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Translating the "Ideal of Beautiful Governance" in Li Sao: A Comparative Analysis of Xu Yuanchong's and Stephen Owen's Versions Through Cultural Translation and Deconstructionism

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Abstract. Existing research on English translations of Li Sao predominantly focuses on single-version analyses, while comparative studies of multiple translations and systematic investigations into cross-cultural translation strategies remain relatively scarce. With the advancement of China's "Going Global" cultural strategy, the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese classics has become a focal point in academic circles. Li Sao, as the origin of Chinese Romantic literature and a core carrier of Confucian "Poetic Education", its translation involves the international interpretation and reception of traditional Chinese cultural values. This paper examines the English translations of Li Sao by Xu Yuanchong and Stephen Owen from the theoretical perspectives of cultural translation and deconstructionism, systematically comparing their translation strategies and cultural stances regarding the "Ideal of Beautiful Governance." Through close textual reading and case studies, it finds that Xu Yuanchong adopts domestication strategies to enhance cultural readability, emphasizing emotional resonance and moral edification, whereas Stephen Owen employs foreignization strategies to preserve textual heterogeneity, highlighting poetic aesthetics and open-ended interpretation. The translation practices of both translators reflect distinct pathways of "cultural output" and "cross-cultural dialogue," offering methodological insights for the global dissemination of Chinese classics.

Keywords: Cultural Translation, Deconstructionism, Li Sao, the Ideal of Beautiful Governance, Domestication and Foreignization

1. Introduction

As a representative work of Chu Ci, Li Sao pioneered the "Sao-style" poetry form in Chinese literary history, exerting a profound influence on later poetic creations. Combining realism and romanticism, it not only reflects the social realities of the Chu State at the time but also showcases the spiritual realm of the poet Qu Yuan. Li Sao embodies Qu Yuan's profound "ideal of beautiful governance" and his deep patriotism, expressing his unwavering commitment to his ideals, indomitable spirit, and concern for the sufferings of the people, embodying the idea of "putting the

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people first." The English translation of Li Sao is a significant topic in the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese classics.

Cultural translation theory emphasizes that translation is not merely a linguistic conversion but also a recreation of cultural meaning (Bassnett & Lefevere) [1]. Translators must strike a balance between "cultural translatability" and "reader reception," employing domestication or foreignization strategies to handle cultural imagery (Venuti) [2]. For instance, Wu Gang points out that the English translation of Li Sao must balance the metaphorical system of Chu Ci with the target language's cultural context [3].

Qu Yuan's "ideal of beautiful governance" primarily encompasses two dimensions: political ethics (e.g., "appointing the virtuous and capable") and poetic aesthetics (e.g., "fragrant herbs and virtuous beauties"). Existing research has largely focused on linguistic comparisons, lacking systematic explanations for the translation strategies of "patriotic sentiment" and comprehensive analyses of translators' cultural stances and theoretical perspectives. This paper selects the English translations of Li Sao by Xu Yuanchong (a Chinese translator) and Stephen Owen (a Western sinologist), integrating cultural translation theory and deconstructionism to reveal the ideological differences behind Xu Yuanchong's stance as a "cultural envoy" (e.g., moralizing amplification) and Stephen Owen's stance as a sinologist of "academic neutrality" (e.g., foreignization preservation) [4]. It explores their differentiated interpretations of the "ideal of beautiful governance" and the underlying motivations, aiming to uncover the cultural negotiation mechanisms behind translation strategy choices and provide theoretical references for the practice of translating classics [5, 6]. The research findings can offer empirical support for constructing the "third space" in globalized translation contexts (Homi Bhabha) [7].

2. Research methodology

This paper compares the translations of Qu Yuan's "ideal of beautiful governance" in the English versions by Xu Yuanchong and Stephen Owen, as well as the translation strategies they employ. It focuses on typical passages in Li Sao that directly reflect the "ideal of beautiful governance" (e.g., "Ride the qiji horses in full gallop—I will open the way before!" and "I sigh deeply, wiping tears, for the people’s lot so sad"), analyzing them across three dimensions: lexical level (e.g., metaphorical treatment of "fragrant herbs and virtuous beauties"), syntactic level (e.g., differences in active and passive voice), and cultural level (e.g., annotation strategies for allusions) [8]. The analysis highlights the translation choices for key terms, such as "beautiful governance" and "fragrant herbs and virtuous beauties," and examines the annotation or omission strategies for historical allusions (e.g., "the Three Sovereigns" and "Yao and Shun"), reflecting the translators' explicit or implicit transmission of "patriotic sentiment."

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3. Analysis of literal and free translation of key terms

3.1. Translation of the sentence “乘骐骥以驰骋兮，来吾道夫先路”

Table 1. Example 1 “乘骐骥以驰骋兮”

Original	乘骐骥以驰骋兮，来吾道夫先路
Xu Yuanchong’s Translation	Gallop the steed of virtue, and I’ll lead the way ahead!
Stephen Owen’s Translation	Ride the qiji horses in full gallop—I will open the way before!”(*qiji: mythical horses symbolizing virtuous rulers)

In this example (Table 1), the "qiji" symbolizes virtuous rulers and the ideal of governance, while "the way before" implies the mission of leading the nation toward beautiful governance. Xu Yuanchong's translation adopts domestication, rendering "qiji" as "steed of virtue," imbuing it with moral didacticism. He also adds "lead the way ahead" to reinforce the sense of mission but weakens the exotic beauty of "qiji" as a mythological image. The active voice in his translation also emphasizes Qu Yuan's sense of mission. In contrast, Stephen Owen's translation leans toward foreignization, retaining the pinyin "qiji" with a footnote explaining its symbolic meaning, preserving the sense of unfamiliarity. He directly translates "the way before" as "open the way before," avoiding moralistic interpretation and highlighting the openness of the original text.

3.2. Translation of the sentence “长太息以掩涕兮，哀民生之多艰”

Table 2. Example 2 “长太息以掩涕兮”

Original	长太息以掩涕兮，哀民生之多艰
Xu Yuanchong’s Translation	I sigh deeply, wiping tears, for the people’s lot so sad.
Stephen Owen’s Translation	Long I sigh and cover my tears—grieving at the hardships of the living.

In table 2, the phrase "the people’s lot so sad" reflects Qu Yuan's concern for the sufferings of the people, a core emotional aspect of his ideal of beautiful governance. Xu Yuanchong's translation renders "哀民生" as "the people’s lot so sad," directly conveying sorrow and intensifying emotional resonance while simplifying the complex social context (e.g., taxes, wars) of "the people’s hardships," focusing on emotional connection. Stephen Owen, however, employs literal translation, rendering "the people" as "the living," avoiding specific definitions of suffering and preserving the polysemy and openness of the original text. He uses "hardships" instead of "sad," presenting a restrained emotional expression that implicitly critiques structural social issues. (Xu's translation enhances readability through emotional domestication but simplifies social critique; Owen's translation retains polysemy through literal translation but requires readers to actively interpret deeper meanings.)

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4. Translation of historical allusions

4.1. Translation of the sentence “彼尧舜之耿介兮，既遵道而得路”

Table 3. Example 3 “彼尧舜之耿介兮”

Original	彼尧舜之耿介兮，既遵道而得路
Xu Yuanchong’s Translation	Yao and Shun were honest and pure, they followed the right path and found the way.
Stephen Owen’s Translation	As Yao and Shun, those lords so grand, who trod the Way with righteous hand.

In Table 3, this line reflects Qu Yuan's admiration for the "abdication system" and "benevolent governance" of ancient sage-kings, a core political metaphor of his "ideal of beautiful governance." Xu Yuanchong amplifies "followed the right path," simplifying the abdication system into a moral narrative that aligns with target-language readers' expectations of "wise rulers." Stephen Owen, however, literally translates "trod the Way," preserving the philosophical polysemy of Daoist "Dao" but relying to some extent on the reader's background knowledge.

4.2. Translation of the sentence “昔三后之纯粹兮，固众芳之所在”

Table 4. Example 4 “昔三后之纯粹兮”

Original	昔三后之纯粹兮，固众芳之所在
Xu Yuanchong’s Translation	“The Three Ancient Kings were pure and bright, where fragrant flowers did cluster.”
Stephen Owen’s Translation	“In old times, the Three Lords were pure—truly, the gathering place of all fragrance.”

In the Table 4, "the Three Sovereigns" refers to Yao, Shun, and Yu, three sage-kings, while "fragrant flowers" metaphorically represents virtuous ministers, emphasizing that beautiful governance relies on historical exemplars and talent. Xu Yuanchong translates "the Three Sovereigns" as "Three Ancient Kings" and adds a footnote specifying their identities (Yao, Shun, and Yu). He renders "fragrant flowers" as "fragrant flowers," weakening its political metaphor (virtuous ministers) through imagistic domestication. Stephen Owen, however, translates "the Three Sovereigns" as "Three Lords," without specifying their identities, relying on the reader's background knowledge. He literally translates "fragrant flowers" as "all fragrance," preserving the original's symbolism. While this approach retains the metaphor, it may create cultural barriers for target readers.

5. Results

Xu Yuanchong employs domestication strategies to build cultural bridges, using moralizing annotations and emotional intensification to promote the accessibility of Li Sao. Stephen Owen, on the other hand, uses foreignization strategies to preserve cultural heterogeneity, leveraging poetic aesthetics and open-ended interpretation to foster academic dialogue. These approaches reflect the translators' cultural stances and ideological differences [9]. The translation of classics requires a dynamic balance between "fidelity" and "creativity," "self" and "other," not only transmitting cultural roots but also integrating into the global humanistic value system [10].

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6. Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of Xu Yuanchong's and Stephen Owen's translations of Li Sao, this paper reveals the strategic differences in their transmission of Qu Yuan's "ideal of beautiful governance" and the influence of their cultural stances. As a Chinese translator, Xu Yuanchong emphasizes the preservation of cultural imagery. For example, he translates "fragrant herbs and virtuous beauties" as "fragrant herbs and high-minded beauties" (fragrant herbs and high-minded beauties), using domestication strategies (e.g., adding "virtuous" and other moralizing annotations) to bridge cultural gaps. However, this approach may oversimplify the poetic ambiguity of the original, such as rendering "the people's lot so sad" as "the people's lot so sad" (the people's fate is so sorrowful), intensifying emotional resonance but weakening the social critique implied by "the people."

Stephen Owen's "aesthetic reconstruction" strategy preserves the text's foreignness. For instance, he translates "beautiful governance" as "beautiful governance" (beautiful governance), retaining the novelty of the language but sacrificing some contextual depth (e.g., omitting the historical allusion of "the Three Sovereigns"). This strategy can spark readers' interest in the text's unfamiliarity but may obscure the connection Qu Yuan sought to establish between his ideal of beautiful governance and historical precedents.

Xu Yuanchong's translation prioritizes "cultural readability," using domestication strategies to reduce comprehension barriers, making it suitable as a bridge for cultural popularization. In contrast, Stephen Owen's translation focuses on "academic depth," using foreignization strategies to preserve cultural heterogeneity, providing interpretive space for specialist readers. The differences between the two essentially represent different pathways of "cultural output" and "cross-cultural dialogue," jointly advancing the globalization of Chinese classics.

Xu's "cultural readability" and Owen's "academic depth" together demonstrate that the translation of classics requires balancing "cultural discounting" and "resistant translation." The comparison of their translations not only provides translation strategy references for "telling China's stories well" but also confirms the practical value of Homi Bhabha's third space theory—cultural translation is essentially a creative negotiation between "otherness" and "selfhood."

The translation of the "ideal of beautiful governance" is a dialogue between Chinese literary traditions and Western poetics, conveying the attitudes of creators and translators toward patriotic sentiment and genuinely expressing the Chinese literati's unyielding spirit of struggle. The translation of Li Sao is not merely a linguistic conversion but a cross-temporal dialogue of cultural spirit, a creative cultural regeneration that promotes Chinese culture to the world through translated texts. Translators must seek dynamic balance between "fidelity" and "creativity," "self" and "other," constructing a "third space" that balances cultural authenticity and reader engagement, enabling Chinese classics to retain their cultural roots while participating in the co-construction of global humanistic values in new forms.

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