Journal of Linguistics & Cultural Studies

Article

Reconstructing the Classic through Multiple Lenses: A Comparative Study of Four Late Nineteenth-Century English Translations of Guan Ju

Xinyi Guo[1,*]

[1] Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, China
* Correspondence: Xinyi Guo, Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, China

Abstract: As the opening poem of the Zhou Nan section in the Airs of the States (Guofeng) of the Shijing (Classic of Poetry), Guan Ju is not only a foundational work of classical Chinese poetry but also a central text in Western Sinological translation and scholarship. This article focuses on the English translation practices of three representative Sinologists of the late nineteenth century: James Legge, William Jennings, and Clement Francis Romilly Allen. Through a close reading of Legge's two distinct versions of 1871 and 1876, alongside Jennings's and Allen's translations of 1891, this study examines the divergences in the translators' cultural positions, aesthetic orientations, and translation strategies. It finds that Legge's two renderings trace a shift from scholarly prose toward a return to metrical form, reflecting his sustained negotiation between the doctrinal weight of the classics and the artistry of poetry; Jennings and Allen, by contrast, develop distinctive approaches to versification and the transference of imagery. By comparing these four texts, the article seeks to illuminate the tension between "fidelity to truth" and "fidelity to beauty" in nineteenth-century Sinological translation, to analyze how the translator's identity intervenes in the cross-cultural interpretation of a canonical text, and to show how these renderings register a broader Western shift in the understanding of Chinese culture from curiosity to scholarly scrutiny.

Keywords: Guan Ju; James Legge; William Jennings; Clement F. R. Allen; Chinese–English translation

1. Introduction

As the opening poem of the Zhou Nan section in the Airs of the States (Guofeng) of the Shijing (Classic of Poetry), Guan Ju occupies a singular position in both the Chinese literary canon and Western Sinological translation. It is at once a foundational text of classical Chinese poetry, a Confucian classic invested with doctrinal authority, and a poem whose imagery, rhythm, and emotional reticence have long challenged translators. Since the nineteenth century, Guan Ju has been repeatedly rendered into English by missionaries, diplomats, and scholars, each of whom has had to negotiate between the philological demands of the source text and the aesthetic expectations of the target culture. The translation history of this short poem therefore offers a particularly concentrated site for examining how a canonical Chinese text is reconstructed through different cultural positions, aesthetic orientations, and translation strategies.

Late nineteenth-century English Sinology provides a rich body of material for such an inquiry. Among the most representative translators of the period are James Legge, William Jennings, and Clement Francis Romilly Allen. Legge translated the Shijing twice, first in 1871 in prose as part of The Chinese Classics, and again in 1876 in verse as The She King; or, the Book of Ancient Poetry. Jennings's 1891 The Shi King and Allen's 1891 The Book of Chinese Poetry appeared in the same year but adopt markedly different approaches to versification, annotation, and the transference of imagery. Placing these four texts side by side makes it possible to observe not only how individual translators

Received: 27 August 2026
Revised: 17 October 2026
Accepted: 30 October 2026
Published: 04 November 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

handled the same source text but also how their renderings register broader shifts in Western understanding of Chinese culture-from missionary curiosity and utilitarian exposition toward more scholarly scrutiny and literary appreciation.

Existing scholarship on the English translation of the Shijing has often focused on individual translators or on the long diachronic development of translation styles. What has been less frequently attempted is a closely comparative reading of these four late nineteenth-century versions of Guan Ju across several interrelated dimensions: the translation of the title, the representation of the female and male figures, and the rendering of emotional states and ceremonial imagery. These dimensions are not incidental. The title condenses the translator's interpretive stance; the description of the female protagonist, particularly the phrase yaotiao shunü (YaoTiaoShuNv), exposes whether the translator attends to the dual connotation of inner virtue and outward beauty; and the rendering of the male protagonist's longing, together with lines such as " QinSeYouZhi " and " ZhongGuYueZhi ," reveals how individual emotion is related to ritual and communal celebration. Through such close reading, the present study seeks to illuminate a central tension in nineteenth-century Sinological translation: the tension between "fidelity to truth" and "fidelity to beauty."

This tension is closely bound up with the translator's identity. Legge was both a missionary and a scholar, and his two versions trace a gradual movement from scholarly prose toward a return to metrical form, reflecting his sustained negotiation between the doctrinal weight of the classics and the artistry of poetry. Jennings, by contrast, moves toward a more thoroughgoing domestication and literary recreation, treating the Shijing less as a document to be explained than as raw material for English poetry in the Victorian Romantic-lyric mode. Allen inherits Legge's literalist tradition while adopting a strategy of simplification, producing fluent prose that attends to rhythm and cadence and retains necessary cultural annotation without piling up commentary. These differences are not merely stylistic; they reveal how the translator's cultural position, institutional role, and aesthetic assumptions intervene in the cross-cultural interpretation of a canonical text.

By comparing these four translations, this article argues that the English translation history of Guan Ju is not a neutral process of linguistic transfer but a practice deeply involved in interpretation, value judgment, and cultural imagination. The comparison shows how Legge's 1871 version emphasizes textual fidelity at the expense of poetic quality; how his 1876 revision seeks a balance between fidelity and literariness; how Jennings's translation incorporates the Shijing into the English poetic tradition through a highly domesticated mode; and how Allen achieves a relatively stable equilibrium among concision, readability, and cultural fidelity. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to comparative translation studies of classical Chinese texts and to a broader understanding of how Western Sinology reconstructed Chinese classical poetry in the late nineteenth century.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 offers a comparative analysis of the translations of the title Guan Ju, showing how Legge, Jennings, and Allen situate the poem through transliteration, annotation, generic labeling, and domestication. Section 3 turns to the translation of key figures and emotional expression, examining the rendering of yaotiao shunü, the male protagonist's longing, and the ceremonial lines " QinSeYouZhi " and " ZhongGuYueZhi ." Section 4 concludes by reflecting on the implications of these differences for understanding translation as an interpretive and cultural practice.

2. A Comparative Analysis of the Translations of the Title Guan Ju

The title of a text is a concentrated expression of the translator's interpretive stance. In his 1871 version, Legge adopts an extreme strategy of foreignization, transliterating " GuanJu " directly as "Kwan ts'eu,"[1] a rendering that plainly derives from the Chinese pronunciation of guan ju. This handling preserves the original phonetic sign-much as "John" is rendered as YueHan or "Los Angeles" as LuoShanJi in Chinese-but it inflicts severe semantic loss in cross-cultural transmission: the recipient cannot infer from the transliteration that John was one of the twelve apostles, or that Los Angeles is a name of

pronounced religious coloring bestowed by Spanish colonizers. The same is true of Guan Ju. Western readers cannot perceive through transliteration the auditory image of " GuanGuan " (guan-guan) as onomatopoeia, nor can they grasp the cultural metaphor of the jujiu bird as a symbol of lifelong pairing. The text thus suffers a loss of meaning at the very threshold of its opening. In the revised version of 1876, Legge retains the transliteration but prefixes it with the definite article "The" and appends a detailed scholarly note: "mainly allusive. CELEBRATING THE VIRTUE OF THE BRIDE OF KING WAN, HIS QUEST FOR HER, AND WELCOMING HER TO HIS PALACE."[2] This shift is academically significant. The use of the definite article elevates the piece to the status of a unique canonical entity, while the extended annotation reflects his transition from missionary to scholar. He cites Zhu Xi's view:

"This is the view of Choo He, and is so in accordance with the language of the stanzas, that it is not worth while to discuss the view of the older school, -that the subject of the piece is Wan's queen, and that it celebrates her freedom from jealousy, and her anxiety to fill his harem with virtuous ladies! It is, moreover, entirely from tradition, that we believe the subject to be the famous T'ae-sze, Wan's bride and queen. I have given the Chinese name of the piece,-the Kwan ts'eu, two characters in the first line. The names of most of the other pieces are formed in the same way, and are not in themselves descriptive of their subjects. They were attached to them, however, before the time of Confucius."

By situating the poem within the interpretive context of classical exegesis, Legge sacrifices literary concision but substantially enhances the documentary depth of the translation.

Unlike Legge's scholarly restraint, Jennings displays a marked tendency toward domestication. As a nineteenth-century Sinologist, his translation bears the interpretive imprint of the Victorian era. In his 1891 rendering, Jennings reads the title of Guan Ju as a song in praise of King Wen's bride, a politicized metaphorical reading common in early Sinology-as seen, indeed, in Legge's 1876 version discussed above. Jennings translates the title as "SONG OF WELCOME TO THE BRIDE OF KING WAN."[3] "SONG OF WELCOME" may be rendered as "a hymn of welcome to...," "WAN" employs the Wade–Giles romanization for King Wen, and "THE BRIDE OF KING WAN" designates his queen. Jennings's interpretation carries a degree of cultural-exegetical intent, yet it appears to elevate what is in essence an ordinary marriage-and-love poem to the status of a celebration of King Wen's wedding rites. As for the title, Allen in his 1891 translation uses "EPITHALAMIUM,"[4] a term that in Western classical literature designates the genre of the wedding hymn. By matching it to the ritual scale and ceremonial character of the poem, Allen situates his Guan Ju within the ritual-musical context of the Zhou royal house. Even at the level of the title alone, the differences among the translators are already discernible. Legge, besides being a renowned Sinologist, was also a missionary. In his 1871 version, in order to serve his evangelical purposes, he disparaged Confucius, holding that the Chinese people's adherence to Confucius amounted to religious worship, which impeded the spread of Christianity; his political identity further disposed him to champion his own nation's faith. Given the Opium War and China's condition at the time, Britain and the British appeared to the Chinese populace as perpetrators, and to exonerate himself and his country Legge invoked the Qin reforms to justify British aggression, arguing that British opium had opened China's markets in a comparable mode of transformation. By 1876, having gradually shed his political role and entered upon academic research, his attitude toward Confucius was no longer so sharp; his translation of the Shijing carried less utilitarian purpose and more literary quality-one reason for the appearance of the verse Shijing in that year. Jennings's translation moves toward a more thoroughgoing domestication and literary recreation. He inherits Legge's 1876 verse version but goes further and more freely: Legge still bore a certain scholarly burden, whereas Jennings casts it off entirely, employing the popular Romantic-lyric style of the Victorian age for free translation and recreation. Yet his rendering is more diffuse and heavily colored by personal sentiment. Jennings does not introduce the Chinese Shijing to Britain; rather, he treats the Shijing as raw material for creating new English poetry. Allen,

by contrast, inherits Legge's 1871 "faithful" version while adopting a strategy of simplification. His translation may be described as fluent prose that attends to rhythm and cadence within and across sentences, making it readable and recitable. Allen retains the necessary cultural annotation to aid comprehension but does not pile up commentary; his aim is to provide non-specialist readers with a reliable and elegant literary text.

3. A Comparative Analysis of the Translation of Key Figures

Beyond the divergent renderings of the title, the different translations of the female protagonist across the four versions likewise invite interpretation from the perspective of translation. In Chinese, yaotiao (YaoTiao) rhymes internally: yao means "deep" and describes the beauty of the mind; tiao means "secluded and beautiful" and describes the beauty of outward bearing. Yaotiao thus describes a woman beautiful in both mind and appearance. For " YaoTiaoShuNv " in the original, Legge (1871) employs a stacked series of adjectives: modest, retiring, virtuous, young [1]. First, consider modest. In the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary and the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the adjective is defined as follows: "someone who is modest does not want to talk about their abilities or achievements; shy about showing your body or attracting sexual interest, because you are easily embarrassed; modest clothing covers the body in a way that does not attract sexual interest." Legge's choice of this word is defensible whether applied to the heroine's attire or to her modest, low-key, and decorous bearing, and it conveys a certain moral connotation. The second word, retiring, is defined in various dictionaries as "someone who is retiring does not want to be with other people, especially people they do not know." This word chiefly describes the heroine's temperament and the impression she produces: a shy, withdrawn figure reluctant to engage with others. The third, virtuous, is defined as "behaving in a very good and moral way," a direct description of the heroine's moral excellence. The last, young, is the simplest and most congruent with popular expectation: an unmarried woman is typically young, a young lady. Legge's 1871 rendering is faithful, but the piling up of four adjectives is undeniably ponderous, and it entirely loses the rhyme and deep cultural connotations of the Chinese. Consider now how Legge handles the phrase in his second version. In 1876, he chooses to describe her in two stages: first modest and virtuous, identical to the wording of 1871, followed by loth herself to show. The greatest difference in the 1876 version is the rhyme Legge deliberately introduces:

Hark! from the islet in the stream the voice
Of the fish-hawks that o'er their nest rejoice!
From them our thoughts to that young lady go,
Modest and virtuous, loth herself to show.
Where could be found, to share our prince's state,
So fair, so virtuous, and so fit a mate?[2]

This also explains why the description of the yaotiao shunü must be divided into two parts. English possesses two modes of rhyme: alliteration and end rhyme. Alliteration, one of the most common phonetic rhetorical devices in English, refers to the repetition of the same initial sound in a group of words, a sentence, or a line of verse. End rhyme is the repetition of final sounds, also called rhyme proper, occurring at the ends of lines; its structural principle is the opposite of alliteration. When alliteration and end rhyme are employed aptly, they heighten the rhythm of language and reinforce its expressive and emotional force, creating atmosphere. In the quoted passage, the [ɪs] sound in voice rhymes with that in rejoice, the [oʊ] in go with that in show, and the [eɪt] in state with that in mate-all end rhymes of the same type. Clearly, compared with Legge's 1871 version, this verse rendering is more readable.

Jennings, in his 1891 translation, renders " YaoTiaoShuNv " as chaste and modest maid, fit partner [3]. His diction is more concise than Legge's 1871 version, but Jennings attends only to the heroine's moral character and neglects the dual connotation of yaotiao as beauty of both mind and appearance. Allen's 1891 rendering is similarly disposed: he too focuses on the heroine's lofty moral conduct, using modest and virtuous [4], so that

the image in the Chinese original-outwardly beautiful and morally elevated-is not adequately presented.

Beyond the translation of the female protagonist, the male protagonist's longing for her also merits attention. In Guan Ju, the relevant lines are:

" WuMeiQiuZhi " (Waking and sleeping, he sought her)

" QiuZhiBuDe , WuMeiSiFu " (He sought her and found her not; waking and sleeping he thought of her)

" ZhanZhuanFanCe " (He tossed and turned)

" QinSeYouZhi " (With lutes and harps he would befriend her)

" ZhongGuYueZhi " (With bells and drums he would rejoice in her)

Legge (1871) renders:

Waking and sleeping, he sought her

He sought her and found her not, and waking and sleeping he thought about her

On his side, on his back, he turned, and back again

With lutes, small and large, let us give her friendly welcome

With bells and drums let us show our delight in her [1]

Legge (1876) renders:

By day, by night, our prince with constant mind

Sought for her long, but all his search was vain. Awake, asleep, he ever felt the pain

Of longing thought, as when on restless bed, tossing about, one turns his fevered head.

Strike every lute, and joyous welcome sound

Let bells and drums proclaim our great delight [2]

Jennings (1891) renders:

He hath sought for, morn and night

Seeking for her, yet not finding, night and morning he would yearn

On his couch would toss and turn

Lute and harp shall hail as ours

Bell and drum shall give delight [3]

Allen (1891) renders:

By day and night he sought her

Sought her and could not find her

Waking and sleeping he thought of her

Turned and turned again upon his bed.

With lutes and harps he would befriend her;

With bells and drums he would rejoice in her [4].

Overall, Allen's translation clearly inherits Legge's 1871 literalist tradition in syntactic structure and semantic progression, but its language is more condensed, with redundant explanatory elements excised, while preserving the rhythmic quality of the original's refrain structure. "By day and night," "Waking and sleeping," and "Turned and turned again" formally correspond to the iterative, revolving pattern of " WuMei " and " ZhanZhuanFanCe " in the Chinese. This near-parallel syntactic arrangement allows the prose rendering to retain a cadence approximating that of verse. If the four translations are placed side by side, discernible differences emerge in the translators' understanding and presentation of the male protagonist's emotional state. Legge's 1871 version is the most faithful at the semantic level, corresponding almost sentence by sentence to the original, but its expression tends toward the narrative: "he sought her," "he thought about her" are relatively restrained in emotional intensity, reading more as statements of behavioral fact than as externalizations of inner feeling. This is closely bound up with his early translational principle of "faithfully presenting the text," yet it also renders the emotional tension somewhat flat. Legge's 1876 version markedly intensifies psychological description. In "Awake, asleep, he ever felt the pain / Of longing thought," he directly introduces affective terms such as "pain" and "longing," translating the relatively reticent emotional experience of the original into the more direct psychological expression characteristic of Western lyric poetry. At the same time, "tossing about, one turns his

fevered head" not only concretizes the action of " ZhanZhuanFanCe " but adds "fevered," an adjective with physiological overtones, so that longing is understood as an almost pathological emotional state. This handling heightens the drama but also departs to a certain extent from the restraint and reticence native to the Shijing.

Jennings's translation pushes this lyricizing tendency further. Words such as "yearn" and "toss and turn" carry well-defined emotional charges within the English poetic tradition, and the sentiment is exposed and direct. His rendering is brisk in overall rhythm, concise in semantics, and strongly musical; yet, as with his treatment of the title discussed above, it reads more as a love poem composed in accordance with Victorian aesthetic taste using the imagery of Guan Ju than as a strict translation. The male protagonist's "seeking and not finding" appears in Jennings more as romantic emotional fluctuation than as ritualized emotion within a ceremonial context. Allen's handling, by contrast, appears notably moderate. He does not introduce an excess of affective vocabulary as Legge does in 1876, nor does he undertake the pronounced poetic rewriting found in Jennings. Allen conveys emotional intensity through syntactic repetition and the rhythm of verbs. For instance, "sought her and could not find her" is semantically plain, yet precisely through this near-flat expression the persistence and fruitlessness of longing emerge naturally. This strategy is closer to the manner in which the Shijing constructs emotion through repetition and elaboration rather than psychological dissection.

Differences in the handling of " QinSeYouZhi " and " ZhongGuYueZhi " are likewise noteworthy. Legge's 1871 version employs explanatory translation with "friendly welcome" and "show our delight," explicitly identifying the social meaning of the acts; the 1876 version intensifies the ceremonial sense through "joyous welcome" and "proclaim our great delight." Jennings incorporates the lines into a context of emotional celebration with "hail as ours" and "give delight." Allen's "befriend her" and "rejoice in her," without excessive explanation, preserve the ambiguous state in the original wherein individual emotion transitions into communal celebration. This very ambiguity constitutes an important source of the long-standing interpretive divergence of Guan Ju between "love poem" and "ritual-music poem."

4. Conclusion

A comparison of the four English translations of Guan Ju reveals that the translators' choices regarding the title, the figures, and the expression of emotion are not merely linguistic transfer but are constrained by their scholarly positions, cultural contexts, and translational purposes. Legge's 1871 version emphasizes textual fidelity at the expense of poetic quality; his 1876 revision seeks a balance between fidelity and literariness, tracing his transition from missionary to scholar. Jennings's translation incorporates the Shijing into the English poetic tradition through a highly domesticated mode, accomplishing a literary recreation. Allen achieves a relatively stable equilibrium among concision, readability, and cultural fidelity, offering non-specialist readers a comparatively ideal reading path.

The translation history of Guan Ju is thus not only a process of the multiple unfolding of textual meaning but also a microcosm of how Western Sinology has understood classical Chinese literature at different stages. Through a close reading of the differences among these translations, it becomes clearer that translation is not a neutral technical operation but a practice that deeply intervenes in interpretation, value judgment, and cultural imagination. This is precisely the scholarly significance of comparative translation studies of a classic text such as Guan Ju.

References

1. J. Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vol. IV: The She King, or the Book of Poetry*. Hong Kong, China: Lane, Crawford & Co., 1871.
2. J. Legge, *The She King; or, the Book of Ancient Poetry: Translated into English Verse*. London: Trübner & Co., 1876.
3. W. Jennings, *The Shi King: The Old "Poetry Classic" of the Chinese*. London: George Routledge and Sons, 1891.
4. C. F. R. Allen, *The Book of Chinese Poetry: Being the Collection of Ballads, Sagas, and Hymns Known as the Shih Ching or Classic of Poetry*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1891.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Publisher and/or the editor(s). Publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.