

Translation Strategies of Hydro-Geographic Imagery in Dongpo Ci

Ziyuan Li, Binghua Lu

Abstract:

Hydro-geographic imagery is a core symbol in Dongpo Ci that embodies natural aesthetics and philosophical contemplation. Su Shi often drew upon the vicissitudes of rivers, lakes and seas to voice his sentiments about the fortunes of life and to construct a grand artistic conception of time and space. However, owing to the differences between Chinese and Western languages in linguistic structure, views of nature and aesthetic orientations, the English translation of hydrographic imagery confronts numerous difficulties at both the micro and macro levels. Drawing on the classification framework for geographic imagery in the English translations of Dongpo Ci established by previous scholars, this paper focuses on the category of “natural hydrographic imagery.” By reference to the classic translations of scholars such as Xu Yuanchong, Burton Watson and Zhu Chunshen, it conducts an in-depth analysis of the core difficulties in the English translation of hydrographic imagery in Dongpo Ci with regard to the conveyance of macro-level philosophical implications, lexical semantic vacancy and the reconstruction of dynamic aesthetic beauty, and explores the corresponding translation strategies, aiming to provide a reference for the cross-cultural dissemination of natural imagery in classical Chinese poetry.

Keywords: Dongpo Ci; hydrographic imagery; English translation; cultural transmission; translation strategies

Date of Submission: 15-09-2026

Date of Acceptance: 27-09-2026

I. Introduction

Research background and significance

As a towering literary giant of the Northern Song dynasty, Su Shi produced ci works remarkable for their broad range of themes and their magnificent, ever-changing grandeur. In the artistic world of Dongpo Ci, water is not merely an objective geographic landscape but also a vehicle of the poet's emotions and a medium of philosophical contemplation. Whether it is the grandeur of “大江东去，浪淘尽” or the philosophical reflection of “门前流水尚能西”，hydrographic imagery endows the works with exceptional aesthetic value and intellectual depth.

With the continuous advancement of China's “Going Global” cultural strategy, the English translation and dissemination of Dongpo Ci have attracted widespread attention from the academic community both at home and abroad. In translation practice, how to handle natural imagery steeped in profound Chinese cultural heritage has long been a bottleneck in the translation of classical Chinese poetry. Research on the translation of Su Dongpo's poetry has spanned a century, establishing itself as a key field in the international translation of classical poetry; Xu Yuanchong's translations have achieved the dual goals of aesthetic reproduction and cultural reconstruction^[1-3].

Research issues and objectives

Hydrographic imagery, combining natural and philosophical attributes, is highly susceptible to the loss of artistic conception in cross-linguistic transfer. Accordingly, this paper intends to draw on typical English translation cases to systematically examine the difficulties in translating hydro-geographic imagery in Dongpo Ci and to explore corresponding coping strategies, so as to convey the literal meaning accurately while preserving, to the greatest extent possible, the aesthetic implications and cultural connotations of the original ci poems. Current research mostly focuses on translator style or comparative studies of translations, and systematic research remains insufficient regarding how translation techniques (literal translation, free translation, annotation compensation, domestication/foreignization) affect the aesthetic reproduction of culture-loaded words; moreover, a systematic framework is still lacking with respect to the translation techniques appropriate for different types of culture-loaded words and the mechanisms through which each technique contributes to the

three-dimensional aesthetic reproduction of artistic-conception beauty, phonological beauty and cultural beauty^[4]. For image-type words, the more appropriate of literal or free translation is selected according to the degree of cultural correspondence; for philosophical-type words, free translation takes priority; and for physical-object-type words, literal translation serves as the foundation, supplemented by internal and external compensation^[5].

II. Classification and Philosophical Implications of Hydrographic Imagery in Dongpo Ci

In Dongpo Ci, hydro-geographic imagery accounts for the overwhelming majority of natural landscape imagery. According to the hierarchical classification of geographic imagery, hydrographic imagery mainly comprises macro-scale water systems (such as the Yangtze River, the Huai River, the West Lake and the sea) and micro-scale streams (such as Lanxi Stream and brooks).

Water in Dongpo Ci often manifests a philosophical import of “the unity of time and space.” At the macro level, river water and the sea are frequently employed as metaphors for the passage of history and the eternity of the universe. For instance, the Yangtze River in 《念奴娇·赤壁怀古》 is not merely a river in the geographic sense but a concrete embodiment of linear history, reflecting the poet’s profound contemplation of the position of individual life within the long river of history. At the micro level, streams and ponds are often associated with the poet’s taste for life and his aspiration for reclusion, or serve as tranquil backdrops against which the impermanence of human life is set in relief. This manner of personifying and philosophizing natural waterscapes constitutes the distinctive charm of Dongpo Ci, yet it is precisely the cultural chasm most difficult to bridge in the process of English translation.

III. Difficulties in English Translation of Hydrographic Imagery in Dongpo Ci

Conveying the Philosophical Implications of Macro-Scale Water Imagery

The descriptions of macro-scale water systems such as the Yangtze River and the sea in Dongpo Ci often transcend sheer landscape depiction and embody a profound philosophy of time and space. For example, the opening lines of 《念奴娇·赤壁怀古》 read “大江东去，浪淘尽，千古风流人物”.

Here, “大江” (the great river) is not merely a geographic term but carries the metaphor of “the long river of history.” In the process of English translation, a purely literal rendering (such as “The great river”) would weaken its weight as a specific philosophical image in Chinese literature. Furthermore, the character “淘” in “浪淘尽” conveys a sense of sifting and violence, as if sand and silt were being swept along together; if it were simply rendered as “washed away” or “gone,” the tragic grandeur with which time relentlessly baptizes human civilization in the original ci would be lost. Translators are required to reconstruct this dynamic tension between “water” and “history” within the limited lexical resources of the English language.

Cultural Load and Semantic Vacancy of Hydrographic Vocabulary

As a language of rich ideographic expression, Chinese possesses a large number of delicate and highly condensed words for describing the states of water. Words such as “惊涛” (terrifying billows), “骇浪” (frightening waves), “澄江” (limpid river) and “明涧” (bright mountain stream) frequently appear in Dongpo Ci, and behind these words lie specific aesthetic preferences.

Although English has corresponding vocabulary, differences exist in cultural associations and emotional coloring. For instance, when translating “乱石穿空，惊涛拍岸，卷起千堆雪”，conveying the ferocity of “惊涛” and the visual spectacle of “千堆雪” poses a tremendous challenge. English commonly employs “raging waves” or “turbulent rapids” to describe surging billows, yet these expressions often lack the poetic quality of the Chinese, which combines a sense of power with pictorial beauty. Translators thus confront the predicament of lexical semantic vacancy, namely, the impossibility of finding fully equivalent English words to bear the rich imagery of the original ci.

Dynamic Aesthetics of Hydrographic Imagery and the Reconstruction of Artistic Conception

Classical Chinese poetry values the ideal that “诗中有画，画中有诗” (there is painting in poetry and poetry in painting), and the hydrographic imagery in Dongpo Ci often exhibits an extremely strong dynamic aesthetic. Through a series of verbs such as “穿” (piercing), “拍” (beating), “卷” (rolling up) and “流” (flowing), the poet endows the static written words with surging vitality.

As a morphologically rich language, English often relies on syntactic structures and complex verb forms to express dynamism. How to reproduce the fluidity and explosive power of this dynamism in English translation, and how to prevent the translation from falling into rigid grammatical structures and losing the original rhythmic beauty, constitutes another major difficulty. For example, when translating “大江东去”, Xu Yuanchong adopted the inverted sentence pattern “Eastward flows the great river”, placing “Eastward flows” at the beginning of the sentence to emphasize the direction of the river’s flow and thereby enhance the momentum

and vigor of the sentence. This demonstrates that translators must undertake a deep linguistic reconstruction of the dynamic imagery of the original ci in order to transcend the barriers of linguistic form.

IV. Translation Strategies for Hydrographic Imagery in Dongpo Ci

In response to the difficulties discussed above, and drawing on the translation practices of eminent translators such as Xu Yuanchong, Burton Watson and Zhu Chunshen, the following effective translation strategies can be summarized:

Image Reconstruction and Cultural Compensation Strategies

When translating macro-scale hydrographic imagery of profound philosophical implications, translators should not confine themselves to the literal level; rather, they should delve into the cultural metaphors beneath the surface and adopt the technique of image reconstruction. For instance, in handling “大江东去”, translators may, beyond literal translation, enhance its grand momentum by adding modifiers (such as “endless” or “mighty”) or by adjusting the word order, thereby hinting to Western readers that this is not merely a river but an endless symbol of time. If literal translation results in the loss of cultural imagery, a brief annotation may be appended at the end of the text to provide cultural compensation and help readers establish an appropriate cognitive framework.

Rhetorical Transformation and Aesthetic Equivalence Strategies

With regard to the semantic vacancy of hydrographic vocabulary, translators should endeavor to find English words that provide a similar aesthetic experience, thereby achieving aesthetic equivalence. For example, when translating “卷起千堆雪”, Xu Yuanchong rendered it as “rolling up a thousand heaps of snow”. Although “heap” does not correspond exactly in its use as a classifier, the vivid verb collocation “rolling up” successfully reproduces the spectacular visual effect of surging waves resembling snow. In addition, traditional images in English poetry may be borrowed for moderate transformation; as long as the original meaning is not deviated from, the purpose of conveying emotions and meaning can likewise be achieved.

Syntactic Adaptation and Dynamic Reshaping Strategies

In order to preserve the dynamic aesthetic beauty of the hydrographic imagery of Dongpo Ci in English translation, translators need to flexibly exploit the syntactic features of English. Apart from the inverted sentences mentioned above, devices such as present participles (e.g., “sweeping away”) and prepositional phrases may be employed extensively to transform the static descriptions of Chinese into dynamic narration in English. Through syntactic adjustment, the originally scattered images are linked together to create an unbroken and majestic textual rhythm, thereby reshaping the artistic tension of the original ci in the target language.

V. Conclusion

Research summary

Hydro-geographic imagery serves as an important medium through which Dongpo Ci expresses emotions and aspirations, and its English translation is not merely a conversion of language but a cross-linguistic practice of culture and aesthetics. As can be seen from the analysis of typical translations, the difficulties in the English translation of hydrographic imagery in Dongpo Ci are mainly concentrated in three aspects: the conveyance of macro-level philosophical implications, the equivalence of culture-loaded vocabulary, and the reshaping of dynamic artistic conception.

Research prospects

Outstanding translators should transcend the constraints of surface semantics and gain a deep understanding of the historical profundity and philosophical reflection on life carried by “water” in Su Shi’s ci poetry. Through strategies such as image reconstruction, rhetorical transformation and syntactic adaptation, and on the basis of remaining faithful to the core implications of the original ci, they should restore its aesthetic artistic conception to the greatest extent possible, thereby building a bridge to the minds of Western readers and enabling the surging waters of Dongpo Ci to continue flowing endlessly in the ocean of world literature.

References

- [1] Xu Yuanchong. *The Art of Translation* [M]. Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2006.
- [2] Xu Yuanchong. *Literature and Translation* [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2003.
- [3] Xu Yuanchong. *Xu Yuanchong’s Classic English Translations of 1,000 Ancient Chinese Poems* [M]. Beijing: Dolphin Press, 2015.
- [4] Xu Xiaohong, Wang Enuo. A Study of the English Translation of Tang Poetry Titles from the Perspective of the Four-Step Translation Theory [J]. *Modern Linguistics*, 2022, 10(2): 244-251.

- [5] Zheng Luman, Yang Jie. Translation Techniques and Aesthetic Reproduction of Culture-Loaded Words in the English Translation of Su Dongpo's Poetry [J]. Famous Works, 2026.

Notes: This paper has been awarded funding by the University-level College Student Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program of Panzhihua University, with Project No. 2025cxcy198, and supervised by Professor Lu Binghua.