

# On the Translation of Plant Images in Li Sao (离骚)

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## ABSTRACT

*Li Sao* is the most important part of *Chu Ci* or *The Songs of the South* which occupies an important place in Chinese literature. There are many cultural images in *Chu Ci*, especially *Li Sao*, and plant images constitute the main body of the cultural images in the classic. They convey both literal and implicit meanings. In other words, poet Qu Yuan uses them to symbolize good or bad things in the source text. The implied meaning of the plant images can only be grasped by putting them into the specific context. The translations in this study use various translating methods such as interpretation and annotation to represent the symbolic meanings of the plant images, but sometimes it is seen that the translators fail to convey the original meaning correctly. It is assumed that only by achieving optimal relevance can target readers understand the original images easily.

**Keywords:** *Li Sao*; plant images; translation methods; Relevance Theory

### 1. Introduction

*Chu Ci* (楚辞), or *The Songs of the South* by Qu Yuan (屈原) and other poets, occupies a very important place in Chinese literature. And *Li Sao* (离骚), or *Encountering Sorrow* by Qu Yuan, is the most important part of *Chu Ci*. As a cultural and literary canon, *Li Sao* is full of cultural images, especially plant images which create great challenges for translators. In this study, we will briefly discuss the methods for translating plant images in the English translations of *Li Sao* by Xu Yuanchong (1994), Yang Hsien-yi & Gladys Yang (2001), Zhuo Zhenying (2006) and David Hawkes (1985) in light of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). The theory holds that an assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context and that optimal relevance lies in the achievement of the greatest contextual effect with the least processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1986: 122). It sheds light on the translation of plant images with profound meanings in *Li Sao*.

### 2. Plant Images in *Li Sao*

According to Xie Tianzhen (1999: 181), a cultural image can be a kind of plant, such as a bamboo in Chinese culture or an oak in American and European culture. It can be an animal or bird in reality or in tales, such as a crow in China or an owl in English-speaking countries. It can be an idiom, a proverb or even a number.

According to Eugene A. Nida (2004: 289), culture is divided into five categories: ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture and linguistic culture. *Li Sao* is one of the oldest literary works in China in which there are many plant images, animal images, historical images, geographical images and mythological images which contain rich cultural connotations. When they are translated into English, not only the literal meaning but also the cultural information contained in the source text (ST) should be translated. It is difficult for foreign readers to understand the cultural images in the translations. To figure out the transmission methods and effects of the cultural images in the classic, we make a comparative study on the English versions of it by Xu Yuanchong, Yang Hsien-yi & Gladys Yang, Zhuo Zhenying and David Hawkes (henceforth “Xu”, “Yang & Yang”, “Zhuo” and “Hawkes”). Based on the classification of culture by Eugene Nida (2004), and the cultural images appearing in *Li Sao*, we divide the cultural images in *Li Sao* into the following categories: ecological images, historical images, geographical images and mythological images. These four categories may well cover most of the cultural images in *Li Sao* and plant images are part of ecological images.

There are many plants in *Li Sao* which symbolize some kinds of emotion and affection, and they fall into two categories: fragrant herbs and stinking weeds. The former represent the virtuous people for whom the poet looks but in vain, while the latter are the wretched sycophants around the king. Both of them imply human emotions expressed by the poet via the observation of their growth characteristics, morphology and functions.

Specifically speaking, there are 15 kinds of fragrant herbs and woods in *Li Sao*, among which the herbs account for the majority, such as “江离”, “白芷”, “秋兰”, “宿莽”, “蕙”, “茹”, “留夷”, “揭车”, “杜衡”, “菊” and “胡绳”, while the woods include “木兰”, “椒”, “桂” and “薜荔”. The stinking weeds such as “棘”, “茅”, “薺”, “藜”, “蒺”, “萧” and “艾” are always creeping plants with sharp thorns, and they are used as a metaphor for something sinister. There are three plant images relating to mythology, including “扶桑”, “若木” and “琼枝”.

3. Translation Methods for Plant Images in *Li Sao*

The plant images in *Li Sao* and their translations in the target text (TT) are demonstrated as follows (see Table 1):

Table 1: Plant images and their translations

Types	ST	Xu	Yang & Yang	Zhuo	Hawkes
Sweet grasses	江蓠	sweet grass	Angelic herbs	Selinea	Selinea
	辟芷		sweet selineas	Angelica	shady angelica
	秋兰	orchids	orchids	Cymbidium flowers	autumn orchids
	宿莽	secluded one	winter-thorn	Winter-Thorn	sedges of the islets
	蕙	sweet orchids	melilotus white	Cassia	the most-prized blossoms
	茝			ash	
	荃	you	The prince	The Calamus	the Fragrant One
	杜衡	fragrant grass	The rumex fragrant	The Rumex fragrant	arums
	菝	clover	Valeria white	Valeria White	valerian
	胡绳	ivy	ivy	ivy	ivy
Flowers	留夷	peonies	azalea bright	Azalea bright	sweet lichens
	揭车				The cart-halting flower
	秋菊	aster	aster	Chrysanthemum	chrysanthemums
	芙蓉	lilies white	Lilies white	Lotus flowers	Lotus petals
Fragrant woods	木兰	grass	magnolias	Magnolia	angelica
	申椒	pepper	cassia	Sweet Grass	pepper
	菌桂	cassia	pepper	Angelica	cinnamon
	薜荔	/	blue wisteria	Wisteria wreaths	castor plant
Stinking weeds	菝藂	thorns and weeds	lentils and weeds	weed	thorns, king-grass, surly-ear
	艾	foul mugwort	stinking mugwort	Stinking Mugwort	mugwort
	茅	weeds	weeds	Wild-Grass	straw
	萧艾	weeds and wormwood	mugworts	Moxa	Worthless mugwort
	檝	it	dogwood	The Cornel	Stinking dogwood
Sacred tree	扶桑	giant tree	the brake	Fusang	Fu-sang tree
	若木	branch	a golden bough	Ruomu the Fairy Tree	Ruo tree(Jo-tree)
Others	琼茅	magic herb	mistletoe	cogon-grass	holy plant
	菱荷	lotus leaves	cress leaves	lotus leaves	lotus and water-chestnut leaves
	琼枝	jasper bough	jasper boughs	Jasper Bough	jasper branch

Let us look at some examples in the context:

**Example 1:** 荃不查余之中情兮，反信谗而齋怒。 (Wang, 2017: 39-40)

Table 2: Rendering of “荃” in the four translations

ST	Xu	Yang & Yang	Zhuo	Hawkes
荃	you	the prince	Calamus	the Fragrant One

Xu To my loyalty you're unkind, oh!  
You heed slander and burst in fire.  
 Yang & Yang The prince my true integrity defamed,  
 Gave ear to slander, high his anger flamed;  
 Zhuo The Calamus ignored my holy sentiment  
 And, credulous to slander, his spite he did vent.  
 Hawkes But the Fragrant One refused to examine my true feelings:  
 He lent ear instead to slander, and raged against me.

“荃” (*quan*), has an alternative name “菰” (*sun*), grows near the water and is fragrant, which is metaphorically used to refer to King Huai of Chu here. Both Xu and Yang & Yang omit the image “荃” and replace it with the personal pronoun “you” and the title “prince” (see Table 2). The original author’s intention here is only to express his mood. It is not that important whether the image “荃” is retained or omitted. Zhuo renders it as “calamus”, while Hawkes translates it freely into “the Fragrant One” with a note as follows: “the Fragrant One: the Chinese word *quan*, literally a kind of iris or flowering rush, is used here by the poet in addressing his king” (Hawkes, 1959: 84).

**Example 2:**

兰芷变而不芳兮，荃蕙化而为茅；  
何昔日之芳草兮，今直为萧艾也。 (Wang, 2017: 309-310)

Table 3: Rendering of “兰芷”，“荃蕙”，“茅” and “萧艾” in the four translations

ST	Xu	Yang & Yang	Zhuo	Hawkes
兰芷	sweet orchids	orchids	orchid and angelica	orchid and iris
荃蕙	sweet grass	angelicas	magnolia	flag and melilotus
茅	weeds	weeds	wild-grass	straw
萧艾	weeds and wormwood	mugworts	moxa which stink	worthless mugwort

Xu Sweet orchids have lost fragrant smell, oh!  
Sweet grass turn to weeds stinking strong.  
 ...Turn to weeds and wormwood unfair?  
 Yang & Yang Even orchids changed, their fragrance quickly lost,  
 And midst the weeds angelicas were tossed.  
 ...Their hue have changed, and turned to mugworts grey?  
 Zhuo The Orchid and Angelica lose their perfume.  
 And the form of Wild-Grass the Magnolia does assume.  
 ...To the status of such grasses as the Moxa which stink?  
 Hawkes Orchid and iris have lost all their fragrance;  
Flag and melilotus have changed into straw.  
 ...Now all transformed themselves into worthless mugwort?

The plant images such as “兰”，“芷”，“荃” and “蕙” mentioned in example 2 are fragrant plants and have medicinal value, which represent the lofty character and cultivated personality in the poem (see Figure 1). On the other hand, “茅” and “萧艾” represent pranksters and hucksters. This example implies that the King of Chu favors his ministers of calumny, which is a kind of metonymy for political relationship. Generally speaking, we have to do research on the botanical meaning of the images and figure out their cultural contextual meanings .



Figure 1: Pictures of lancao (兰草), baizhi (白芷), hui (蕙), ai (艾) and mao (茅)

According to the translations in example 2, “兰芷” is translated respectively as sweet orchids, orchids, orchid and angelica, orchid and iris. In Xu’ version, not only the referential meaning but the characteristics of the plant have been translated. Zhuo adopts the literal translation which just presents the referential meaning of the two images. Hawkes replaces the image “芷” with “iris” (see Table 3). As a popular garden flower, Iris is a kind of flowering plant with showy flowers, and it is always regarded as the national or regional flower by many countries and states, such as Croatia, Jordan, Louisiana and Tennessee (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Pictures of iris, melilotus and magnolia

Hawkes replaces the image “茅” with another image “straw” which is an agricultural by-product that is not the plant to which the original image refers. Apparently, Hawkes has made a wrong contextual assumption according to Relevance Theory. Both Zhuo and Hawkes adopt interpretation and translate the image “艾” into “Moxa which stink” and “Worthless mugwort”. By adding the verb “stink” and the adjective “worthless”, the characteristics of the two images are conveyed accurately, and thus the optimal relevance is achieved on the part of target readers.

**Example 3:**

总余轡乎扶桑，折若木以拂日兮 (Wang, 2017: 194-195)

Table 4: Rendering of “扶桑” and “若木” in the four translations

ST	Xu	Yang & Yang	Zhuo	Hawkes
扶桑	giant tree	The brake	Fusang	Fu-sang tree
若木	branch	golden bough	a branch from Ruomu the Fairy Tree	Ruo tree (Jo-tree)

Xu I tie their reins to giant tree.  
 I break a branch to brush Sun’s path, oh!

Yang & Yang Where bathed the sun, whilst I upon the brake  
 Fastened my reins; a golden bough I sought

Zhuo Which I tie to Fusang, ’neath which the sun does out burst.  
 I break off a branch from Ruomu the Fairy Tree

Hawkes And tied their reins up to the Fu-sang tree.  
 I broke a sprig of the Ruo tree to strike the sun with

Both “扶桑” and “若木” are legendary trees that relate to the sun, and the relevance between the trees and the sun must be reflected in the translation. Hong Xingzu, a famous scholar of the Song Dynasty, offers the record on the trees in *Tales of Ten States* (十洲记) as follows: “Fusang trees grow in blue seas; the leaves are like those of white mulberry; they are as long as thousands of meters and as wide as two thousand meters; they tend to grow in twos; they are called Fusang” (“扶桑在碧海中，叶似桑树，长数千丈，大二千围，两两更相依倚，是名扶桑”). This shows that “扶桑” is also called “大木” (big tree). Xu’s translation “giant tree” may enable the target readers to realize how magical the tree is. Yang & Yang replace the image with another image “brake”, which not only omits the original culture



but also fails to convey the connotation of the image (see Table 4). Apparently, without the contextual knowledge about the image “扶桑” in Chinese culture, the target readers may have to make great efforts to grasp the associative meaning in the versions of Yang & Yang. On the contrary, Zhuo adopts transliteration and interprets it as “Fusang, ’neath which the sun does out burst” which not only retains the original cultural image, but also discloses the relationship between “扶桑” and the sun. Hawkes’s version helps the target readers to attain the optimal relevance with a clear note like this: “Fu-sang tree: Mythical tree in the far east which the sun climbs up in his rising. According to one version of the myth, it had ten suns in its branches, one for every day of the week” (Hawkes, 1959: 28).

“若木” is another name of “扶桑”, which also relates to the sun. Xu roughly translates it as “a branch” which is unable to convey the associative meaning of the image. Yang & Yang make a wrong assumption and interpret “若木” as “a golden bough” which may somewhat reminds the readers of the scene that the sun is shining over the tree. However, in western countries, “golden bough” is reminiscent of J. M. W. Turner’s painting (see Figure 3). Meanwhile, “golden bough” is also existent in the Latin epic *The Aeneid*, written by Virgil between 29 BC and 19 BC, in which Aeneas and the Sibyl present the golden bough to the gatekeeper of Hades to gain admission. In Roman mythology, “golden bough” has nothing to do with the sun, which gives rise to the cultural dislocation and fails to achieve the optimal relevance.



Figure 3: J. M. W. Turner's painting of the Golden Bough incident in the *Aeneid*

According to the data analysis, the frequency of the translation methods used by the four translators to translate plant images is listed in the table below (see Table 5). The statistical results are as follows.

Table 5: Translation methods for plant images

	T	L	A	O	S	I
Xu		6		7	9	8
Yang & Yang		5		1	15	9
Zhuo	1	7		2	13	7
Hawkes	3	9	3		7	8

Note: T= transliteration      L= literal translation      A= annotation  
 O=omission      S=substitution      I=interpretation

The data in Table 5 clearly shows that it is substitution that the four translators use most frequently when translating the plant images, while transliteration and annotation are seldom used. Xu tends to replace the plant images with its hyponyms. For example, he translates “江蓠” and “辟芷” as “sweet grass”, “杜衡” as “fragrant grass”, and “茅” as “weeds”.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

It is well-known that there are many plant images used in *Chu Ci*, including flowers, grasses, weeds and woods and that these plants have both literal and metaphorical meanings. In other words, poet Qu Yuan uses them to symbolize good and bad people or things. Their implicit meaning can only be grasped by putting them in the specific context in which Qu Yuan often mention and worries about his native country and people. In translating *Li Sao*, special attention should be paid to the plants with symbolic meanings. As has been discussed above, the translators sometimes fail to represent the implied meaning expressed by the plant images in the classic, even though they use various translating methods, such as literal translation, interpretation, substitution, omission, annotation and transliteration. Only by achieving the optimal relevance in the target text can target readers understand the original cultural images easily. But this is not an easy job for translators in rendering ancient classics.

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