

# A Study of the Translation Patterns of Mythical Images of Chinese Mythology

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## Abstract

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, western missionaries in China founded periodicals like the *Chinese Repository* to introduce the social situation, culture, and customs in China. In the *Chinese Repository*, there are a large number of translations of Chinese traditional classic books among which is *Soushen Ji* and translations of other mythical stories. Mythical images of Chinese mythology are important parts of *Soushen Ji* because they are representative of Chinese culture and the embodiment of Chinese aesthetics. The translators at that time use certain patterns to translate the mythical images of Chinese mythology in order to better introduce Chinese culture and to help readers learn about what the original texts look like. By analyzing the translated text in the *Chinese Repository*, it is concluded that there are mainly four translation patterns. They are: Cantonese Pinyin + liberal translation in English + background information; liberal translation in English + Cantonese Pinyin + annotation; liberal translation in English + annotation; pictures + Chinese meaning + Cantonese Pinyin + (liberal translation in English) + background information. Against the background of spreading Chinese culture overseas, figuring out an effective way to achieve this goal is important. To discuss the translations by native translators can not only help understand the translation strategies they apply but also provide a reference for translation of Chinese mythology and other similar materials.

## Keywords

Chinese Mythical Images, Translation Patterns, *Soushen Ji*, The *Chinese Repository*

## 1. Introduction

*Soushen Ji* 《搜神记》, also called *In Search of the Sacred*, *In Search of the Su-*

*pernatural and Anecdotes about Spirtis and Immortals*, is the work of Gan Bao (干宝) who is a historian in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420). The book is a collection of 464 stories, with subjects of natural curiosities, gods, ghosts, demons, and so on. The work is also a representative of Chinese mythology since many mythical images of Chinese mythology like Guanyin (Bodhisattva), Mazu, and the Jade Emperor (the Supreme Deity of Taoism) are mentioned in this book. It has been introduced to the western world since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the translations were first published in the *Chinese Repository*. Other translations of Chinese mythology are also published in the *Chinese Repository* at that time. This article analyzes the translations of *Soushen Ji* and other related translations together.

With the support of Protestant missionary Robert Morison (1782-1834) and David W. C. Olyphant (1789-1851), head of the American firm of Olyphant, missionary Elijah Coleman Bridgman (1801-1861) launched the *Chinese Repository* (1832-1851) in May 1832. "In his introduction to the periodical, Bridgman declared that the *Chinese Repository* aimed to inform the people of the West about China in a completely unbiased manner" (Malcolm, 1973). The *Chinese Repository* consists of 20 volumes, and 232 issues, and every volume has about 600 pages. The periodical publishes about 1300 articles, having columns like current events, book reviews, literary notice, religious information, and miscellany. Among the articles published, many articles are translations of Chinese materials like traditional classic books, folklore, important official documents, and Chinese newspapers or periodicals. "A large number of translations of articles about religions and social customs in China and translations of official documents, scientific or technological works, popular literature and current events coverage published in the *Chinese Repository* is quite important for describing the overall picture of translations of and introduction to Chinese literature in the West in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (Deng, 2021).

"In China, the study of the *Chinese Repository* began in 2015" (Deng, 2021). Now the study of the *Repository* remains at an early stage. In recent years, more and more papers about the study of the *Chinese Repository* are published and the research scope is getting wider and wider. For example, Jiang, Li, Gao, & Chen (2016) outline the general picture of studies on the translation of traditional Chinese classics in the *Chinese Repository*; Some scholars also conduct case studies to focus on specific classical works like *A Supplementary Sack of Wisdom* 《智囊补》, *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* 《聊斋志异》, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 《三国演义》, *Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms* 《海国图志》, and *Four Books and Five Classics*<sup>1</sup>; the translations of culture-loaded words and nouns about historical figures in the *Chinese Repository* also receive certain attention. Although the study mentioned above can be re-

<sup>1</sup>The Four Books and Five Classics (四书五经 in Chinese) are the authoritative books of Confucianism in China written before 300 BC. The Four Books refer to *Great Learning* 《大学》, *Doctrine of the Mean* 《中庸》, *Analects* 《论语》, and *Mencius* 《孟子》. The Five Classics refer to *Classic of Poetry* 《诗经》, *Book of Documents* 《尚书》, *Book of Rites* 《礼记》, *Book of Changes* 《易经》, and *Spring and Autumn Annals* 《春秋》.

garded as progress in the study of the translation of Chinese traditional classics in the *Chinese Repository*, there are still some important works ignored. For example, the translations of *Soushen Ji* which is the representative of famous Chinese mythology, have not received sufficient attention from scholars. And a series of translations that introduces Chinese mythical images and Chinese mythology are also ignored.

Related studies on Chinese mythology have been conducted for a long time, but they mainly focus on the field of mythology and seldom view this subject from an interdisciplinary perspective, especially the translations of articles on mythology. The background, objective, and methods of the translation activities conducted by missionaries and western businessmen are important clues to further study of the translations of mythological materials. The mythical images of Chinese mythology are the expression of Chinese appreciation of beauty and are the representation of Chinese culture. To analyze the differences among translation methods applied by the anonymous translator, John Bowring (1792-1872) and John Lewis Shuck (1812-1863) is essential for figuring out the features of the translation of mythical images at that time. And it will provide a reference for future studies and the translation of Chinese mythology today.

Many pieces of research on the translations in the *Chinese Repository* have been conducted, but some of the translations have not received enough attention from scholars. The translations of Chinese mythology are some examples. There are eighteen translations of Chinese mythology published in the *Chinese Repository* in the early 19th century. The authors of articles published in the *Chinese Repository* are usually missionaries, diplomats, and businessmen, but they seldom put their names on the articles. Therefore, most of the articles are anonymous. John Lewis Shuck is the translator of the articles in *Soushen Ji*, John Bowring translates some articles about Chinese history and mythical characters and some articles are translated by anonymous translators.

Based on the translations in the *Chinese Repository*, it is possible to systematically analyze how the mythical images of Chinese mythology are translated and to conclude the characteristics. Doing so will help make the research about translations of *Soushen Ji* more systematic and provide references for the study of the translation of and introduction to mythology and similar materials.

## 2. Mythical Images of Chinese Mythology

Mythology is not the work of certain people but the outcome of a nation. And that is also the reason why the myths of different nations have their characteristics. At the same time, the mythical images of myths in the world have something in common. "In Joseph Campbell's view, mythological image is a supernatural symbol created by the stimulation of the acquired imprint. This kind of symbol stimulation created by human beings is combined with the innate reaction mechanism of human nature. Under the combined action of the innate physiological basis and the acquired environment, the world has a mythological

wonder that has same origin but different ways of expression” (Zhang, 2018). Human beings face almost the same situation in the process of development no matter where they are, and thus it is possible that they have similar understanding of certain images which are expressed in different way in different nations.

In order to figure out the similarities and differences between different myths and to have a better understanding of mythologies in the world, Wang Shiyun divides mythologies into various categories and summarizes their features. Based on her discussion on 137 mythical stories, mythologies are classified into three categories: Creation, nature, and human. Creation mythology is about the creation of heaven and earth, gods and goddesses, and the origin of human beings. Nature mythology is about natural phenomena, changing seasons, floods and fires, and animals and plants. Human mythology is about disease, death, the underworld, fate, totem, ancestor, heroes, love stories between celestial beings or between celestial beings and human beings, and the production of medicine, agriculture, music and language (Wang, 1994).

“There are full of strange and bizarre images in mythology. ... All these images are the products of a nation’s ancestors’ unconscious imagination” (Wang, 1991). The images are different from that of the western world and represent an aspect of Chinese culture. “Images of Chinese mythologies are at the center of mythic narrative and the plots occupy only a second place” (Wang, 2013). Images are more important than plots when it comes to Chinese mythology. Therefore, the translation of mythical images is essential for the representation of the mythologies.

“Picture is one of the main ways to pass on Chinese prehistoric mythologies. In the early days, primitive mythologies were passed on by pictures and the information carried in the pictures. And books recording most of Chinese prehistoric mythologies like the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and *Tianwen* by Qu Yuan are based on pictures of prehistorical mythologies” (Yue & Wang, 2010). In the age of no writing, mythologies are passed on by word of mouth or pictures. Pictures are more figurative compared with words because they directly show how the characters in mythologies look like. As important elements of Chinese mythology, pictures should receive attention when it comes to translation.

### 3. Translation Patterns Applied to Represent Mythical Images

John Bowring was the 4th British Governor of Hong Kong. John Lewis Shuck was an American Baptist missionary who came to China and participated in the translation of the Holy Book of the Old Testament, the *Guanfu Wenjian Jicheng* (Official Documents Collection) 《官府文件集成》 and excerpts from *Soushen Ji*, and he mentioned that literal translation was the main strategy he applied when he translated works. By analyzing some translated texts, it is possible to figure out translation patterns and the reasons why the translators do so. And

sometimes the author will tell why they choose certain pattern or strategies in the text.

### 3.1. Cantonese Pinyin + Liberal Translation in English + Background Information

In an article called “Description of the temple of Matsoo po, at Ama kō in Macao. Prepared for the *Repository* by a Correspondent”, the author introduces the goddess Matsoo po and the temple to worship her. The author just mentions Matsoo po in the title, gives its English meaning “the goddess” in the first paragraph and further introduces Matsoo po in the following paragraphs. “The temple at Ama kō is an ancient structure. In the reign of Wanleih, of the Ming dynasty (about A.D. 1573), there was a ship, from Tseuenchow foo in the province in the province of Fuhkeën, in which the goddess Matsoo po was worshipped. Meeting with misfortunes, she was rendered unmanageable and driven about in this state, by the resistless winds and waves” (Anonymous Author, 1840). Matsoo po is an alien concept to English readers and may be regarded as meaningless if there is no explanation or background information to help them understand the concept.

“Sketch of Teën Fe, or Matsoo Po, the goddess of Chinese seamen. Translated from the *Sow Shin Ke*. By J.L.S.” is also an article about the image Matsoo Po. Although translated by different translators, the pattern is the same. But in this case, the author gives a more detailed explanation in English. The goddess of Chinese seamen tells readers directly why Matsoo Po is worshipped. The background information is related to Matsoo Po’s address, her family and how she rescues her brothers and so on (Shuck, 1841b). Translation in this way like explaining a noun in detail can help readers understand the mythical image Matsoo Po.

“Sketch of Kwanyin, the Chinese Goddess of Mercy. Translated from the *Sow Shin Ke*. By J.L.S.” also follows the same translation pattern. In the title, the translator adds “the Chinese” as extra information to inform readers that Kwanyin is a Chinese goddess. The background information provided in the translation is mainly about Kwanyin’s family and her stories. “KWANYIN, originally called Shen, was the third child of Shekin senior, who dwelt in the mountains of Tsewling, situated in the district of Keshoo of the state Koochuh—and by spiritual transformation of person was re-born in the state of Pihheueŕ” (Shuck, 1841a).

The text “San Hwang Ke, or Records of the Three august Sovereigns, subjects of the early mythological history of the Chinese” is another example of this pattern. At the beginning of the text, explanation and background information are provided. “Celestial, Terrestrial, and Human sovereigns—Teën hwang, Te hwang, Jin hwang—are the appellations of three august ones, often alluded to by the Chinese, but whose existence is, beyond all question, purely mythological” (Anonymous Author, 1841).

“Sketch of Yuhwang Shangte, one of the highest deities of the Chinese my-

thology. Translated from the *Sow Shin Ke* by J.L.S.” is a translation published in the *Chinese Repository*. The title of the translation is clear enough for readers to get the main idea and to know the original text of the translation.

Bowring has translated three articles and published in the *Chinese Repository*. His translation also follows this pattern to a large extent. “Fuh-hí 伏羲, the first emperor, with a human head and serpent’s body. Be instituted marriage...” and “Shin-nung 神农, The husbandman spirit (or genius). While his mother was a virgin, and was traveling along a road, she...” (Bowring, 1851) are two examples.

In the 19th century, cultural exchanges between China and the western world are partially conducted in the form of publishing articles in newspapers and periodicals. Chinese mythology and mythical images are alien to readers in the western world, and these translations of Chinese mythology or articles about the topic are helpful. Many articles introduce Chinese mythical images at length and can help readers have a better understanding of the images of Chinese mythology.

### 3.2. Liberal Translation in English + Cantonese Pinyin + Annotation

A translated text mentions “the goddess Kwanyin of the southern ocean” with an annotation of “Kwanyin is the Chinese goddess of mercy, and is a very popular idol. A sketch of her history is also contained in the *Sow Shin Ke*” (Shuck, 1841b). Giving an annotation at the end of the translation gives more information about the original text. Fang (1993) concludes several objectives of annotation in translated texts: helping readers settle their doubts about the texts; explaining the content and features of the original text; making the translation to be closer to the original text when the translator cannot fully represent the style and the beauty in sound of the original text in the main body of the translated text. This translation pattern helps readers from different cultures comprehend the meaning, the original pronunciation and the detailed information of the mythical images introduced.

### 3.3. Liberal Translation in English + Annotation

Apart from the mythical images like Kwanyin or Matsoo Po which are introduced in detail in an article, there are also some images mentioned when introducing other mythical images. These images are always explained at the end of the text to make the translated text more readable. Some examples are here. “the celestial emperor” appears at the beginning of the translation and the annotation is detailed. “The idea of the Chinese classics seems to be that 皇帝 Hwang Te is the emperor who has under his jurisdiction all the nations of earth, and that 天帝 Teěn Te, and 玉帝 Yüh Te, and 上帝 Shang Te, are only different designations of a supreme emperor who controls the heavens and the earth, and the gods” (Shuck, 1841a). Although mythical images like the celestial emperor are not introduced with much background information, but it is also explained in detail via the form of annotation.

### 3.4. Pictures + Chinese Meaning + Cantonese Pinyin + (Liberal Translation in English) + Background Information

In Chinese mythological books, there are many pictures because picture is one of the most important ways to pass on stories or other materials for a very long time during the development of the history of human beings. Mythical images in China and the West are different. Providing pictures will make the translation more comprehensive and more readable. And it can help readers distinguish mythical images in different cultures.

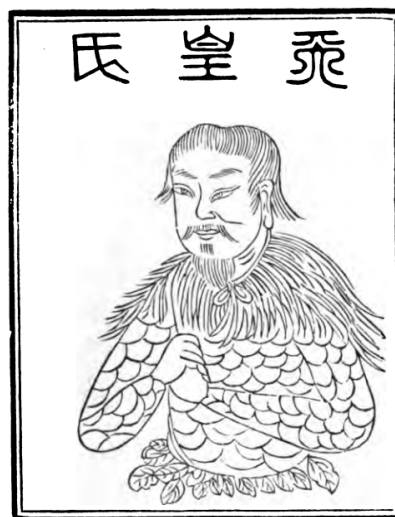
Here is an example introducing a mythical image 天皇氏.

The author first provides a picture of the image as shown in the following **Figure 1**.

“天皇氏 Tien Hwáng shí, the Celestial Sovereign, or the August one of Heaven, stands first in the trio, the immediate successor of Pwánkú, noticed in our last number, page 47. This being was born on one of the mountains of Kwanlun, ‘in a region beyond which there is nothing.’ His deeds, like the place of his birth, are more easily conceived than described. Most historians allow him, or his family, to have existed through thirteen generations, during a period of 18,000 years. Some Chinese historians have attempted to correct the above, and have proposed to read 1800 years instead of eighteen thousand” (Anonymous Author, 1842).

When introducing the background information, the author tells readers where they can find a more detailed introduction of the mythical image and tells people related discussion about the image. But the author does not give his or her own opinions, which makes the introduction remain a relatively objective one.

Some introduction to Chinese mythical images also follows this pattern. They will be shown in the following **Table 1**.



**Figure 1.** Tien Hwáng shí<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup>The figure is from “Portraits of the Three Sovereigns, the immediate successors of Pwánkú, among the Chinese the reputed progenitor of the human family” in the *Chinese Repository*, 1842.Vol.11. No.2. p111.

**Table 1.** List of images translated by the same patterns<sup>3</sup>.

Chinese Meaning	Cantonese Pinyin	Liberal Translation in English	Source
地黄氏	Ti Hwáng shí	Not provided	The <i>Chinese Repository</i> 1842. Vol.11. No.2. p142.
人皇氏	Jin Hwáng shí	Not provided	The <i>Chinese Repository</i> 1842. Vol.11. No.2. p143.
太昊伏羲	Tái Háu Fuhí	The Great Illustrious Fuhí	The <i>Chinese Repository</i> 1842. Vol.11. No.3. p173.
神农(炎帝)	Shinnung (Yen ti)	Godly-agriculturist or Divine-husbandman (the Blazing emperor)	The <i>Chinese Repository</i> 1842. Vol.11. No.6. p322.
皇帝	Wáng tí or Hwáng tí	The Yellow emperor	The <i>Chinese Repository</i> 1842. Vol.11. No.7. p386.
少昊	Sháuhau	Not provided	The <i>Chinese Repository</i> 1842. Vol.11. No.8. p452.
颀頊	Chuenhiu	The eminent and noble	The <i>Chinese Repository</i> 1842. Vol.11. No.11. p617.
髡高辛	Ku Káusin	Not provided	The <i>Chinese Repository</i> 1843. Vol.12. No.2. p75.

The mythical images mentioned above basically follows the same pattern, though the liberal translations in English of some mythical images are not provided. It is possible that the translator could not figure out the Chinese meaning of the characters or could not find appropriate English expressions. The Cantonese Pinyin for image is provided, which can be regarded as an effort to help readers learn how to read corresponding Chinese characters. From the examples provided, it can be seen that the translators are not familiar with Chinese and their Cantonese Pinyin are not standard. For example, “皇帝” is read as Wáng tí or Hwáng tí in the same text. But these are good tries to learn about Chinese and Chinese culture, especially Chinese mythology.

#### 4. Conclusion

Mythology is important carrier of a nation’s culture and occupies an essential role in cross-cultural communication between China and Western countries. Since language remains a barrier between nations speaking different languages, the importance of translation is obvious. Translation is influenced by cultural factors, which is likely to cause ambiguity and makes readers feel confused. And it requires translators to be aware of cultural differences and try their best to help target readers understand the translations and the cultural elements mentioned in the text. The articles and translations about Chinese mythology pub-

<sup>3</sup>All translations of the mythical images in the table follows the same pattern. For the picture and detailed background information, please check the source.



lished in the *Chinese Repository* are welcomed by western readers at that time, which means that the translation patterns and strategies applied by the translators are appropriate. Analyzing the translations of Chinese mythology at that time may help translators today to learn about how to deal with similar materials and to choose appropriate translation methods. Besides, from the materials chosen by foreigners in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible to learn about their attitudes towards Chinese culture. Selected parts of *Soushen Ji* were translated to the western world as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is also part of the translation activities conducted by the missionaries in China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Though the complete translations of *Soushen Ji* have been published and existing studies on the translation of *Soushen Ji* are mostly based on the complete versions, it is still necessary to analyze the earlier version to make a systematic study on all the translations of this book. By having a detailed discussion on the translations in the *Chinese Repository*, it is likely to make related researches more comprehensive and to provide reference for similar studies. What's more, the study and translation of Chinese mythologies will be promoted.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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