

# ***A Comparative Study of the English Translation of Meng from the Perspective of Eco-translatology — Taking Bernhard Kalgren’s and Xu Yuanchong’s Translations as an Example***

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**Abstract:** Ancient Chinese poems are treasures of Chinese culture. Translation of ancient poems is an important means to promote and publicize the culture of Chinese tradition. This paper explores the relationship between ancient Chinese poetry and translation, especially how to manifest cultural confidence and realize communicative purposes through translation. Using the theory of eco-translatology, this study takes the English translation of *Wei Feng-Meng* from *The Book of Odes* as an example and analyzes the translation effects of the two translations from Bernhard Kalgren and Xu Yuanchong in the three dimensions of language, culture, and communication. This study aims to provide a new perspective for the study of translation and appreciation of *The Book of Odes* to improve the quality of English translation of ancient Chinese poems and to promote Chinese poetic culture to the world.

**Keywords:** *Meng*, Ecological Translation Studies, Three-Dimensional Transformation, Translation Strategies

## **1. Introduction**

Throughout the ages, countless sages have devoted themselves to promoting Chinese culture to the world, and it is of utmost importance for the translation industry to create a unique discourse system in the field of Chinese translation. Utilizing appropriate means to tell the “Chinese story” and promoting Chinese culture through translation channels to enhance its charm is undoubtedly an important issue that needs to be seriously considered and faced by translators [1]. Therefore, the translation community shoulders the important mission of Chinese culture dissemination, and the translation research on Chinese traditional culture is particularly important.

Since the arrival of the missionary Matteo Ricci in China, *The Book of Odes*, as a Confucian canon and literary classic, has been highly valued by Western readers, resulting in a large number of translations. As a perfect combination of narrative and literary in *The Book of Odes*, *Meng* has a high research value, but there are fewer studies on the translation of *Meng* at present. Therefore, there is still a lot of research space for the translation of *Meng*. Eco-translatology was proposed by Hu Gengshen in 2001 in his book *Translation as Adaptation and Selection*, which is guided by the basic principles and ideas of Darwin’s Adaptation/Selection doctrine. At present, eco-translatology is

mainly applied to literary texts, subtitled political documents, etc., and there are fewer studies on the translation of ancient Chinese poems. Therefore, this paper intends to take the theory of eco-translatology as a starting point and take Bernhard Kalgren's and Xu Yuanchong's English translations of *Meng* as an example for comparative analysis, aiming at exploring the translation effects of the two translations in the three dimensions of language, culture, and communication, and promoting the source and target cultures to fully engage in communication, so as to provide new perspectives for the research on the translation and appreciation of *The Book of Odes*.

## 2. Eco-translatology

Eco-translatology was proposed by Hu Gengshen in 2001, which skillfully combines “ecology” and “translation.” It was the first time that Chinese and foreign translators were discussed in depth from an ecological point of view, and it is a new translation theory that carries out a comprehensive study of translation from an ecological point of view.

Eco-translatology mainly contains the eco-environment for translation, translation as adaptation and selection, a centrality of place to the translator, and the three-dimensional transformations as the effect of eco-translation. Among them, the eco-environment for translation “refers to the world presented by the original text, the original language and the translated language, i.e., the whole of language, communication, culture, society, and the interconnected interaction of the author, the reader, and the client.” [2]. Translation as adaptation and selection believes that translation activity is the translator's selection and adaptation. The translator needs to adapt to the ecological environment of translation presented by the original text, the original language, and the translated language; the translator needs to choose a translation that fits well with the ecological translation environment. A centrality of place to the translator means translator-centered, and the translator plays the main role in the translation process and needs to give full play to his subjective initiative to pursue the optimal degree of holistic adaptation and selection [3]. The core translation strategy advocated by eco-translatology is the three-dimensional transformation theory, whose core meaning can be summarized as the three-dimensional transformation process. Under the premise of multi-dimensional adaptations and adaptive selections, the theory mainly focuses on the adaptive selection and transformation of linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions.

At present, the types of texts in which the theory of ecological translation is applied are mainly film and television texts, foreign propaganda texts, and public announcement texts. For example, He [4] analyzed the subtitle translation of *Hi, Mom* as an example and evaluated the effect of subtitle translation from the three-dimensional perspective of eco-translatology; Liu [5] analyzed the English translation of the 19<sup>th</sup> *National Congress Report* and focused on the multi-dimensional adaptations and adaptive choices made by the source language and the translated language and the translation methods adopted in different ecosystems; Shu [6] investigated the English translation of the public announcement language of the Shanghai World Expo from the perspective of eco-translatology and explored the new perspective of public announcement translation.

To summarize, there are fewer studies on the translation of ancient Chinese poems based on eco-translatology, while *Meng*, as a representative work of Chinese poetry, has high literary and aesthetic values. Therefore, this paper intends to use the three dimensions of eco-translatology (i.e., linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions) to compare and analyze the English translations of Bernhard Kalgren and Xu Yuanchong, with a view to providing a new perspective for the use of eco-translatology in the translation of ancient poems.

### 3. Meng and Its English Translation

*Wei Feng·Meng* (*Meng*, henceforth) from *The Book of Odes* is a folk ballad in the first collection of poems in ancient China, which vividly describes the whole process of a woman from falling in love, getting married, being abandoned in her own voice, and shows the misery of women in marriage in the society at that time, and it is a true portrayal of the concept of love in the pre-Qin period, which is still of revelation significance to love in the society nowadays. As a folk song, *The Book of Odes* is characterized by simple language, diverse forms, and rich emotions, and such textual features constitute the object environment for eco-translatology. In the process of translation, the translator's understanding of the poem, his translation style, the cultural environment he is situated in, the acceptability of the readers, and the expectations of the publisher all have a certain impact on the final translation. Thus, the translator, the readers, the publisher, and so on constitute the subjective environment of eco-translatology. Translators need to take the ecological translation environment into full consideration so that the translated text can fully adapt to the subject and object translation environment, thus achieving the optimal degree of holistic adaptation and selection.

Bernhard Kalgrenand is a renowned Swedish sinologist whose scholarly research involves many aspects of traditional Chinese culture, including dialectology, phonetics, and the exegesis of classical literature. Bernhard Kalgren's translation of *The Book of Odes* is one of the nine complete English translations of *The Book of Odes* in the history of Chinese and foreign translations, which came out in 1950 and has been highly respected by the poetic and translational academia and is regarded as another milestone in the history of western broadcasting of *The Book of Odes* [7]. Bernhard Kalgren's style of translation focuses on word-for-word correspondence and seeks to convey literal meaning accurately. Xu Yuanchong, a famous Chinese translator, is the only expert in translating Chinese poems through the ages into English and French rhymes. Unlike other English translators of *The Book of Odes*, Xu Yuanchong regarded aesthetics as his lifelong pursuit, and he carried this pursuit through every aspect of the English translation of *The Book of Odes*. In the process of translating the classic, he put forward the three-aesthetics theory, including beauty of sound, beauty of form, and beauty of meaning, i.e., focusing on conveying the emotion and mood of the original poem, emphasizing rhyme and rhythm, and trying to maintain the form of the original poem in the process of translation. Xu Yuanchong's English translation of *Meng* has not only had a far-reaching impact on the academic and translation academia but also set an important benchmark in the practice of cultural dissemination and literary translation and made an important contribution to the globalization of ancient Chinese poetry.

### 4. A Comparative Analysis of the Translation of Meng from the Perspective of Three-Dimensional Transformations

#### 4.1. The linguistic dimension

Adaptive transformation from the linguistic dimension refers to the translator's adaptive selection of language forms in the process of translation. English and Chinese belong to different linguistic systems, with different vocabulary choices and sentence structures at the linguistic level, so the translator is required to make appropriate adjustments to the words and convert the sentence structures in the translation process. The language of *Meng* is simple and concise, full of rhyme and rhythm. During the translation process, the translator needs to find the appropriate expression in the target language to preserve the beauty of sound, shape, and meaning in the original poem. In this paper, we will compare and analyze Bernhard Kalgren's and Xu Yuanchong's translations from the three levels of lexis, syntax, and phonology in order to explore the adaptive choice made by translators in the language dimension.

#### 4.1.1. Lexis

*Meng* contains a large vocabulary in the form of literary language, which requires that the translator first fully investigate its meaning when translating and then translate it into vernacular Chinese before English translation, which means secondary translation. Therefore, the understanding of the vocabulary based on the original text and the translator's own knowledge of the ancient Chinese language are crucial. The following table shows the comparison between Bernhard Kalgren's and Xu Yuanchong's translations in terms of vocabulary.

Table 1: Comparison of Bernhard Kalgren's and Xu Yuanchong's translations at the lexical level

Lexis	Bernhard Kalgren's translation	Xu Yuanchong's translations
蚩蚩	jesting	free from guile
愆期	procrastinated	gave him not my word
贿	dowry	to you I will be wed
耽	take pleasure with	do what he will
食贫	eat poverty	share his poverty
不爽	have not deviated in my allegiance	have done nothing wrong
罔极	reckless	fickle
悼	grief	deplore my fate
总角	during the pleasant time of the (tied horns) girlhood-hairtufts	when we were girl and boy
寐	went to sleep	sought repose

In the choice and treatment of vocabulary, the two translations show sharp differences. For example, the word “贿”, which appears in the phrase “以尔车来,以我贿迁”, should be translated as “你赶着车来接我,我带上嫁妆嫁给你” in vernacular Chinese. Therefore, “贿” refers to “嫁妆” in the original context, and Bernhard Kalgren treats it as “dowry”, which achieves accurate lexical correspondence in the English context, effectively conveys the meaning of the word and facilitates the target language readers to understand the meaning of the word. In the Xu's translation, it is “to you I will be wed”, which is translated as “我将嫁给你”. In order to achieve “phonetic beauty”, Xu's translation chooses “wed” to rhyme with “said” in the previous sentence, which also conveys the intention of marriage, but it is not the same as the word “贿” in the original sentence, which to a certain extent is not conducive to the readers' grasping of the specific meaning of the word.

Furthermore, the phrase “食贫”, which appears in “自我徂尔,三岁食贫”, is translated as “自我嫁给你后,三年来我忍受贫困的生活” in vernacular Chinese. Bernhard Kalgren's version is “eat poverty”, which is a direct translation in strict accordance with the literal meaning, but there is no similar expression in the English context, which will easily cause the translation to be rigid and not in line with the cultural expression habits of the target language, and the readers will not be able to accurately understand the meaning conveyed by the word. Xu's translation is “share his poverty”, which is an adaptive selection of “食”, fully exploiting its connotation and expressing its meaning through the word “share”. Therefore, readers can easily understand that the woman shares and tolerates her husband's poverty, making the expression more localized and greatly enhancing the acceptance and understanding of the audience.

### 4.1.2. Syntax

*Meng* consists of six chapters, each with ten lines, and is mainly in the form of quatrains, mostly in pairs, with a neat and corresponding form. Translators are required to pay attention to the formal characteristics of the original poem so that readers can subjectively feel the beauty of the syntactic form of ancient Chinese poems. The following table shows the comparison between Bernhard Kalgren's and Xu Yuanchong's translations at the syntactic level.

Table 2: Comparison of Bernhard Kalgren's and Xu Yuanchong's translations at the syntactic level

Sentence	Bernhard Kalgren's translation	Xu Yuanchong's translations
将子无怒,秋以为期。	I prayed you not to be angry, and we made autumn the appointed time.	"Try to find one." I pray. "In autumn be the day."
士之耽兮,犹可说也。	That a gentleman takes pleasure can still be excused.	Man may do what he will; He can atone it still.
三岁为妇,靡室劳矣。 夙兴夜寐,靡有朝矣。	For three years I was your wife, I (had no toil from the household =) never felt toiled by the household; Early I rose and late I went to sleep, I (had no morning:) never had the leisure of a morning;	Three years I was his wife. And led a toilsome life. Each day I early rose And late I sought repose.
及尔偕老,老使我怨。	Together with you I was to grow old; (ageing:) as we passed the years, you caused me to have resentment.	I'd live with him till old; My grief was not foretold.

Through comparison, it is not difficult to find that in the treatment of sentence structure, Bernhard Kalgren's translation has merged the two quatrains of the original poem and synthesized them into one long sentence. The Xu's translation, on the other hand, retains the sentence structure of the original poem, which corresponds to each quatrain one by one. In terms of conveying the meaning of the poem as a whole, Bernhard Kalgren's translation focuses on conveying the meaning of the sentences and logical correspondence, while Xu's translation pays more attention to conveying the techniques and contents of the original text.

For example, the line “及尔偕老,老使我怨” is translated as “当年发誓要和你一同到老,如今现实却让我满生怨恨” in vernacular Chinese. This line conveys the woman's resentment towards the man for betraying their vow through the comparison of time. Bernhard Kalgren's translation accurately conveys the meaning of “怨” through the word “resentment”, and uses the logical word “caused” to point out that the direct cause of the woman's resentment is the man, making the implicit logic of the original text explicit. However, Bernhard Kalgren's translation treats two short sentences into one long sentence, complicating the syntax and to a certain extent, losing the beauty of the original poem's syntactic structure. The word “grief” in Xu's translation conveys the woman's sadness after being betrayed, but it is not as strong as the emotion expressed by “怨”. The word “foretold” shows that the woman did not expect the man's betrayal at that time, which accurately reproduces the contrasting technique of the original text. In addition, Xu's translation has adapted the sentence structure to the original text, treating it in the form of two short sentences, which preserves the beauty of the original poem's form.



### 4.1.3. Phonology

As a folk ballad, *Meng* is rich in the beauty of sound and rhythm, especially in the rhyming of the poem. For example, many lines in the poem have rhyming echoes at the end of the lines, such as “乘彼垝垣,以望复关。不见复关,泣涕涟涟”。The words “关” and “涟” rhyme with each other. This kind of rhyme gives the verses a kind of musical beauty when recited, which makes them catchy to read. Therefore, how to effectively convey the original poem’s rhythmic characteristics in the translation is a major problem for the translator to consider. The following table shows the comparison between Bernhard Kalgren’s and Xu Yuanchong’s translations in the phonetic level.

Table 3: Comparison of Bernhard Kalgren’s and Xu Yuanchong’s translations at the phonetic level

Sentence	Bernhard Kalgren’s translation	Xu Yuanchong’s translations
及尔偕老,老使我怨。	Together with you I was to grow old; (ageing:) as we passed the years, you caused me to have resentment.	I’d live with him till old; My grief was not foretold.
淇则有岸,隰则有洋。	The K’I, at least it has its banks, the swamp, at least it has its shores.	The endless stream has shores; My endless grief e’er pours.
总角之宴,言笑晏晏。	During the pleasant time of the (tied horns) girlhood-hairtufts, we chatted and laughed pleasantly;	When we were girl and boy, We’d talk and laugh with joy.
信誓旦旦,不思其反。	We were sworn to good faith earnestly; I did not think that it would be reversed.	He pledged to me his troth. Could he forget his oath?
反是不思,亦已焉哉!	To reverse this was something I could not imagine; and yet now it is all over.	He’s forgot what he swore. Should I say any more?

Through comparison, it reveals that Bernhard Kalgren’s translation basically does not take into account the rhyme of the poem, while Xu’s translation not only reproduces the rhymes in the original poem but also adds rhymes that did not exist in the original poem. For example, “old” rhymes with “foretold”, and “shares” rhymes with “pours”. It perfectly conveys the rhythmic beauty of the original poem and gives the translation a poetic character, adapting it to the ecological translation environment of ancient poetry.

### 4.2. The cultural dimension

Adaptive transformation from the cultural dimension refers to the translator’s adaptive selection of cultural connotations in the translation process so as to maximize the interpretation and transmission of the original culture and make readers fully understand the cultural information carried. *Meng* contains rich Chinese cultural connotations, such as social thoughts, ethics, and morals, concepts of nature, etc. Translators need to convey these cultural backgrounds so that readers of the target language can understand the cultural connotations of the original poem. In this paper, we will explore the adaptive choices of conversion made by Bernhard Kalgren’s and Xu’s translations at the cultural level from the levels of cultural value and cultural imagery.

#### 4.2.1. Cultural value

Cultural values are the sum of values, moral codes, and behavioral norms recognized and followed by a society or a cultural group, and they are the core and soul of culture. In *Meng*, one of the most obvious cultural values that runs through the whole poem is “grudges but not anger”. In *The Analects of Confucius*, Confucius once said, “Poetry can rise, it can be viewed, it can be grouped, and it can be grudged,” that is to say, poetry can express grievances, but not excessively. The woman in *Meng* was betrayed by a man, and despite her resentment, she did not engage in any excessive behavior, reflecting the norms of propriety.

*Original text:* 反是不思,亦已焉哉!

*Bernhard Kalgren’s translation:* To reverse this was something I could not imagine; and yet now it is all over.

*Xu Yuanchong’s translation:* He’s forgot what he swore. Should I say any more?

The original text shows the woman’s attitude of breaking up with the man after being betrayed. However, it is not difficult to feel the woman’s helplessness in the face of the man’s behavior in the original poem, and due to the influence of cultural values, the woman’s resentment can only be ended by breaking up with the man, and the overly drastic behaviors were not permitted by the society at that time. Bernhard Kalgren’s translation accurately conveys the surface meaning of the original poem by using “all over” to explain the woman’s breakup with the man but ignores the cultural values conveyed by the original poem. Xu’s translation uses a rhetorical question, “could I say any more?” to vividly express the woman’s helplessness: what can she say in the face of such behavior? This allows the reader to visualize the influence of cultural values.

#### 4.2.2. Cultural imagery

Cultural imagery refers to images or things with specific cultural connotations and symbolism in a specific cultural context. In *Meng*, cultural imagery is often used to convey the woman’s emotional changes and the sage’s thoughts on love, such as: “淇水”, “桑”, “鸛” and so on.

*Original text:* 淇则有岸,隰则有泮

*Bernhard Kalgren’s translation:* The K’I, at least it has its banks, the swamp, at least it has its shores;

*Xu Yuanchong’s translation:* The endless stream has shores; My endless grief e’er pours.

In *Meng*, “淇水” originally refers to a river in Wei state. However, “淇水” appears three times throughout the poem, witnessing the woman’s first meeting with the man, her marriage, and her final breakup, thus symbolizing the woman’s psychic change. The phrase “淇则有岸,隰则有泮” superficially describes that the bank of the river has a boundary, but in fact, it refers to a limit to the woman’s patience. Bernhard Kalgren simply follows the literal form of the phrase, translating “淇水” phonetically, which only conveys the surface meaning without delving into its cultural meaning. Xu’s translation goes beyond the formal constraints of the original text and expresses “淇水” with “stream” and “grief”, which skillfully conveys both the surface meaning and the deep cultural imagery of the word. Then the word “endless” and “pour” are used to show that the woman’s great resentment will eventually gush out like a river, vividly reproducing the cultural imagery of “淇水”. The cultural image of “淇水” is vividly reproduced.

#### 4.3. The communicative dimension

Adaptive transformation from the communicative dimension refers to the translator’s adaptive selection of communicative intention in the process of translation, which conveys the communicative

intention and realizes the communicative balance as the ultimate purpose of translation. As a poem about a deserted woman, *Meng* has a strong narrative character and contains the woman's rich emotions. Therefore, the translator needs to convey these communicative intentions so that the translation can resonate with the readers of the target language. In this paper, we will discuss the adaptive choice of translation between Bernhard Kalgren's and Xu's translation in terms of communicative person and communicative purpose.

#### 4.3.1. Communicative person

In the context of translation, communicative personification refers to the person adopted by the translator when translating narrative works. *Meng* is narrated in a woman's voice, in the first person, telling her love story and accusing the world of her misery, so the original poem has a strong communicative intent, and the translator's choice of communicative person is of vital importance.

*Original text:* 信誓旦旦,不思其反。

*Bernhard Kalgren's translation:* *We were sworn to good faith earnestly; I did not think that it would be reversed.*

*Xu Yuanchong's translation:* *He pledged to me his troth. Could he forget his oath?*

The meaning of the original text is "We once made a promise, but I never expected you to break it", which conveys the woman's strong anger at the man's betrayal. Both translations use "I" as the first person to narrate from the woman's point of view, but there is a difference in the choice of the man's person. In Bernhard Kalgren's translation, the word "we" is used to refer to both the man and the woman, creating an atmosphere of direct dialogue between the woman and the man. From "we" to "I", the two were in love during their passionate love, but now they are falling apart, and the contrast between the former and the latter emphasizes the woman's disillusionment. Xu's translation uses "he" to refer to the man, which is actually a dialog between the woman and the reader, asking the reader why the man has changed his heart, thus causing the reader to think about the woman's love encounter and indirectly conveying the woman's resentment. Therefore, the choice of communicative person in the two translations is quite different from each other, and both of them realize the communicative intention of the original poem.

#### 4.3.2. Communicative purpose

Communicative purpose in translation refers to the ultimate communicative goal and effect that the original work wants to convey to the reader. The communicative purpose of *Meng* is mainly that the woman confesses her marriage tragedy to the readers through the poem, expresses her resentment against the man and her feelings about her own fate, and also warns other women not to fall into a similar love predicament easily. Therefore, the translator needs to convey the communicative purpose of the original poem in the translation process.

*Original text:* 于嗟鸠兮!无食桑葚。

*Bernhard Kalgren's translation:* *Oh you dove, do not eat the fruits of the mulberry!*

*Xu Yuanchong's translation:* *Beware, O turtledove, Eat not the fruit of love!*

The surface meaning of the original text is "the little turtledove bird, don't eat the mulberry", but in the context of the original poem, its communicative purpose is actually to warn the woman not to be overwhelmed by love. Both translations adopt the tone form of calling out, but the major difference lies in the translation of the word "桑". The word "桑" is used in the original poem as a metaphor for the beauty and danger of love. Bernhard Kalgren translated the word as "mulberry". Despite accurately translating the meaning of the word, he failed to convey the ultimate communicative purpose and remains at the linguistic level. Xu's translation of "the fruit of love" perfectly conveys



the symbolism of “mulberry” in the original poem and makes the readers realize that the fruit of love, though sweet, is also full of dangers, and they need to stay awake, thus realizing the ultimate communicative purpose. The final communicative purpose of the poem is realized here.

## 5. Conclusion

From the perspective of eco-translatology, this paper comparatively analyzes the English translations of *Wei Feng Meng* from *The Book of Odes* by Bernhard Kalgren and Xu Yuanchong. Through the comparison of three dimensions: linguistic dimension, cultural dimension, and communicative dimension, the differences between the two translations in terms of translation effect are explored. Bernhard Kalgren’s translation focuses on the accurate conveyance of literal meaning but sometimes neglects the cultural connotation of the source language, while Xu Yuanchong’s translation pays more attention to conveying the original poem’s emotion and mood and pursues the unity of beauty of sound, form and meaning. In comparison, Xu’s translation makes more adaptive selections in three-dimensional transformations.

This paper applies eco-translatology to the study of the English translation of ancient poems. By comparing and analyzing Bernhard Kalgren’s and Xu Yuanchong’s translations, the paper reveals the advantages and disadvantages of different translation strategies, provides specific references for translators in translating ancient poems, and expands the scope of application of ecological translation, which not only provides a new theoretical framework for the translation of ancient poems but also provides references for the study of the translation of other literary works. For example, when dealing with vocabulary, translators can refer to Xu Yuanchong’s pursuit of “sound of beauty”, which enhances the beauty of the translation through rhyme and rhythm; when dealing with cultural imagery, they can refer to Xu Yuanchong’s way of dealing with it, so as to fully convey the cultural connotations and symbols to readers of the target language. These specific guidelines help to improve the quality of English translation of ancient poems and promote Chinese poetic culture to the world. Although this paper has made some contributions in both theory and practice, there are some shortcomings. For example, this paper mainly focuses on the translations of Bernhard Kalgren and Xu Yuanchong, with less comparative analysis of other translations. Future studies can further expand the research object and compare the translations of more translators in order to explore the diversity and complexity of English translations of ancient poems more comprehensively.

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