbia University Press. Reprinted in 1973. New York: Octagon Books.
- Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Liao, Q. Y. (2004). *Contemporary translation studies in UK*. Wuhan: Hubei Education Press.
- Xie, T. Z. (1999). *Medio-Translatology*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Xu, Y. C. (1983). Revisiting semantic, phonetic and formal beauty. *Foreign Language Research*, 4, 68-75. Harbin: Heilongjiang University Press.
- Xu, Y. C. (2006). *300 Tang poems*. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation.
- Xu, Y. C. (2007). *300 Song lyrics*. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Co., Ltd.
- Xu, Y. C. (2018). *300 Tang poems: Bilingual edition* (5th ed.). Beijing: CSPG Publishing.
- Xu, Y. C. (2021). *Selected poems of Tao Yuanming*. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation.