

# *A Comparative Study of Biological and Geographical Image Translation in Existing Versions of Hard Roads in Shu*

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**Abstract:** *Hard Roads in Shu*, a famous poem by Li Bai, a poet of the Tang Dynasty, has been translated into the English and American worlds with a certain degree of alteration of its original meaning. This paper analyzes the translation of geographical imagery and biological imagery in the four English translations of *Hard Roads in Shu* from the perspective of Chinese and foreign comparisons based on the translations of four Chinese and foreign translators, which focuses on analyzing the three dimensions of the direct translation treatment and the free translation treatment, the embodiment of rhetorical devices such as couplets, and the different word choices of the four translators in translating biological and geographical imagery. In the end, the study finds some better solution and suggestions for the future translation of geographic and biological imagery in other languages while retaining the flavor of the source language, so as to achieve the purpose of cultural exchange.

**Keywords:** *Hard Roads in Shu*, biological and geographical imagery, rhetorical device, poem translation

## 1. Introduction

Li Bai was a great poet of the Tang Dynasty. He sympathized with people in poverty, exposed to the people's heating and cooling, and criticized the evils of the time. Meanwhile, he also indulged himself into natural sceneries. In his poem, he showed a beautiful natural landscape, and celebrated the country's mountain river. His poetry style was bold and imaginative, the words were naturally fluent, and the rhythm was constantly changing in harmony. These were the new features of the romantic poetry which developed since the time of the small-scale peasant economy. *Hard Roads in Shu* is a masterpiece in this style. The whole poem leaped into the imaginary vision, combining exaggerations, myths, and legends, and creating an imaginary, disturbed, and varied state of art. Among them, the unique geographical and biological imagery of *Hard Roads in Shu* is widely loved by readers. The role and purpose of allusion in Chinese poetry greatly increased the extent and depth of poetry in historical culture and achieved a soft esthetic effect.

However, the translation of geographical imagery and biological imagery is a big problem. Excessive direct translation causes cultural differences, comprehension, or confusion in expression, while excessive free translation distorts the original thought.

This paper intends to analyze the lexical meaning of biological imagery and geographical imagery in *Hard Roads in Shu* with a focus on the four translation: Sun Dayu's [1], Xu Yuanchong's [2], Arthur Cooper's [3], and Vikram Seth's [4]. The selection of the translation was embedded with the intension

of comparing the Chinese translators and non-Chinese translators' works. It is hoped that the result of the study can provide some solutions for future translations of geographical and biological imagery. This paper analyzes the Chinese and foreign English translations from the perspective of the aesthetic communication of biological imagery and geographical imagery by the four translators.

## 2. Literature review

*Hard Roads in Shu* is a representative of Li Bai, a great poet of the Tang Dynasty. The poem is based on the old title of "Lefu" and is meant to send a friend to Shu. Li Bai used romanticism to develop his rich imagination and artistically reproduced the lofty, abrupt and tough Shu Road and the majestic momentum that cannot be overridden, to sing about the mountains and rivers of Shu and show the majesty of the motherland's mountains and rivers. The poem adopts a mixture of metrical style and prose, with a jagged text, and is written in a bold and unrestrained style. This poem is called "Old Melody," but it is written in a dangerous, magnificent scene in which the thought and the art form are innovative. The story, the reality, and the myth are entangled, and the momentum doesn't stop, and the style of the language is changed gradually, and it is full of strong romance.

This poem was written around the beginning of the Tianbao period when Li Bai visited Chang'an for the first time. The poem *Hard Roads in Shu* was written by Li Bai when he visited Changan for the first time in the early days of Tianbao. The poem "Difficulties on the Road to Shu" was written by Li Bai after he had adopted the ancient title of "乐府" and developed his rich imagination. The poem depicted the beautiful and dangerous mountains and rivers on the road to Shu and Qin, and revealed his worries and concerns about society. In the rhyme scheme of the poem, Li Bai also broke through the old program of one rhyme in the Liang and Chen era and changed the rhyme scheme three times in a row in describing the dangerous environment in Shu, which was a great change. Regarding this poem, there are all kinds of allegorical sayings, and it is concluded that it is specially made for someone or something. Hu Zhenheng, commented on Li Bai that "A song of praise for the road to Shu, with no ulterior motive." [5] Nowadays, some people say that this poem reflected the poet's long time roaming in the life experience of repeated stumbling and the resentment towards the unrecognized talent. So far there is no conclusive evidence.

Li Bai used a lot of bio-geographical imagery to depict the "rareness" of the Shu Road in *Hard Road to Shu*. How to effectively convey the danger of the Shu Road and the "rareness" of the living creatures in the author's writing are a major difficulty for English translation of the poem. To study and analyze the transmission of bio-geographical imagery of *The Road to Shu* by Chinese and foreign translators, the author selected the translations of four translators, namely, Sun Dayu's translation, Xu Yuanchong's translation, Arthur Cooper's translation, and Vikram Seth's translation. Among them, Mr. Sun Dayu's translation is from his book *Selected Tang Poems in English Translation* (2007). Mr. Sun Dayu is a poet of the modern Chinese "New Moon School", a famous translator, a member of the Democratic League of China, and one of the "Four Sons of Tsinghua". After returning to China, Mr. Sun served as a professor of English literature at many famous universities. Mr. Xu has devoted his life to translation and has published translations of Qu Yuan, Tang poetry, Shakespeare, and many other works. Mr. Xu Yuanchong's translations are from *The Collection of Chinese Classical Poetry-Three Hundred Tang Poems* (2018). Mr. Xu Yuanchong is a professor at Peking University and a renowned translator. Mr. Xu Yuanchong has been engaged in literary translation for more than sixty years, his translations cover Chinese, English, French, and other languages, and his translations focus on the English translation of ancient Chinese poems, forming the methodology and theory of translating poems into rhyming style, and is known as "the only person who translates poems into English and French". Through Mr. Xu's skillful hands, many classic Chinese poems have been translated into excellent English rhymes. In addition, two foreign translators' versions will be introduced in this paper, one is the translation by Arthur Cooper, a famous British translator who is

especially good at translating Chinese ancient poems, and the other is the translation by Vikram Seth, a famous Indian novelist, and translator who has done in-depth research on Chinese classical poems. This paper will also refer to the theory of three beautifulness proposed by Mr. Xu in his pursuit of the beauty of sound, shape, and meaning, and analyze how to better convey the geographical and biological imagery in the poems with the support of Mr. Xu's theory.

### 3. Methodology

The translation of geographical and biological imagery must be carried out in two dimensions, namely, an accurate paraphrase that retains the vividness of traditional Chinese biological imagery and geographical imagery, and a direct translation that is faithful to the source language and ensures accurate and clear syntax. Based on Mr. Xu Yuanchong's theory of three beautifulness in translation, this paper will analyze the translations of the four translators and discover their strategies and aesthetic styles in translating geographical and biological imagery. Secondly, through the comparative study of the translations of the four translators, we will compare the focus and communication effect of the translations of geobiological imagery by Chinese and foreign translators word by word and sentence by sentence, and summarize the research results to put forward the inspiration and suggestions for the translation of geobiological imagery.

Kristeva formally proposed the term "Intertextualité" in her article Word, dialogue and novel in 1967.[6] The concept of "Intertextualité" not only provides a new perspective for the fields of literary criticism and cultural studies but also opens up a new way of thinking for the study of translation.[7] As far as its definition is concerned, the theory of intertextuality is closely related to the study of translation, which is all about the transformation of symbol systems. To further elucidate how the poetic text retains and reveals its intertextual features in the process of translation, this section will take Li Bai's poem "The Hard Roads in Shu" translated by four translators as an example of the dynamic process of poetic translation, which illustrates how to realize the transmission of the intertextuality of the geographical and biological imagery of the poem.

### 4. Result

#### 4.1. Embodiment in direct, free translation of geological and biological imagery

The two translation procedures, "direct translation" and "free translation," each of which has distinct qualities in their use. The term "direct translation" refers to a translation process or text that retains both the content and the form of the source text. The term "free translation" refers to a translation process or text that retains only the content of the source text instead of its form. Free translation is still based on the meaning of the original. It is adopted usually when the translator feel it necessary to use the expression of the broad idea of the original without paying too much attention to details. However, it still demands a natural and fluid translation instead of a random or awkward translation. It should be noted that the "literal translation" also does not equal to the rigid translation. The two translation strategies "literal translation" and "free translation," share the same goal which is to accurately express the original author's intention. The distinction between them is that literal translation necessitates a greater degree of "fidelity to the original."

Example 1 "六龙回日"

From: "上有六龙回日之高标"

Sun Dayu's translation:

Six dragons of the sun-chariot round.

Xu Yuanchong's translation:

Above stand peaks too high for the sun to pass o'er.

Cooper's translation:

That reaches the mark where the Sun turns his team of dragons.

Seth's translation:

Above-high peaks turn back the dragon-chariot of the sun.

“日乘车，驾以六龙。羲和御之。日至此面而薄于虞渊，羲和至此而回六螭。” This is the origin of the phrase “六龙回日” in Example 1. Li Bai used this biological imagery to express the towering majesty of the Shu Road and its impenetrable aura. Sun's commentary on the background of the mythical story conveys the meaning of the allusion to “six dragons returning to the sun”. Xu's translation is not literal translation according to the original text of the poem. This treatment accurately expresses the meaning of the mythological story and makes the readers realize the poet's intention. Comparing the two foreign translators, Cooper's translation of “六龙回日” as “where the Sun turns his team of dragons” does not express the meaning of “six dragons returning to the sun”, but it does not express the meaning of “six dragons returning to the sun” in Seth's translation. The Seth translation still translates the meaning of “六龙回日” directly, but it does not explain the background of the allusion, which makes it difficult for the target readers to realize the cultural background of the poem from the words alone.

#### Example 2

“子规”

From: “又闻子规啼月夜”

Sun Dayu's translation:

You should hear the cuckoos wailing at the moon

Xu Yuanchong's translation:

And hear home-going cuckoos weep Beneath the moon

Cooper's translation:

And hear a cuckoo call

On mipon to light

Seth's translation:

You'll hear the cuckoo call in the moonlight

The “子规” in Example 2 is the cuckoo bird, which is common in Shu. The “子规” in the poem alludes to Du Yu, the king of Shu. Du Yu's greatest achievement was to teach the people to be engaged in agriculture. After his death, he turned into a cuckoo bird, which cried so much to urge the people to cultivate their land that it cried out for blood. The four translators coincidentally chose the word “cuckoo” for the direct translation, but added different modifiers to express their feelings. Sun used “wailing” and “gasping out”, using anthropomorphism to reproduce the meaning of the allusion and increase the vividness of the translation. Xu translated it as “home-going cuckoos weep”, i.e. “the cuckoos weeping on returning home,” and the sound of the cuckoos weeping resonates in the empty valley, which further enhances the atmosphere of the sad and desolate environment. However, the other two Western translators have adopted a direct translation of the allusion, which is a bit hard and does not fully convey the sadness that the poem is trying to express.

## 4.2. Pairing Techniques in Translating Biological and Geographical Imagery

Hard Roads in Shu is a poem with a metrical form. When translating the poem Hard Roads in Shu, the translator should take into account the intertextual effect achieved by the interweaving of rhythm and rhyme in the whole poem, in which “couplet” is also the key to highlighting the intertextuality of the poem.[7] In the translation of words and phrases involving geographical and biological imagery,

for example, “上有六龙回日之高标” and “下有冲波逆折之回川”, “上” to “下”, “六龙” to “冲波”, “高标” to “回川”; another example is “朝避猛虎, 夕避长蛇”, “朝” to “夕” is opposite, “长蛇” to “猛虎” are also relative to each other. Thus, from the translations of the four translators, we can see that Up / Down, Above / Below, and At dusk/dawn are three sets of phrases with the same lexical nature, function, and structure that lead to the lines of the poem. It can be seen that all four translators, both Chinese and foreign translators, have paid attention to the importance of the couplet technique and the accurate combination of words and vocabulary. Although it is difficult to achieve 100% accuracy in translation, the translators can still play the role of the main body and realize the intention of "pairing" through the technique of foregrounding.

### 4.3. Translators' Word Choice Differences in Translating Biological and Geographical Imagery

Shu Road is a winding road, the road is bumpy and difficult, the Tang poem "Shu Road", refers to the Qinling and Bashan mountains into the Sichuan road, up to tens of thousands of miles long, across the Guanzhong Basin and the Qinba mountains, the Sichuan Basin and many other terrain complex areas, along the route is mainly the Qinling Mountain Range and Bashan Mountain Range represented by the lofty mountains, which puts forward a great challenge to the people's transportation and the obstacles. Therefore, the poet opens the poem by analogizing the difficulty of the Shu Road with that of going up to the blue sky from a macroscopic point of view, and uses the word "难" twice to emphasize its great difficulty, thus visualizing the difficulty and danger of the Shu Road. [8]At the same time, the Shu Road along the dense barren, steep mountains, to all kinds of beasts and venomous insects to a good place to live, so the beasts along the Shu Road, poisonous snakes gathered, brutality for the trouble. To emphasize the wildness of the Shu Road, the animal imagery of the original poem has a strong typicality, which marks the most ferocious and strong type of “wildness” shown in a certain kind of animal.

#### 4.3.1. Geographical imagery

The terrain of the Shu Road is rugged, and the word “塞” in the original poem “不与秦塞通人烟” refers to “a dangerous and obstructed place in the mountains and rivers”. This is a controversial issue because it involves the evolution of the meaning of the word and the difference in the shape of the characters. In the Dictionary of Commonly Used Ancient Chinese Characters, the word “塞” is interpreted as “边”, which is a symbol for “border”. However, in the English translation, the dangerous terrain of “塞” has disappeared without a trace. The reason for this is mainly due to the different translation strategies adopted by the translators for the original text and the translated text: Cooper's translation translates “塞” as the “border”, and Seth's translation as the “Qin frontier”. Both of these translations adopt the phonetic method, but neither of them puts the word “塞” in its proper place. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (9th edition), “frontier” means “a line that separates two countries”. Under this translation strategy, “塞” is translated as a geographically relatively closed and enclosed place, instead of “between high mountains and valleys” or “between mountains and rivers” in Chinese. It can be seen that the word “塞” translated by the two foreign translators only contains the meaning of a geographical boundary line, but does not cover the meaning of topographical danger implied in it. From this point of view, this paper will analyze and compare the influence of topography on the imagery of the poem in the two translations. In the original text, the borders of Shu and Qin are adjacent to each other, however, in the translation, we only see some dangerous terrains, and the barrenness and desolation of these terrains are not fully shown.

In “西当太白有鸟道”, “太白” refers to Mount Taibai, according to Shen Meng's “Record of

Famous Mountains”, Mount Taibai “在凤翔府郿县东南四十里，钟西方金宿之秀，关中诸山莫高于此”[9], is a mountain in the middle of Guanzhong, and is the border between Shu and Qin, however, we only see some dangerous terrain, this terrain is barren and desolate is not fully shown. According to Shen Meng's Record of Famous Mountains, Mount Taibai is the highest mountain range in Guanzhong, and the highest point of Mount Emei, which is also the peak of Mount Emei. The phrase depicts the majestic peaks that stretched from the Qin Dynasty to the land of Shu.[10] In Cooper and Seth's translations, “太白” and “峨眉” are translated as “White Star Fell” and “White Star Peak”, respectively, while “峨眉” is translated as “Eyebrow Fell” and “Mount Emei”. However, these two Western translators translated the place names phonetically or directly but failed to provide cultural metaphors and geographic characterization of their. However, these two Western translators translated the place names phonetically or literally, but did not provide additional explanations of their cultural metaphors and geographical characteristics, which turned them into atypical and common places and failed to reproduce the difficulty of the Shu Road. Comparing the two Chinese translators, Sun translates “塞” as “Qin terrain”, while Xu translates “太白” as “the great white mountain”, which is a more subtle depiction of the treacherous nature of the Shu Road. Nevertheless, there are still two Chinese translators who fail to adequately express classical imagery in certain words, such as “青天” and “峨眉”, which still suffer from a single direct translation and lack of emotional color.

#### 4.3.2. Biological imagery

In “黄鹤之飞尚不得过，猿猱欲度愁攀援”，“黄鹤” refers to the yellow swan, which looks like an eagle with spread wings. It looks like an eagle with its wings spreading. It is said in Chu Rhetoric - Oath of Respect that the yellow swan soars in the sky, and when it lifts its wings, it can see the landscape of mountains and rivers, and when it lifts its wings again, it can see the twisting and turning of heaven and earth, and when it lifts its wings again, it can see the perfect roundness of the land, and it is a divine bird known as “swan”. “猿”，an animal belonging to the category of apes and monkeys, is described as “猿善援” in the Book of Beasts Chronicles, with its tall and powerful figure, easy to climb and extremely convenient. “The bird's whimper is not very loud but has a very high sound, so it can be heard by people”. Yuan dynasty Xiao Shi Eddie in his book Classification of Complementary Note of Li Taibai poem said: “黄鹤飞之至高者，猿猱最便捷者，尚不得度，其险绝可知矣”。[11] Among birds, the “黄鹤” stands out for its excellent flying skills, while among land animals, “猿” are famous for their excellent climbing ability. The “长蛇” in the original poem “夕避长蛇” does not refer to ordinary snakes, according to Jin Guo Pu's The Classic of Mountains and Seas: “长蛇百寻，其鬣如虺，飞群走类，靡不吞噬。极物之恶，尽毒之利”。[12] It can be seen that "the long snake in the formation" refers to this fierce beast. The long snake depicted in the poem is an extremely ferocious type of snake, which makes people shudder. Thus, the animals depicted in the original poem were not chosen at random but contained profound Chinese cultural connotations, metaphorically representing the wildness of Shu Road, which is rarely visited by people and is barbaric, and highlighting the profoundness of Chinese civilization. The “猿” recorded in The Book of Songs is an animal with a black neck, long tail, red back and white belly, and is extremely good at climbing.[13] In Cooper's and Seth's translations, “黄鹤” is translated as “yellow crane”, while in the Xu translation, it is “golden crane”. The word “猿猱” is rendered as “gibbons and monkeys” and “apes” in Cooper's and Seth's translations, respectively, and as “gibbons” in Xu's. Both Western translators render “长蛇” as “serpent”, while Xu translates it as “blood-snake”. This paper analyzes and compares these two different translations from a linguistic and cultural point of view. Based on the above information, it can be inferred that the “黄鹤” has been mutated into a new bird in the translations of the two

Western translators, and its original qualities of flying and sacredness have disappeared. Although there are similarities between the two translations, the different cultural backgrounds and the differences in understanding of the original text have led to greater ambiguity in the translations. The climbing skills of “猿” are summarized in several versions as ordinary apes or even more slender monkeys, while the Xu translation highlights the climbing talent of apes even more. In Cooper’s and Seth’s translations, the image of the ferocious serpent has been generalized to that of the common long snake, and the typical beasts, which are found only in rarefied places-have been generalized to common animals. The typical “wild beasts”-which could only be found in rare and unpopulated places-have been generalized to ordinary animals, thus weakening the barbaric and wild qualities of their original environments. In comparison, in Xu’s translation, the image of the extraordinary wild animals bred in the treacherous

land of Shu is more vividly presented to the readers.

According to the previous section, the two Western translators, in translating the geographical and biological imagery in *Hard Roads in Shu*, adopted the direct translation strategy, i.e., translating directly based on pinyin or literal meanings, without annotating and explaining the deeper features or cultural meanings embedded in them. This paper argues that the root cause of this phenomenon is that the translators do not treat it as an independent unit. In the process of symbolic transformation by the two Western translators, the wild characteristics and aesthetic orientation of geographical and animal imagery in the Chinese cultural context become generalized and subtle, which leads to the inability of overseas readers to perceive the aesthetic experiences and perceptions brought about by these images, even though the translation seems to correspond formally to the original poem.

## 5. Conclusion

By examining the variations of non-human natural imagery such as geographical and biological imagery in *Hard Roads in Shu*, both in the translations of the two foreign translators and the other seven English translations, it is possible to find the generalization and diminution of the rugged and treacherous, wild characteristics of the Shu Roads as depicted in the original poem. These alienation phenomena reflect the Western translators' intentional selection and adaptation of the complex and diverse regional cultural differences in the original poem. In the context of traditional Chinese culture, the specific imagery in the original poem can trigger the reader's cultural migration and association, forming an interrelated “imaginative community” with certain features, thus giving the imagery unique cultural characteristics and aesthetic value. However, in the process of cross-civilization acceptance, the heterogeneity of readers’ cultures will cut off the connection between the imagery and the original culture, and if the translation strategy of direct translation or naturalization is only adopted, the unique cultural connotation of the original poem will be mutated or disappeared. Therefore, how to translate not only convey the original mood but also meet the appreciation habits of the readers of the translated language has become a problem that the translator must solve. In the final analysis, the decline of natural wildness in the English translation of *Hard Roads in Shu* is not only due to the difference between Chinese and English linguistic symbols but also due to the heterogeneity of Eastern and Western cultures, especially in the cultural origin, which shows a strong difference between the Eastern and Western view of wildness and nature. It is this difference that leads to the large cultural differences between the translation and the original work in the English-Chinese translation. Traditional Chinese culture contains the ideas of “unity of heaven and man” and “the beauty of heaven and earth and the reason of all things”, which show the human's reverence and obedience to nature, while mainstream Western culture is deeply influenced by Christianity, which contains the idea of anthropocentrism. These two very different modes of thinking and cognitive styles determine their completely different views on things. When translating or accepting traditional Chinese literature and cultural texts, Western translators often ignore the profound ecological

connotations and ecological values embedded in them, which need to be highly valued by them. This indifference to the local culture has led to the failure of the translated texts to realize the purpose of cross-cultural communication and caused great negative impacts. Considering this, as Chinese translators, we must have enough cultural self-confidence to apply ecological interpretation or re-interpretation of traditional Chinese literature and cultural classics based on traditional culture, to gain the right to speak in cross-civilization communication and acceptance. At the same time, the cultural identities of different peoples should also be fully respected to realize the purpose of cross-cultural dialogue. Only in exchanges across different civilizations can traditional Chinese culture maintain its unique national characteristics and aesthetic value, which requires our continuous exploration and innovation. When a country's literature is introduced into a culture different from its cultural model, it inevitably undergoes mutation due to the different languages and cultural backgrounds of the recipients. In the literary exchanges of heterogeneous civilizations, the works in the form of "textual transmission, etc." must first undergo language conversion, and in the process of language conversion, the original literary text must not only be detached from its original linguistic references but also be understood by the translator and filtered through the re-expression of the translated language and ultimately form the variation of the original text. Language as a cultural representation and symbol, its transformation and mutation must be the product of dialogue and communication among various cultures, which is closely related to the real context, traditional culture, and aesthetic characteristics of the translator. Take *Hard Roads in Shu* as an example, the geographical and biological imagery of "wild beauty" revealed in the original poem is diminished in the English translation because, on the one hand, its connotation is bound to undergo a certain variation through symbolic conversion in the translation of the two very different languages of Chinese and English; on the other hand, it is due to the different mentality of poets and translators towards the wild nature amid of a heterogeneous civilization. On the other hand, it is because poets and translators in heterogeneous civilizations have different understandings of wild nature.

From the point of view of Mr. Xu Yuanchong's theory of the "three beautifulness" of translation, the core of translation lies in culture, not just words, sentences, or chapters. What the translator wants to convey in translation is only the difference between the translated text and the imported language. For the translation of bio-geographical imagery, the main purpose is not simply to convey the literal meaning. To better realize cross-cultural communication, appropriate translation strategies must be used to convey the cultural information of the original language. Since translators cannot restore the "original flavor" of the original language and culture only through direct translation or free translation, they can adopt the strategy of "rewriting" to retain the original cultural heritage as much as possible while making it easy for readers of the target language to understand, to realize the goal of cultural communication. Therefore, they can adopt the strategy of "rewriting" to retain the cultural heritage of the original text as much as possible while making it easy to be understood by the target language readers, to realize the goal of cultural exchange. In addition, since biological and geographical imagery is closely related to our daily life, the cultural context must be taken into account when translating it. Therefore, when translating biological and geographical imagery, translators must first understand the origin of the allusions and the cultural connotations, and then, according to their own translation needs and the differences in the target audience, adopt appropriate translation strategies and methods to maximize the retention of the unique flavor of the source language, to achieve the goal of cultural exchange.

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