

Decanonizing the *Classic of Poetry*: A Study of Legge, Allen, and Pound's Translations

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Abstract

Since its inception, the *Classic of Poetry* has been endowed with profound cultural significance in Chinese tradition, with its embedded Confucian doctrines constituting the foundational basis for its canonical establishment and enduring preservation. Within the context of global cultural exchange, the transnational dissemination of the *Classic of Poetry* has inevitably encountered a process of “decanonization”. An examination of the English renditions of the “Airs of the States” by James Legge, Clement F. R. Allen, and Ezra Pound reveals that the degree of decanonization is markedly influenced by factors such as the translator’s identity, ideological orientation, and sociohistorical context. In light of the inherent inevitability of this decanonizing trend, it is imperative for Chinese literary classics to reanchor their value in the source texts, leverage contemporary communicative opportunities, proactively engage with heterogeneous cultures, and assume a more dynamic role within global discourse.

Keywords: English translation of the *Classic of Poetry*, decanonization, cross-cultural, James Legge, Clement F. R. Allen, Ezra Pound

Since its inception, the *Classic of Poetry* has carried profound significance within Chinese culture. As noted by Douwe Fokkema in *The Study of Literature and Cultural Participation*, the reverence for Confucian classics in China has been profound and sustained for over two millennia—far exceeding that of any other country or region (Fokkema, 1996, p.

45). And this tradition finds one of its most vivid manifestations in the enduring reverence for the *Classic of Poetry*.

During the pre-Qin period, the text now canonized as the *Classic of Poetry* was conventionally designated as *Poetry* (诗). This anthology comprises approximately 305 poetic works composed between the early Western Zhou Dynasty and the mid-Spring and Autumn Period (11th to 6th century BCE). The corpus engages with a diverse range of themes, encompassing depictions of labor, expressions of romantic and ritual sentiment, accounts of military conflict, descriptions of corvee obligations, recordings of local customs and practices, hymns for ancestral worship, as well as reflective observations on astronomy, geography, and various species of flora and fauna.

During the late Spring and Autumn period, Confucius systematically recompiled six canonical texts—including Poetry—for pedagogical purposes (Xia, 1998, p. 62). Although intended to promote Confucian doctrines, this compilation played a pivotal role in the intellectual milieu of the “Hundred Schools of Thought”. It facilitated the transformation of the Poetry from an official reader for observing civil affairs into a political classic employed for rhetorical authority, and ultimately into a Confucian canonical text widely cited across classical writings (Wang, 2011, p. 560).

During the Western Han dynasty, Confucianism attained hegemonic status as the state orthodoxy, leading to the formal canonization of the text then known as *Poetry* as a Confucian classic. Within this ideological framework, the original poetic compositions were systematically assimilated and reinterpreted through a Confucian hermeneutic lens. Consequently, their exegesis became permeated with moral and didactic imperatives, effecting

a transformative process through which the anthology gradually evolved into its recognized form as the *Classic of Poetry* (诗经).

It is evident that the canonical status of the *Classic of Poetry* was consolidated through a dual process of ideological incorporation and institutional enforcement. The text became systematically integrated into the dominant Confucian philosophical and historical discourse, a process reinforced by its inclusion in the imperial examination system—a state-sponsored mechanism that legitimized and propagated specific forms of knowledge (Fokkema, 1996, p. 46). It was this synergy between doctrinal alignment and socio-political institutionalization that ultimately cemented *the Classic of Poetry*'s authoritative position, one that remains influential to this day in China.

With the evolution of world literature, Chinese cultural classics have gradually gained global recognition. The *Classic of Poetry* is no exception to this transnational trajectory. Between the 16th and 17th centuries, the *Classic of Poetry* was first introduced to the West through fragmentary translations by missionary figures such as Juan Cobo and Matteo Ricci, whose work emphasized theological interpretations. In the 18th century, scholarly engagement with the text expanded significantly. Sinologists and literary translators across Europe, such as Thomas Percy and Sir William Jones, began producing selective translations that increasingly recognized its literary qualities, marking a clear shift from earlier religious approaches. Building upon this foundation, the 19th century saw increased Sino-Western exchange, leading to a rise in complete English translations and broader scholarly study of the *Classic of Poetry*, exemplified by the versions of James Legge, William Jennings, and Clement F. R. Allen. The 20th century introduced new interpretive approaches, with influential translations by Arthur

Waley, Bernhard Karlgren, and Ezra Pound—the last achieving particularly widespread recognition.

As Fokkema notes, changes in historical consciousness give rise to new canons, while shifts in social consciousness stimulate the study and expansion of existing classics (Fokkema, 1996, pp. 49-50). The history of English translations of the *Classic of Poetry* clearly reflects this dynamic in its cross-cultural reception. Within traditional Chinese cultural discourse, the *Classic of Poetry* was systematically positioned within the Confucian ideological framework, where its canonical status predominated over literary appreciation. In contrast, Western reception has predominantly classified it as a literary text (Fokkema, 1996, pp. 45-46). This divergence exemplifies the process of “decanonization”—a recurrent phenomenon in the cross-cultural transmission of cultural classics wherein their original normative authority becomes reconfigured. The potential for such texts to achieve “recanonicalization” within heterogenous cultural contexts, however, constitutes a distinct field of inquiry.

In the current era of world literature, the global dissemination of Chinese literary and cultural classics into heterogeneous cultural contexts has established itself as an irreversible trajectory. Responding to this development, the present study investigates the manifestations of “decanonization” in the cross-cultural reception of the *Classic of Poetry* through a comparative analysis of translations of the “Airs of the States” in the *Classic of Poetry* by James Legge, Clement F. R. Allen, and Ezra Pound. This examination seeks to generate both empirical and theoretical insights regarding the worldwide circulation of Chinese literary and cultural heritage.

1. Sinological Interpretation: Canonical and Literary

James Legge, a preeminent British sinologist of the nineteenth century, devoted twenty-five years (1861-1886) to the systematic translation of key Chinese canonical texts, including the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics*. His English rendition of the *Classic of Poetry*, completed in the 1870s, represents a landmark achievement in the history of the *Classic of Poetry*'s translation into Western languages and is widely regarded as the most philologically substantial and influential version produced during that century (Li, 2013, p. 31).

James Legge's project of translating the *Classic of Poetry* evolved through three distinct phases between 1871 and 1879, each serving a specific scholarly or communicative purpose. His first version, published in 1871, took the form of a precise prose translation intended for specialists in sinology and advanced learners of classical Chinese. Building upon this foundation, Legge issued a second complete translation in 1876, now composed in metrical English, which sought to enhance literary accessibility for a general Western readership. Finally, in 1879, he produced an abridged version for *the Sacred Books of the East*, which consisted largely of excerpts from his 1871 translation.

James Legge, operating from his dual identity as a missionary and sinologist, approached his initial translation of the *Classic of Poetry* with predominantly pragmatic and evangelistic motives rather than literary appreciation. His primary objective was to establish a cultural and intellectual foundation for proselytization in China, under the conviction that comprehensive scholarly engagement with Chinese classics was indispensable for effective missionary work (Li, 2013, p. 32). Reflecting this prioritization of utility over aesthetics, James Legge's first complete translation foregrounded the hermeneutics of Confucian canonical tradition. The translation rendering deliberately omitted poetic devices such as rhythm and

rhyme, while incorporating extensive exegetical annotations aimed at explicating Confucian doctrines and ethical frameworks. Rather than presenting the text as a literary monument, this version functioned as a sinological resource—designed to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and support missionary activities.

However, the 19th-century British translation milieu favored metrical forms for rendering foreign poetry. In response to criticisms directed at his first complete translation, James Legge produced a second full version aimed at addressing these stylistic concerns (Zhang, 2022, pp. 85-86). Although this metrical rendition did not fully align with Legge's original sinological intentions and exhibited certain limitations in literary execution, it reflected a strategic accommodation to Western aesthetic expectations. This shift effectively prioritized the literary dimension of the *Classic of Poetry* in its cross-cultural dissemination, facilitating its reception primarily as a work of literature rather than—as within its native context—a text inextricably bound to Confucian ideology and socio-moral doctrines.

2. Diplomatic Translations: “Western Origins” and Human Nature

Inspired by James Legge's foundational contributions to sinological translation, a number of Western scholars in the nineteenth century produced complete English versions of the *Classic of Poetry*. One notable figure in this regard was Clement Francis Romilly Allen. Having served as a British diplomat in China, Allen acquired considerable familiarity with Chinese social attitudes and cultural traditions. Though not a trained sinologist, he developed a distinctive perspective on Chinese literary and cultural production. These interpretations were communicated to Western audiences through his translations, among which his rendition of the *Classic of Poetry* functioned as a principal vehicle for his literary and cultural viewpoints. His

translation was published in 1891.

C. F. R. Allen engaged in scholarly correspondence with Terrien de Lacouperie and became a proponent of his theory regarding the “Western origin of Chinese civilization”. This ideological alignment led him to challenge the narrative of cultural superiority and innate sense of ownership expressed in the *Classic of Poetry* (Zuo, 2021, p. 156). In his translation, this skepticism frequently resulted in the systematic misinterpretation of culturally laden terms—such as rendering “Xing Cai (荇菜)” as “cress” and interpreting “Lin (麟)” as “giraffe.” Thus, Allen’s approach not only deliberately attenuated the canonical stature of the *Classic of Poetry* within its native tradition but also called into question the foundational narratives of Chinese culture itself.

Allen’s translation also articulated his distinct literary idea. He placed significant emphasis on metrical form, adhering to Western poetic conventions in his rendition, which nonetheless reflected his regard for the literary qualities of the *Classic of Poetry*. Beyond versification, Allen prioritized the expression of nature and humanity within the poems, frequently diverging from interpretations offered by traditional Chinese commentators. For instance, in his translation of *A Disappointed Lover* (“Jing Nü” 静女), he emphasized the genuine emotions between the lovers, opposing the moralizing interpretations of scholars such as Zhu Xi (朱熹) and Mao Qiling (毛启龄).

In summary, Allen’s English translation of the *Classic of Poetry* exhibits pronounced “decanonization”. It not only sought to dissociate the text from Confucian ideology and socio-moral frameworks but also questioned fundamental perspectives embedded within Chinese culture. Although these challenges were later substantiated as misguided conjectures by

Western scholarship, they nonetheless reflect adverse dynamics that can arise during the cross-cultural dissemination of canonical texts.

3. Poetic Fusion: Irresponsibility or Re-creation?

By the twentieth century, the *Classic of Poetry* had undergone extensive dissemination in the West, and scholarly focus had expanded from translational practice to broader interdisciplinary inquiry. This period witnessed intensified examination of the text's literary, linguistic, and historical values (Zhang, 2022, pp. 98-118). Against this backdrop of diversified scholarship, Ezra Pound's translation emerged as a defining representative of its era.

Ezra Pound, a seminal figure in the twentieth-century Anglo-American Imagism, demonstrated a sustained intellectual engagement with Chinese culture, with a particular emphasis on Confucian philosophy. His undertaking to translate the *Classic of Poetry* was driven by a dual impetus: a profound attraction to the structural and aesthetic refinement of Chinese poetry, and his dedicated interest in Confucian intellectual traditions (Zhang, 2022, p. 96). Published in 1954 under the title *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius*, Pound's translation explicitly foregrounded the constitutive role of Confucian thought within the anthology.

As a seminal proponent of the Anglo-American Imagism, Ezra Pound prioritized the evocation of imagery and the cadence of language in his translational practice. His limited proficiency in classical Chinese and absence of formal sinological training, however, precluded a philologically rigorous approach to the source text. Instead, Pound's translation—and his broader hermeneutic engagement with Chinese characters—is distinguished by its pronounced imaginative latitude. Consequently, his work conveys a distinctive sense of inventive freedom,

often diverging from conventional interpretative frameworks. For example, in his translation of the opening line of “Guan Ju” (关雎), Ezra Pound imaginatively constructed a scene in which a fish-hawk speaks—a significant departure from the original text’s literal meaning. While this interpretation diverges substantially from the semantic content of the source, the inventive liberty it demonstrates imbues the poem with a distinctive stylistic character unique to Pound’s translational approach.

Pound’s translation was often regarded as “irresponsible” by professional translators. Pound himself, however, was not a professional translator but a poet, whose approach introduced not only the imaginative reinterpretations noted earlier but also a substantive challenge to established Western poetic conventions (Zhou, 2024, pp. 419-420). His work constitutes a deliberate attempt at cultural and poetic synthesis: namely, the integration of Confucian philosophy and Chinese culture with a modern Western lyric sensibility. This creative endeavour may thus be interpreted as a notable example of how Chinese literary culture exerted influence upon Western poetic thought.

In conclusion, although Ezra Pound’s translation introduced a degree of separation between the poetic content of the *Classic of Poetry* and its originating cultural framework, his conscious effort to synthesize these works with Western literary and cultural forms constitutes a singularly valuable and unanticipated outcome in the history of the text’s cross-cultural reception.

4. Conclusion: The Inevitability and Opportunity of Decanonization

An examination of the English translations of the *Classic of Poetry* produced by James Legge, Clement F. R. Allen, and Ezra Pound reveals that decanonization constitutes an inherent

dimension of the text's cross-cultural transmission. The degree and manner of this decanonization, however, are critically mediated by factors including the translator's professional identity, personal ideology, and specific historical circumstances.

The translator's professional orientation fundamentally governs the intended readership, market circulation, and pragmatic functions of the translated work. In contrast, the translator's ideological position directly informs the discursive priorities and modes of cultural re-mediation enacted in the translated text. Furthermore, the historical context must be recognized as a constitutive factor that shapes discursive opportunities within cross-cultural dissemination. Translations produced within contemporaneous periods tend to exhibit homologous selective orientations, while those spanning disparate temporal frameworks—mediated through evolving hermeneutic paradigms—engender distinctive challenges or generative interpretive potentialities. This temporal dimension remains indispensable for any rigorous scholarly engagement with translational phenomena.

Since decanonization represents an inevitable tendency in cross-cultural dissemination, heightened scholarly attention ought to be devoted to the multifaceted attributes of canonical works themselves. Conceptualized as a hand of cards in a strategic game, these attributes may be tactically deployed in response to specific historical and cultural contexts. Such deliberate selection allows for the discursively effective and targeted emphasis of particular traits at strategically opportune moments.

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