

Article

From the *Rhapsody on the Goddess of the Luo River* to the *Goddess of the Luo River*: The Indirect Translation from Literature into Image

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Abstract

The Goddess of the Luo River is a visible painting that depicts *The Rhapsody on the Goddess of the Luo River*, an invisible poem. How does the painter convey the intricate plot, abstract verbal imagery, and musicality of the poem—particularly the subtle emotions of betrayal, anguish, and regret—in a tangible visual form? In translating the text, the painter employs at least five methods: literal depiction, perspective shift, metaphor, suggestion and symbolism. Corresponding to these methods, the painter selects, abridges, modifies, or expands upon the textual content. The success of this transformation from text to image lies precisely in the fact that the image does not rigidly adhere to the text but instead captures its spiritual essence. The indirect translation from literature to image is fundamentally grounded in the heterogeneous nature of poetry and painting and must respect the inherent principles of each art form.

Keywords: image; literature; indirect translation; method; *the Rhapsody on the Goddess of the Luo River*; *the Goddess of the Luo River*

1. The *Rhapsody on the Goddess of the Luo River* and the *Goddess of the Luo River*

1.1. The Content and Literary Features of the *Rhapsody on the Goddess of the Luo River*

Cao Zhi's *Rhapsody on the Goddess of the Luo River* (hereafter *Rhapsody*) uses a first-person narrative to recount a melancholic love story: while traveling eastward from the capital back to his domain in the fourth year of the Huangchu era (223 CE), the narrator encounters the Goddess of the Luo River. Though mutually drawn to one another, their union proves impossible, leading to their eventual parting. This short lyric rhapsody consists of 176 lines, 156 of which are rhymed. Characterized by ornate diction, alternating short and long lines, varied rhymes, and a pronounced musicality, it exemplifies Cao Zhi's poetic virtuosity. Consider the following examples:

I left the capital, heading for my eastern domain.

Leaving Mount Yi behind, crossing Mount Huanyuan,

Passing through Tong Valley, ascending Mount Jing.

The sun had slanted toward the west, my chariot wearied, my horse grew faint. . .

Then my spirit wandered, my mind adrift.

Looking down, I saw nothing; looking up, I beheld a wondrous sight:

A lovely woman, by the riverbank.



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Her form, delicately poised as a startled swan,
 Graceful as a frolicking dragon,
 Radiant like the autumn chrysanthemum,
 Lush as a spring pine.
 Neither too plump nor too slender, her proportions just so,
 Her shoulders like carved jade, her waist like a girdle of white silk.
 Her slender, elegant neck revealed her fair complexion,
 No cosmetics needed, no powder required (Cao 1984, p. 283)

The pronounced musicality of the *Rhapsody* derives from the alternation of short and long lines and the shifting rhyme scheme—both testaments to Cao Zhi’s masterful command of language. Short lines, primarily of four characters, inherit the rhythmic cadence of the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*) and are frequently used to evoke vivid imagery, swift actions, and moments of surprise. The predominantly six-character long lines, influenced by the style of *Encountering Sorrow* (*Lisao*), adopt a more measured, melancholic rhythm, well suited to conveying sorrow, melancholy, and hesitation. It is particularly noteworthy that, within the 156 rhymed lines of the *Rhapsody*, Cao Zhi employed these two line lengths in nearly equal measure.

1.2. The Content and Compositional Features of the Goddess of the Luo River

Among the nine surviving versions of *The Goddess of the Luo River*¹, the handscroll housed in the Liaoning Provincial Museum is selected as the primary example for this study because it is the most complete and earliest extant Song Dynasty copy, preserving the continuous narrative structure, the original placement of textual passages, and the richest visual details for analyzing the painter’s translation strategies.

Scholarly consensus holds that the surviving Liaoning handscroll is a Song Dynasty copy (10th–13th century) after a composition attributed to Gu Kaizhi (c. 344–406 CE), not an original work by Gu Kaizhi himself (Chen 2012, p. 25). This attribution does not affect the argument, which concerns the painter’s translation strategies regardless of the copyist’s identity.

The scroll (hereafter *Painting*) is a narrative handscroll featuring figures set against a landscape backdrop. Its composition unfolds from right to left in a continuous format, comprising three primary elements: landscape features (mountains, trees, and rocks), human figures, and passages of text from the *Rhapsody*.

The landscape, composed of simplified mountain ranges and groves of trees, is generally positioned along the lower margin of the scroll. This arrangement creates a series of open spaces that serve as the foreground and suggests a limited sense of depth. The forms and brushwork are notably succinct yet robust. Rocks, slopes, peaks, and various trees—including ginkgo saplings—are depicted with elongated, upright postures. Individual or clustered hills and slopes, often bordering the water’s edge, line the lower edge of the scroll. Their gentle, hummock-like contours form an undulating rhythm that not only defines the spatial and background parameters of each scene but also creates a visual sense of rhythmic flow.

Most figures are shown in a three-quarter profile. In each scene, they are arranged in a gentle arc that mirrors the rhythmic quality of the *Rhapsody*. With the exception of Cao Zhi, who appears somewhat fuller in form, all figures share slender, columnar bodies, oval faces, tall coiffures, and elongated forms. Their outlines are rendered with soft, elastic, curvilinear strokes. Passages from the *Rhapsody*, divided into segments of varying lengths, are placed at different heights according to their relevance to the adjacent scenes, compelling the viewer’s eye to move vertically across the scroll. This demonstrates the painter’s deep

appreciation for the musicality and rhythm of the *Rhapsody*, which he adeptly translates into visual terms through various compositional strategies.

Although the *Painting* follows the *Rhapsody* closely, the differences in artistic medium—the abstract, immaterial nature of poetry as opposed to the concrete, visual nature of painting—inevitably result in distinct experiences for the audience. In transforming the literary text into a visual image, the painter does not slavishly imitate his source but instead strives to capture its underlying spirit. This involves selecting, abridging, modifying, and expanding upon the textual content in order to convey the intricate narrative, abstract imagery, and musicality of the poem, particularly its subtle emotional undercurrents of betrayal, anguish, and regret. Ultimately, this process of indirect translation from literature to image rests on the understanding that poetry and painting operate according to different logics and must adhere to their own respective laws and principles.

2. Analysis of the Methods of Transformation from Text to Image

Since the *Painting* is based on the *Rhapsody*, how does the painter interpret the poetic language of the original and translate it into visual form? How does he transform the narrative, imagery, and musicality—especially the subtle emotions of betrayal, anguish, and regret—into tangible images? And how does he use the concrete medium of painting to convey the intangible, abstract rhythm and cadence of the poem?

In representing the meaning of the *Rhapsody*, the painter employs at least five methods: literal depiction, perspective shift, metaphor, suggestion and symbolism. Through these methods, he translates the poem's meaning while simultaneously articulating his own interpretation of it. Among these, literal depiction refers to the direct visual rendering of concrete, perceptible elements mentioned in the text, such as the figures of the Goddess of the Luo River, Fengyi (the God of the Yellow River), Chuanhou (the God of Rivers), and Nüwa, as well as objects like chariots, horses, and boats. Since literal depiction is self-explanatory, this analysis will focus on the other four methods.

The Taiwanese scholar Chen Baozhen, in her work *The Nymph of the Luo River and Chinese Narrative Painting*, describes this handscroll as “an elegant musical drama” and divides it into five acts comprising twelve scenes (Chen 2012, pp. 29–31). The acts and scenes are:

- Act I: Encounter (including three scenes: Departing the Capital, Resting, and Stunning Encounter)²;
- Act II: Pledge of Love (including two scenes: Playfulness and Gift Exchange);
- Act III: Change of Heart (including two scenes: Spirits Gathering and Hesitation);
- Act IV: Separation (including two scenes: Preparing the Carriage and Departure);
- Act V: Returning in Sorrow (including three scenes: Boating, Night Vigil, and Returning East).

This analysis adopts Chen's five-act, twelve-scene division and her descriptive scene titles to examine the methods of transformation from text to image. The focus is on how the *Painting* translates the *Rhapsody*, though the discussion will occasionally draw upon examples from Chinese painting history—whether for comparison, confirmation, or counterpoint—to ensure a more rigorous analysis.

2.1. Perspective Shift

Although the *Rhapsody* is titled after the Goddess of the Luo River, the first-person narrator (“I”) does not occupy a central role; rather, he remains on the periphery as an observer and narrator. The Goddess is the primary subject of his description, admiration, and lament, and thus the protagonist of the *Rhapsody*. In the *Painting*, however, the protagonist is not the Goddess but the narrator. As the saying goes, “You stand on the bridge watching

the scenery; the scenery watcher watches you from the upstairs window” (Bian 2002, p. 29); the *Painting* adopts a perspective distinct from that of the text. The painter, acting as a reader and interpreter of the *Rhapsody*, foregrounds the narrator—the author and one of the story’s protagonists—placing him at the center of the composition. This decision reflects the painter’s unique understanding of the text.

In the *Painting*, the narrator (Cao Zhi) is depicted as a tall, round figure (Figure 1). Wearing a tall cap, a red wide-sleeved robe with a curved collar (in contrast to the V-neck collars worn by the Goddess and attendants), and high-nosed clogs (as opposed to the high-toothed clogs of his attendants), he is clearly distinguished from the other figures. He stands upright, supported by two attendants. Behind him, an attendant holds a canopy, followed by others bearing a round fan, books, and a mat—an entourage befitting his status. His chariot and boat are equally ornate, emphasizing his prominent position as a feudal prince. While the *Rhapsody* does not explicitly mention the narrator’s aristocratic status (a fact known to readers from historical context), the *Painting* makes it immediately apparent through his expression, attire, and retinue, allowing viewers to grasp his noble identity at a glance.



Figure 1. The “Gift Exchange” scene. Attributed to Gu Kaizhi, *The Goddess of the Luo River* (detail), ink and color on silk, handscroll, 26.0 × 646 cm, Liaoning Provincial Museum.

The substitution of Cao Zhi for the Goddess of the Luo River as the central figure of the *Painting* has significant implications for the unfolding of the narrative. Building upon this foundational shift, numerous other departures from the text emerge. Two examples will suffice. First, in the *Rhapsody*, Cao Zhi consistently looks up to observe and describe the Goddess: “Looking down, I saw nothing; looking up, I beheld a wondrous sight. . .”; “Gazing at her from afar, she glistens like the morning sun rising over the dawn clouds”; “Dwelling on my feelings, I linger, my gaze filled with longing.” In the *Painting*, however, Cao Zhi and the Goddess meet each other’s eyes at eye level. Second, the “Returning in Sorrow” section comprises only fourteen lines, a mere fraction of the 176-line *Rhapsody*. Yet the painter devotes nearly one-quarter of the scroll to its depiction³, including the three expansive scenes of “Boating,” “Night Vigil,” and “Returning East.” Both of these examples are natural consequences of the initial perspectival shift.

Thus, before setting brush to paper, the painter had already resolved not to adhere rigidly to the text. Instead, he selected, abridged, and transformed his source material in accordance with his own understanding of the poem. In his essay “Lin Shu’s Translations,” Qian Zhongshu posits that the highest standard of literary translation is “transformation”:

“A work that has been transferred from one language to another, without showing any trace of rigidity or awkwardness due to linguistic differences, while perfectly preserving its original flavor, can be said to have achieved the realm of ‘transformation.’” (Qian 2002, p. 77) Although Qian was discussing linguistic translation, his observation aptly describes the achievement of *The Goddess of the Luo River* in relation to *The Rhapsody on the Goddess of the Luo River*. The success of this transformation lies precisely in the fact that the image does not slavishly imitate the text but prioritizes capturing its spirit. This process goes beyond mere translation; it constitutes a form of artistic re-creation.

The perspective shift employed in the *Painting* is a rarity in Chinese painting history. While countless paintings have been based on literary texts—poems, Buddhist scriptures, novels, and dramas—most adhere faithfully to the perspective, stance, and attitude of the source. In other words, they follow and replicate the text without developing their own narrative viewpoint. This tendency led the Song dynasty scholar Zheng Qiao to lament that “one sees the book but not the image.” (Zheng 1936, p. 729)⁴ Narrative paintings based on Buddhist scriptures, as well as the woodblock illustrations and frontispieces of Ming and Qing novels, naturally follow the narrative perspective of their sources. Even the works of renowned masters in the narrative and poetic painting traditions often do the same. A few examples illustrate this point.

Han dynasty tomb murals depicting the story of “Two Peaches Killing Three Warriors” show the climactic moment of the dispute over the peaches, faithfully following the account in the *Annals of Master Yan*. Gu Kaizhi’s *Benevolent and Wise Women* (Eastern Jin), based on the “Biographies of the Benevolent and Wise” from *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, likewise adheres to the Confucian moral standards of the text. Luo Ping’s *The Jian’ge Pass* (Qing dynasty), inspired by Li Bai’s “Hard is the Road to Shu,” uses a panoramic composition to depict the treacherous terrain of the Jian’ge Pass and the difficulty of the Shu road, evoking in the viewer the same sense of awe and trepidation conveyed by the poem. The theme of danger and difficulty, central to both painting and poem, reflects Li Bai’s narrative perspective.

Paintings depicting Tao Yuanming present a particularly instructive case. As a cultural icon, Tao Yuanming—his poetry, his life, and his persona—represented ideals of purity, detachment from worldly affairs, and reclusion that resonated deeply with the Chinese literati. Consequently, numerous painters throughout history produced portraits of Tao⁵. One might expect this subject to offer ample opportunity for creative interpretation, yet most extant works remain bound to the narrative perspective of their textual sources. A notable exception is Chen Hongshou’s *Scenes from the Life of Tao Yuanming*⁶, an early Qing work that deliberately introduces ironic distance from its biographical source: for instance, Tao is shown meditating on a levitating rock, and in another scene he paints on fans rather than writing poems, as the text records. Such visual distortions indicate that Chen was not simply replicating the text but engaging in a critical commentary. This exception, however, does not undermine the general rule; rather, it confirms that painters possess the agency to depart from their sources—a capacity that the painter of *The Goddess of the Luo River* also exercises through perspective shift and other methods.

In summary, when transforming the *Rhapsody* into visual form, the painter of *The Goddess of the Luo River* subtly shifted the narrative perspective from that of the author (Cao Zhi) to that of a painter and reader. This shift also changed the protagonist of the story: while the Goddess remains the central figure in Cao Zhi’s text, the painter places Cao Zhi himself at the heart of the composition. This unique approach is rarely encountered in the history of Chinese narrative painting. Why have most Chinese narrative paintings tended to replicate their textual sources rather than develop their own distinctive perspectives? This question merits further investigation.

2.2. Metaphor

Metaphor is employed to great effect in the “Gift Exchange” scene (Act II, “Pledge of Love,” Figure 1). The corresponding passage in the *Rhapsody* delicately describes Cao Zhi’s shifting inner emotions:

I was charmed by her beauty and grace,
 Yet my heart stirred within me without joy.
 With no matchmaker to convey my feelings,
 I sent my thoughts through the rippling waves.
 Wishing to declare my true intentions,
 I undid my jade pendant to give to her.
 Alas, this beautiful one was truly virtuous,
 Versed in rites and learned in the *Classic of Poetry*.
 She raised her jade pendant in response,
 Pointing to the deep waters as the place of our tryst.
 Holding fast to her sincere affection,
 I feared this spirit might deceive me.
 Moved by the story of Jiao Fu and his broken promise,
 I was hesitant and doubtful.
 Composing my expression, I calmed my heart,
 And invoked the bounds of ritual to control myself (Cao 1984, p. 283)

Translating this nuanced account of rapidly evolving emotions into visual imagery would be challenging. Consequently, the painter opts for a direct depiction of Cao Zhi undoing his jade pendant and offering it to the Goddess, while subtly conveying their psychological states through metaphor.

The metaphor here is primarily achieved through the strategic placement of the figures. In the scene, Cao Zhi stands at the center, the Goddess to his right, a male attendant to his left, and two female attendants behind him. Cao Zhi, holding a long jade pendant, extends it toward the Goddess. This seemingly simple arrangement conceals two significant details: first, the reversed positions of Cao Zhi and the Goddess; second, the presence of a male attendant with his back to the viewer. Throughout the rest of the scroll, whenever Cao Zhi and the Goddess appear together, she is on the left and he on the right. Here—and only here—their positions are reversed. This unusual reversal functions as a metaphor for a shift in their feelings. Similarly, the male attendant’s back-turned posture is highly significant. All other figures in the scroll are shown in three-quarter view; this is the only instance of a figure depicted from behind. This deliberate choice translates the abstract concept of “betrayal” (or “breach of trust”) in the text into the concrete visual language of “turning one’s back,” implying that Cao Zhi will betray the Goddess’s love.

Metaphor also appears in other Chinese paintings as a vehicle for indirect expression. For example, the Ming loyalist painter Bada Shanren (Zhu Da) used exaggerated forms—fish and birds with unnervingly large eyes, inverted conical boulders that appear on the verge of collapse, massive cliffs seemingly suspended in mid-air, landscapes of desolate mountains and lonely waters, and skies rendered bone-chillingly cold—to encode his anguish over the fall of the Ming dynasty. Another Ming painter who excelled in the use of metaphorical satire was Xu Wei. His paintings of crabs—such as *Yellow Armor Crab* and *Ink Crab*—used the dark, hollow interior of the crab to symbolize intellectually vacuous officials.

2.3. Suggestion

Suggestion is employed in the “Boating” and “Night Vigil” scenes (Act V, “Returning in Sorrow,” Figure 2).

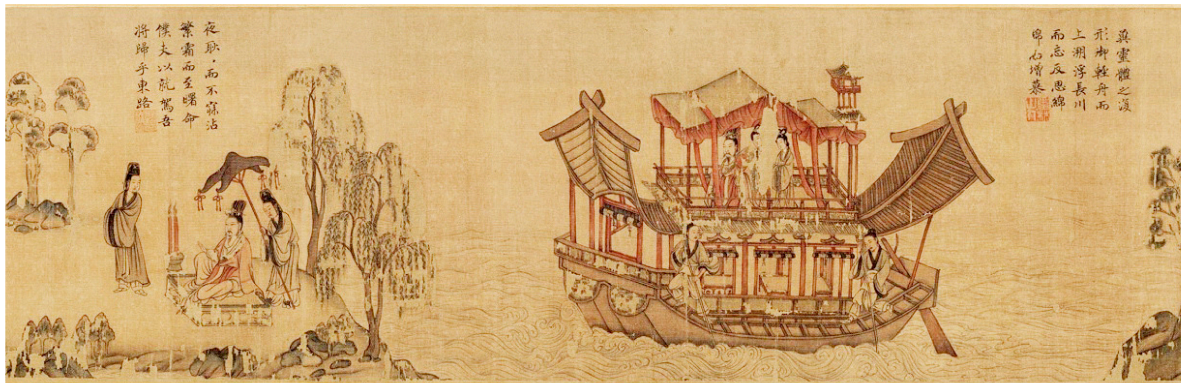


Figure 2. The “Boating” and “Night Vigil” scenes. Attributed to Gu Kaizhi, *The Goddess of the Luo River* (detail), Liaoning Provincial Museum.

Following the Goddess’s departure, Cao Zhi is consumed by sorrow, as described in the *Rhapsody*: “He descended the heights but his heart remained behind./ Dwelling on his feelings, he looked back, his heart filled with longing.” He therefore takes a boat to follow her path upstream. In the *Painting*, Cao Zhi is shown seated in the upper pavilion of an ornate multi-decked boat, attended by two female servants. The movement of the boat is suggested by the fluttering ribbons and the waves lapping against its hull. The contrast between the empty upper pavilion and the two cushioned seats placed within the cabin below implies that, despite the cabin’s comfort, Cao Zhi prefers to endure the wind in the exposed upper deck, so intent is he on searching for the Goddess. This effectively conveys the sentiment expressed in the *Rhapsody*: “Hoping the spirit might appear again,/ I take a light boat and sail upstream./ Drifting on the long river, I forget to return,/ My longing deepening as I dwell on her.” Yet the painter’s elaborate, richly detailed boat is far more evocative than the “light boat” of the text.

The “Night Vigil” scene depicts Cao Zhi, consumed by regret for his betrayal and longing for the Goddess, unable to sleep. He is shown seated on a heated *kang* platform, with two burning candles to his upper left—suggesting that he has been awake throughout the night. Behind him stands an attendant holding a parasol, hinting that he has sat outside long enough for his clothes to be dampened by the heavy dew. Beneath the parasol, Cao Zhi leans on his left hand for support while gesturing with his right toward a servant in front, seemingly giving orders to prepare the carriage for his return east. Weary and broken in spirit, he can no longer maintain the composure he had before the Goddess’s departure; his posture suggests that he is about to collapse. Through such details—the candles, the parasol, the slumped posture—the painter translates the fourteen characters of the *Rhapsody* (“The night lengthens, yet he cannot sleep,/ He waits until dawn, his clothes wet with dew”) into a compelling visual narrative. Here, the image arguably proves more expressive than the text.

Suggestion is a widely employed technique in Chinese painting. A famous modern example is Qi Baishi’s *Frog Sounds from a Ten-Li Gully*, which takes its inspiration from a line in a poem by the Qing dynasty poet Cha Shenxing: “Frog sounds rise from the gully ten li (about 5 km) away” (Cha 1986, p. 464). The sound of frogs is intangible and invisible—how can a painting convey it? Qi’s solution is to meet intangibility with intangibility. The composition shows only a few tadpoles swimming in a mountain stream, with no frogs in sight. The absence of frogs invites the viewer to imagine not the immediate present,

but a future moment: when the stream has flowed ten li (about 5 km) and the tadpoles have matured into frogs, their calls will finally be heard. This imaginative leap—from tadpole to frog, from silence to sound—is a masterful use of suggestion. Similarly, during the Song dynasty, imperial painting examinations rewarded suggestive compositions, such as a galloping horse with a butterfly around its hoof to convey the “scent of trampled flowers” (Deng 1963, p. 5). These examples confirm the importance of suggestion in Chinese pictorial tradition.

2.4. Symbolism

In the “Stunning Encounter” scene (Act I, “Encounter,” Figure 3) and the “Departure” scene (Act IV, “Separation,” Figure 4), we can clearly observe the painter’s use of symbolism to translate the *Rhapsody*.



Figure 3. The “Stunning Encounter” scene. Attributed to Gu Kaizhi, *The Goddess of the Luo River* (detail), Liaoning Provincial Museum.



Figure 4. The “Departure” scene. Attributed to Gu Kaizhi, *The Goddess of the Luo River* (detail), Liaoning Provincial Museum.

In “Stunning Encounter,” Cao Zhi appears on the right with eight attendants. His attire, as well as the ritual objects carried by his attendants—a canopy, a mat, and a feather fan—symbolize the human world. This stands in stark contrast to the Goddess on the left, surrounded by eight natural elements that symbolize her beauty, forming a world of spirits. The contrast between the human and divine realms in terms of appearance and nature effectively conveys Cao Zhi’s lament in the *Rhapsody*: “I lament the divide between the realms of human and spirit.” This sorrow, stemming from the insurmountable gulf between the two worlds, recurs throughout the scroll. For instance, the Goddess is always shown in the air or on the water, while Cao Zhi remains firmly on the ground. The Goddess’s chariot is drawn by six dragons, Cao Zhi’s by four horses; her chariot is wingless. Through such

recurring symbolic contrasts, the painter translates the *Rhapsody*'s theme of human–divine separation and the pervasive melancholy it engenders into visual terms.

While the implications of these contrasts are relatively accessible to the viewer, the symbolic significance of the long column of text that separates Cao Zhi from the Goddess in the “Departure” scene (Figure 4) may be less readily apparent. In this scene, Cao Zhi appears on the right with three attendants. On the left, the Goddess, seated in a chariot drawn by six dragons and escorted by aquatic birds, is depicted within a body of water. Between them, a “wall” of text from the *Rhapsody* is inscribed in eight columns. This arrangement symbolizes the insurmountable distance between the human and divine realms, while also suggesting that they can nonetheless achieve spiritual communion through the medium of words—that is, through literature.

Leaping fish alert the procession,
 Hanging jade rings chime as they depart together.
 The six dragons, heads held high,
 Draw the cloud chariot with ease.
 Whales and giant fish leap between the wheels,
 Waterbirds soar as escorts.
 So they cross the northern islet, pass over the southern ridge,
 The Goddess turns her fair neck, casts her clear gaze,
 Parts her crimson lips to speak softly,
 Articulating the rules of their relationship.
 ‘I lament the divide between the realms of human and spirit,
 I grieve that my youthful prime goes unfulfilled.
 I raise my silken sleeve to hide my tears,
 My gown soaked with falling drops.
 I mourn that our joyous meeting is forever past,
 I sorrow that this parting sends us to different worlds.
 I have no trifling gift to show my love,
 So I offer these southern earrings.
 Though I dwell in the darkness of the deep,
 I will forever cherish the prince in my heart.’
 Suddenly, before he realizes where she has gone,
 She vanishes, her spirit hiding its light (Cao 1984, p. 284)

This column of text, like a barrier descending from the heavens, blocks Cao Zhi’s path as he seeks to follow the Goddess. The “wall” formed by these eight columns of text, with its formidable height and density, instills a sense of awe in the viewer, who cannot help but echo Cao Zhi’s lament: “I lament the divide between the realms of human and spirit.” By transforming the abstract concept of the human–divine divide into a tangible, palpable object, the painter successfully conveys the subtle pathos of the text.

This placement of text serves at least three symbolic functions. First, it symbolizes the fundamental difference between the human and divine realms and the unbridgeable gulf between them. Second, throughout the scroll, whenever Cao Zhi and the Goddess appear together, they are depicted in close proximity without any intervening elements—except here. This suggests that their love can have no future. Third, the use of text rather than another object to form this barrier implies that communication between the human and

divine realms is possible on a spiritual level through the medium of words—one of the reasons Cao Zhi composed his *Rhapsody*.

Like suggestion, symbolism is a common technique in Chinese painting, employed in both the Southern (literati) and Northern (academic) traditions. Plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, and chrysanthemums, for instance, serve as classic symbolic images for ideals such as nobility, purity, integrity, and serenity. Auspicious motifs—dragons and phoenixes for prosperity, bats for good fortune, deer for official rank, cranes for longevity, and magpies for happiness—are also widely used. Such examples are too numerous to detail here.

However, the use of text as a symbolic element in painting is unusual in Chinese art history; to the best of this author's knowledge, it appears only in this version of *The Goddess of the Luo River*. In this instance, the translation of text into image achieves a remarkable fusion of the verbal and visual.

3. Questions Regarding the Methods of Transformation

Zhang Yanyuan, in his *Record of Famous Painters Through the Ages*, observed: "Histories can narrate events, but they cannot depict their appearance; rhapsodies and hymns can sing of beauty, but they cannot fully portray its image. Painting is uniquely capable of achieving both." (Zhang 2009, p. 6) Painting's strength—the ability to depict appearance and image—compensates for poetry's weakness. The Liaoning version of *The Goddess of the Luo River*, with its skillful integration of painting and passages of text of varying lengths, is an exemplary union of the two arts. As such a perfect work of art, it has long attracted the admiration of scholars and art lovers⁷, though with praise sometimes comes criticism. The Qianlong Emperor, in a poem he inscribed on one version of the scroll, posed questions about its authorship and techniques:

Another scroll bears the Li family mark,
Why date it to the Chen era?
Surely not pure ink linework;
This copy must be authentic indeed?⁸

Regarding the methods of transformation analyzed above, while the *Painting* successfully translates the moving narrative, intricate plot, abstract rhythm, musicality, and subtle emotions of the *Rhapsody* through techniques such as literal depiction, perspective shift, metaphor, suggestion, and symbolism, several aspects of its approach raise questions that these methods do not fully address.

1. How should we classify the translation of rhetorical figures of speech in the text into literal visual representations? To describe the Goddess's beauty, the *Rhapsody* employs eight similes: "startled swan," "frolicking dragon," "autumn chrysanthemum," "spring pine," and others. These are metaphors, not literal elements within the narrative. In the "Stunning Encounter" scene (Figure 3), however, the painter directly depicts these eight images, arranging them around the Goddess. Zhao Xianzhang has described this as an interesting phenomenon in the interaction between word and image: "the appearance of non-representational imagery within representational illustration." (Zhao 2013, p. 163) This technique does not fit neatly into any of the five methods previously identified, and its classification requires further investigation.
2. Why does the *Painting* include elements not present in the text? Does this represent a legitimate interpretation of the poem, or a misinterpretation? Cao Zhi's *Rhapsody* makes no mention of phoenixes, yet in the "Departure" scene (Figure 4), a goddess riding a phoenix is clearly visible. Chen Baozhen suggests that "this goddess riding a phoenix is not mentioned in the *Rhapsody* and can therefore be seen as an addition made by the painter for aesthetic purposes." (Chen 2012, p. 43) This explanation is not

entirely convincing. If the painter's goal was simply to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the scene, he could have added any number of familiar elements, such as the rocks and trees that appear elsewhere in the scroll. That he chose to depict a complex figure of a goddess riding a phoenix suggests a more specific intention. What this intention might be remains an open question.

3. Conversely, why does the *Painting* omit certain elements that are present in the text? After Cao Zhi's affection turns to doubt, the *Rhapsody* describes the Goddess's intense anguish at feeling betrayed:

So the Goddess was moved,
She wandered, hesitant.
Divine light appeared and vanished,
Now bright, now dim.
She lifted her light body like a crane standing,
As if about to fly, yet not taking wing.
Stepping through the fragrant pepper-scented path,
She moved among the sweet grasses, leaving fragrance behind.
She let out a long sigh, prolonging her longing,
Her voice sorrowful, mournful, and prolonged (Cao 1984, p. 285)

Given the length and importance of this passage in the *Rhapsody*, its complete absence from the *Painting* is striking. In Chen Baozhen's view, "This reveals the limitations of painting when translating a literary text" (Chen 2012, p. 39)—suggesting that the painter was unable to visually convey the depth of the Goddess's sorrow. However, the analysis of metaphor and symbolism above demonstrates that the painter was not only capable of but also adept at translating complex and subtle emotions into visual form. Chen's explanation is therefore unsatisfactory.

Why, then, does the painter omit this passage? The insights of the German aesthetician Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in his *Laocoön*, offer a possible answer. In the first chapter of that work, Lessing poses a similar question: "Why does Laocoön scream in the poem, but not in the sculpture?" His answer is that the visual arts are limited to the imitation of beautiful objects. To depict Laocoön's anguish in the throes of screaming would produce an image of ugliness, violating the principle of "beauty" that governs the visual arts (Lessing 1985, pp. 291–97). By the same logic, the *Rhapsody*'s description of the Goddess's anguished appearance and demeanor—"divine light appeared and vanished, now bright, now dim," "her voice sorrowful, mournful, and prolonged"—if rendered literally, would likely conflict with the image of the Goddess as a figure of beauty and violate the aesthetic principles of painting. The painter's decision to omit this passage altogether, rather than risk an aesthetically displeasing representation, suggests that while multiple methods exist for translating literature into image, they must all operate within the fundamental constraints imposed by the distinct natures of poetry and painting.

4. Conclusions

This essay has examined how the painter of *The Goddess of the Luo River* (Song Dynasty copy after Gu Kaizhi) translated Cao Zhi's *Rhapsody on the Goddess of the Luo River* into visual form. Five methods have been identified and analyzed: literal depiction (the most direct, requiring no further elaboration), perspective shift, metaphor, suggestion, and symbolism. Among these, the painter's most innovative contribution is the use of inscribed text as a symbolic "wall" separating Cao Zhi from the Goddess—a device that visually renders

the insurmountable human–divine divide while also suggesting spiritual communion through literature.

Returning to the three questions raised in Section 3, this essay has proposed the following:

- (1) The depiction of poetic similes as literal images—which may be termed “illustrated metaphor”—calls for further theoretical investigation;
- (2) The painter’s addition of elements absent from the text (such as the phoenix-riding goddess) points to a creative liberty that extends beyond simple illustration;
- (3) The omission of the Goddess’s anguished reaction is consistent with Lessing’s principle that the visual medium must avoid representing ugliness, thus reflecting a strategic adherence to painting’s own aesthetic laws rather than a failure of translation.

Taken together, these analyses confirm that the indirect translation from literature to image is neither a transparent nor a complete transfer. It is a creative process of selection, transformation, and reinterpretation, governed by the distinct properties of each medium. The success of *The Goddess of the Luo River* lies precisely in its willingness to depart from the text while remaining faithful to its spiritual essence—a model for intermedial translation that resonates across cultures and periods.

Future research might extend this framework to other narrative handscrolls based on literary sources, such as Gu Hongzhong’s (10th century) *The Night Banquet of Han Xizai* or Dong Yuan’s (10th century) *The Xiao and Xiang Rivers*, to further illuminate the strategies by which Chinese painters have negotiated the relationship between word and image.

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Notes

- ¹ Among the nine surviving versions of *The Goddess of the Luo River*, the Liaoning version is the primary source for this study. The other versions are held by the Palace Museum in Beijing (Beijing versions A, B, C), the Freer Art Museum in the United States (Freer versions A, B), the British Museum, and the Palace Museum in Taipei (Taipei versions A, B). Unless otherwise specified, all references to the Painting and all illustrations are from the Liaoning version.
- ² The Liaoning version is missing the “Departing the Capital” and “Resting” scenes, leaving “Stunning Encounter” as the sole surviving scene of Act I.
- ³ Because the Liaoning version lacks the “Departing the Capital” and “Resting” scenes, the “Returning in Sorrow” section actually occupies nearly one-third of the extant scroll.
- ⁴ Zheng (1936, p. 729). The original Chinese text reads: “One sees the book but not the image; one hears its words but does not see its form. The image is concise; the book is expansive. To seek the concise through the image is easy; to seek the expansive through the book is difficult.”
- ⁵ Famous portraits of Tao Yuanming include Lu Tanwei’s *Returning Home* (Southern Dynasties), Zheng Qian’s *Portrait of Tao Qian* (Tang dynasty), Wang Yun’s *Tao Qian’s Summer Residence* (Yuan dynasty), Li Longmian’s *Tao Yuanming in Reclusion* (Northern Song), Li Gonglin’s *Returning Home* (Northern Song), and Liang Kai’s *The Hermit of the Eastern Fence and Small Portrait of Tao Yuanming* (Southern Song).
- ⁶ Chen Hongshou’s *Scenes from the Life of Tao Yuanming* is a 1650 handscroll held in the Honolulu Museum of Art.
- ⁷ The Liaoning version alone bears over eighty collector’s seals, including those of the Song dynasty emperors Huizong and Gaozong, the Ming dynasty collector Xiang Yuanbian (with over thirty seals), the Qing dynasty collector Liang Qingbiao, and the Qianlong, Jiaqing, and Xuantong emperors of the Qing imperial collection. Among the Qianlong seals are “Contemplating Essence,” “Treasure of Qianlong,” “Treasure of the Supreme Old Emperor,” “Essence of the Sanxi Chamber,” and “Old Man of

Seventy." Private collector seals include "Longxi ji," "Xiyuchi shuanglong banxi," "Changyi zisun," "Zongjia zhonggui," "Yunjian cishi Geng Jixun yin," "Hebei Tangcun," "Jiaolin guan qi da lue," "Jiaolin," and "Yuli shi tushu".

- 8 From the Qianlong Emperor's inscription on Beijing version A of The Goddess of the Luo River. The full inscription reads: "Gu Kaizhi's Goddess of the Luo River, two scrolls complete./Not like logs piled one on the other,/But as earlier proof to earlier texts./The painting is elegant, yet mysterious;/The new version is astonishing./Another scroll bears the Li family mark,/Why date it to the Chen era?/Surely not pure ink linework;/This copy must be authentic indeed?/Both date to the Sui and Tang at the latest,/But worthy of Song and Yuan transmission./Not in the style of the Court Attendant,/Yet comparable to the Infantry Colonel./I examine this work at my desk,/A tale of the Stone Moat treasured./Why seek the lost sword?/Better to float on the river./One scene contains three images;/The spirit passes through the text." The inscription is signed "Qianlong bingwu xinzen yubi".

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