Cultural Preservation or Poetic Regeneration? A Skopos-Theoretic Analysis of Li Qingzhao's English Translations

SHANG Xinyun, BI Yifei

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

This study applies Skopos Theory to conduct a comparative analysis of two seminal English translations of Li Qingzhao's poetry: Xu Yuanchong's academic version and Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung's creative version. Focusing on the translation of the name of tune and the reconstruction of metrical patterns, this study examines how the translator's differing purposes—cultural preservation versus poetic regeneration—dictate their strategic choices. The findings reveal that Xu consistently employs foreignization strategies, striving to preserve the original's cultural imagery and prosodic features in alignment with his Skopos of disseminating Chinese poetic aesthetics. In contrast, Rexroth and Chung preferentially adopt domestication strategies, adapting the text to enhance its readability and emotional resonance for the target-language audience. The study concludes that Skopos Theory provides a powerful explanatory framework for such strategic divergences, validating both translational approaches as legitimate when evaluated against their intended purposes. This underscores the necessity of a pluralistic standard in translation criticism, moving beyond the traditional fidelity-based dichotomy.

Keywords: Skopos Theory, academic translation, creative translation, the name of tune, metrical patterns

Introduction

The translation of classical Chinese poetry has long been a fertile ground for scholarly debate, often centered on the perennial tension between fidelity to the source text and accessibility for the target reader. Within this domain, the poetry of Li Qingzhao, a seminal figure of the Song Dynasty known for her exquisite lyricism and profound emotional depth, presents a particular challenge. Her work, in the Ci (词) form, is characterized by its intricate metrical patterns, culturally embedded imagery, and nuanced emotional tones. As her poetry has been introduced to the English-speaking world over the past century, translators have adopted strikingly different approaches, ranging from scholarly, source-oriented renditions to creative, poetically liberated adaptations.

This divergence in translational practice reveals the limitations of traditional translation theories that prioritize "equivalence" or "faithfulness" as the paramount criteria. Such frameworks often struggle to legitimize creative translations, which may deviate from the source text's form or literal meaning to capture its aesthetic or emotional essence. Skopos Theory, a cornerstone of the German Functionalist School, seeks to resolve this theoretical impasse. From the perspective of Skopos Theory, translation is not only the conversion of language,

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SHANG Xinyun, B.A., College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.
BI Yifei (Corresponding author), Ph.D., lecturer, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

but also a cross-cultural communication activity with a clear purpose (Jia, 2024). By positing that the purpose (Skopos) of the translational action determines all subsequent strategies, Skopos Theory provides a robust framework for understanding and justifying diverse translation outcomes. According to this view, a translation is evaluated not by its degree of correspondence to the original text, but by its adequacy in achieving its intended communicative function within the target culture.

While Skopos Theory has been widely and successfully applied to the analysis of pragmatic texts, such as advertisements and technical documents (e.g., Jia, 2016; Li & Wang, 2012), its application to literary translation, particularly poetry, remains a nuanced and somewhat contested area. Scholars like Li (2018) have pointed out the inherent tensions that can arise between a translator's Skopos and the imperative to preserve the aesthetic integrity of a poem, suggesting that the theory's focus on function may at times undervalue formal poetic elements.

Concurrently, existing scholarship on the English translation of Li Qingzhao's poetry has been prolific, yet it has largely followed two distinct trajectories. Domestically, a significant body of research has engaged in comparative analysis, often focusing on the translator's subjectivity or contrasting the aesthetic outcomes of different versions, notably between Rexroth's independent and collaborative work (Feng & Wang, 2022). Foreign scholarship, on the other hand, has been more practice-oriented, with translations themselves, such as those by Hsu (1962) and Rexroth and Chung (1979), sparking critical discussion regarding their literary merits, as seen in Palandri's (1981) review. However, a conspicuous gap exists at the intersection of these two domains: There is a scarcity of studies that systematically employ Skopos Theory as a central analytical framework to explain the macro-level strategic choices and their underlying purposes across the academic and creative translation paradigms of Li's work.

This study addresses the existing research gap by conducting a purpose-driven comparative analysis of two representative English translations of Li Qingzhao's poetry: Xu Yuanchong's *Selected Poems of Li Qingzhao* (2006), which exemplifies an academic translation driven by a Skopos of cultural preservation and dissemination, and Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung's *Li Ch'ing-Chao: Complete Poems* (1979), which represents a creative translation guided by a Skopos of poetic regeneration and cross-cultural empathy.

By integrating Skopos Theory into the analysis of classical poetry translation—an area often overlooked within functionalist frameworks—this study contributes to translation studies in both theory and practice. It further proposes a pluralistic evaluative framework that legitimizes the coexistence of academic and creative translation approaches as equally valid and purpose-oriented practices.

Specifically, the study seeks to elucidate how translational purpose dictates strategic choice in the cross-cultural transmission of poetry, focusing on the following research questions:

1. How do the differing Skopos of academic and creative translation govern the treatment of culture-specific elements such as the name of tune and metrical patterns in Li Qingzhao's poetry?

2. How can Skopos theory reconcile the apparent conflict between these two translation styles, and what implications does this have for translation evaluation criteria?

Methodology

Theoretical Framework: Skopos Theory

Skopos Theory is formally proposed by Hans J. Vermeer in 1978, with the core point of the purpose justifying the means. Unlike the equivalence theory that pursues the "equivalence" between the source text and

the target text, the Skopos Theory defines translation as an "intentional intercultural action" (Vermeer, 2013) and holds that the translator can adjust the content or even reconstruct the text according to the target needs.

There are three rules in the Skopos Theory: Skopos rule, coherence rule, and fidelity rule, among which the Skopos rule is primary, emphasizing the influence of the purpose on translation strategies. Coherence rule postulates that a translation must adhere to intra-textual coherence to ensure its acceptability and readability in the target language. The fidelity rule is the supplement of the Skopos rule, holding that the translation and the source text need to be reasonably related.

Skopos Theory has promoted a shift in translation studies from structuralist-linguistic paradigms to functionalist-sociological frameworks. It has made contributions not only to the affirmation of translator's subjectivity, who transitioned from being "invisible" intermediaries to proactive decision-makers in cross-cultural communication, but also to the construction of actionable frameworks for practical domains, such as advertising translation, localization, and subtitling, where functional adaptation outweighs formal fidelity. Despite ethical debates over its potential for instrumentalization and manipulation, its practical value in addressing globalization-era challenges such as cultural localization remains unparalleled.

Data and Materials

Materials of this study consist of two English translations of Li Qingzhao's poetry, selected for their contrasting translational Skopos and their significant influence in the target culture.

The first one is Xu Yuanchong's *Selected Poems of Li Qingzhao* (2006). This version is widely regarded as a representative example of academic translation. As a renowned Chinese translator, Xu operates with a clear Skopos of cultural preservation and dissemination. His overarching goal is to introduce the quintessential beauty of Chinese classical poetry—encompassing the beauty of sense, sound, and form—to the global audience, striving for maximal fidelity to the source text and its cultural context.

The other one is Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung's *Li Ch'ing-Chao: Complete Poems* (1979). This version is celebrated as a paradigm of creative translation. The American poet Kenneth Rexroth, working in concert with the scholar Ling Chung, was driven by a different Skopos, that of poetic regeneration and cross-cultural "sympathy". Their primary aim was not to achieve word-for-word accuracy, but to recreate a vibrant and living poetic experience in English. Consequently, their translation prioritizes emotional resonance and textual acceptability for the English-speaking reader, often through inventive adaptations.

Analytical Approach

Analysis of the Name of Tune

The analysis of the translation of the name of tune concentrated on identifying the overarching translation strategy, distinguishing between foreignization and domestication. It further sought to determine the specific translation method employed, such as literal translation, free translation, generalization, or compensation. Ultimately, the objective was to infer the underlying translational Skopos by examining how the treatment of cultural imagery and semantic components corresponded with the stated goals of each translator. Several of the most frequent and evocative names of tune from Li's Ci, such as 《小重山》 (*The Small Heavy Hills*), 《满庭芳》 (*Full Sweet Court*), and 《玉楼春》 (*Jade Tower in Spring*), were identified for detailed comparison.

Analysis of Meter

The analysis of the reconstruction of meter and rhythmic patterns involved selecting iconic lines and stanzas from Li's Ci that are renowned for their musicality, including prominent examples of reduplication and rhyme. The comparative analysis in this phase focused on several key aspects. It examined how the translators handled the original poem's rhyme scheme and repetitive structures. Attention was also given to the specific techniques used to recreate rhythmic effects in English, such as the employment of end-rhyme, alliteration, syntactic parallelism, or the conversion of structured verse into a free narrative. A central part of this analysis was evaluating the trade-offs made by the translators between formal fidelity, which adheres to the fidelity rule, and the creation of a coherent and aesthetically pleasing text in English, which aligns with the coherence rule. All these strategic choices were then interpreted through the overarching lens of the Skopos rule, which governs the entire translational action.

Results

Translation of the Name of Tune

The translation of culture-specific names of tune reveals a fundamental divergence in strategy, directly attributable to the translators' distinct purposes.

Example 1: 《小重山》 (*The Small Heavy Hills*)

Xu's translation:

  Hill on Hill

Rexroth and Chung's translation:

  Small Hills

Xu's translation employs the preposition "on" to visually replicate the meaning of overlapping of "重" inherent in the original, using a foreignization strategy to preserve the spatial imagery. In contrast, Rexroth and Chung opt for domestication and generalization, conveying the notion of multiple hills but omitting the specific configuration, thereby prioritizing immediate readability for the target audience.

Example 2: 《满庭芳》 (*Full Sweet Court*)

Xu's translation:

  Courtyard Full of Fragrance

Rexroth and Chung's translation:

  Perfumed Garden

Xu's literal translation retains the core semantic components of the original: "满" (Full), "庭" (Courtyard), and "芳" (Fragrance). The choice of "Courtyard" maintains the enclosed, intimate spatial concept typical of Chinese cultural settings. Conversely, Rexroth and Chung's version substitutes the Chinese "庭" with the more Western, open-concept "Garden", shifting the cultural context to align with the pastoral conventions familiar to native English readers.

Example 3: 《玉楼春》 (*Jade Tower in Spring*)

Xu's translation:

  Spring in Jade Pavilion

Rexroth and Chung's translation:

  Spring in the Jade Tower

The key difference lies in the translation of "楼". Xu's use of "Pavilion" aligns with traditional Chinese architecture, often associated with beauty and leisure. Rexroth and Chung's choice of "Tower" domesticates the image towards a structure more prevalent in Western landscapes (e.g., church towers and castle turrets), enhancing cultural accessibility even at the cost of architectural precision. The summarized strategies reveal a systematic alignment between each translator's Skopos and their linguistic choices, as detailed below in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Translation Strategies for the Name of Tune

Name of tune	Translation	Strategy/method	Skopos
《小重山》	Xu: *Hill on Hill*	Foreignization/ Visual compensation	Cultural preservation
	Rexroth and Chung: *Small Hills*	Domestication/ Generalization	Poetic communication
《满庭芳》	Xu: *Courtyard Full of Fragrance*	Foreignization/ Literal translation	Cultural preservation
	Rexroth and Chung: *Perfumed Garden*	Domestication/ Free translation	Target culture accessibility
《玉楼春》	Xu: *Spring in Jade Pavilion*	Foreignization/ Literal translation	Cultural and architectural fidelity
	Rexroth and Chung: *Spring in the Jade Tower*	Domestication/ Free translation	Reader familiarity

Reconstruction of Meter and Rhythmic Patterns

The approaches to recreating the musicality of Li's poetry further highlight the contrast between academic fidelity and creative reinterpretation.

Example 4: "才下眉头，却上心头"

Xu's translation:

From eyebrows kept apart,

Again it gnaws my heart.

Rexroth and Chung's translation:

It is on my eyebrows.

The next, it weighs on my heart.

Xu replicates the rhyming structure of the original (眉头/心头) by employing a strict end-rhyme ("apart"/"heart"), directly transferring the "beauty of sound". Rexroth and Chung forgo the end-rhyme, instead creating a parallel rhythmic structure through the repetition of "It is on my…" and "The next, it… on my…", which conveys the lingering sorrow through syntax rather than phonology.

Example 5: "寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚"

Xu's translation:

I look for what I miss;

I know not what it is.

I feel so sad, so drear,

So lonely, without cheer.

Rexroth and Chung's translation:

I Search. Search. Seek. Seek.

Cold. Cold. Clear. Clear.

Sorrow. Sorrow. Pain. Pain.

Here, the translations embody their core philosophies. Rexroth and Chung strive for formal equivalence, mirroring the original's reduplicative structure through monosyllabic repetition and alliteration, albeit with a potential deviation in meaning by using "Clear" for "清". Xu, prioritizing the integrated "three beauties", breaks the repetitive form. He reconstructs the rhythm through internal repetition ("I…what…", "I…so…") and new end-rhymes ("miss"/"is"; "drear"/"cheer"), aiming for a naturalized poetic flow in English.

Example 6: "争渡，争渡，惊起一滩鸥鹭"

Xu's translation:

  Get through!

  Get through!

  Startled, a flock of herons from the sandbank flew.

Rexroth and Chung's translation:

  And startled the gulls and egrets

  From the sand bars.

  They crowded into the air

  And hastily flapped away

  To the opposite shore.

Xu preserves the urgent repetition ("Get through! Get through!") and maintains a rhyming couplet ("through"/"flew") to mimic the original's compact, rhythmic urgency. Rexroth and Chung transform the repetitive exclamation into a linear, narrative sequence written in free verse. They sacrifice the original's sonic structure for a dynamic, descriptive progression that paints a vivid scene for the reader.

In summary, the results demonstrate a consistent pattern: Xu's strategies are predominantly geared towards cultural and formal preservation, often employing foreignization, rhyme, and structural mirroring. In contrast, Rexroth and Chung's methods are oriented towards emotional resonance and target-culture acceptability, frequently utilizing domestication, free verse, and syntactic creativity. These findings provide a solid empirical basis for discussing the role of Skopos Theory in the following section.

Discussion

The findings reveal a consistent pattern of purpose-driven decision-making in both translations, affirming the central tenet of Skopos Theory: The translation purpose governs the choice of strategies. This section discusses the theoretical and pragmatic implications of these findings.

Xu's translation, aimed at cultural preservation and dissemination, consistently adopts a foreignizing strategy. His meticulous rendering of the name of tune (e.g., "*Hill on Hill*" for 《小重山》) and reconstruction of end-rhymes demonstrate a prioritization of the fidelity rule within the bounds of the overarching Skopos rule. In contrast, Rexroth and Chung's version, driven by the goal of poetic regeneration and cross-cultural sympathy, frequently employs domestication and rhythmic innovation, favoring the coherence rule and reader acceptability over strict formal correspondence. This divergence illustrates that what is often framed as a "faithful *vs*. free" dichotomy in translation criticism is, in fact, a reflection of divergent Skopos. Neither approach is inherently superior; each serves a different communicative function.

The study also highlights the role of translator identity in shaping the Skopos. Xu, as a scholar-translator, embodies the role of a cultural custodian. His translations are acts of cultural archaeology, seeking to introduce Chinese poetic traditions to the world with minimal distortion. Rexroth, a poet-translator collaborating with a

bilingual scholar Chung, represents a hybrid identity. Their approach aligns with what Nord (1997) calls "function plus loyalty"—not only to the source text, but also to the target language readers and their own poetic sensibility. This explains why their versions, though sometimes less literal, are often celebrated for their emotional resonance and lyrical fluency in English.

The analysis challenges the traditional criterion of "faithfulness" as the sole measure of translation quality. Under Skopos Theory, a translation should be evaluated based on whether it successfully fulfills its intended purpose. Xu's version succeeds in academic and pedagogical contexts where cultural accuracy is valued, while Rexroth and Chung's version thrives in literary and general reader contexts where aesthetic experience is paramount. This supports a pluralistic approach to translation criticism, where multiple versions of the same source text can coexist and be judged on their own functional terms.

While Skopos Theory effectively explains the macro-level strategic choices, it is less prescriptive at the micro-level of poetic transference. For instance, it does not fully account for how translators negotiate the tension between semantic meaning and sonic patterns when these conflict with the Skopos. This suggests the potential for integrating Skopos Theory with other frameworks, such as phonostylistics or eco-translatology, to offer a more granular analysis of poetic translation.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the explanatory power of Skopos Theory in elucidating the strategic divergences between academic and creative translations of classical Chinese poetry. Through a systematic comparison of Xu Yuanchong's and Rexroth and Chung's renditions of Li Qingzhao's poetry, it becomes unequivocally clear that translational purpose serves as the paramount principle governing choices at all levels, from the treatment of culture-specific names of tunes to the reconstruction of complex metrical patterns. Xu's foreignizing strategies, manifested in his semantically precise renderings of names of tunes and his diligent replication of rhyme, are consistently motivated by the Skopos of cultural preservation and the dissemination of Chinese poetic aesthetics. In contrast, Rexroth and Chung's domesticating approach, which adapts cultural references and prioritizes free-verse fluency over formal mimicry, is equally coherently driven by the Skopos of poetic regeneration and cross-cultural empathy.

The findings validate the core tenet of Skopos Theory that the adequacy of a translation should be judged primarily by its fulfillment of the intended function, not by a rigid adherence to source-text form. This theoretical framework successfully transcends the traditional and often unproductive "faithful *vs.* free" dichotomy, providing a legitimate foundation for appreciating the distinct value of both scholarly and creative translations. Consequently, this study advocates for a paradigm shift in translation criticism towards a more pluralistic and functionally oriented evaluation system, where multiple versions of a classic text can be valued for serving different communicative purposes and reaching different readerships.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The analysis was confined to two key aspects of poetic form: the name of tune and meter. Thus, a more comprehensive investigation incorporating the translation of imagery, allusion, and other rhetorical devices would yield a fuller picture. Furthermore, the claims regarding the functional effectiveness and reader acceptance of these translations, while theoretically grounded, would be significantly strengthened by empirical support, such as through reader-response surveys or reception studies among target-language audiences.

Future research could expand in several promising directions. Scholars may apply the same Skopos-driven comparative model to the translations of other Chinese poets or to diverse genres of classical literature. Moreover, incorporating empirical approaches—such as reader-response or reception studies—would yield valuable evidence on how different translational strategies are perceived and appreciated within target cultures.

In addition, extending the application of Skopos Theory to intersemiotic and digital translation of Chinese poetry would open new avenues for exploring how purpose-driven adaptation evolves across multimodal and technological contexts. Ultimately, by recognizing the legitimacy of diverse translational purposes, future studies can contribute to a more dynamic and inclusive dialogue in the global dissemination of Chinese literary heritage.

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