

Translation Strategies and Meme Transmission: A Comparative Study of Du Fu's *Five Hundred Words* *from Ch'ang-an to Feng-hsien*

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Received: July 27, 2026 Accepted: August 14, 2026 Published: August 17, 2026

doi:10.5296/ijele.v14i2.23988 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijele.v14i2.23988>

Abstract

Du Fu has long been regarded as the greatest poet in Chinese literary history. Both American sinologist Stephen Owen and Chinese historian William Hung have highly praised his literary achievements and cultural significance. As one of Du Fu's most representative long narrative poems, *Five Hundred Words from Ch'ang-an to Feng-hsien* embodies profound social criticism, personal concerns, and rich cultural connotations, making it an important text for the translation and dissemination of classical Chinese poetry. Drawing on Chesterman's (2016) memes of translation, this study aims to investigate how translation strategies shape the transmission of cultural, ideological, emotional, and poetic memes in the English translation of Du Fu's poetry, thereby deepening understanding of the preservation, adaptation, and transformation of Chinese classical poetry across cultures. Using qualitative textual analysis, it compares the translation strategies adopted by the two translators and investigates how these strategies influence the transmission of poetic memes across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The analysis focuses on the translation of cultural images, historical allusions, poetic language, and emotional expression. The findings reveal distinct strategic preferences between the two translators. Owen generally adopts a source-oriented approach that emphasizes linguistic

fidelity and cultural preservation, whereas Hung tends to employ a more target-oriented approach characterized by explicitness change, interpretation, and cultural filtering, prioritizing readability and accessibility for English readers. These differences influence the fidelity, fecundity, and longevity of poetic memes in the target culture. The study argues that effective meme transmission requires a balance between preserving source-cultural meanings and addressing target readers' communicative needs.

Keywords: translation strategies, meme transmission, Du Fu's poetry, Stephen Owen, William Hung

1. Introduction

Among the many distinguished poets of the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-917) in China, Du Fu (AD 712–770) occupies a particularly significant position. Revered as the “poet sage”, he is celebrated not only for his exceptional artistic achievements, but also for his deep concern for the suffering of ordinary people and his realistic depiction of social and political turmoil in the Tang Dynasty (Xie, 2020). His poems integrate personal emotions with national concerns, transforming individual experiences into enduring cultural and literary symbols. Consequently, the English translation of Du Fu's poetry plays a crucial role in introducing Chinese literary traditions to international audiences and promoting intercultural understanding (Tian, 2024).

William Hung (1893-1980) and Stephen Owen (1946-2026) represent two influential yet contrasting approaches among the many English translators of Du Fu (Zhang, 2022). William Hung was born in China and pursued his studies in America in his youth. He was a distinguished contemporary historian and educator. He was also one of the earliest Chinese scholars to introduce Du Fu systematically to English readers. In his book *Tu Fu: China's Greatest Poet*, William Hung praised Du Fu's poetry as a Chinese version of “Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, Wordsworth, Béranger, Hugo, or Baudelaire” (Hung, 2021, p.1). But Hung also felt that Du Fu was unique in some respects. “Du Fu is the only one whose influence grows with time” (Hung, 2021, p. 1). By contrast, Stephen Owen was one of the most influential contemporary American sinologists, specializing in premodern literature, lyrical poetry, and comparative poetics. He regarded Du Fu as a world poet on par with Shakespeare and Dante (Wei, 2022). Stephen Owen was so obsessed with Du Fu that he spent eight years translating entire poems from Chinese into English, and that, too, in his later years. The completed translation of the poems was compiled in a volume, *The Poetry of Du Fu* by Owen. Hung and Owen's translations of Du Fu's poetry make their versions particularly valuable for comparative investigation (Zhang, 2022).

Among Du Fu's extensive poetic corpus, *Five Hundred Words from Ch'ang-an to Feng-hsien* is widely regarded as one of his greatest long narrative poems (Mo, 2022; Ye, 2024). Li (2025) highlighted it as the most representative work of “poet sage”. This poem doesn't try to impress others by choosing words carefully, using melodious sounds, or beautiful imagery, but rather by using profound, honest narratives (Ye, 2024). This poem was written in lunar November of AD 755, shortly before the outbreak of the An Lushan Rebellion (AD 755-763). Although the

rebellion had not yet begun, social tensions were already severe. Du Fu really missed his wife and children in Feng-Hsien County (known as Pucheng in Shaanxi Province), so he went from the capital Ch'ang-an (known as Xi'an in Shaanxi Province) to Feng-hsien County to visit his family. Deeply troubled by the national crisis and the suffering of the people he saw on his way home, Du Fu composed this long poem to voice his anxiety and dissatisfaction over national affairs, express his sympathy for the suffering people, and convey his frustration with social inequality (Mao, et al., 2021). The poem is remarkable for its integration of historical references, political criticism, philosophical reflection, and emotionally charged imagery, all conveyed through highly condensed poetic language (Li, 2025). These characteristics make the poem not only a literary masterpiece but also a complex cultural text whose meanings are deeply embedded in the historical and cultural context of the Tang Dynasty. Consequently, translating the poem involves much more than achieving linguistic equivalence; it requires the effective transmission of the cultural, historical, and emotional meanings encoded in the original text.

Although studies have examined some translations of Du Fu's poem, very few comparative studies investigate how different translators transmit the same poetry through different strategic choices. However, comparative studies of Stephen Owen's and William Hung's translations remain scarce, and few studies have explored the transmission of poetic memes in Du Fu's poetry, particularly the mechanisms through which these memes survive, evolve, or disappear across cultures. Accordingly, the present study addresses this research gap by employing Chesterman's (2016) memes of translation to compare Stephen Owen's and William Hung's English translations of *Five Hundred Words from Ch'ang-an to Feng-hsien*. Rather than evaluating translation solely in terms of fidelity or equivalence, this study aims to examine how different translation strategies facilitate or hinder the transmission of poetic memes, including historical allusions, cultural imagery, emotional meanings, and literary values. The research questions are therefore as follows:

- (a) How do Stephen Owen and William Hung employ different translation strategies in their English translations of *Five Hundred Words from Ch'ang-an to Feng-hsien*?
- (b) To what extent do these translation strategies facilitate or hinder the transmission of poetic memes in the target culture from the perspective of Chesterman's memes of translation?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Translation Strategies of Du Fu's Poetry

Andrew Chesterman's *Memes of Translation: The Spread of Ideas in Translation Theory (revised edition)* (2016) remains the principal theoretical foundation for translation memetics. Chesterman (2016) proposed a systematic classification of translation strategies, including semantic strategies, syntactic strategies, and pragmatic strategies. Chesterman (2016) divided syntactic strategies into "literal translation, loan and calque, transposition, unit shift, and phrase structure change, etc." (Chesterman, 2016, p. 94). Semantic strategies comprise "synonymy, antonymy, converses, abstraction change, distribution change, emphasis change, paraphrase, trope change and other semantic changes" (Chesterman, 2016, p. 101). Chesterman (2016)

classified pragmatic strategies into the followings: “cultural filtering, explicitness change, information change, interpersonal change, coherence change, partial translation, visibility change, transediting, and other pragmatic changes” (Chesterman, 2016, p. 110).

With regard to translation strategies, William Hung argues that, in order to convey what the poet intends to express, poetry translation should not be a word-for-word process, i.e. it should not worry over the form, but “convey the poet’s spirit and thoughts” (Hung, 2021, p.13). Hung’s translation of Du Fu’s poetry is written in concise language with clear syntax and few obscure words. While demonstrating that Chinese history and culture are different from the readers’ world, it also provides western readers with a smooth and easy-to-understand reading experience (Li & Zhu, 2024).

Xie (2020) provides one of the most comprehensive evaluations of Stephen Owen’s translation and scholarship on Du Fu, arguing that Owen reconstructs Du Fu through a combination of philological interpretation and comparative poetics. Rather than pursuing literal equivalence, Owen attempts to recreate the intellectual and literary significance of Du Fu for contemporary English readers, demonstrating how translation functions simultaneously as interpretation and cultural mediation. Zhang (2022) conducts a comparative study of Stephen Owen and William Hung’s translations of Du Fu’s poem *Zhuangyou*. Due to their different translation strategies, the two translations present different portrayals of Du Fu as a poet.

2.2 Memes Transmission in Translation

Instead of treating translation theories as fixed paradigms, Chesterman (2016) argues that translation concepts, including norms, strategies, values, and ideologies, are memes that spread, compete, mutate, and survive through scholarly discourse and translation practice. Chesterman (2016) emphasized that translation should be understood as a process of meme transmission, in which cultural information continuously undergoes replication, mutation, selection, and adaptation. Translation strategies are therefore not merely technical procedures but mechanisms through which cultural information is selected, reproduced, and transmitted into new communicative environments.

Building upon Chesterman’s framework, Komeili (2021) investigates translation theories from a memetic perspective and argues that different schools of translation can be interpreted as clusters of competing translation memes. According to this perspective, translators function as active meme transmitters who continuously negotiate between preserving existing cultural memes and adapting them to new linguistic and cultural contexts. Translation therefore becomes an evolutionary process in which cultural information undergoes continual modification while maintaining sufficient continuity to remain recognizable. Toury (2000) viewed translation as a culturally conditioned activity in which texts are reshaped according to the norms and expectations of the receiving culture. Their functional and descriptive perspectives complement Chesterman’s memetic framework by explaining why memes often undergo adaptation or mutation during cross-cultural transmission. Tymoczko (2007) further argues that translators act as cultural mediators who selectively preserve, transform, or reconstruct cultural meanings according to communicative purposes and ideological considerations.

Recent developments in translation studies have further strengthened this cultural orientation. Although not explicitly framed within memetics, contemporary scholars increasingly conceptualize translation as a process of intercultural dissemination rather than simple linguistic transfer. Research on literary translation, cultural translation, and world literature consistently emphasizes that translators participate in reconstructing cultural meanings for international audiences, thereby facilitating the global circulation of literary traditions. These developments closely parallel Chesterman's understanding of translation as meme transmission, suggesting that memetics provides a useful theoretical bridge connecting linguistic translation with broader processes of cultural dissemination.

Despite these developments, existing research on meme transmission still exhibits several limitations. First, few studies investigate the transmission of memes in Chinese classical poetry. Second, few studies examine how specific translation strategies influence different categories of memes, such as cultural, ideological, emotional, historical, and poetic memes. Third, comparative studies involving multiple translators remain limited, making it difficult to evaluate how different translation philosophies affect meme preservation and mutation. Furthermore, empirical analyses applying Chesterman's memes of translation to individual poems by Du Fu are particularly scarce, despite the richness of his works in cultural symbolism, historical allusions, and humanitarian thought.

Therefore, this study seeks to address the gaps by applying Chesterman's memes of translation to a comparative analysis of Stephen Owen's and William Hung's English translations of *Five Hundred Words from Ch'ang-an to Feng-hsien*. By examining the relationship between translation strategies and the transmission of cultural, ideological, emotional, and poetic memes, the study aims to deepen understanding of how Chinese classical poetry is reconstructed in English and how different translation approaches influence the preservation, adaptation, mutation, and dissemination of literary memes across cultures.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Guided by the two research questions, this study adopts a qualitative research approach, also with the reason that qualitative research aims to discover new ideas and insights (Heighem et al., 2009). This study focuses on describing the existing characteristics and phenomena; therefore, qualitative descriptive design (Ayton et al., 2023) is employed in this research. As this study explored the translation strategies and the meme transmission of English translations of *Five Hundred Words from Ch'ang-an to Feng-hsien*, a detailed account of the features in both source poetry and Stephen Owen's and William Hung's translations are compared in this study.

This study adopts Chesterman's (2016) memes of translation as its theoretical framework to examine the English translations of selected excerpts from Du Fu's *Five Hundred Words from Ch'ang-an to Feng-hsien* by Stephen Owen and William Hung. The analysis first identifies the translation strategies employed in the two target texts according to Chesterman's classification

of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic strategies. This is followed by a comparative analysis of the source text and the two translations to examine how cultural, ideological, emotional, and poetic memes are transmitted, replicated, adapted, or transformed in the translation process. On this basis, patterns of meme transmission are identified and interpreted to reveal the relationship between translation strategies and cross-cultural meme transmission. Rather than evaluating the superiority of either translation, the study aims to describe and explain how different translation strategies influence the preservation, adaptation, and dissemination of source-text memes, thereby providing insights into the cross-cultural transmission of Chinese classical poetry.

3.2 Data Source and Data Selection

Du Fu's masterpiece *Five Hundred Words from Ch'ang-an to Feng-hsien* was selected as the primary source text for this study because it is widely regarded as one of the poet's most representative works. The poem was also chosen because it contains a rich variety of culture-specific elements, including historical allusions, mythological references, political symbolism, and vivid natural imagery (Li, 2025). These features provide abundant evidence for investigating how translators preserve, adapt, or transform source-text memes during cross-cultural transmission. As an autobiographical poem, it combines the poet's personal experiences with broader reflections on national crisis and social injustice, allowing the study to explore how different types of memes are transmitted through various translation strategies. This diversity makes the poem particularly suitable for applying Chesterman's memes of translation, which emphasizes the replication, adaptation, mutation, and dissemination of ideas and cultural elements through translation. Another important reason for selecting this poem is the availability of two influential English translations by Stephen Owen and William Hung. Although both translators aim to introduce Du Fu's poetry to English readers, they are quite different in their translation philosophies and strategies. Their translations provide an ideal basis for comparative analysis and enables the study to examine how different translation strategies influence the transmission and evolution of source-text memes.

Data selection involved five steps. First, the poem was carefully read alongside the two English translations. This study identified textual segments that contained significant translation differences. The units of analysis included words, phrases, couplets, and complete stanzas whenever they exhibited distinctive translation strategies or meme transmission patterns. Second, purposive sampling was employed to select representative examples from the poem, and it was deliberate selection of sampling based on their characteristics to provide information-rich data related to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015). The selected data met one or more of the following criteria: the presence of culture-specific items (e.g., historical figures, mythological references and traditional cultural concepts); the use of metaphorical or symbolic imagery; expressions conveying ideological, emotional, or humanitarian meanings; significant differences between Owen's and Hung's translations; evidence of meme preservation, adaptation, mutation, or omission. These criteria ensured that the selected examples were directly relevant to the research questions. Third, each selected example was coded according to Chesterman's translation strategy model. The translation strategies employed by Stephen Owen and William Hung were identified and classified into three major

categories: syntactic strategies, semantic strategies, and pragmatic strategies. The specific sub-strategies such as literal translation, paraphrase, synonymy, explicitness change, cultural filtering, information change, and interpersonal change were also identified. Fourth, after identifying the translation strategies, each source-text segment was compared with its two English translations to examine how different categories of memes, including cultural, ideological, emotional, historical, social, and poetic memes, were transmitted. The analysis focused on whether the source-text memes were faithfully replicated, adapted, mutated, strengthened, weakened, or omitted in the translation process. Finally, the findings from all selected examples were synthesized to identify the overall translation patterns adopted by Stephen Owen and William Hung. The relationship between translation strategies and meme transmission was then interpreted to explain how different strategic choices influenced the preservation, adaptation, and dissemination of Du Fu's poetic memes across cultures.

Through these systematic procedures, the selected data provided sufficient evidence to address the research questions concerning the translation strategies employed by the two translators and the mechanisms through which cultural and literary memes are transmitted in the English translation of Chinese classical poetry.

4. Results and Discussion

After From Chesterman's (2016) meme theory, translation can be viewed as a process of meme transmission, in which linguistic forms, cultural concepts, values, and literary images are replicated, adapted, or transformed as they move from the source culture to the target culture. The effectiveness of a translation depends on how successfully these memes survive and spread in the target context. The two translations of this passage employ different strategies, resulting in different patterns of meme transmission. In response to RQ1, this section presents the comparison of Owen's and Hung's translation strategies in translating Du Fu's *Five Hundred Words from Chang'an to Feng-hsien*. To address RQ2, the analysis further compares the extent to which the two translators' translation strategies facilitate or hinder the transmission of poetic memes in the target culture.

4.1 Translation Strategies and Memes

From Chesterman's memes of translation (2016), translation is a process of transmitting, replicating, adapting, and sometimes mutating memes across languages and cultures. The following examples contrast the translation strategies by Stephen Owen and William Hung, and show how they transmit these memes through different translation strategies, resulting in different patterns of meme preservation and adaptation. The differences of translation strategies can be seen from the following examples.

Example 1

杜陵有布衣，老大意转拙。

Source text 许身一何愚，窃比稷与契。(Owen, 2016, p. 208)

There is a man of Duling in homespun clothes,

as I age, my aims grow more inept.

Owen's translation So foolish in what I swore to become! —

I secretly likened myself to Hou Ji and Xie. (Owen, 2016, p. 209)

From Tu-ling, there is a poor and obscure man;

The older he grows, the more impractical he becomes,

Hung's translation Until he is foolish enough to wish

To serve his country as did the best men of the past. (Hung, 2021, p. 88)

The source verse presents several important memes. Cultural meme: “杜陵” (Duling), a place associated with Du Fu. Social identity meme: “布衣”, referring to a commoner without official rank. Character meme: the poet's self-deprecating description of his unwavering idealism. Historical-cultural meme: “稷与契” (Hou Ji and Xie), legendary sage ministers symbolizing loyalty, virtue, and service to the state. Emotional meme: a mixture of humility, irony, and persistent political aspiration.

As for the translation strategy, Stephen Owen closely preserves the original lexical items. “杜陵” and “稷与契” are transliterated as Duling, Hou Ji and Xie. This belongs to literal translation of syntactic strategy, and this strategy maintains the source-text cultural specificity. By retaining “Duling”, “Hou Ji” and “Xie”, Owen preserves the foreign cultural elements rather than replacing them with familiar target-culture references. The expression “I secretly likened myself” closely follows the original meaning, preserving the poet's modest and self-mocking tone. This is semantic reproduction.

In William Hung's translation, he uses explicitness change to transform the implicit meaning of the allusion into an explicit statement: “稷与契” (Hou Ji and Xie) is translated as “the best men of the past”. The aspiration associated with these figures becomes “serve his country”. Instead of preserving the names of Hou Ji and Xie, Hung conveys their cultural significance through a generalized description, which is called cultural filtering of pragmatic strategy. Hung interprets the underlying meaning of the allusion rather than reproducing its linguistic form.

What's more, the two translators adopt different pragmatic strategies. Owen's use of “I” is pragmatic equivalence through explicitness change. While Hung renders it as “he”, which is regarded as a pragmatic strategy involving interpersonal change or information restructuring. Owen's use of the first-person pronoun exemplifies faithful meme replication. By contrast,

Hung's shift to the third-person represents a mutation of the narrative meme. The initial third-person narration helps readers unfamiliar with Du Fu to recognize him as a historical figure before they encounter his personal experiences.

Example 2

Source text	穷年忧黎元，叹息肠内热。(Owen, 2016, p. 208)
Owen's translation	To the end of my years I worry for the common folk, I heave sighs, and my guts burn within. (Owen, 2016, p. 209)
Hung's translation	He worries about the people the year round, He sighs, and his heart burns with anxiety. (Hung, 2021, p. 88)

In Example 2, the source couplet contains several interconnected memes. Ideological meme: concern for the welfare of ordinary people (黎元). Emotional meme: profound anxiety and distress expressed through sighing. Metaphorical meme: “肠内热” literally refers to an internal burning sensation, a traditional Chinese metaphor for emotional anguish and worry. Confucian meme: the moral obligation of intellectuals to care for the people and society. These memes together portray Du Fu as a poet whose personal emotions are inseparable from his concern for the nation and its people.

In Owen's translation, he uses literal translation to closely follow the original wording. “穷年” (To the end of my years), “黎元” (the common folk), and “肠内热” (my guts burn within). The semantic structure of the source text is largely preserved. The phrase “my guts burn within” retains the bodily imagery of the original Chinese metaphor. Rather than replacing it with a more familiar English expression, Owen allows the source-language image to remain visible. The imagery of internal burning is directly reproduced, maintaining the physical intensity of the original expression.

In comparison, Hung makes the emotional meaning of the metaphor explicit. “肠内热” is translated as “heart burns with anxiety”. The emotion implied in the original metaphor is directly stated through the addition of “anxiety.” Instead of preserving the imagery of the intestines, Hung replaces it with the culturally familiar English metaphor of the “heart”. Thus, the focus shifts from preserving the literal image to conveying the intended emotional effect.

Example 3

Source text	葵藿倾太阳，物性固莫夺。 顾惟蝼蚁辈，但自求其穴。 胡为慕大鲸，辄拟偃溟渤。(Owen, 2016, p. 210)
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	Like mallow and pulse, I bend to the sun—
Owen's	none can rob a thing of its nature.
translation	But I turn to consider that ant-breed, seeking only their own little holes. Why should they aspire to be Great Leviathan ever aiming to sprawl across the dark sea? (Owen, 2016, p. 211)
	But that the sunflower turns to follow the sun Is its nature
Hung's	which it cannot help. Yet he reminds himself of the tiny ants: Each
translation	will seek its own hole. Why then should an ant emulate the giant whale And wish to float on the great waves? (Hung, 2021, p. 88)

In this example, Du Fu employs a series of natural images, for example, sunflower (葵藿), ants (蝼蚁), and giant whale (大鲸), to express his political ideals and self-reflection. These images function as cultural, ideological, and metaphorical memes. These memes together create an extended metaphor in which the natural world reflects human morality and political aspiration. Owen and Hung transmit these memes through different translation strategies, resulting in different patterns of meme preservation and adaptation.

Owen adopts literal translation to closely follow the original structure. For example, “葵藿” refers to mallow and related plants rather than the modern sunflower, and it is directly translated as “mallow and pulse”. Rather than replacing unfamiliar images, Owen preserves the original botanical and zoological references. Expressions such as “mallow and pulse” retain the cultural specificity of the source text, even though they may not immediately evoke the same symbolic associations for English readers. By contrast, instead of translating “葵藿” literally, Hung adopts cultural filtering and renders it as “sunflower”. Although it is botanically inaccurate, “sunflower” immediately communicates the symbolic meaning of naturally facing the sun.

The most notable adaptation is that “大鲸” (literally great whale) is rendered as “Great Leviathan” by Owen. Instead of simply translating “great whale”, Owen selects the biblical and literary figure Leviathan, a powerful sea monster deeply embedded in Western cultural tradition. This represents partial cultural substitution, preserving the symbolic grandeur while relocating the image into the target culture’s literary repertoire. Hung translates “大鲸” as “giant whale” without introducing additional Western mythological associations. Yet, metaphor remains straightforward and accessible.

Example 4

Source text 瑶池气郁律，羽林相摩戛。(Owen, 2016, p. 212)

Owen's Vapors surged swelling from Alabaster Pool, where the royal guardsmen
translation rub and clack. (Owen, 2016, p. 213)

Hung's A dense mist rises above the jasper-green pools. The Imperial guards rub
translation elbows one with another. (Hung, 2021, p. 88)

In the source verse, “瑶池” (Yaochi) literally means “Jade Pool”, a mythical paradise associated with Daoist mythology about the Queen Mother of the West. In Tang poetry, it often symbolizes imperial luxury and the emperor’s palace (Li, 2025). Owen translates it as “Alabaster Pool”. This is neither a purely literal translation nor a complete domestication. By choosing “Alabaster”, Owen preserves the imagery of whiteness, purity, and preciousness associated with jade while making the imagery intelligible to English readers. Although “Alabaster Pool” evokes elegance and luxury, it no longer recalls the Daoist mythology surrounding the Queen Mother of the West. The cultural meme survives only at the level of symbolic beauty, while its deeper mythological associations are weakened. Therefore, Owen achieves relatively high meme fidelity while allowing limited mutation for readability. By contrast, instead of retaining the singular mythical “Yaochi”, Hung translates it as “jasper-green pools”. The mythical meme of “Yaochi” disappears almost entirely. Readers perceive only beautiful green pools rather than the legendary celestial lake associated with imperial symbolism. Consequently, Hung increases readability while reducing the historical and political specificity of the source-text memes.

Example 5

Source text 朱门酒肉臭，路有冻死骨。(Owen, 2016, p. 214)

Owen's Crimson gates reek with meat and ale, while on the streets are bones of the
translation frozen dead. (Owen, 2016, p. 215)

Hung's Behind the red-lacquered gates, wine is left to sour, meat to rot. Outside
translation these gates lie the bones of the frozen and the starved. (Hung, 2021, p. 88)

This couplet contains several interrelated memes. First, cultural meme. “朱门” (zhumen), literally “red gates”, symbolizing the residences of the wealthy and powerful in imperial China rather than merely a physical gate. Owen follows the original lexical structure closely. The concise parallelism of the source text is largely retained. The cultural meme embedded in “朱门” is only partially preserved. While “Crimson gates” reproduces the image literally, English readers unfamiliar with traditional Chinese architecture may not recognize it as a metaphor for

the aristocracy. Thus, the linguistic form of the meme survives, but its cultural significance may not be fully replicated without background knowledge. Hung expands the original expressions. The implicit cause of the smell (“left to sour”, “left to rot”) is made explicit, and “starved” is added to clarify the victims’ condition. Hung’s translation “red-lacquered gates” provides a more concrete architectural image than “crimson gates”, helping readers visualize elite residences while partially conveying their luxurious status. This cultural filtering increases the accessibility and communicative impact of the poem’s social criticism.

Example 6

Source text 老妻寄异县，十口隔风雪。谁能久不顾，庶往共饥渴。
入门闻号咷，幼子饥已卒。吾宁舍一哀，里巷亦呜咽。
(Owen, 2016, p. 214)

Owen’s
translation My wife was in a different county,
ten mouths separated from me by winds and snow.
Who could go long without checking on them?
I hoped to go share their hunger and thirst.
When I came in the gate, I heard crying out,
my young son had died of hunger.
I could not suppress a wail of my own,
when even the whole lane was sobbing. (Owen, 2016, p. 215)

Hung’s
translation I have left my good wife in a strange district, For disastrous times have
broken up our household of ten. I cannot leave them any longer without
care, So I have come to share hunger and thirst.
Wails rise when I enter the door;
I am told my infant boy has died’ of hunger.
Why should I suppress a natural grief
When even the neighbors in the village weep? (Hung, 2021, p. 89)

In this part, Du Fu recounts his reunion with his family after the journey, only to discover that his youngest son has died of starvation. The passage conveys not only profound personal grief but also a broader humanitarian concern, making it one of the emotional climaxes of the poem (Mo, 2022; Ye, 2024). In Owen’s translation, expression “ten mouths” (十口) retains the

cultural imagery of the Chinese text, although English readers may not immediately recognize its figurative meaning. Owen seeks high-fidelity meme replication. By contrast, Hung emphasizes adaptive meme transmission. In Hung's translation, he renders “十口” as “our household of ten”, making the meaning immediately clear but sacrificing the compact expression. In addition, Hung's shift to the first person makes the emotional and experiential memes become more immediate and compelling. The shift therefore strengthens the emotional meme in the latter half of the poem. Thus, Hung sacrifices the consistency of the narrative in order to enhance the accessibility and reception of different memes among target readers. also makes explicit the emotional logic that remains implicit in the Chinese text.

4.2 Meme Transmission

Chesterman (2016) argues that successful memes are those that survive, spread, and adapt within new cultural environments. From a memetic perspective, Owen adopts a strategy of high-fidelity meme replication. In Example 1, the cultural meme of Duling is intact, the historical meme of Hou Ji and Xie is directly transmitted, the ideological meme of aspiring to become sage ministers is preserved, and the emotional meme of self-criticism and humility remains visible. However, the transmission may face a lower replication rate among English readers because many readers lack the cultural knowledge necessary to understand who Hou Ji and Xie are. Owen adds annotation to explain Hou Ji and Xie, but his explanation about Du Fu wanting to be the founder of a great family like them is erroneous (Mo, 2022). Xie (2020) argued that here Owen simply incorporated his own research and close reading of Du Fu's poetry into the translation, thus presenting the readers with a false image of Du Fu. The memes survive in their original form but may not spread effectively without additional explanation. Thus, Owen achieves high meme fidelity but relatively limited meme accessibility. By comparison, Hung prioritizes meme adaptation over direct replication. The ideological meme of patriotic service is successfully transmitted, the emotional meme of idealistic aspiration is retained, and the translation increases accessibility for English readers because the intended meaning is immediately understandable. However, some source-culture memes are weakened: The specific historical meme of “Hou Ji and Xie” disappears, the intertextual and cultural associations attached to these legendary figures are lost, and the uniqueness of the Chinese cultural reference is replaced by a more universal concept. As a result, Hung's version facilitates wider dissemination of the core message but reduces the amount of source-culture information being transmitted. This can be viewed as meme mutation, where the original meme evolves into a more target-oriented form to improve communicative effectiveness.

In Example 2, Owen's translation successfully preserves: the social concern meme (“worry for the common folk”); the emotional meme of deep anguish; the metaphorical meme of bodily suffering as a manifestation of emotional distress. The phrase “my guts burn within” reproduces the original imagery with little modification. As a result, the source-text meme survives largely intact. However, English readers may find the expression somewhat unusual or even harsh because bodily metaphors involving “guts” are less common in literary English than in classical Chinese. Consequently, while the meme is transmitted faithfully, its communicative effectiveness may be reduced. The meme survives, but its replication among target readers may be less successful due to cultural distance. However, Hung prioritizes meme adaptation and

successful replication. The translation effectively transmits the ideological meme of concern for the people, the emotional meme of anxiety and distress, and the poet's compassionate character. The phrase "heart burns with anxiety" is immediately understandable to English readers and therefore has a higher probability of successful reception and replication. However, some transformation occurs during transmission. The original metaphorical meme of "肠内热" is altered; the bodily imagery shifts from the intestines to the heart; the traditional Chinese conceptualization of emotional suffering is replaced by a more familiar Western metaphor. This represents a process of meme mutation, in which the original meme changes form in order to increase its adaptability within the target culture.

In Example 3, Owen's translation successfully preserves the natural imagery meme, the philosophical meme of innate nature, the ideological meme. However, the substitution of "Great Leviathan" introduces a meme mutation. Although Leviathan conveys enormous power similar to the source language, it also carries biblical associations of chaos, divine power, and mythical monstrosity that are absent from Du Fu's poem. Consequently, a new Western cultural meme enters the translation while the original Chinese image is partially transformed. Thus, Owen achieves high linguistic fidelity but introduces selective cultural mutation to facilitate literary resonance among English readers. In contrast, Hung prioritizes adaptive meme transmission. The translation effectively communicates the philosophical meme of following one's nature, the ideological meme of recognizing one's humble status, and the emotional meme of self-reflection. For example, he constitutes meme adaptation by rendering "葵藿" as "sunflower". Although botanical precision is sacrificed, the symbolic function of the imagery becomes immediately recognizable to English readers. Likewise, Hung therefore increases the meme's communicative success while reducing its botanical and historical specificity.

Chesterman (2016) argues that translation memes survive most successfully when both their form and communicative function are replicated in the target culture. In autobiographical poetry, the speaking voice is itself a crucial meme. Owen's use of the first-person pronoun exemplifies faithful meme replication: although Classical Chinese omits the subject, the explicit "I" reconstructs the original deictic perspective for English readers, preserving the poet's voice, emotional immediacy, and moral stance. This pragmatic explicitness change strengthens the transmission of the poem's authorial and emotional memes without altering their function. By contrast, Hung's third person in the first verse of the translation represents a mutation of the narrative meme. The poem is transformed from a personal confession into an external characterization. Consequently, the autobiographical, emotional, and ideological memes become less immediate and more descriptive. In the following verse, Hung adopts the first-person narrative meme. This adaptation may improve coherence if the translator wishes to maintain a consistent third-person narrative, but it does so at the cost of reducing the fidelity of the source text's communicative and rhetorical memes.

The following Table 1 summarizes the comparison of meme transmission between Stephen Owen and William Hung.

Table 1. Comparison of meme transmission

Aspect	Stephen Owen	William Hung
Translation Orientation	Source-oriented	Target-oriented
Translation Strategies	Literal translation & foreignization	Explicitness change & cultural filtering
Cultural meme transmission	Strong	Reduced
Historical allusion transmission	Complete	Generalized
Accessibility for target readers	Lower	Higher
Meme fidelity	High	Moderate
Meme dissemination potential	Limited without annotation	Greater among general readers
Meme mutation	Minimal	Significant
Meme dissemination	More dependent on readers' cultural knowledge	More accessible to general readers

Owen and Hung illustrate two distinct transmission pathways. Owen emphasizes faithful replication of the source-text memes. His literal rendering of most natural images preserves the original conceptual network, allowing readers to encounter Du Fu's imagery with minimal mediation. Even where he introduces the translation like "Great Leviathan", the substitution aims to preserve the image's symbolic magnitude through an equivalent literary meme familiar to Western readers. His translation therefore reflects source-oriented meme replication, although the introduction of a biblical allusion demonstrates that meme transmission is never entirely free from cultural mutation. Hung, by contrast, adopts adaptive meme transmission. Through explicitness change and cultural filtering, as well as semantic simplification, he reshapes the original memes into forms that are more easily accepted within the target culture. These adaptations enhance the replicability of the poem's philosophical and ideological memes

among English readers, even though some of the source text's botanical precision and cultural distinctiveness are reduced. His translation exemplifies Chesterman's notion that memes often survive by mutating to fit the receiving cultural environment.

4.3 Major Findings

The study reveals that Stephen Owen and William Hung employ markedly different translation strategies in rendering Du Fu's *Five Hundred Words from Ch'ang-an to Feng-hsien*, resulting in different patterns of meme transmission. Owen predominantly adopts a source-oriented approach, relying on literal translation, foreignization, and imagery preservation to retain the linguistic form, cultural specificity, and poetic structure of the source text. His translations preserve historical allusions, culture-bound expressions, metaphorical imagery, and the autobiographical voice of the original, thereby achieving a high degree of meme fidelity. In contrast, Hung adopts a more target-oriented approach, frequently employing explicitness change, interpretation, and cultural filtering to enhance readability and comprehension. These strategies improve the accessibility and communicative effectiveness of the translations for English readers but often involve the adaptation or mutation of source-text memes, particularly those associated with Chinese cultural references, historical allusions, and metaphorical expressions.

From the perspective of Chesterman's memes of translation, the study demonstrates that different categories of memes exhibit different degrees of transmission. Ideological memes, such as Du Fu's humanitarian concern for the people, loyalty to the state, and criticism of social injustice, are effectively transmitted in both translations because of their universal significance. Emotional memes, including grief, frustration, compassion, and moral responsibility, are likewise preserved, although Owen tends to maintain their poetic subtlety while Hung often reinforces them through explicitness change. In contrast, cultural and historical memes are more susceptible to mutation during translation. Owen generally preserves these memes through foreignization and literal translation, whereas Hung adapts them into culturally familiar forms to facilitate target-reader reception.

Overall, the findings confirm Chesterman's view that translation is a dynamic process of meme replication and adaptation, in which translators negotiate between preserving source-culture meanings and ensuring their effective dissemination in the target culture.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

This study investigated the English translations of selected excerpts from Du Fu's *Five Hundred Words from Ch'ang-an to Feng-hsien* by Stephen Owen and William Hung through the theoretical framework of Chesterman's memes of translation. By identifying and comparing their translation strategies, it was established that two translators can adopt distinctly different approaches to meme transmission.

The findings reveal that the two translators adopt distinctly different approaches to meme transmission. Stephen Owen consistently employs a source-oriented strategy. His translation

maintains a high degree of meme fidelity because he preserves the linguistic form and cultural meme of the source text. Consequently, the cultural, historical, and rhetorical memes of Du Fu's poetry are largely retained, allowing target readers to encounter the poem in a manner that closely reflects its original literary and cultural context. However, this strategy requires greater cultural knowledge from readers and may reduce the accessibility of some culture-bound memes. In contrast, William Hung adopts a more target-oriented approach. His translation effectively communicates the ideological and emotional messages embedded in Du Fu's poetry, making these memes more accessible to English-speaking readers. Nevertheless, this increased accessibility is often achieved through meme mutation, whereby culture-specific references, historical allusions, metaphorical images, and narrative perspectives are modified, generalized, or partially omitted to accommodate the expectations of the target audience. The comparative analysis further indicates that different categories of memes exhibit different degrees of stability during translation. Ideological memes, such as Du Fu's humanitarian concern for the people, and criticism of social injustice, demonstrate strong transmission in both translations because they possess relatively universal significance. Emotional memes are also successfully transmitted, although Owen tends to preserve their poetic subtlety while Hung often strengthens them through explicitness change. By contrast, cultural and historical memes are more vulnerable to mutation, particularly when translators seek to improve readability through cultural filtering or interpretation.

Nevertheless, this study has its limitations. First, the study focuses exclusively on one poem and compares only two English translations. The findings therefore cannot be generalized to all translations of Du Fu's poetry or to the translation of Chinese classical poetry more broadly. Second, the analysis is primarily qualitative and interpretive. The identification of translation strategies and meme transmission relies on close textual analysis, and different researchers may arrive at alternative interpretations of particular translation choices or meme transformations. Further research could investigate readers' reception through surveys or interviews.

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Acknowledgments

Not Applicable.

Funding

Not Applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Macrothink Institute.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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