

# *A Corpus-Based Study on the Comparison and Value of the Translations of the Romance of the Western Chamber*

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**Abstract:** *The Romance of the Western Chamber* is a representative work of the Yuan Dynasty by Wang Shifu, which is a legendary drama. This paper takes the translations of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* by S. I. Hsiung and *Romance of the Western Bower* by Xu Yuanchong as the research objects, constructs a bilingual parallel corpus, and conducts a comparative analysis of the translation strategies and historical backgrounds of the two translations, exploring the translation characteristics and cultural dissemination effects of each translation. The study found that S. I. Hsiung's translation tends to literal translation, emphasizing the direct expression of the source cultural content, which is conducive to cultural dissemination, while Xu's translation adopts free translation, reflecting the rhythmic beauty of the text. Translating Chinese dramas into English requires finding a balance between preserving cultural connotations and meeting the needs of readers, promoting the international dissemination of Chinese dramas.

## 1. Introduction

*The Romance of the Western Chamber* is an outstanding work of classical Chinese literature and a valuable resource for studying Chinese traditional culture and literature. It embodies its immortal artistic and cultural value in its innovative contributions to dramatic art, profound expression of emotions, and challenges and reflections on the values of society at that time.

In the early 20th century, Europe maintained its position as the center of world cultural and artistic activities and was the center of world drama. China at this time was undergoing a period of transformation, with many literati and scholars studying in Europe and America, attempting to align with the world's academic and cultural trends[1].

As one of the most representative works of Chinese classical drama, *The Romance of the Western Chamber* has attracted the attention of translators and sinologists from various countries. The English translation of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* began in 1935 and has since produced six major translations, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of Major English Translations of *the Romance of the Western Chamber*

Translator	Year of Publication	Translation Title	Publisher	Translation Type
S. I. Hsiung	1935	The Romance of the Western Chamber	Methuen, London	Complete Translation
Henry H. Hart	1936	The West Chamber, a medieval dream	California, USA	Verse Translation
Henry W. Wells	1972	The West Chamber	Columbia University, USA	Verse Translation
T.C. Lai & Ed Gamarekian	1973	The Romance of the Western Chamber	Heinemann Education Books, Hong Kong	Complete Translation
Dolby William	1984	West Wing	Scottish Publishing, Edinburgh, UK	Complete Translation
Stephen H. West & Wilt L. Idema	1991	The Moon and the Zither: Wang Shifu's Story of the Western Wing	University of California Press, USA	Complete Translation
Xu Yuanchong	1992	Romance of the Western Bower	Foreign Languages Press, China	Complete Translation

The author has organized relevant literature on *The Romance of the Western Chamber* from CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), inputting the keywords *The Romance of the Western Chamber* and “English translation,” which retrieved a total of 51 papers. After manually removing irrelevant or low-relevance papers, a total of 35 related papers were obtained.

From 2002 to 2010, the output of literature on English translations of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* was relatively low, with an average annual output of less than one paper. After 2012, academic interest in this topic increased significantly, the number of papers began to rise, and peaked in 2016 and 2022, with five papers each. From a long-term academic perspective, the total number of research literature on English translations of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* is not large, with a shortage of papers, mostly master’s theses, few papers published in professional journals, and few high-quality papers.

In addition, among the 35 papers retrieved, there are 15 papers on comparative studies of translations, mainly focusing on the translations contributed by Stephen H. West & Wilt L. Idema and by Xu Yuanchong and S. I. Hsiung. Researchers have adopted research methods such as emotional translation, stylistic analysis, rewriting theory, corpus stylistics, compliance theory, and translation aesthetics to explore the characteristics and translation strategies of different translations. These studies tend to describe how translations are influenced by the translator’s language, culture, and aesthetic concepts, resulting in different understandings of and emotional conveyances from the original text. Among them, Li Huifeng and his co-authors’ literature uses corpus stylistics to analyze in-depth the translations of *Romance of the Western Bower* by Xu Yuanchong and *The Moon and the Zither: Wang Shifu’s Story of the Western Wing* by Stephen H. West & Wilt L. Idema [2]. These studies provide important insights into understanding the translation challenges and opportunities of literary works in cross-cultural communication.

Furthermore, there are a total of 9 papers on the study of a single translation, including 6 papers exploring Xu Yuanchong’s English translation of *Romance of the Western Bower* and 3 papers

studying the translations by Stephen H. West & Wilt L. Idema. These studies focus more on the acceptance and dissemination of translations. Sun Haoran analyzes the translations of Stephen H. West & Wilt L. Idema from a sociological perspective, discussing the macro, meso, and micro factors affecting their dissemination and acceptance [3]. Yang Jiayi examines Xu Yuanchong's translation from a "narrative re-telling" perspective, emphasizing the role of translators in narrative reconstruction [4]. Lu Lichun focuses on the literary qualities of the translations, discussing how Xu Yuanchong preserves the literary characteristics of the original work through phonology, rhetoric, and intertextuality [5].

Although the above studies cover a wide range of content, there are still certain limitations. First, existing research lacks in-depth analysis of the profound impact of cultural dissemination. Second, existing comparative analyses mostly focus on the linguistic and stylistic aspects, lacking research on the historical background and philosophical ideas of translations. Therefore, the multiple meanings and influences of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* in cross-cultural communication can be explored more comprehensively by introducing new research perspectives, methods and data.

## 2. A Comparative Study of the S. I. Hsiung's Translation and the Xu Yuanchong's Translation

The study mainly deals with two English translations of *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, the full English translation of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* translated by S. I. Hsiung in 1935, and *Romance of the Western Bower* by Xu Yuanchong in 1992.

The author first uses ABBYY FineReader to scan the two English translations of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* and *Romance of the Western Bower* as well as its corresponding Chinese original texts. Then extracts and cleans them to get the standardized and clear plain texts. Subsequently, ABBYY Aligner is used to align the original and the translated texts. After dealing with the error codes existing in the aligned texts, a bilingual parallel corpus is generated.

Since *The Romance of the Western Chamber* by Wang Shifu has been lost, in terms of the choice of the original text, both translators chose Jin Shengtan's *The Sixth Scholar's Book of the Western Chamber*, or *the Book of Jin's Criticism* for short. This version is a very classic rewriting of *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, which is itself characterized by linguistic elegance, and is able to change to a great extent the misunderstanding of Westerners about China and Chinese traditional culture.

### 2.1 A Comparative Study of the S. I. Hsiung's Translation and the Xu Yuanchong's Translation

#### 2.1.1 S. I. Hsiung's translation of *The Romance of the Western Chamber*: showcasing the beauty of tradition

S. I. Hsiung grew up in a classical and enlightened family and learn from his mother about classical Chinese literature and traditional culture. And in 1923, after graduation, he began to translate the works of the great English playwrights George Bernard Shaw and James Mathew Barre, which were published *Fiction Monthly* and the *Crescent Moon Monthly* [6] due to his strong interest in theater. It was his translation of the *Lady Precious Stream* that really made a significant achievement in theater translation. S. I. Hsiung rewrote the stage play the *Lady Precious Stream* in English and directed it himself for a London production, which ran for three years with 900 performances, meeting an unprecedented success. Later, the play was staged in the United States and became the first Chinese play to be staged on Broadway [7].

Although the *Lady Precious Stream* was being performed in London at the time, S. I. Hsiung

believed that *The Romance of the Western Chamber* was the true artistic play. Therefore, he spent 11 months translating it into English and showing it on stage in London, which also resulted in the first English translation of *The Romance of the Western Chamber*. The S. I. Hsiung's translation was highly praised by academics, with George Bernard Shaw saying, "I love *The Romance of the Western Chamber* far more than the *Lady Precious Stream*. The latter is nothing more than an old-fashioned romance, while the former is on a par with the best stage play of ancient England, and could only have been produced in 13th-century China". The translation has also become a textbook for Chinese departments in British and American universities, as well as Asian Institutes.

The translation of S. I. Hsiung adopts the translation strategy of literal translation, which is faithful to the original text and pursues the accuracy of the translation. The translation is a rhyme-less version, in which he did not make any rhyme in the process of translation, but focused on the reproduction of the original content, so his translation is highly readable and has unique literary and aesthetic values. In terms of specific translations, S. I. Hsiung said, "It is more sinful to translate a good book badly than to write a bad one", and "Readers, If the poem is beautiful, it's attributed to the original, but if the words are difficult to read, the fault lies with the translator." Therefore, in his own words, translation is sentence to sentence, even sometimes word to word [8]. This can be seen from S. I. Hsiung's translation of the names of the five books as shown in Table 2, also twenty-one chapters, of *The Romance of the Western Chamber*. Except for a few chapters, such as *The Interruption of the Religious Service* and *Hung Niang in the Dock*, which adopted the strategy of free translation according to the acceptability of Western readers, the rest of the names were translated almost entirely. Such a translation strategy reflects the traditional beauty of his translations. Such a translation strategy reflects the traditional beauty of its translation, that is, it is faithful to the original work without adding or subtracting anything.

Table 2: Comparison of Chapter Names of S. I. Hsiung's Translation

Chapter	Chapter Names (the translation)
Book One, Act One	Beauty's Enchantment
Book One, Act Two	The Renting of Quarters in the the Monastery
Book One, Act Three	A Response and Its Poem
Book One, Act Four	The Interruption of the Religious Service
Book Two, Act One	The Alarm at the Monastery
Book Two, Act Two	The Invitation to the Feast
Book Two, Act Three	The Breach of Promise
Book Two, Act Four	Love and the Lute
Book Three, Act One	First Expectations
Book Three, Act Two	The Fuss about the Billet-doux
Book Three, Act Three	Repudiation of the Billet-doux
Book Three, Act Four	Further Expectations
Book four, Act One	Fulfillment of the Billet-doux
Book four, Act Two	Hung Niang in the Dock
Book four, Act Three	A Feast with Tears
Book four, Act Four	A Surprising Dream
Book five, Act One	Report of success at the Examination
Book five, Act Two	Guess the Meaning of Her Gifts
Book five, Act Three	The Contest For the Beauty
Book five, Act Four	The Glorious Home-coming

Secondly, S. I. Hsiung's version has no annotations in the whole book, and the explanation is

directly added into the text, which enhances the readability of the translation. S. I. Hsiung’s translation style and translation strategy prove his wish to spread traditional Chinese culture to Europe and even to the world, and the smooth and readable text is also loved by many foreign readers, showing the traditional beauty of Chinese culture.

### 2.1.2 Translation of Xu Yuanchong: Highlighting the beauty of rhythm

Xu Yuanchong is a famous contemporary translator. In the book *The Art of Translation*, he puts forward the translation principle of “Three Beauties Theory”, which is beauty in sense, beauty in sound and beauty in form. “Poetry, especially rhythmical poetry, should convey the meaning, sound and form of the original poem as much as possible.” Xu Yuanchong believes that the translated poem should touch the reader’s heart like the original poem, which is beauty in sense. To have a pleasant rhythm like the original poem, this is beauty in sound. It is also necessary to maintain the form of the original poem as much as possible, which is the beauty in form. In order to achieve the goal of “three beauties” in poetry translation, it is necessary to adopt three translation strategies: elaboration, equalization and generalization, and finally, focus on optimizing the translation [9].

Xu Yuanchong applied “Three Beauties Theory” to the English translation of *Romance of the Western Bower*, which further demonstrated the rhythmic beauty of this classic work. When translating *Romance of the Western Bower*, he not only paid attention to the accurate transmission of the story, but also highlights the rhythmic beauty of the work. So that the translation is not only faithful to the original content, but also adds a sense of musicality and rhythm. In doing so, the classical drama has a new vitality in the English-speaking world, and conveys the charm of classical Chinese literature to a wider international audience.

In the translation of *Romance of the Western Bower*, Xu Yuanchong translated all the lyrics into verse, and the asides were translated in prose, so Xu’s translation of *Romance of the Western Bower* is also called the verse version of *Romance of the Western Bower*. In terms of the specific content, the translation strategy of domestication as the main strategy and foreignization as supplementary.

For example, Xu Yuanchong translated the Matchmaker of the story into “Rose”. If we choose literal translation, it will lack image and complex. Therefore, translating Matchmaker into “Rose” makes this character very vivid. In addition, Xu Yuanchong’s translation of the Scene III of the ACT IV also reflects the translation principle of “Three Beauty Theory”, such as the processing method of the Scene III of the ACT IV Table 3.

Table 3: The Scene III of the ACT IV of Xu’s translation [Calm Dignity] [10]

Translation
<p style="text-align: center;">With clouds the sky turns grey  O’er yellow-bloom-paved way.  How bitter blows the western breeze!  From north to south fly the wild geese.  Why like wine-flushed face is frosted forest red?  It’s dyed in tears the parting lovers shed.</p>

This poem is about desolate and bitter separation between Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying, with the bleak autumn scenery to set off the pain of departure. Rhyme at the end of every two sentences to make it easy to read, so that readers can appreciate the beauty of rhythm. In the content, the words “grey”, “yellow” and “red” echo each other to highlight the sadness of departure.

A lot of rhetorical devices are used in Xu’s translation, metaphor is one of the most common. In the tune “Pseudo-Melody”, in order to highlight the beauty of Cui Yingying, a conceptual metaphor is used: “The abbot, though advanced in years/ From his high seat, bends his eyes on the belle/ What a fool the bead monk appears/ He’s striking Facong’s bead and not the bell”. The gist of this

tune is that Cui Yingying's beauty attracts the master's attention, and thus mistakenly knocked the head of the young monk Fa Cong as a wooden fish.

It can be seen that Xu's translation pays attention to the rhetoric and rhymes of poetry, and takes "Three Beauty Theory" as the guiding principle to translate *Romance of the Western Bower*. In rhyme style, it is similar to Shakespeare's Sonnets, the verse uses four main rhyme patterns, alternating rhymes, and ends with two rhyming lines. It can be seen that Xu's translation is roughly the same as Shakespeare's plays in terms of genre. In terms of rhythmic style, it draws heavily on the rhythmic format of Shakespeare's sonnets. Xu's translation takes a form that is more familiar to Western readers which presents a unique rhythmic beauty.

### 3. Exploring Value Underpinnings and Cultural Transmission

In December 6, 1938, S. I. Hsiung's translation of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* was staged in London. However, such highbrow art play did not receive a significant response and remained relatively unknown for a long time. The reasons for this are intertwined with the historical context of the Great Depression in pre-World War II Britain. Moreover, the translator adopted a strategy of strict fidelity to the original text, sacrificing a certain degree of performability. In the preface of the translation of *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, British scholar Gordon Bottomley pointed out that the extensive lyrics in *The Romance of the Western Chamber* might be perceived in Britain as "literary" rather than "dramatic." [11]. Hence, translation activities are subject to various constraints. Although S. I. Hsiung's translation received a lukewarm response during its performance, the profound literary value of S. I. Hsiung's translation cannot be ignored over time, garnering high praise from foreign readers. Bernard Shaw commended S. I. Hsiung's translation as "an admirable dramatic poem," suggesting it could rival medieval British dramas. Some Chinese and Asian studies departments in English-speaking universities incorporate S. I. Hsiung's translation of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* into their curriculum, highlighting its fidelity, fluency, and artistry. In the introduction, as S. I. Hsiung himself stated, the dramas used in performances are commercial rather than artistic, such as the then-popular *Lady Precious Stream* in London. *The Romance of the Western Chamber* is a truly artistic drama.

Gordon Bottomley believed that S. I. Hsiung had an accurate and vivid understanding of the original text of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* and the translation wording is clear and concise, aligning with the ideological trends of the West at that time. [7].

Furthermore, S. I. Hsiung's translation has gained popularity among foreign readers. According to the statistics of world library collections of the translated version and English monographs of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* [12]. S. I. Hsiung's translation ranks first, both in the world library collections of the translated version of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* and the world library collections of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* and English monographs. S. I. Hsiung's achievement is not only due to its early publication and high authority but also because the translator emphasized the reader's reading experience, intending to present Chinese culture in its entirety to Western readers.

In comparison, Xu Yuanchong's English translation of *Romance of the Western Bower* rich in rhyme and conforming to the rhythmic habits of Shakespearean sonnets, is a masterpiece. The translation is more musical, retaining the original literary features and employing various rhetorical devices [13]. Therefore, Xu's translation of *Romance of the Western Bower* is a remarkable work, spreading the beauty of the Chinese language to the world, receiving high praise from domestic and foreign experts.

Xu's translation, possessing both artistic value and poetic beauty, has garnered high acclaim. However, its impact in the English-speaking world did not meet expectations. Although foreign



readers have a higher acceptance of prose-style translations, as Mr. Xu Yuanchong stated in the preface of *The Art of Translation*, Chinese literary translators have a responsibility to infuse some blood from foreign cultures into Chinese culture while injecting some blood from Chinese culture into world culture, enriching and brightening world culture [14]. It is precisely this sense of responsibility that prompted Mr. Xu Yuanchong to present *Romance of the Western Bower* in poetic form, aiming to promote traditional Chinese culture and integrate it into the world.

#### 4. Conclusion

S. I. Hsiung's and Xu Yuanchong's translations embody two distinctly different translation philosophies. S. I. Hsiung tends toward literal translation, striving to faithfully convey the cultural content and context of the original work, emphasizing direct expression of the source culture, which holds significant importance in disseminating traditional Chinese aspects. Conversely, Xu focuses more on free translation, particularly accentuating the rhythmic beauty of poetry. While communicating the cultural spirit of the original work, he adds artistic and creative elements to the translated version.

S. I. Hsiung's translation of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* stands out for its readability and refined language, avoiding the use of rhyme. The faithful translation approach results in a text that loses some of the performative aspects of drama but aligns with Western ideological norms. This version has become the most beloved among foreign readers and is incorporated into educational materials, greatly contributing to the cultural exchange between China and the West.

On the other hand, Xu's translation of *Romance of the Western Bower* places a strong emphasis on rhythmic beauty, employing rhyme and rhetoric extensively. The language is magnificent, genuinely blending artistic value with poetic beauty, earning high praise. While maintaining Chinese literary characteristics, Xu's strategy considers the reading habits and cultural background of Western readers, achieving a successful fusion of Chinese and Western cultures. However, its impact in the English-speaking world hasn't met expectations.

These two translations underscore the complexity and challenges of translating Chinese drama into English. On one hand, translations must stay true to the original to preserve its cultural richness. On the other hand, they must adapt to the target language audience, ensuring readability and attractiveness. The key to successfully promoting Chinese drama on the international stage lies in finding a delicate balance between retaining cultural essence and catering to the reception and understanding capacity of international audiences. Proper adjustments to translations can preserve the authentic cultural features while making them more acceptable and appreciated by readers. This delicate equilibrium is crucial for the successful global dissemination of Chinese drama.

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