



Cultural Filtering in Translation Memes: Allusions in English-Chinese Classical Poetry and Western Readers' Comprehension Barriers

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Received: 20 August 2025 | Received: in revised form 23 November 2025 | Accepted 15 December 2025

APA Citation:

Yunxia, H. (2025). Cultural Filtering in Translation Memes: Allusions in English-Chinese Classical Poetry and Western Readers' Comprehension Barriers *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11(3), 318-330.
Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32601/ejal.11328>

Abstract

Translation of Chinese classical poetry involves far more than a direct linguistic transfer; it requires a systematic mediation across complex cultural contexts. A core difficulty lies in the prevalence of culturally embedded memes, in the sense proposed by Dawkins, which often carry implicit and multi-layered meanings that do not lend themselves to literal translation. In practice, these translation-specific memes are handled through selective adaptation: some are domesticated and simplified to facilitate understanding for Western audiences, whereas others are preserved in their original form to maintain cultural authenticity for readers familiar with East Asian traditions. This study investigates the role of cultural filtering in the English translation of Chinese classical poetry, with a particular focus on how culturally bound memes are negotiated in the translation process. It analyses the strategies employed to mediate cultural distance and identifies key issues that Western readers should consider when interpreting translated poetic texts. The paper first reviews relevant translation theories, then conducts a comparative analysis of five canonical Chinese poems and their English renderings to demonstrate the application of theoretical approaches in practice. To safeguard the interpretive richness of allusive expressions, several recommendations are advanced: results should be presented without reducing the density of cultural allusions; translators should employ cross-cultural metaphors and select an appropriate cross-linguistic register; and the interpretive process should involve audiences with adequate cultural and linguistic competence.

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Keywords: Translation Memes, Cultural Filtering, Allusions, Chinese Classical Poetry, English Translation, Western Readership, Comprehension, Domestication, Foreignisation.

Introduction

Classical Chinese poetry, characterised by compressed expression, evocative imagery, and dense intertextuality, represents a foundational component of China's literary tradition and is widely regarded as one of the most influential poetic heritages globally. Its historical trajectory extends over more than two millennia, beginning with the Shijing (Book of Songs) during the Zhou Dynasty and continuing through the lyric traditions of the Tang and Song periods. Beyond aesthetic concerns, these poetic works incorporate social, political, and philosophical dimensions. Classical poems frequently contain allegorical and intertextual references, whether implicit or explicit, drawing on historical events, Confucian doctrine, earlier poetic

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32601/ejal.11328>

traditions, and mythological narratives. Such references enhance interpretative complexity and anchor the texts within their cultural context. These semiotic features, often implicit and culturally bounded, are readily interpretable for readers familiar with Chinese traditions, but they pose substantial challenges for translation, particularly for Western audiences who lack the relevant cultural frameworks (Bassnett, 2013).

These culturally embedded references, termed *diǎngù* (典故), constitute a core feature of classical Chinese literature. They commonly operate through allusion or parody, connecting the poem to earlier historical and literary sources. Through such mechanisms, allusions generate associative semantic networks that expand interpretative possibilities. For instance, the invocation of “Mount Lu” in Su Shi’s poetry may signify not only a geographical location but also philosophical discourse and established literary traditions, especially within Buddhist contexts. While native Chinese readers can access multiple interpretative layers through such references, Western readers may perceive them as obscure or semantically empty unless situated within their historical and cultural frameworks (Cheung & Neather, 2016). Consequently, translating classical poetry entails more than linguistic transfer; it constitutes a process of cultural negotiation. Translation studies scholars, including Chesterman, have addressed this complexity by conceptualising translation memes as recurrent patterns of translational behaviour or strategies within translator communities. These patterns include culturally conditioned norms governing the treatment of allusions and other culture-specific features. Chesterman’s memetic framework underscores the socially embedded, dynamic, and evolving nature of translation practice and is particularly useful for analysing how allusions are negotiated in cross-cultural literary translation (Damrosch, 2017).

The notion of cultural mediation is closely associated with this perspective and has been elaborated by scholars. Nida’s concept of dynamic equivalence promotes domestication strategies to reduce cultural distance and enhance accessibility for target readers (Nida, 2019). Conversely, Venuti’s notion of foreignisation advocates preserving cultural specificity, thereby encouraging readers to engage with unfamiliar cultural elements (Elmenfi, 2014). These theoretical approaches are especially pertinent to the translation of allusions, where translators must decide whether to retain, replace, omit, or adapt culture-specific references for the target audience (Eco, 2013). A central issue highlighted in this review is the absence of shared cultural reference points, which often produces cognitive dissonance for Western readers encountering translated Chinese classical poetry. In translation, allusive content may lose contextual depth, subtlety, and emotional resonance. Furthermore, translators inevitably impose culturally mediated interpretations on the source text through memetic strategies that, although necessary, reshape reception. Such interventions affect reader comprehension and influence international perceptions of Chinese culture and its poetic tradition. This review therefore examines how translation memes shape cultural filtering and influence reader interpretation, with a specific focus on allusions in classical Chinese poetry. The primary research questions are as follows:

- How are traditional allusions addressed in English translations of Chinese poetry?
- Which translation memes or strategies dominate this field, and how have they developed over time?
- How does the cultural filtering examined in this study influence Western readers’ understanding and interpretation of translated poems?
- What cognitive and interpretative barriers do non-Chinese readers encounter in relation to allusions (obstacle 1, obstacle 2, obstacle 3, and obstacle 4), and how can translators mitigate these challenges?

This review focuses on English translations of works by prominent classical Chinese poets, including Li Bai, Du Fu, Wang Wei, and Su Shi, across different historical periods and translation traditions. It integrates established theories from translation studies, cognitive semiotics, and reception theory, together with comparative analyses of the original Chinese texts and their English translations. By investigating translators’ engagement with cultural content through memetic practices and filtering strategies for allusions, this paper aims to advance understanding of literary translation as a mechanism of cultural transmission. It also proposes practical approaches to enhance reader engagement while preserving the cultural integrity of the source texts.

Conceptual Framework

To facilitate a rigorous examination of how allusions in Chinese classical poetry are translated for Western audiences, it is necessary to first delineate key theoretical constructs within translation studies. This section outlines three core concepts that structure the analytical framework of this review: translation memes, cultural filtering, and the interrelated notions of allusion and intertextuality. Together, these concepts provide a basis for analysing how culturally embedded references are preserved, transformed, or omitted in translation, and how these translational decisions shape the interpretative processes of Western readers (Jiang, 2018).

Translation Memes

The term meme was first proposed by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), where it was defined as a unit of cultural transmission analogous to the relationship between genotypes and

phenotypes in biological evolution. Memes encompass a wide range of cultural phenomena, including songs, expressions, fashions, and ideas, which are reproduced across individuals while undergoing modification as they circulate within specific sociocultural environments. Although the concept originated in evolutionary biology, it has subsequently been applied in disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, and cultural studies (Shields, 2017). Within translation studies, Chesterman extended the notion of memes to describe recurrent patterns of translational behaviour or strategies that circulate within translator communities (Chesterman, 2016). These translation memes are not biological entities but socially and intellectually transmitted conventions. They appear in the form of pedagogically endorsed practices and widely adopted techniques, such as literal translation, explicitation, and cultural substitution, which become institutionalised through repeated professional use (Lefevere, 2016).

Translation memes can be understood as operational conventions and cognitive-procedural frameworks employed by translators when negotiating meaning across cultural boundaries. In the context of translating Chinese poetry, such memes may involve preserving poetic form, reducing culture-specific references, or prioritising accessibility for the target readership. These practices are not fixed; they shift in response to reader expectations, institutional pressures, and critical scholarly discourse. Scholars examining the translation of allusions trace how these strategies have transformed across historical periods and linguistic settings (Liu, 1995). Conceptualising translational practice through a memetic lens also clarifies the persistence of certain dominant strategies, even when they result in semantic loss or cultural distortion. For example, the routine simplification or omission of culturally dense references in English translations illustrates a prevailing translation meme that prioritises fluency and readability over cultural fidelity, reflecting a broader tendency towards producing translations that conform to the stylistic and interpretative norms of the target culture.

Cultural Filtering

In Table 1, another key construct within this analytical framework is cultural filtering, a notion linked to the translation theories of Nida and Venuti, whose approaches to cultural content diverge substantially (Elmenfi, 2014; Nida, 2019). Nida’s concept of dynamic equivalence, later reformulated as functional equivalence, prioritises the effect of the message on the target audience, with the aim of eliciting a response comparable to that of the source-text readership (Nida, 2019). This orientation frequently results in domestication, whereby culturally unfamiliar elements are adapted into more familiar forms to facilitate comprehension. For instance, a reference to a particular historical figure in Chinese history may be replaced with a figure more recognisable to Western readers (Munday et al., 2022). By contrast, Venuti promotes foreignisation as an ethical stance in translation. This strategy seeks to preserve cultural and linguistic otherness in the translated text, intentionally confronting the target audience with unfamiliar elements rather than eliminating them (Elmenfi, 2014). Venuti argues that domestication is not a neutral practice but a form of cultural assimilation that reflects the homogenising dynamics of imperialism influencing the global circulation of texts (Katan & Taibi, 2021).

Table 1: Cultural filtering in Domestication and Foreignisation: Strategies, Effects, and Reader Impact in Translation Theory

Aspect	Domestication	Foreignisation
Definition	Adapting source text to fit the target culture’s norms and expectations	Retaining foreign cultural elements to preserve source text authenticity
Theoretical Proponent	Eugene Nida (Dynamic Equivalence)	Lawrence Venuti (Ethical Translation)
Translation Strategy	Replacing or explaining allusions using culturally familiar equivalents	Preserving original allusions with minimal intervention or annotation
Effect on Readability	Increases fluency and accessibility for target readers	May challenge target readers with unfamiliar references
Effect on Cultural Content	Risk of cultural dilution or loss of historical specificity	Retains cultural density and intertextuality of the original
Common Techniques	Substitution, paraphrase, glossing in the main text	Literal translation, footnotes, translator’s preface/notes
Reader Experience	Immediate comprehension; smoother reading flow	Slower, possibly more reflective reading requiring background knowledge
Risk	Ethnocentric bias; erasure of source culture identity	Reader alienation; potential loss of poetic effect
Example	Translating “Zhuangzi dreaming of a butterfly” as “a man dreaming he’s a butterfly.”	Keeping the original reference and adding a note about Zhuangzi’s Daoist significance

Cultural filtering denotes the degree and manner in which culturally embedded elements are altered, retained, or excluded in the translation process. Translators may consciously apply such filtering to align the text with the cognitive frameworks and cultural expectations of the target readership, whereas in other cases

filtering may occur implicitly through established professional norms or institutional constraints. This concept is particularly salient in poetic translation, where allusions function not only as carriers of information but also as sources of aesthetic and affective meaning. In the translation of Chinese classical poetry, cultural filtering influences whether an allusion is explicated to enhance clarity, replaced with a culturally equivalent reference from the target context, or preserved in its original form to maintain source-text integrity. These translational choices represent a continual negotiation between readability and cultural fidelity, and they play a decisive role in shaping how Western readers perceive, interpret, and evaluate the poetic text.

Allusion and Intertextuality in Chinese Poetry

The third core component of this conceptual framework is allusion, which is intrinsically connected to intertextuality. In classical Chinese poetry, allusions function as condensed references that encapsulate widely shared historical, literary, or cultural knowledge. Such references are typically conveyed through brief expressions, including personal names, idiomatic phrases, or quotations from canonical texts, and they carry substantial connotative meaning for readers who possess cultural literacy within the Chinese tradition (Ning, 2010). Allusions may be classified into several categories:

- Historical Allusions: References to prominent historical figures or events (for example, the collapse of the Qin Dynasty).
- Mythological Allusions: References to mythic figures or legendary narratives (for example, the Queen Mother of the West).
- Literary Allusions: Citations, adaptations, or echoes of earlier literary or philosophical texts.
- Philosophical Allusions: References to concepts and doctrines associated with Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism (Meulenbeld, 2019).

These allusions perform a fundamental structural and semantic function within the poem. Rather than serving as ornamental devices, they create intertextual linkages that situate the poem within a broader cultural and literary tradition. Through these connections, readers are encouraged to interpret the poem in relation to historical, philosophical, and textual precedents. For Western readers, who may lack the requisite cultural background, these intertextual layers are often inaccessible, and the compact and frequently ambiguous style of classical Chinese poetry, which constitutes a defining aesthetic feature, can become a barrier to comprehension in translation. When translators preserve allusions without explanation, the result may be opacity; conversely, excessive explanatory intervention may disrupt poetic rhythm, tonal coherence, or aesthetic integrity (Li & Yang, 2010). Consequently, the translation of allusions represents a critical site of negotiation between fidelity to the source text, effective cultural transmission, and the interpretative needs of the target readership. It is within this domain that translation memes and cultural filtering intersect most prominently as shown in Figure 1, and where translators' decisions exert the most substantial influence on readers' interpretative experiences.

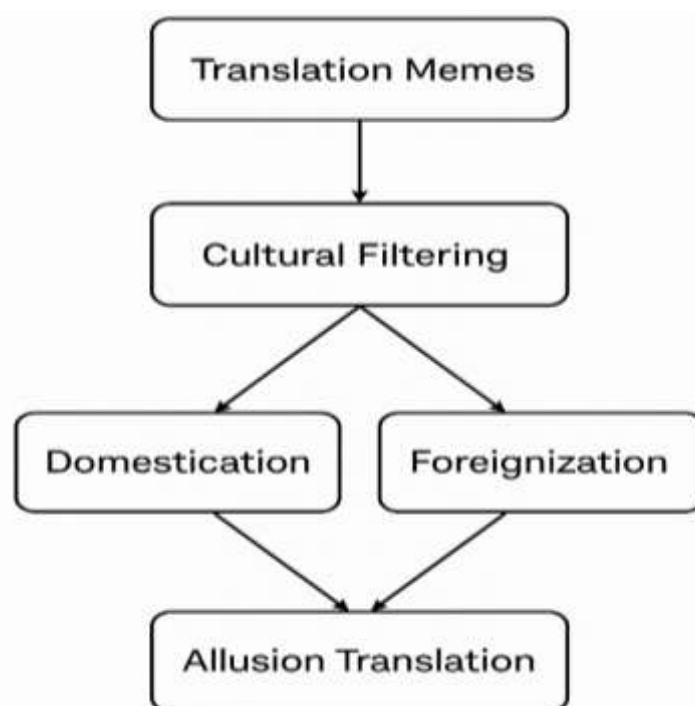


Figure 1: Relationships between Translation Memes, Cultural Filtering, and Allusion Translation Strategies (Self-Computing)

Literature Review

This section reviews key strands of academic scholarship relevant to the English translation of Chinese classical poetry, with particular emphasis on the treatment of allusions, cross-cultural translation strategies, and the role of translation memes in shaping translator practices. The literature review is structured into four subsections, each corresponding to one of the main thematic dimensions examined in this study.

Translation of Chinese Classical Poetry: Key Studies

The translation of classical Chinese poetry into English has developed through multiple trajectories, particularly within Anglophone literary and academic traditions. Early influential translators include Arthur Waley, Burton Watson, and Stephen Owen, whose work was instrumental in introducing Chinese poetry to English-speaking audiences. Arthur Waley was among the earliest translators of Tang and Song dynasty poetry in the early twentieth century. His translations prioritised fluency and prose-like readability rather than strict adherence to historical and cultural specificity. Although his approach has been criticised for oversimplification and adaptation to Western readerships, Waley significantly enhanced the accessibility of Chinese poetry and contributed to the foundational development of literary sinology (Ouyang, 2025).

Burton Watson adopted a more academically grounded approach while retaining broad readership appeal. He aimed to balance fidelity to the source text with clarity in modern English (Tao, 2024). Compared to Waley, Watson employed less idiomatic language and placed greater emphasis on preserving poetic and cultural conventions (Watson, 2014). He frequently incorporated footnotes and paraphrastic explanations to support reader comprehension. Stephen Owen, active in the late twentieth century, further advanced the field by foregrounding the historical and intellectual contexts of classical Chinese poetry. His studies combined literary criticism with philosophical and humanistic perspectives. Although Owen's translations sometimes reduce the density of allusions and layered meanings in the original texts, they require a higher level of cultural and literary competence from readers (Owen, 2020). Scholarly discussions of translation practice commonly identify three primary strategies:

- The Poema method closely follows the formal structure of the source text, employing a word-for-word approach that preserves surface-level linguistic features.
- Free translation prioritises the underlying meaning or spirit of the original, often modifying both form and content to maintain cultural coherence within the target language and context.
- Interpretative translation represents an intermediate approach between literal and fully communicative translation, seeking a balance between source-text fidelity and target-reader accessibility.

Each strategy involves distinct mechanisms for handling allusions, particularly regarding the transmission, adaptation, or reduction of cultural connotations in translation (Gutt, 2014).

Handling of Allusions in Cross-Cultural Translation

The scholars emphasise the particular difficulty of translating allusions, which constitute one of the most challenging elements in rendering Chinese poetry into English due to their deep roots in Chinese cultural and historical traditions (Chu, 2018). The success of such translations can be assessed along a continuum, ranging from effective adaptation to substantial loss of meaning. A common translational strategy involves simplification of cultural references; for example, replacing "Prime Minister Tani" with the more generic "a faithful minister," thereby reducing the original's historical specificity and cultural nuance. In contrast, David Hinton's translations often preserve Chinese personal names and mythological references. However, his frequent use of extensive explanatory notes has been criticised, as such annotations, while intended to maintain cultural and historical context, can produce excessive foreignisation and disrupt the poetic rhythm for readers lacking familiarity with Chinese traditions.

An instructive case can be found in Daoist studies and philological translation, exemplified by the work of Victor Mair at the University of Pennsylvania. Mair utilises paratextual devices extensively, providing interpretative guidance designed to safeguard the cultural integrity of the source text while rendering it intelligible for target readers. This approach reflects a careful negotiation between fidelity to the original and accessibility for the audience. Comparative analyses of different translations indicate that strategy selection is frequently shaped by the translator's objectives and assumptions regarding the reader's cultural competence. For instance, Hong (2025) examines translations of Wang Wei's poetry and notes that foreignising approaches may overwhelm general readers with cognitive complexity, whereas domestication risks eroding the semantic richness of the text. They refer to this issue in terms of "semantic density," though its precise definition remains somewhat ambiguous and may itself introduce interpretive challenges. Similarly, Ruokonen (2010) contends that more complex translations, which preserve cultural allusions through analogies or embedded explanations, are generally preferable. Although these strategies demand greater engagement from the reader, they support the retention of cultural references and enhance interpretive depth in the translation of poetry.

Reader Reception and Comprehension

Evaluating the translation of allusions extends beyond assessing textual fidelity; it also necessitates consideration of how readers engage with and interpret translated poetry. This subsection reviews empirical studies on reader reception to illuminate the interpretive challenges Western audiences encounter when confronted with texts dense in cultural references. For instance, [Ruokonen \(2012\)](#) conducted comprehension assessments with English-speaking university students reading translations of Tang dynasty poetry. The results demonstrated that readers frequently overlooked or misinterpreted allusions, even when explanatory footnotes were included. Participants tended to concentrate on the surface meaning of the text, often failing to apprehend deeper historical or mythological references. In a related investigation, the study examined responses to various translational approaches. The findings indicated that readers exposed to literal or foreignised translations often experienced a combination of admiration and disorientation, attributing their difficulty to unfamiliarity with certain allusions ([Venuti, 2017](#)). In contrast, those engaging with more domesticated translations found the texts more accessible but were less likely to perceive the loss of the original works' layered meanings ([Katan & Taibi, 2021](#)). These studies underscore the significance of reader reception in assessing the effectiveness of translation strategies, particularly in relation to the conveyance of culturally embedded allusions.

The Cognitive Barrier is Twofold

- Cultural references are frequently inadequately conveyed; although they may be immediately recognisable to Chinese readers, many allusions remain obscure to typical Western audiences.
- Three principal challenges emerge: first, the extensive use of footnotes and parentheses, which can interrupt the textual flow; second, these interruptions often hinder readers from engaging in deeper interpretive processes.
- Current scholarship emphasises the necessity of cultural filtering, but stresses that it must be applied judiciously. Excessive filtering can lead to cultural loss, whereas insufficient filtering may produce interpretive difficulties. For this study, it is essential to consider how readers cognitively respond to translation strategies, particularly those seeking to balance literal fidelity with cultural authenticity.

Translation Memes and Cultural Transfer

The concept of translation memes has been further examined in relation to the mechanisms of cultural transmission in literary translation ([Zid & Jilani, 2014](#)). Within this framework, memes are understood as recurring patterns of translational practice that are replicated across texts and transmitted between translators. Several translation memes have been frequently identified in English renditions of Chinese classical poetry, including:

- “Elegance over precision” – prioritising stylistic refinement in the target language, often at the cost of semantic accuracy.
- “Explanatory footnoting” – handling culturally specific allusions and obscure terms through paratextual explanations, such as footnotes, rather than integrating them into the main text.
- “Mythological omission” – a tendency to remove mythological references considered too obscure or unfamiliar for Western readers ([Frye & Macpherson, 2004](#)).

These strategies are not arbitrary but reflect established translational conventions shaped by formal training, publishing norms, and the influential practices of translators such as Waley or Owen. Over time, they contribute to what Bourdieu describes as a “collective translator habitus,” representing shared norms and expectations within translator communities regarding acceptable practice ([Owen, 2020](#)). An illustrative example is the translation history of Qu Yuan’s *Li Sao*, where early translations simplified or omitted much of the poem’s intertextual richness, privileging “meaning over wording.” As translation preferences shifted towards foreignising strategies and reader expectations evolved, subsequent renditions gradually reinstated these allusive elements.

Translation memes also shape the degree of agency exercised by translators. In certain instances, translators deliberately challenge conventional norms through experimental or hybrid approaches that disrupt standard poetic translation practices. Post-colonial interpretations of Chinese poetry, for example, reject the filtering of gendered or politicised content, seeking to move beyond traditional strategies. Ultimately, translation memes provide a framework for understanding the persistence of specific cultural filters, regardless of a translator’s theoretical orientation. Recognising these memes enables scholars and practitioners to critically evaluate and revise them, thereby contributing to the ethical and intellectual development of the discipline ([Newmark, 2011](#)).

Analysis of Translation Strategies for Allusions

The translation of Chinese classical poetry, particularly with regard to allusions, poses considerable challenges. Translators are required to preserve the essential meaning of the original text while also retaining

its cultural and connotative richness. Allusions, often grounded in historical, cultural, or literary references specific to Chinese tradition, become especially complex when the target audience consists of Western readers who may lack the necessary cultural background. These allusions play a central role in determining how faithfully a translator can convey or adapt the cultural and semantic nuances of the source text. This section presents a classification of strategies employed in translating allusions, provides illustrative examples from translated poems, and explores how the translator's cultural perspective shapes these translation decisions (Nord, 2007).

Strategy Typology

Strategies for translating allusions in Chinese classical poetry are typically classified into four principal approaches: direct preservation, cultural substitution, omission, and explanatory annotation. Each approach addresses the challenges of conveying both linguistic and cultural meaning.

- **Preservation:** This strategy entails retaining the original allusion in the translation, either by reproducing it verbatim or by selecting a term in the target language that closely approximates its meaning. The aim is to maintain the cultural resonance of the source text, ensuring that the allusion retains its intended significance. However, for readers lacking familiarity with the source culture, this approach may pose comprehension difficulties.
- **Substitution:** Here, the translator replaces the original allusion with a culturally analogous reference from the target culture. While this can enhance reader comprehension by introducing a familiar element, it frequently results in the loss of the original cultural nuance and the multiple layers of meaning inherent in the allusion.
- **Omission:** In some cases, translators may omit an allusion entirely, particularly when it is considered non-essential or lacks a relevant context in the target culture. Although this simplifies the text and reduces potential misunderstandings, it can diminish the literary and cultural richness of the translated work.
- **Annotation:** This method involves providing supplementary information to clarify the allusion for readers, commonly through footnotes, endnotes, or occasional integration into the main text. While annotations improve comprehension by making the source and significance of the allusion explicit, they can interrupt the poem's rhythm and hinder a smooth reading experience, potentially reducing reader engagement.

Case Studies of Translated Poems

To demonstrate the effects of different translation strategies, this section examines the works of eminent Chinese poets such as Li Bai, Du Fu, and Wang Wei. The density of historical, cultural, and philosophical references in their poetry makes them particularly instructive for analysing translational choices.

- **Li Bai:** A prominent Tang Dynasty poet, Li Bai frequently integrates Daoist themes, historical references, and vivid natural imagery. Translators may elect to preserve original allusions, as seen in *Drinking Alone by Moonlight*, where Daoist references to immortality are rendered literally to retain the poem's spiritual resonance. Alternatively, some translations employ substitution, replacing obscure Daoist concepts with more accessible Western analogues, or omit them entirely when considered non-essential. The chosen strategy critically shapes how the poem's philosophical depth is conveyed in the target language.
- **Du Fu:** Renowned for his reflective engagement with history and Confucian ideals, Du Fu's poetry is rich in references to Chinese political and social structures. In *Spring View*, for example, he alludes to the upheavals of the Tang Dynasty. Such references may be opaque to Western readers, prompting translators to add explanatory notes for historical context. However, this can disrupt the poem's flow, leading some translators to prefer substitution or omission. While these approaches enhance readability, they risk diminishing the original complexity and intent of the text.
- **Wang Wei:** Celebrated for his fusion of Buddhist symbolism and natural imagery, Wang Wei draws extensively on Zen and Buddhist-Sanskrit traditions. In poems such as *Deer Park*, translators often retain the visual imagery while adapting Buddhist terminology into more broadly spiritual expressions for contemporary readers. Although this can improve accessibility, it may compromise the philosophical and cultural integrity of Wang Wei's original vision, potentially obscuring the poet's distinctive spiritual framework.

The outcomes of these translational decisions are significant in terms of both semantic fidelity and cultural authenticity. Preservation strategies tend to produce translations that are intellectually dense and culturally faithful, albeit potentially challenging for general audiences. Conversely, substitution and omission strategies enhance readability and accessibility, but often at the expense of the poem's original cultural richness and poetic subtlety.

Role of Translator's Cultural Positioning

The translator's handling of allusions is profoundly influenced by their cultural orientation and personal judgement. The management of such references is therefore not purely a technical matter but is shaped by

the translator's familiarity with the source and target languages, as well as their respective cultural frameworks. When translation is understood not merely as a linguistic exercise but as the conveyance of cultural meaning, translators can be regarded as cultural mediators. This role becomes particularly complex when dealing with texts rich in culturally embedded or inferential references, as is often the case in literary works (Tourey, 2012). In some instances, translators deliberately incorporate their own cultural perspective, applying a form of filtering in which Chinese allusions are reframed using motifs more accessible to Western audiences. These decisions are frequently guided by the translator's personal biases or assumptions regarding the target readership's expectations. While such an approach may facilitate comprehension, it carries the risk of diluting the original cultural significance, as the connotative depth of allusions may be simplified or altered (Tymoczko, 2005).

Conversely, other translators adopt a more neutral position, consciously avoiding the imposition of personal interpretation. Their goal is to act as transparent intermediaries, striving to preserve the cultural nuances of the source text. This often entails the inclusion of supplementary explanations or comprehensive research into both the source and target cultures. Ultimately, the translator's cultural stance decisively shapes the selection of translation strategies and the degree of interpretive autonomy afforded to the reader. While some translators aim for invisibility within the text, others assume the active role of cultural interpreters, directly influencing how allusions are received and understood within the target culture (Venuti, 2019).

Comprehension Obstacles for Western Readers

The translation of Chinese classical poetry poses distinct challenges, particularly regarding comprehension among English-speaking readers. These difficulties primarily arise from fundamental divergences between Chinese and Western linguistic, cultural, and literary traditions. The frequent incorporation of Confucian and Daoist themes, historical allusions, and intertextual references can impede understanding when the target audience lacks familiarity with the underlying conceptual frameworks. In such instances, culturally embedded meanings and allusions may become inaccessible or be misinterpreted. Insights from cognitive translation studies and reception theory have further illuminated how readers engage with translated texts and the obstacles they encounter. These perspectives help clarify the extent to which linguistic and cultural differences influence comprehension. This section addresses these challenges by examining issues related to language and cultural variance, intertextuality, the application of reception theory, and the role of paratextual elements in either facilitating or hindering reader understanding.

Linguistic and Cultural Barriers

A central challenge in translating Chinese classical poetry arises from the profound differences between the linguistic and cultural frameworks of the source and target languages. Many poems are laden with Confucian, Daoist, or historical allusions that are not immediately intelligible to Western readers, yet these references are integral to Chinese literary tradition. For instance, Wang Wei's poetry often incorporates Daoist concepts that are readily understood by readers familiar with Daoist philosophy. In contrast, Western audiences, particularly those without foundational knowledge of Daoism, may find these references opaque. Similarly, Confucian ideals such as filial piety, social harmony, and ritual propriety may lack resonance for readers unacquainted with Confucian thought. Historical context further complicates comprehension. The Tang Dynasty, which shaped much of the period's poetic output, provides essential cultural and political background; without this knowledge, Western readers may misinterpret the significance of certain allusions or grasp only a superficial sense of the text. Linguistic structures also contribute to difficulty. Classical Chinese poetry is characterised by conciseness, parallel constructions, and highly evocative imagery, which contrast sharply with the more explicit, linear narrative forms common in Western literature. Literal translations may improve accessibility but require careful balancing of fidelity to the source with clarity for the target audience. Determining the extent to which original form and meaning should be preserved thus remains a central consideration in the translation of Chinese classical poetry.

Problems of Intertextuality

Another major challenge in translating Chinese classical poetry lies in its extensive intertextuality. During the classical periods, poets frequently drew upon earlier literary works or cultural traditions deeply embedded in Chinese society, many of which have no direct parallels in Western literature. These intertextual references contribute to a complex literary identity, encompassing allusions to historical events, mythological figures, or canonical texts. While such references are readily recognised by Chinese readers, they often remain obscure to Western audiences. For instance, Li Bai's mention of the Xuanwu Gate Incident would immediately resonate with Chinese readers, given its historical and political significance as a case of political assassination, but without contextualisation, it is likely to be unintelligible to foreign readers.

Classical Chinese poetry also frequently employs natural imagery imbued with philosophical significance derived from Daoism and Buddhism. Elements such as the moon, mountains, rivers, and flowers function not

merely as descriptive motifs but as conduits for abstract and spiritual reflection. These symbolic images carry layered philosophical meanings for Chinese readers, whereas Western literary traditions may interpret similar imagery through alternative aesthetic or metaphorical frameworks. Translating these intertextual and symbolic elements thus requires both linguistic precision and an acute awareness of their embedded cultural and philosophical connotations. Readers unfamiliar with Chinese literary or philosophical contexts may inadvertently project their own interpretive frameworks onto the translation, risking oversimplification or misinterpretation. Translators must therefore negotiate whether to retain culturally specific references, which may challenge or alienate the reader, or to adapt them into a more familiar Western idiom, potentially compromising the original's cultural depth and richness.

Reception Studies and Reader Response

Reception studies and cognitive translation theory provide crucial insights into how English-speaking readers perceive and engage with Chinese poetry rendered in translation. Reception studies explore the responses of specific audiences to texts, while cognitive translation theory examines the mental processes involved when readers interact with translated material. Together, these approaches indicate that Western readers frequently face substantial challenges when encountering classical Chinese poetry, largely due to cultural and conceptual elements that may be unfamiliar or difficult to contextualise. Feedback from surveys and audience studies suggests that these difficulties often stem less from the ideas themselves than from the stylistic complexity and density of the poetic form. Western readers commonly struggle with embedded cultural references, historical allusions, and philosophical concepts intrinsic to Chinese poetry. The characteristic suggestiveness and allusiveness of these works can generate confusion or disengagement, particularly among those accustomed to more linear prose or conventionally structured literature. From the perspective of cognitive translation theory, efforts to interpret culturally dense or conceptually intricate cues increase cognitive load and slow comprehension. Challenges emerge when translators omit implicit meanings or substitute them with Western analogues that fail to convey the original nuance. In such cases, the translation may appear less meaningful or insufficiently rich in interpretive depth. This risk is heightened when translators overestimate the cultural familiarity of their readership, potentially leading to miscommunication and a diminished appreciation of the literary work.

Role of Paratexts

Paratextual elements, including footnotes, appendices, introductions, and commentaries, can either aid or impede Western readers' understanding of Chinese classical poetry in translation. When applied effectively, these elements provide essential contextual and cultural information. For example, when a poem or its title references philosophical concepts from Confucianism or Daoism, paratexts can guide the reader's interpretation. Introductions and commentaries are particularly useful in situating a text within its historical, social, or political context, thereby deepening comprehension of the poem's thematic concerns. However, paratexts can also create interpretive difficulties. Excessive reliance on annotations, long introductions, or detailed commentaries may interrupt the reading flow, overwhelm readers, and give the impression that additional resources are required to understand the poem. In some cases, paratexts that over-explain or misrepresent cultural allusions may distort the original meaning, hindering readers from forming an authentic connection with the work. While paratexts possess considerable interpretive value, they must be used judiciously to support, rather than obstruct, engagement. Western readers frequently encounter barriers arising from linguistic, cultural, and literary differences, which can discourage sustained engagement, especially when compounded by intertextual density or cognitive complexity. Careful application of paratexts can help bridge these gaps, enabling translators to navigate the challenges of cross-cultural rendering while fostering a deeper appreciation of Chinese classical poetry among Western audiences.

Discussion

A thorough analysis of the strategies employed in translating Chinese classical poetry into English highlights the considerable challenges arising from linguistic, cultural, and philosophical divergences. Central to these challenges is the cultural-filter hypothesis, which significantly informs the translation of allusions, metaphors, and other culturally embedded references from the source into the target language. This process of cultural mediation is often guided by "translation memes," which influence translators' choices to retain, omit, or adapt culturally specific content. Such decisions inevitably shape how the poem's cultural significance is conveyed and perceived in the translated version (Owen, 1996). This research seeks to identify a balanced approach that maintains linguistic clarity for Western readers while preserving the essential cultural depth of the original work. Achieving this equilibrium is critical to ensuring that the translated poem is both accessible and faithful to its cultural framework. The findings discussed here consider the implications of various translation strategies, particularly in terms of improving readability while potentially reducing the richness of culturally nuanced expressions. The discussion further addresses broader considerations regarding the evolving role of the translator and educator, as well as ethical questions surrounding the treatment of cultural unfamiliarity. Whether foreign elements should be preserved to uphold the text's

cultural authenticity or adapted to enhance audience comprehension remains a central concern for practitioners in the field (Hervouet, 1959).

Synthesis of Findings: Translation Memes and Cultural Filtering Effects

The examination of translation strategies applied to allusions in Chinese classical poetry demonstrates that such references are deeply embedded with cultural significance, often inaccessible to readers lacking familiarity with Chinese traditions. As a result, translators employ a range of approaches, including the preservation of original expressions, substitution with culturally analogous terms, omission, or the addition of explanatory annotations. These strategies are particularly prominent when addressing content related to Confucian or Daoist philosophy, historical events, or nature-based symbolism. Each decision reflects an effort to convey the cultural essence of the source text within a different cultural context. The concept of translation memes offers a valuable lens for understanding how cultural elements are either maintained or modified in the translation process. These memes represent recurring patterns in which specific cultural features are replicated, adapted, or transformed to align with the expectations of the target readership. For example, a translator might retain a Confucian reference or replace it with a Western philosophical equivalent, such as substituting Confucian ethical principles with Christian moral concepts. While such adaptations can improve accessibility for Western audiences, they may simultaneously reduce the distinctive cultural depth that defines Chinese classical poetry. These cultural filtering mechanisms thus underscore the tension inherent in translation: balancing the preservation of the source text's ideological and cultural integrity with the need to render it intelligible and meaningful to a foreign audience.

Critical Reflection on the Balance between Accessibility and Authenticity

A central challenge in translating Chinese classical poetry lies in striking an appropriate balance between accessibility for the target audience and fidelity to the source text. Translators often incorporate explanatory elements to aid comprehension for readers unfamiliar with the historical or cultural references embedded in the original poem. However, this strategy can risk compromising the authenticity and subtlety of the source material (Huang & Zhang, 2020). This tension is especially pronounced in classical Chinese poetry, where texts are deeply rooted in specific cultural worldviews. Accurately conveying the connotative meaning of allusions to Confucian or Daoist principles requires fidelity to the original context, which may be largely unfamiliar to Western readers. Replacing culturally dense references with analogous Western concepts can enhance immediate understanding but may simultaneously distort the original intent, erasing layers of cultural significance. Conversely, strategies that preserve the original references may maintain cultural and semantic integrity but risk producing translations that are opaque or inaccessible to readers lacking relevant cultural knowledge. Accordingly, translators must exercise careful judgement in determining which cultural elements are indispensable to the poem's meaning and which can be adapted or omitted to facilitate comprehension. These decisions depend not only on the translator's objectives and understanding of the target audience's expectations but also on the thematic and cultural specificity of the poem itself. For instance, a text rich in Daoist philosophy may require interpretive strategies to convey its depth, whereas a poem expressing universal human emotions might be comprehensible to English-speaking readers with minimal cultural adaptation.

Implications for Future Translators and Educators

The findings of this study offer valuable guidance for future translators, shedding light on factors that may either facilitate or impede the effective application of translation practices in contemporary contexts. A primary consideration for translators is achieving an appropriate balance between diegetic and non-diegetic elements within their chosen translation strategy. To make informed decisions regarding the treatment of cultural references, translators must cultivate a thorough understanding of the source text's cultural and historical context. Two additional aspects warrant careful attention: first, intertextuality, which involves recognising the poem's connections with other works within its literary tradition, and second, the identification of these intertexts as key instruments for uncovering the poem's layered meanings. Equally important is ensuring that readers are provided with sufficient cultural context to support comprehension. This can be achieved through judicious use of paratextual elements such as introductions, footnotes, or endnotes, which convey necessary information without overwhelming the reader or compromising the poem's aesthetic qualities. Educators play a crucial role in this process by fostering critical reading skills, enabling students to appreciate translated literature not only for its artistic value but also as a reflection of its cultural and historical foundations (Liu, 1995; Mair, 2010). This study highlights the importance of promoting cultural awareness in literary education. By engaging with allusions, examining translators' decision-making processes, and exploring the tension between cultural assimilation and acculturation, students can develop a more nuanced and critical approach to translated texts. Such preparation equips them to navigate the complexities inherent in cross-cultural literary interpretation and to appreciate the delicate balance between preserving cultural integrity and facilitating accessibility in translation.

The Ethical Dimension: Should Cultural Strangeness Be Preserved?

Cultural strangeness poses a notable ethical challenge within translation studies, particularly regarding whether culturally distinctive or anomalous practices should be preserved in translated texts. This issue engages fundamental ethical considerations, including individual rights and autonomy. When such cultural particularities are maintained without regard for the reader's comprehension or well-being, there is a risk that the preservation of cultural distinctiveness may inadvertently subordinate the accessibility of the text, potentially compromising ethical responsibilities toward the audience. As highlighted earlier, the decision to retain or adapt cultural otherness in translation is ethically complex. Translators must determine whether their role is to uphold the alienness of the source text or to render it intelligible for readers unfamiliar with its cultural context. Both approaches offer legitimate justifications. Preserving exotic or culturally distant elements can enrich the reading experience by exposing audiences to alternative worldviews. By maintaining these references, translators enable readers to engage with the depth and nuance of the original work, promoting intercultural understanding and appreciation (Owen, 1977). This perspective supports the notion that translation should function as a conduit for intercultural dialogue rather than as a vehicle for imposing the translator's own cultural lens on the source text (Chan, 2015). Conversely, the unmediated retention of culturally specific references may render the text obscure or alienating for readers lacking the necessary background knowledge. In such cases, strict fidelity to the source risks obstructing comprehension, raising ethical questions regarding the fairness of expecting readers to interpret culturally coded material without adequate guidance. Translators must therefore negotiate a careful balance between remaining true to the cultural essence of the source text and accommodating the interpretive capacities of the target audience. Ethical translation practice requires an approach that simultaneously honours the original cultural context and facilitates meaningful engagement, ensuring that the reader can access and appreciate the text without diminishing its inherent cultural richness.

Conclusion

This review has investigated the function of translation memes as mechanisms of cultural filtering, with particular emphasis on allusions, within the English translations of Chinese classical poetry. It has highlighted the challenges posed by rendering culturally specific material for Western audiences. The analysis demonstrates that allusions function as both figurative and culturally embedded devices, contributing substantially to the interpretive and symbolic richness of Chinese classical poetry. These elements present particular difficulties for translators when the intended readership lacks familiarity with Chinese historical and cultural contexts. Within the framework of translation memes, the cultural dimensions of translation are revealed through strategies such as domestication, foreignisation, and amplification. While these approaches can enhance accessibility for Western readers by introducing familiar elements, they often compromise cultural and historical fidelity, potentially leading to distorted or misleading interpretations of the original work. The review also emphasises the need for a nuanced understanding of cross-cultural communication in translation. The challenges extend beyond lexical or syntactic concerns to encompass semantic depth and cultural embeddedness, which are shaped by historical context and literary traditions distinct from those of Western audiences. Consequently, translation should be understood not merely as a linguistic exercise but as a complex cultural practice, requiring careful attention to the interplay between language, history, and ideology. This review argues that allusions in Chinese classical poetry cannot be transferred seamlessly across cultural frameworks. Future research should continue to explore the evolving nature of translation memes and strategies, with the goal of enabling non-Chinese readers to engage meaningfully with Chinese classical poetry. Such efforts can deepen intercultural appreciation and promote a more informed reception of Chinese literary heritage.

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