

## **Ethereal Tranquility: A Study of the English Translation of Hanshi Chan Poems in Early Qing Dynasty through the Perspectives of Translation Aesthetics**

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**Abstract:** The Lingnan poet-monk group in early Qing Dynasty is the largest poet group in China to date, with the most renowned being the Haiyun school. The leader, Hanshi, left behind the Xiatang Poetry Collection in 20 volumes, which is considered a classic of Lingnan Buddhist literature. The Chan poems of Tianran Hanshi, as an aesthetic object, contain rich Chan meanings and artistic nuances. Their aesthetic value is primarily reflected in three aspects: the beauty of sound, the beauty of emotion, and the beauty of imagery. This study, using Liu miqing's translation aesthetics as a linguistic aesthetic framework, explores the English translation practices of ancient poems, analyzing how interlingual conversion is carried out within formal and non-formal systems, and how the Chan principles of the original poems are conveyed. The goal is to recreate the ethereal tranquility of the original, promoting the cultural dissemination and reception of Lingnan monk poetry in the English-speaking world.

**Keywords:** Monk poets of Lingnan; Tianran Hanshi; English Translation of Chan Poetry

### **1. Introduction**

In the early Qing dynasty, a group of scholars donned the monastic robe and wandered through the mountains and forests of Lingnan, composing poetry and forming a large community of poetic monks. According to Li Shunchen's research, there were 154 poetic monks in Lingnan during this period [1]. From a historical perspective, in the early 20th century, domestic scholars' research on the poetry of the Lingnan poetic monk group appeared sporadically in academic notes and anthologies, such as the records of Dan Gui's

Chan poetry in Su Manshu's Yanzi Kan Suibi, as well as the works Records of Monastic Disputes in Early Qing and Research on Buddhism in Late Ming and Early Qing in Yunnan and Guizhou by Chen Yuan in the early 1940s [2]. In the 1950s-60s, Xian Yuqing studied Guangdong Buddhism from a bibliographical perspective, and his work A Bibliographical Study of Buddhism in Guangdong became an important historical resource for the study of Lingnan culture. Around the same period, Deng Zhicheng included poetic monks Da Shan and Cheng Jiu in Early Qing Poetry Chronicles. In the 1980s, Qian Zhonglian compiled works of 16 Lingnan poetic monks into Continuations of the Early Qing Poetry Chronicles: The Buddhist Volume. In the 1990s, Qin Zhaowen authored Lingnan Chan Culture and Chan Moon, Poetic Soul: The Chinese Poetic Monks' Discourses, introducing the concept of the "Early Qing Lingnan Poetic Monk Group" for the first time [3]. Cai Hongsheng dedicated a chapter in A Brief History of Early Qing Buddhism in Lingnan to discussing the literary works of poetic monks [4]. Since the 21st century, domestic scholars have conducted more in-depth research on the "Early Qing Lingnan Poetic Monk Group." He Zongmei's study in Research on Literati Societies in the Late Ming and Early Qing offers new insights into the "Ice Heaven Poetry Society" founded by poetic monk Han Ke [5]; Li Shunchen has analyzed the poetic verses of Dan Gui and Da Shan; Li Fubiao has explored the themes and styles of Han Shi's poetry. From a synchronic perspective, domestic scholars' focus on literati Chan poetry is more intense than on poetic monks, as evidenced by Liu Yang and Zhuang Guorui's reviews of Wang Anshi's Chan poetry and Dai Yuxia's critique of English translations

of Su Shi's Chan poetry. In contrast, international scholars are more interested in a few historical Chinese poetic monks, such as the Tang Dynasty's Han Shan and Hui Neng, and the Song Dynasty's Su Shi. Japanese scholar Suzuki Daisetsu has written extensively on Hui Neng's literary works [6], and the only foreign attention to early Qing Lingnan poetic monks focuses on Da Shan [7]. Research on this group of poetic monks has been notably contributed to by historians, while specialized discussions by scholars in Buddhism and literature remain relatively scarce. Most research focuses on individual poetic monks. Domestic scholars, such as Wang Jisi, Chen Yongzheng, and Yang Quan, have analyzed the characteristics of the Lingnan poetic school [8], and Li Shunchen has conducted a systematic study of the early Qing poetic monk group [2]. International scholars have generally concentrated on case studies of individual poetic monks from early Qing Lingnan. Some have analyzed the missionary work of Da Shan in Vietnam, such as British scholar Charles Wheeler and French scholar Claudine Salmon. In translation practice, American Buddhist scholar Guru Chen has translated over 30 poems by Han Shi into English. Overall, both domestic and international research on early Qing Lingnan poetic monks has been approached from historical, bibliographical, and religious perspectives, systematically organizing their societies, school tenets, and poetic styles, while fewer studies have approached the group from literary and linguistic perspectives. Although some Buddhist lay scholars have translated individual works of these poetic monks, no systematic collections of their translated poetry have been published, nor has there been any theoretical research on the translation of the works of this group of poetic monks.

## **2. The Origin of the English Translation Collection of Han Shi's Poems from the Perspective of Translation Aesthetics**

In the early Qing dynasty, the Lingnan poetic monk group produced numerous poems, many of which were profound in thought and rich in meaning. The works of this group of poetic monks, written both before and after their ordination, cover diverse themes, rich content, and far-reaching implications. These works

reflect the political, economic, cultural, and religious contexts of their time, possessing significant historical and literary value. Han Shi, a leading figure in the Lingnan Buddhist community during the late Ming and early Qing periods and the 34th patriarch of the Caodong school, was instrumental in the development of Buddhist temples, such as the establishment of Haoyun, Haizhuang, and Danxia monasteries. His teachings, emphasizing both Chan and doctrinal education, are primarily recorded in the Record of Chan Master Han Shi. He also authored a poetry collection titled *The Blind Hall Poems* and, along with Han Ke and Dan Gui, is celebrated as one of the "Three Great Poetic Monks of Lingnan." Han Shi was highly skilled in poetry, creating works that are harmonious, ethereal, and full of natural beauty and insight [8].

Chan culture is a distinctive feature that differentiates Lingnan culture from other regional cultures in China. Therefore, studying and translating these poems into English will contribute to enhancing the external image and identity recognition of Lingnan Buddhist poetry. *Selected English Translations of Early Qing Lingnan Buddhist Poems* is translated by Song Ying, Shi Panrong, Yang Linling, and Xiao Lu. This anthology includes 182 Chan poems written by three prominent Lingnan Buddhist monks: Han Shi, Dan Gui, and Cheng Jiu. Of these, 169 poems by Han Shi are translated by the four contributors. The poems are categorized by themes: life philosophy and Buddhist practice, landscapes and idyllic living, friendship and national sentiments [3].

The translation aesthetics theory proposed by Liu Miqing emphasizes the aesthetic reproduction of the translation process and creative fidelity, focusing on the translator's subjectivity and the need for balance between formal systems (such as rhyme, rhythm, sentence structure) and non-formal systems (such as emotion, imagery, and atmosphere). In line with this theory, the aesthetic analysis of the monk's poetry involves four steps: selection, understanding, aesthetic appreciation, and extensive reading. As the aesthetic object, the translation of early Qing Lingnan Buddhist poems involves a multi-layered aesthetic scanning of the source language text. The first level concerns the beauty of language structure, including phonetic beauty, word choice,

sentence and paragraph structure, and overall composition. The second level pertains to the supra-linguistic beauty of language, including beauty in imagery, atmosphere, and emotional resonance. The third level focuses on stylistic beauty, encompassing both the writing style and the overall tone of the work [4]. This paper examines the interlingual transformation of early Qing Lingnan Buddhist poems in English translation, analyzing and interpreting the aesthetic issues in Chan poetry translation. Based on extensive reading, it integrates common poetic language, prosody knowledge, and stylistic features from English-language poetry into the translation process of early Qing Lingnan Buddhist poems, assessing the aesthetic reproduction of the English translation practice.

### 3. Aesthetic Reproduction of Han Shi's Poems in the Formal System of English Translation

In Liu Miqing's translation aesthetics theory, the formal system of the aesthetic object includes phonetics, vocabulary, and sentence structure. This section discusses the aesthetic reproduction of Han Shi's poetry in English translation through these three aspects.

#### 3.1 Aesthetic Reproduction of the Phonetic Level in the Formal System

**Table 1. English Translation of After the Summer Rain**

Source Poem (Shi hanshi)	Translation (Song Ying)
夏日雨后 木桥人初度, 云树尚微茫. 持此幽閒意, 如闻兰蕙香. 风轻帘欲动, 荷静院生凉. 午睡梦方足, 一声清磬长.	After the Rain on a Summer Day Across the wooden bridge, first step taken, Trees and clouds in mist softly awaken. In quietude, the peace I calmly embrace, As if sweet orchids fill the air with grace. The gentle breeze stirs curtains, light and fair, The stillness of the courtyard cools the air. A midday dream at noon, its pleasure found, Awakened by the chime of one's clear sound.

As shown in Table 1, "After the Summer Rain" is a five-character regulated verse, where Chan

Master Han Shi uses elegant and refreshing language to depict the comfort and tranquility after a summer rain. We begin by scanning the phonetic layer of the aesthetic object in three aspects: rhyme, tone patterns (pingze), and rhythm, aiming to reproduce the original poem's sound and rhythm in the English translation.

In the original poem "After the Summer Rain", the even-numbered couplets end with the rhyming characters "máng", "xiāng", "liáng", and "cháng", which conform to the rhyme rules in regulated verse. In the translation process, I attempted to retain end rhymes in the English version, following the principle of "translating rhyme with rhyme," resulting in a rhyme scheme of "aabbccdd," with pairs such as taken - awaken, embrace - grace, fair - air, and found - sound. This approach closely mirrors the "rhyme poetry" structure of the original, creating a harmonious aesthetic effect in the translation.

The experience, reproduction, and reconstruction of rhythm during translation are essential issues that every translator must prioritize and address [9]. In terms of rhythm, the original poem alternates between even and odd tones (ping-ze), which in the English translation manifests as alternating stressed and unstressed syllables, producing a rhythm with clear rising and falling intonations. Specifically, the original poem's first four lines follow the tonal pattern: "Ze-Ping-Ping-Ze-Ze, Ping-Ze-Ze-Ping-Ping. Ze-Ze-Ping-Ping-Ze, Ping-Ping-Ping-Ze-Ping." (in which the characters alternate between even and odd tones according to regulated verse structure), creating a sense of musicality. I attempted to employ iambic pentameter in the English translation to mirror this rhythmic alternation. For example, the first line "Across the wooden bridge, first step taken," the fourth line "As if sweet orchids fill the air with grace," the fifth line "The gentle breeze stirs curtains, light and fair," and the sixth line "The stillness of the courtyard cools the air" all employ strict iambic pentameter, reproducing the gentle, tranquil atmosphere created in the original. This rhythm highlights the natural beauty of the summer rain scene, unfolding with the relaxed cadence of a soothing, steady rhythm.

#### 3.2 Aesthetic Reproduction of the Lexical Level in the Formal System

At the lexical level, methods for conveying aesthetic information generally fall into categories such as word choice, register, collocation, and rhetorical devices. The first manifestation of lexical aesthetics is grammatical correctness, the second is appropriateness of word choice, and the third is clarity of meaning [9].

**Table 2. English Translation of Returning to Simplicity and Nature, No. 23**

Source Poem(Shi hanshi)	Translation(Song Ying )
归宗山籟(二十三) 心知非一一, 林木自森森. 不识云烟幻, 惟同岩壑深. 枕窥明月白, 溪近野棠阴. 绝迹何云易, 谁从行处寻.	Returning to Simplicity and Nature, No. 23 The heart perceives not one by one, it's clear, The forest stands in density, sincere. The clouds and mists, illusions we don't see, In depths of ravines, unified we be. While resting, glimpsing at the moon so bright, By stream near crab apple in shaded light. How easy it is to lose tracks we tread, Who'll seek the paths where former steps were led?

In the original poem "Returning to Zong Mountain's Murmurs (No. 23)" as shown in Table 2, the third and fourth lines "Not recognizing the illusion of clouds and mist" and "Only the deep ravines remain the same" are neatly parallel in structure. The fifth and sixth lines "Pillows glimpsing the bright white moon" and "The creek near the wild hawthorn shade" are similarly well-balanced, lending the natural scene a flowing sense of rhythm and musicality. In the first and second lines, the phrases "The heart knows it's not one by one" and "The forest stands densely and flourishingly" use reduplication with "yī yī" and "sēn sēn". In the English translation, these are rendered as "The heart perceives not one by one, / it's clear, the forest stands in density, sincere." The word "sēn sēn" evokes the dense, layered forest, lush and verdant, with both phonetic and visual depth. The translation "in density" clarifies the meaning, capturing the dense and profound nature of the forest.

Similarly, in "After the Summer Rain", the phrase "The wooden bridge, first step taken" is translated as "first step taken," evoking the delicate movement of a foot stepping onto the bridge, lending a sense of dynamic poetry. The line "The clouds and trees still faintly dim" is translated as "Trees and clouds in mist softly awaken." The term "wēi máng", which is somewhat ambiguous, is translated as "softly awaken," creating an ethereal and tranquil atmosphere. The phrase "As if hearing the fragrance of orchids and sweet-scented flowers" translates the word "fragrance" as "sweet," but the blooming orchids' elegant fragrance is conveyed in the translation as "fill the air with grace," which restores the refined essence expressed in the original.

### 3.3 Aesthetic Reproduction of Sentence and Paragraph Structure in the Formal System

In the formal system, aesthetic reproduction at the sentence and paragraph level can manifest in three ways: first, syntactic variation, which creates aesthetic appeal through the use of grammatical ambiguity; second, frequency, which generates beauty through repetition; and third, the creation of aesthetic appeal through the pragmatic and functional arrangement of sentence structures, as well as the overall coherence and harmony of form. This requires clear conceptual thinking within sentences, logical flow within paragraphs, grammatical accuracy, and effective organization and arrangement of sentences [10].

Under the lens of translation aesthetics theory, the translation is as follows:

As shown in Table 3, the first line of the original poem, "On Human Day, searching the ravine shade", follows a "temporal noun + subject-predicate structure." In the English translation, it is rendered as "On Human Day, searching the ravine shade," where the "prepositional phrase as time adverbial + present participle phrase structure" introduces a syntactic variation compared to the original. At the same time, the first-person subject is omitted in the translation, making the sentence more succinct and refined. The use of the present participle phrase, "searching the ravine shade," dynamically portrays the scene of seeking the shade of the valley.

Similarly, the phrase "Guifeng, renowned for ages" is a "subject-predicate-object" structure. In English, it is translated as "Guifeng,

renowned for ages, long displayed," where the syntactic structure shifts to a subject-verb construction. The phrase "renowned for ages" acts as an adjective phrase modifying the subject "Guifeng," offering a static description. The temporal adverb "old" is fronted, and by combining the past participle "renowned" with the adverb "long," the translation emphasizes the historical significance of "Guifeng." This results in a more concise English version, while the translation maintains the dynamic quality of the original meaning: "On Human Day, the poet bathes in sunlight, seeking a secluded and tranquil spot in the valley."

**Table 3. English Translation of Visiting Guifeng**

Source Poem (Shi hanshi)	Translation (Song Ying)
游圭峰 人日寻幽壑， 圭峰旧有名。 徐行怜日暖， 小坐爱风清。 败叶残碑覆， 枯椿野鸟鸣。 青山空垒垒， 无限古今情。	Visiting Guifeng On Human Day, searching the ravine shade, Guifeng, renowned for ages, long displayed. A slow walk, bathing in the sun of glow; Sitting and touching the breeze's tender flow. Decayed leaves the broken stele conceal, While withered trees and wild birds' songs reveal. The green hills stand in silent, solemn line, With endless feelings from all times entwined.

In the third and fourth lines of the original poem, "Slowly walking, relishing the warmth of the sun" and "Sitting, loving the cool breeze", the syntactic structure is symmetrical, both using the "verb-object + verb-object complement" coordination, expressing the poet's leisurely pace and dynamic motions in the mountains. The English translation reads: "A slow walk, bathing in the sun of glow; / Sitting and touching the breeze's tender flow." The third line uses a "noun phrase + present participle phrase" structure, while the fourth line follows a "coordinated participial phrase + object" structure. The parallel construction—"bathing in the sun of glow" and "touching the breeze's tender flow"—creates rhythm and symmetry, while maintaining the original rhyme scheme. The use of functional sentence structures and rhythmic balance in the

translation attempts to faithfully reproduce the aesthetic quality of the original poem.

#### 4. Aesthetic Reproduction of Han Shi's Poems in the Non-formal System of English Translation

The non-formal system primarily manifests through emotion, will, meaning, and image, expressing the symbolic emotions of the aesthetic object [10]. Unlike formal systems, the non-formal system is not constrained by language forms or grammatical structures and cannot be directly represented in specific words, phrases, or sentences, nor can it be quantified. Instead, it is through the overall perception of the aesthetic object that complex sensory and emotional experiences are formed.

##### 4.1 Aesthetic Reproduction of Emotion and Will

In poetry, the expression of will, or "zhi" reflects the poet's aspirations and ambitions [11]. Will serves as the basic direction of the poem, while emotion, or "qing" is the impetus that activates the will [12]. Translating a short poem requires a greater sense of leisurely emotion, depending on the translator's skill in managing tone, with emotion acting as the most dynamic factor in balancing softness and strength [9]. Emotion and will are the emotional responses evoked within the aesthetic object, representing emotional identification with the aesthetic subject.

Chinese poets, particularly those influenced by Buddhism, often express a Chan-like enjoyment of tranquility, derived from natural realizations [13]. Han Shi, the Chan master, once remarked: "Entering the Tao is immeasurable, so the ancients achieved enlightenment by seeing peach blossoms, hearing the sound of a bowl during a meal, listening to an ancient verse, or reading scriptures. The essence is not about meaning or lack of meaning, but in the sudden breakthrough of one's doubts, which overturns everything. It is a unique realization beyond ordinary thought, hence called enlightenment" [14].

In the earlier mentioned "Traveling to Guifeng Peak", the third and fourth lines "Slowly walking, relishing the warmth of the sun; Sitting, loving the cool breeze" depict the poet immersed in the joys of nature. The verb choices "relishing" and "loving" are translated

as "bathing in the sun of glow" and "touching the breeze's tender flow" in English. The present participle usage elongates the emotional tension, making the reader feel as though the poet is fully immersed in the sunshine, with a prolonged sense of joy, and physically touched by the soft breeze. This creates an intimate connection with nature, allowing the joy to permeate the heart.

The fifth and sixth lines, "Decayed leaves the broken stele conceal, / While withered trees and wild birds' songs reveal", evoke a sense of desolation in nature. The decaying leaves, broken stelae, and withered trees contrast with the wild birds' songs, which introduce a hint of vitality. The words "decayed", "broken", and "withered" convey a sense of abandonment. In the translation, past participles such as "decayed, broken, withered" correspond to these terms, highlighting the decline and destruction, suggesting the sorrow of death and the Chan concept of the cyclical nature of life. The seventh and eighth lines, "The green hills stand in silent, solemn line, / With endless feelings from all times entwined", elevate the Buddhist concepts of "emptiness" and "infinity," expressing profound Chan teachings. The translation "silent" and "solemn" creates an atmosphere of stillness, suggesting that the green hills are not just part of nature, but also witnesses of time. The poet expresses a nostalgia for the passage of time, the changes in history, respect for nature's life force, and the melancholy of life's inevitable decline. The Chan aesthetic and philosophy are revealed through the harmonious depiction of natural scenery.

Although the translation may introduce subtle emotional shifts due to linguistic conversion, the emotional tone of the English translation preserves the original poem's tranquil, contemplative, and detached feelings. Through careful consideration of sound, vocabulary, and sentence structure, the translated poem conveys the poet's deep love for nature and the emotional purification and sense of belonging that the poet feels in the serene landscape.

#### **4.2 Aesthetic Reproduction of Meaning and Image**

The realm of poetry lies in the congruence of emotion and scene. All things in the universe are in a continuous state of change, and there are no absolute, identical emotions or scenes.

Emotion and scene emerge together, making the realm of poetry both creative and ever-renewing [13]. Liu Miqing argued that the imagery in translation should not only reproduce the external appearance but also capture the vivid images through the artistic use of language and cultural connotations. The narrative structure, expression methods, and depiction of the mood in Chan poetry all hold literary value. The poems composed by Buddhist monks, whether expounding Buddhist principles, recording Chan practices, or conveying Chan-inspired sentiments, possess poetic qualities and reflect the wisdom of the Chan masters [15]. Based on this, the imagery in the poem "Two Poems on He Lin's Spring Return, Poem One" is summarized and translated as follows:

**Table 4. English Translation of Spring Return to Guangxiao Temple, No.1 [9]**

Source Poem (Shi hanshi)	Translation (Song Ying)
河林春归二首·其一 塵居日易逝, 不觉报春归. 雁影空潭尽, 禅声远树微. 江山三月里, 人事十旬违. 积雨留寒色, 焚香但掩扉.	Spring Return to Guangxiao Temple, No.1 Days in the marketplace so quickly pass, Unseen, the spring returns with soft repose. The shadows of the geese from ponds now gone, A distant chant, from trees the sound now flows. In rivers, mountains, March brings early green, While human lives move on for countless days. The rain accumulates, a chill it leaves, We burn the incense, quietly close the doors.

As shown in Table 4, the original poem's imagery can be divided into two categories: natural imagery and imagery of human activities. Natural imagery includes "the shadows of geese, pond waters, Chan sounds, trees, and landscapes," while imagery of human activities includes "accumulated rain, incense burning, and closing doors." The line "Days in the marketplace so quickly pass" is translated as "Days in the marketplace so quickly pass," depicting the hustle and bustle of the marketplace, with the phrase "so quickly pass" conveying the Buddhist concept of the impermanence of human affairs. In "Unseen,

the spring returns", the term "unaware" is subtly expressed through the phrase "soft repose," evoking a silent and serene tranquility. The translation reads, "Unseen, the spring returns with soft repose." The lines "The shadows of the geese from ponds now gone, / A distant chant, from trees the sound now flows" are translated as "The shadows of the geese from ponds now gone, / A distant chant, from trees the sound now flows." The shadow of the geese passing by represents the swift passage of time, while "empty pond" is not directly translated as "empty" but instead as "gone," suggesting the feeling of loss and emptiness left behind by the departure of the geese. The Chan chant emanating from distant trees is translated as "distant chant," highlighting the remote and ethereal quality of the Chan sound, thus enhancing the sense of echo. In the phrase "Incense burns, the door merely closed", incense, a typical Buddhist image, is translated with the addition of "quietly" to soften the noise of the marketplace and highlight the monk's inner peace during meditation. The translation seeks to reproduce the vivid natural imagery of the original poem, depicting the fleeting flight of geese, the far-reaching Chan sound, and the silent return of spring, while also conveying the constancy of Chan amidst the rain and incense burning. This creates an immersive experience, placing the reader in a tranquil and profound natural setting.

### **5. Conclusion**

Based on the English translation practice of Chan poetry, this paper explores the aesthetic reproduction of Han Shi's Chan poetry from the perspective of translation aesthetics, analyzing both the formal systems (such as phonetics, rhythm, and sentence structure) and non-formal systems (such as emotion, will, and imagery). The study reveals the challenges of translating Chan poetry into English: conveying the emotions, Chan meaning, and Chan aesthetic while preserving the musical beauty and rhythm of the original poem. The research confirms that the English translation of Chan poetry requires not only linguistic transformation but also cross-cultural aesthetic reproduction. Translating Chan poetry is no easy task, and capturing the essence of Chan is even more challenging. Errors and omissions in the translation are inevitable, and

constructive feedback from experts is highly appreciated. The task of inheriting, promoting, and spreading classical Chinese poetry through translation is a noble yet arduous mission. The path ahead is long, but occasional successes bring satisfaction to translation scholars. Future efforts should focus on expanding both the breadth and depth of Chan poetry translation, establishing a solid practical foundation for further research.

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