

The Construction of Colonial Narrative and Cultural Domestication in Sir Cecil Clementi's *Cantonese Love Songs*

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Abstract

Cantonese Love Songs, the 1904 English translation of *Yue'ou* by Sir Cecil Clementi, a British colonial official, stands as a major systematic rendition of Cantonese vernacular literature. However, his translation practice was deeply embedded within colonial power structures. Through close textual analysis and comparative study, this paper reveals how Clementi strategically reconstructed the source text—via title reframing, structural rearrangement, and symbolic reinterpretation—transforming Zhao Ziyong's socially critical ballads into "Orientalist romantic elegies" that aligned with Western imaginaries of the East. Findings demonstrate that the translation erased the intrinsic connections between courtesans' plight and broader socio-political structures, fabricating an image of the "docile and melancholic Oriental subject." This case study exposes how colonial translation functioned as an instrument of cultural governance, while offering a fresh lens to re-examine power asymmetries in modern Sino-Western literary exchanges.

Keywords: Sir Cecil Clementi, *Cantonese Love Songs*, colonial narrative, cultural domestication

1. Introduction

Yue'ou (also known as Cantonese Ballads or Jie Xin), was a popular folk musical and narrative art form in Guangdong from the mid-Qing Dynasty to the mid-Republic of China period. It was typically performed by courtesans on the flower boats of the Pearl River, initially accompanied by pipa (Chinese lute) and later by the yangqin (dulcimer) and erhu (two-stringed fiddle). The lyrics often expressed the laments of brothel women and the hardships of lower-class life.

Characterised by its distinctive Cantonese dialectical rhythm and imagery, Yue'ou

carried a strong local flavour and popular sentiment. The earliest known composer of Yue'ou was Zhao Ziyong, a scholar-official during the Jiaqing and Daoguang reigns (early 19th century). A native of Hengsha Village, Nanhai County, Guangdong (now part of Guangzhou's Baiyun District), Zhao passed the provincial examination in 1816 and later served as a county magistrate in places like Weixian, Shandong, where he earned a reputation for effective governance before being dismissed due to political complications.

A talented poet, painter, and musician, Zhao frequented the pleasure boats of the Pearl River, drinking and enjoying music while discussing literature. Noticing that courtesans often adapted old tunes with improvised lyrics—some charming yet crude—he refined their compositions and wrote new verses. These polished ballads, performed by the singers, were met with great acclaim, leading Zhao to formally name the genre Yue'ou.

In 1828 (the 8th year of Daoguang), Zhao compiled and published *Yue'ou* through Guangzhou's Xiguan Chengtiange Press. The collection included a preface, 12 dedicatory poems, and 121 ballads grouped under 97 titles.

In 1904, Sir Cecil Clementi (1875–1947), a British colonial administrator and seasoned sinologist who later became the 17th Governor of Hong Kong, translated *Yue'ou* into English under the title *Cantonese Love Songs*. Published by Clarendon Press (an imprint of Oxford University Press), this edition became a major systematic English rendering of Cantonese vernacular literature, significantly contributing to the global circulation of Lingnan folk culture. In the preface, Clementi vividly depicted *Yue'ou*'s widespread appeal:

The Songs were not long in gaining popularity, and during the nineteenth century they established themselves so firmly in the Canton province, and especially in the city of Canton itself, that today they are known to high and low, rich and poor: they are sung alike by “toys of paint and powder” on board the gilt and scarlet flower-boats, by blind minstrel-girls in the houses of wealthy men, and by the dirty beggar in the suburban

slum. (Clementi, 1904, Introduction, p. 1).

He further elevated *Yue 'ou*'s status, comparing its enduring value to that of Hebrew folk songs (Xian, 1983, p. 26). However, Clementi was not merely a scholar but also a colonial official, and his translation inevitably bore the imprint of imperial power. Through strategic reframing – including the romanticized title (*Love Songs*), structural rearrangements, and symbolic reinterpretations—he transformed Zhao Ziyong's original collection, which contained sharp social critiques, into “Orientalist elegies” that aligned with Western fantasies of the East.

2. Cecil Clementi's Dual Identity and Motivations in Translation

Sir Cecil Clementi was among the rare British figures who seamlessly combined the dual identities of a renowned sinologist and a colonial administrator. Born in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India, he was sent to England for education, attending St. Paul's School in London before matriculating at Magdalen College, Oxford. Graduating with first-class honors in 1898, he chose to pursue a career in Hong Kong. Between 1899 and 1901, Clementi was dispatched to Guangzhou to study Cantonese. Immersing himself in the local culture, he frequently wandered along the Pearl River, where he developed a deep familiarity with *Yue'ou* (Cantonese Ballads). A gifted linguist, he made history in 1900 by passing the Cantonese proficiency exam in record time for a civil servant. The following year, he earned his Master's degree from Oxford while simultaneously being appointed Assistant Registrar General, overseeing land registration in the New Territories. By 1903, he joined the New Territories Land Survey Office, and his rapid ascent continued—by 1907, he rose to Assistant Colonial Secretary, handling broad administrative affairs in Hong Kong. His distinguished career culminated in 1924, when he was appointed as the 17th Governor of Hong Kong.

Cecil Clementi's English rendition of *Yue'ou* (*Cantonese Love Songs*) was accomplished with significant assistance from three Chinese intellectuals: Song Xuepeng, Yang

Xiangfu, and Ou Fengchi. His initial interest in *Yue'ou* stemmed from an introduction by Song Xuepeng, a young Chinese scholar renowned as a “Master of Classical Chinese”. Song served as Clementi’s first Cantonese language tutor and became his primary companion in studying these folk ballads. During the annotation and editing process, Clementi received substantial support from his then-language instructor, Yang Xiangfu. Additionally, Ou Fengchi, Chief Chinese Clerk at Hong Kong’s Registrar General’s Office, meticulously proofread the Chinese texts and corrected errors. Beyond these local collaborators, Clementi also benefited from the guidance of Mr. J. A. van Aalst, a Dutch expert on Chinese music, while researching the pipa (Chinese lute) melodies associated with *Yue'ou*.

Why did Cecil Clementi translate *Yue'ou*? Clementi explicitly stated his motivations in the preface to *Cantonese Love Songs*, framing the translation as an anthropological revelation of the “Chinese sentimental character”:

I cannot hope that in translating for the first time this small collection of songs, I have always found the true shade of meaning, or traced the right allusion: but my purpose will have been served, if I succeed in directing attention to a side of the Chinese character which tends often to be overlooked. No one can hope to appreciate the extreme sentimentality of the Cantonese, unless he has delighted in scenes such as those which the preface of “Shek the Taoist” (pp. 18, 19) describes so beautifully; but, the more fully this sentimentality is understood, the more clearly will it be seen to tinge the temperament even of the coldest business-man, or the most uncouth coolie (Clementi, 1904, Preface).

Here, Clementi unabashedly adopts an imperial-colonial lens. By essentializing the plaintive qualities of *Yue'ou* as inherent “Guangdong character”, he constructs a “docile and melancholic Oriental subject”—a fabrication perfectly aligned with British imperial interests in China.

Beyond his stated motives, Clementi harbored another, more personal impetus for translating *Yue 'ou*—one rooted in his classical education and scholarly aspirations: the pursuit of poetic immortality. As he noted in the introduction:

The author of the Cantonese Songs, which were published probably in 1828 A.D., was Chit Tsz-yung, a prefect of Tsheng-chau, who lived under the present dynasty in the reign of the Emperor To Kwong, (1821-51 A.D.). But, although the fathers of the present generation of Cantonese were contemporaries of the author, his life is hidden in obscurity: for, as happens frequently in the history of Oriental literature, the poet has passed into oblivion, and his poetry stands in the eyes of the afterworld for all that was immortal in its author (Clementi, 1904, Introduction, p.1).

Trained in the classics, Clementi would have been intimately familiar with the timeless sentiment expressed in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18": "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." This Western tradition of poetic transcendence—where verse outlives its creator—resonated deeply with his sinological pursuits. As a bilingual scholar straddling East and West, Clementi sought to emulate this tradition: by rendering *Yue 'ou* into English, he positioned himself not merely as a translator, but as a cultural mediator whose work might secure his own name in the annals of literary history.

3. Textual Manipulation: The Construction of Colonial Narrative and Cultural Domestication

Cecil Clementi's English translation of *Yue 'ou* was not a neutral act of cross-cultural mediation, but rather a deliberate textual operation that reconfigured the original Cantonese ballads to align with colonial discourse. Through strategic interventions in title reframing, structural reorganization, and symbolic reinterpretation, he systematically transformed Zhao Ziyong's socially critical folk songs into orientalist lyrical artifacts, reinforcing British imperial

narratives while erasing subversive undertones.

3.1 Title Reframing: The Reduction from *Yue'ou* to *Love Songs*—A Colonial Narrowing of Scope.

While *Yue'ou* contains numerous depictions of romantic relationships, its thematic range extends far beyond, encompassing sharp critiques of social reality and class oppression. As scholar Chen Ji notes: “Most of Zhao Ziyong’s *Yue'ou* compositions expose the living hell endured by courtesans, lament their misfortunes, and voice their appeals and accusations against injustice” (Chen, 2017, Preface, p. II). Yet in his “Introduction”, Clementi asserts: the love-theme remains the same in all the Songs. This deliberate framing erases the original’s sociopolitical critique, exemplifying the colonial practice of depoliticizing subjugated cultures. Clementi’s translation of the title *Yue'ou* as *Cantonese Love Songs* constitutes a reductive interpretation that narrowed the original work’s rich regional characteristics and diverse themes into mere sentimental love ballads. This renaming conformed to 19th-century Western stereotypes of Oriental art as exotic yet politically shallow “folk tunes”. By applying the “Love Songs” label, Clementi steered Western readers to view *Yue'ou* simply as texts about romantic relationships, disregarding their complex sociocultural implications, thereby assimilating this Chinese regional culture into the Western imaginary of “Oriental romance”.

3.2 Structural Reconstruction: Shifting from Lyricism to Narrative, from Collective to Individual.

The *Yue'ou* tradition, as noted by Xu Dishan, primarily employed lyrical forms characterized by fluid, improvisational structures: “In poetry there are lyrical forms, narrative forms and prose forms – the same applies to songs. *Yue'ou* predominantly uses lyrical forms with remarkably free composition” (Xu, 1971, pp. 4-5). Scholars like Xian Yuqing also observed: “*Yue'ou* predominantly employs metaphorical preludes, as seen in ‘The Peach Blossom Fan’, ‘Waves at the Prow’, ‘Butterflies Among Flowers’, ‘Wild Geese over Xiao-

Xiang', and 'The Lonely Flying Goose' —all using imagery of other things to introduce the true subject of the song" (Xian, 1995, p.151). Zeng Daxing also said that "Yue'ou are short lyrical songs" (Zeng, 2015, p. 90). Cecil Clementi regarded Yue'ou as narrative poetry. He also believed that nine out of ten Chinese women who fell into the "lanes of willows and streets of flowers" (brothels) were forced by circumstances—few did so willingly. Some were sold by their impoverished parents in childhood, while others were pawned by husbands to settle debts. To escape this misery, these women had only two paths: either save enough "flesh money" to buy their freedom or wait for a sincere man to redeem them. "In a series of varied pictures the Cantonese Songs describe for us the life of such a girl (Clementi, 1904, Introduction, p.7)". Moreover, among the courtesans depicted in Yue'ou, aside from Qiu Xi, many remain unnamed—rendering them universal symbols through which the original poet expresses sympathy for the tragic fate of this marginalized sisterhood. In his translation, Cecil Clementi rearranged the ballads to weave them into a cohesive, heartbreaking narrative of Qiu Xi's life: it begins with her meeting and falling in love with a young scholar, followed by their tearful parting as he leaves for the imperial exams in the capital. Day after day, she leans by the gate, awaiting his return. Yet as time stretches on without word from him, despair creeps in. Burdened by insurmountable debts, she drowns herself in the river. And after death—where does her soul find refuge? Perhaps some former client might burn paper money at her grave, bribing the King of Hell, or perhaps she could purchase a quiet plot in the netherworld, finally free from sorrow. "It is a sad picture, with the pathos of an intense realism. The life here described is lived by thousands throughout the length and breadth of the Chinese Empire, and withal lived in so humble a resignation to that which these girls believe to be their predestined fate (Clementi, 1904, Introduction, p.9)". In reality, while economic hardship was indeed one factor driving women into prostitution, the phenomenon was more fundamentally a product of societal structures and political systems. The existence of courtesans was not merely a matter

of “personal tragedy”, but rather the inevitable outcome of a patriarchal moral order and the institutionalization of state-sanctioned prostitution.

Structurally, Cecil Clementi’s translation introduced two significant alterations: first, transforming the original lyrical verses into a narrative poem, and second, shifting the focus from the collective plight of courtesans to the individual story of Qiu Xi. This approach significantly diluted the universal relevance and critical force of *Cantonese Ballads*. By personalizing the suffering, the broader systemic critique—the condemnation of a society that normalized the exploitation of women—was softened, if not entirely obscured.

3.3 Reconstruction of Imagery: From the Implicit Culture of the East to the Literal Translation of the West

Yue’ou frequently employs characteristically subtle Eastern imagery such as “qinglou” (brothels), “huafen” (courtesans’ adornments), “yanhuadi” (pleasure quarters), “huazhai” (prostitution debts), and “liuxianghuaajie” (pleasure quarters). In Cecil Clementi’s translation, many of these culturally nuanced terms were either softened or altered. Taking “qinglou” as an example: in the second poem of “How easy it is (six parts)”, and in “Dirge for Tshau Her”, it was translated as “green arbours”. In “A Lament for fortune’s frailty (five parts)”, “qinglou” was rendered as “love’s arbour”; and in “Concord grass”, “qinlou” was translated into “love’s green arbour”. In traditional Chinese culture, “qinglou” served as a euphemism for brothels—this term avoided vulgar directness while suggesting the refined elegance of such establishments and reflecting some literati’s romanticized notions of pleasure quarters.

Take the term “huafen” as another example. This expression serves as a euphemistic reference to “women of the pleasure quarters”, belonging to the semantic system where “cosmetics-related terms” symbolize “courtesans”. Such terminology avoids crude directness while subtly invoking the transient, artificial nature of “powder and rouge”—mirroring society’s stereotypical view of these women as “drifters who trade on their charms”. When

translated as “flowers and paint”, the original cultural connotations are lost. The English rendering fails to capture the characteristically Chinese linguistic features of “taboo avoidance” and “metaphorical expression”, diluting the poetic subtlety of the source text. Clementi’s translation thus obscures the layered social commentary embedded in these carefully chosen euphemisms.

Similarly, “yanhuadi” in “The Land of Flowers and Vapour (two parts)”, was rendered by Clementi as “The land of flowers and vapour” and “the land of flower and smoke” respectively. While these translations may evoke to Western readers imagery of blooming flowers, fragrant mists, and hazy vapors, they completely obscure the term’s actual cultural reference to brothels in Chinese context.

Now comes “huazhai”. In “Fate the miser” and “My heart”, “huazhai” was translated into “flower debts”. The term “huazhai” carries a culturally specific metaphorical meaning. In classical Chinese context, it refers to the emotional entanglements, financial obligations, or moral burdens arising from romantic or licentious affairs—particularly those involving courtesans. The term essentially frames romantic or sexual relationships as “debts” that must be repaid, subtly reflecting the low social status of women in traditional society. Clementi’s translation of “huazhai” as literal “flower debts” could easily mislead Western readers into interpreting this as financial debts from flower-selling businesses, entirely missing the term’s deeper socio-cultural implications.

By flattening these culturally embedded metaphors into superficially literal translations, the English version not only loses the poetic richness of the original but also erases the critical social commentary on gender and power dynamics inherent in the Cantonese Ballads. The translated text thus becomes a tamed, exoticized version that aligns more with Orientalist fantasy than with the subversive realism of the source material.

In “A debt of three lives” and “Sorrow indelible”, “huajielixiang” clearly refers to

pleasure quarters, another euphemism for brothels. Clementi's translation as "Willow Lane and Flower Street" creates an image of picturesque avenues lined with willows and blossoms, completely obscuring its actual cultural connotation as red-light districts.

Another example appears in "Thought-born desire", that is "canhuabailiu". Here, "canhuabailiu" uses decaying natural imagery to metaphorically represent fallen women or courtesans. This rhetorical device embodies traditional society's moral discipline, value judgments, and hierarchical positioning of women, vividly reflecting the gender inequality inherent in patriarchal systems—where women were objectified, instrumentalized, and morally constrained. Yet Clementi renders this as "a blighted willow or a bruised flower", erasing the profound cultural context of female oppression under feudal ethics. His literal translation preserves the botanical imagery but strips away the term's function as social critique, transforming what was originally a condemnation of patriarchal values into mere descriptive natural symbolism.

Through these translation choices, the English version systematically neutralizes the source text's subversive potential. What were originally culturally coded criticisms of gender oppression become, in translation, either romanticized scenery or neutral botanical references—effectively whitewashing the poems' challenging commentary on traditional Chinese society's treatment of women. The translated ballads thus present a sanitized version that aligns with Western expectations of "Oriental charm" while suppressing the texts' uncomfortable truths about power, morality, and exploitation.

4. Conclusion

In the historical context of colonial expansion, translation was never merely a linguistic exercise, but rather a site of power struggle and cultural identity formation. Cecil Clementi's English rendition of *Yue'ou* systematically tamed the literati's genuine sympathy for marginalized women into folksy sentimentality, crafting an image of the "docile and

melancholic” Oriental subject that catered to Western readers’ expectations while erasing the original’s social critique. As one of the earliest Western interventions into Lingnan folk literature, Clementi’s translation strategies subtly reinforced colonial narratives through calculated choices. His “domestication” of Cantonese cultural elements served as an invisible mechanism to consolidate colonial discursive hegemony. The stark contrast between the translation and original texts reveals translation’s fundamental nature as “cultural-political practice” during the colonial era—where linguistic mediation became an instrument of ideological control, reshaping subaltern voices to fit imperial frameworks while obscuring their emancipatory potential. The case exemplifies how colonial translations often operated as soft power tools, producing knowledge about the colonized that ultimately served the colonizer’s epistemic dominance.

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