

The Translation and Reception of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* in the English-Speaking World

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Abstract—*The Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shan Hai Jing)* is not only an encyclopedic account of ancient Chinese society but also holds significant value for tracing the origins of Chinese civilization and understanding the continuity of Chinese culture. Moreover, it contributes to global multicultural integration. In line with China's cultural export strategy, the Chinese government, along with numerous domestic and international scholars, has actively promoted the dissemination of classical Chinese texts by employing diverse translation and introduction strategies tailored to the needs of target-language audiences. This paper analyzes three representative English translations of the *Shan Hai Jing*, along with the China Central Television (CCTV) documentary *A Hazy Dream World from Ancient China*. As a key work in the "Library of Chinese Classics" series and a text adapted into non-verbal media, the *Shan Hai Jing* plays an important role in enhancing the international visibility of Chinese culture and expressing the Chinese spirit to a global audience.

Index Terms—*Shan Hai Jing*, translation and introduction, dissemination

I. INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of the "Go Global" strategy for Chinese culture, the translation of classical texts has become a project of considerable national significance, attracting sustained attention from both government bodies and academic institutions (Luo & Li, 2020). Widely acclaimed as "an ancient classic of mysterious origin," the *Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shan Hai Jing)* presents a vast array of knowledge, encompassing geography, mineral resources, flora and fauna, as well as folk customs and traditions. The text is renowned for its unique aesthetic appeal, characterized by the bizarre, the mythical, and the mysterious. It serves as a critical reference for the study of ancient Chinese history and the origins of ethnic cultures. Moreover, English translations of the *Shan Hai Jing* have contributed to a deeper Western understanding of China's historical and cultural heritage, thus fostering intercultural dialogue and supporting global multicultural exchange. To date, several English translations of the work have been published, each offering a distinct perspective. This paper focuses on three influential English translations, along with a documentary adaptation titled *A Hazy Dream World from Ancient China*, produced by China Central Television (CCTV). The translations examined include Anne Birrell's full translation published in 1999, Wang Hong's full translation from 2010, and Howard Goldblatt's partial translation released in 2021. Through both textual and audiovisual media, these works have significantly advanced the visibility and understanding of this encyclopedic classic among English-speaking audiences, each emphasizing different dimensions of the original.

II. OVERVIEW OF THREE REPRESENTATIVE ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE *SHAN HAI JING* AND THEIR TRANSLATORS

The three translators examined in this study come from diverse cultural backgrounds and exhibit distinct academic focuses and linguistic styles. These differences have resulted in varied interpretations and translation strategies, yielding markedly distinct stylistic outcomes. Such variation enhances both the representativeness and comparability of the translations, thereby providing substantial value for academic research. Anne Birrell, a renowned British mythologist, translator, and sinologist, is well-versed in Chinese culture and has made notable contributions to the study of ancient Chinese mythology. Howard Goldblatt, a highly acclaimed American sinologist, is widely regarded as the foremost translator of modern and contemporary Chinese literature in the English-speaking world. Wang Hong is the Director of the Institute of Translation Studies at Soochow University and a leading scholar in the School of Foreign Languages, specializing in translation. His research primarily focuses on the translation of classical Chinese texts and language education.

The three English translations span a considerable period, during which significant societal changes occurred and

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reader expectations evolved. Meanwhile, governmental support for the translation of classical texts in China has steadily increased. Anne Birrell's complete English translation, published by Penguin Books in 1999, was an independent scholarly undertaking. In contrast, Wang Hong's version emerged within the framework of a state-sponsored campaign to disseminate Chinese classics globally, benefiting from both governmental funding and institutional support. Howard Goldblatt's 2021 translation, published by Tsinghua University Press, features a contemporary design format. It includes over 150 hand-drawn illustrations of deities and mythical creatures, each paired with a brief explanatory note. While both Birrell's and Wang's translations follow the structure of the source text, employing a sentence-by-sentence format aligned with the original narrative order, Goldblatt's version takes a different approach. He selected 133 deities and mythical creatures from the *Shan Hai Jing* and restructured them into individual mythological stories. Subjective interpretation is apparent in this version, as the translator weaves narrative links and imaginative conjectures to construct a coherent retelling of the classic.

III. MULTIMODAL TRANSLATION AND RECEPTION

Translation and Introduction Studies, in the context of "intercultural communication and cultural exchange far broader than the traditional scope of linguistic transfer," conceives of translation not merely as a linguistic transformation of the source text, but as a complex cultural activity embedded within broader socio-political and ideological frameworks. As Xie (2007, p. 12) notes, "translation must be examined from a broader perspective that includes not only textual transformation but also extratextual factors, such as the ideological context of the target culture, dominant literary norms, translator subjectivity, patrons (including publishers and literary institutions), and the reception environment." Building on this theoretical foundation, this paper analyzes the English translations of the *Shan Hai Jing* through four key dimensions of cultural translation: thematic focus, translator subjectivity and strategy, publishing institutions and sponsorship, and reader reception and feedback.

A. Translation and Reception in Textual Form

(a). Elements of Translation

1. Theme of the Translation

The *Shan Hai Jing* encompasses an extraordinary range of topics, blending the known with the imagined. Since the modern era, under the influence of Western mythological traditions, the text has increasingly been regarded as a mythological classic. Containing the most extensive collection of ancient Chinese myths, it remains a primary reference for scholars studying early Chinese mythology. Accordingly, this study treats the *Shan Hai Jing* as a mythological text. The structure of the *Shan Hai Jing* is uniquely organized according to geography, categorizing gods, spirits, and fantastical creatures by region. Its narrative style is fluid and mysterious, imbued with imaginative speculation about the origins of natural phenomena, celestial bodies, and landscapes. The language is bold and unrestrained, offering vivid depictions that ignite the reader's imagination. In portraying gods and mythical creatures, the text frequently employs analogy and generalization. Human and animal forms are frequently hybridized, with creatures bearing composite features such as human faces and serpentine or bestial bodies. This hybridity opens up an expansive imaginative space for readers.

In contrast to the systematized structure of Western mythology, Chinese mythology is often perceived as fragmented. This fragmentation can be attributed to China's vast geography, the historical diversity of its tribes, and the coexistence of multiple narrative traditions. For instance, the myth of Kuafu, a deity who chased the sun, appears in different versions within the *Shan Hai Jing*. In *Classic of Regions Beyond the Seas: North*, Kuafu runs with the sun and finally walks into the scorching sunlight. Feeling thirsty, he drinks up all the water in the Yellow River and the Weishui River, but he still cannot quench his thirst. He then goes to the north, desiring for the water in a big marsh there. Unfortunately, he dies of thirst half the way. On the verge of death, he throws away his walking stick, which immediately transforms into a forest called Denglin (夸父与日逐走，入日。渴，欲得饮，饮于河、渭；河、渭不足，北饮大泽。未至，道渴而死。弃其杖，化为邓林。). Alternatively, in *Classic of the Great Wilderness: East*, Yinglong, a legendary dragon with wings, lives at the South Pole. He kills Chiyou and Kuafu, two legendary figures. But he cannot go back up to heaven. This is why down on earth there are severe droughts. When there is a drought, people always draw a picture of Yinglong. Then there will be a heavy rain (应龙处南极，杀蚩尤与夸父，不得复上。故下数旱，旱而为应龙之状，乃得大雨。)(Liu, 2002). These conflicting accounts—whether Kuafu died of thirst or was slain by Yinglong—highlight the open-ended nature of Chinese mythology. For English-speaking readers, such ambiguous and multifaceted narratives enhance the mystique of Eastern mythology and offer fertile ground for imaginative engagement. This openness contributes positively to the reception and dissemination of the *Shan Hai Jing* in translation.

According to Yuan (2019), "Mythology reflects the character of a nation; every country's myths mirror, to varying degrees, its national identity. Chinese mythology, naturally, reveals many traits of the Chinese people." Deities in early Chinese myths are often depicted as embodying a spirit of selflessness and sacrifice that transcends ordinary human nature. As creations of human imagination, these deities inevitably exhibit human traits. Their emergence reflects humanity's development—from revering nature and interpreting natural disasters as divine punishment, to actively resisting such forces. This evolution embodies a spirit of transformation, resilience, collective cooperation, and the belief in humanity's ability to overcome nature. These ideals, projected onto mythical figures, have profoundly shaped the formation of the

Chinese national character. For Western readers, this serves as a valuable textual resource for tracing the historical and cultural development of the Chinese people.

In recent years, feminist studies—prominent in Western academia—have found fertile ground in the *Shan Hai Jing*. Shifts in women’s social status are discernible throughout the text. For example, the goddess NvWa appears as a central creator figure: “There are ten gods who are collectively called Intestines of NvWa as they are transformed from the intestines of NvWa. They live in a wilderness called Liguang and stay crosswise on the road.” NvWa, as the goddess of creation, symbolizes the origin of all things. Her role transcends traditional reproductive functions and becomes the generative force behind all existence. Similarly, the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu) is depicted as a sovereign figure: “Queen Mother of the West who looks like a human, but has a leopard’s tail and a tiger’s teeth. She is good at roaring and wears jade ornaments on her unkempt hair.” In contrast to traditional portrayals of women as subordinate wives or mothers supporting male heroes, these examples reflect a significant expansion of female agency. NvWa embodies creation itself, while Xiwangmu governs disaster, disease, and retribution. These depictions signify an elevation of women’s status within mythological narratives. From another perspective, this shift suggests the emergence of female consciousness and subtle resistance to male-dominated social structures. The *Shan Hai Jing* thus reveals early expressions of female autonomy and empowerment, offering a valuable reference point for cross-cultural discussions on gender roles and feminist thought.

2. Translator Subjectivity and Translation Strategies

For a considerable period, translation studies were largely confined to the linguistic level, focusing primarily on word-for-word equivalence while neglecting broader literary and cultural dimensions. This approach tended to overlook the translator’s subjective agency in the interpretive process (Zha & Tian, 2003). It was not until the emergence of the “cultural turn” in translation theory that substantial attention was given to the translator’s role and agency.

Translator subjectivity refers to the translator’s individual consciousness and creative participation in the translation process (Xu, 2003). Given the richness and complexity of mythological texts, translators inevitably adopt different strategies based on their interpretation of the genre and comprehension of the source material. These strategic choices result in stylistic diversity across translations.

In Wang Hong’s English translation of the *Shan Hai Jing*, translation strategies are primarily evident at the lexical and syntactic levels. The translation of flora and fauna in the *Shan Hai Jing* follows a consistent approach: real-world species are rendered using their standard English equivalents. For imaginary creatures or those without direct English equivalents, the translator employs strategies such as transliteration, paraphrasing, or literal translation with annotations. For minerals with real-world equivalents or analogues, literal or explanatory translation is applied. However, for mythical or unidentifiable minerals, the translator adopts either transliteration or a hybrid of transliteration and descriptive translation. As for place names, due to the uncertain identification of certain rivers and mountains, most geographic names are transliterated, while a few are translated literally when contextually appropriate. When translating mythological figures and culturally loaded terms, a mixed strategy is adopted: original Chinese names are retained, accompanied by modern Pinyin and explanatory English annotations. For culturally specific items, such as traditional Chinese instruments, transliteration is often paired with cultural descriptions to convey both linguistic and cultural meaning.

At the syntactic levels, Wang’s translation tends to preserve the sentence structure and narrative order of the source text. This fidelity aligns with the translation principles of “clarity, fluency, and intelligibility” (Wang, 2018). As the *Shan Hai Jing* edition in the *Library of Chinese Classics* series targets general readers in English-speaking countries, the translation avoids overly complex vocabulary and syntactic intricacies, thereby enhancing readability and accessibility. Moreover, the translation draws on annotated editions of the source text compiled by renowned scholars, thereby enhancing textual accuracy and interpretative depth. The resulting style is concise yet expressive, consistently reflecting traditional Chinese cultural elements. This achievement is closely tied to Wang Hong’s identity as a native Chinese translator and his dedication to the broader mission of cultural transmission.

Howard Goldblatt’s English translation of the *Shan Hai Jing* is marked by his selective compilation and reinterpretation of 133 deities and mythical creatures. His approach integrates subjective commentary and narrative restructuring, resulting in a translated text with a total character count significantly exceeding that of the original. Although Goldblatt asserts that “rewriting is undoubtedly the essence of translation,” he does not equate it with a rejection of fidelity. For Goldblatt, fidelity remains the foundational principle of translation. In this context, rewriting represents a form of creative engagement grounded in fidelity to the original, allowing the translator’s insights and stylistic signature to shape the final work. As a polyglot literary critic and translator with extensive experience, Goldblatt demonstrates deep insight into the challenges and possibilities involved in transferring meaning across languages (Xu, 2019). His commitment to “the passion and study of Chinese literature” and to “making a meaningful contribution to its translation and global dissemination” has long informed his work in the field of Chinese cultural translation. Goldblatt’s primary translation strategy centers on reader reception. Throughout the translation process, he consistently posed the question: Would the target reader experience the text as the original reader would? Does the translated version evoke similar feelings of pleasure, awe, or other emotional responses intended by the source author? (Sun, 2019, p. 27). His method involves restructuring the original narrative for plot coherence, modifying or omitting certain expressions, and adapting the text to align with the cognitive and aesthetic expectations of English-speaking audiences. This strategy helps bridge the considerable linguistic, cultural, psychological, and aesthetic gaps between Chinese and Western readers (Liu, 2019, pp.

302–303).

Recognizing the fragmented and unsystematic nature of the *Shan Hai Jing*, along with its often exaggerated and fantastical portrayals of deities and beasts, Goldblatt reshapes the material into mythological stories with enhanced coherence. His adaptations soften the raw and grotesque features of the original text, placing greater emphasis on its mystical and exotic qualities. By embedding his cultural understanding and offering interpretive commentary, he enhances the accessibility and readability of the text for Western audiences. For example, in translating the passage about the phoenix (Fenghuang), Goldblatt incorporates cultural context and interpretive elaboration: “有鸟焉，其状如鸡，五采而文，名曰凤皇，首文曰德，翼文曰义，背文曰礼，膺文曰仁，腹文曰信。是鸟也，饮食自然，自歌自舞，见则天下安宁。” is rendered as: “The Fenghuang, known as the phoenix, was the king of the 360 species of birds. It had the look of a golden pheasant, with feathers that dazzled the eye. Of the five elements, its green head represented wood, its white neck metal, its red back fire, its black chest water, and its yellow feet earth. Its feathers were patterned to represent written characters: on its head a ‘de’ for ‘virtue’; on each of its wings a ‘yi’, for ‘righteousness’; on its back a ‘li’ for ‘courtesy’; on its chest a ‘ren’ for ‘benevolence’; and on its belly a ‘xin’ for ‘trust.’ When the four virtues of benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, and trust were displayed on its body, and with its every auspicious appearance, the world was at peace. Historically, there were both male (feng) and female (huang) entities, but the female predominated and is now linked to the mythical dragon. No wonder it is considered the most important bird in Chinese civilization” (Chen & Wang, 2010). In this passage, Goldblatt significantly expands on the original to clarify the symbolic significance of the Fenghuang in Chinese culture. This type of elaboration enables target readers to better grasp the broader cultural meanings and fosters deeper engagement with the text.

Anne Birrell adopted a strategy of thick translation to convey the full complexity of the source text. As Appiah (1993, p. 817) defines it, this approach entails “translation that includes relevant commentary and annotations, enriching the linguistic and cultural context.” This method enables the mythological ideas embedded in the *Shan Hai Jing* to be more thoroughly conveyed. Birrell’s English edition of the *Shan Hai Jing* spans 277 pages in total, with 196 pages—approximately two-thirds—dedicated to the translated main text. The remaining one-third consists of paratextual materials, including a one-page acknowledgment, a 38-page introduction, a 75-page afterword, a 5-page bibliography, and nine pages of illustrations depicting mythical creatures (Gao & Yang, 2016). According to Birrell, this extensive supplementary content contributes to a more complete translation (1999a, p. xlv). Her translation techniques are primarily evident at the lexical level. Birrell adopts a semantic translation approach for most proper nouns, bringing a sense of vitality to the English version. However, for well-known deities with established transliterations—such as Yu (禹)—she retains the original form to preserve familiarity and cultural authenticity. As both a mythologist and a translator of mythology, Birrell pays close attention to contextual variation in terminology. She analyzes how the same word may acquire slightly different meanings depending on narrative context, and accordingly chooses either literal translations or descriptive renderings to enhance clarity and reader engagement. Additionally, she employs alliteration to reflect the phonetic and tonal qualities of Chinese, thereby introducing rhythm and energy into the English translation. One example is the term “微裊,” which she renders as “proud prow,” imparting vividness and fluidity to the phrase. Furthermore, Birrell maintains lexical consistency throughout the text by assigning stable English equivalents to repeated Chinese terms. For instance, the character “玄” (xuan) is consistently rendered as “dark,” producing coordinated expressions such as “dark turtles” (旋龟), “dark flowers and yellow fruit” (玄华黄石), “Mount Bigdark” (大玄之山), and “the Darkmound Folk” (玄丘之民) (1999b, p. xlv).

3. Publishers and Patrons of the Translations

In translation studies, patronage refers to “the provision of financial support or institutional influence by individuals or organizations to promote translation activities.” As Bai (2009, p. 222) points out, “patrons are the sponsors or supporters of translation endeavors”.

Within China’s cultural export strategy, institutional sponsorship—particularly from government entities—continues to play a crucial role due to their substantial economic, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bai, 2019). Such sponsorship enables the implementation of large-scale translation projects aimed at disseminating Chinese culture internationally. Wang Hong’s English translation of the *Shan Hai Jing* was published by Hunan People’s Publishing House. The front matter explicitly indicates that the publication received funding from the *Library of Chinese Classics* project. Launched in 1995, the *Library of Chinese Classics* represents the first state-organized and systematic cultural initiative in Chinese history aimed at promoting the translation of Chinese classical texts. As Yang Muzhi (2007, p. 25) describes, it is “a foundational cultural project for the comprehensive and systematic external translation of Chinese cultural classics, and for introducing the heritage of the Chinese nation to the world.” In this context, government support provides translators with a favorable environment and aims to project China’s symbolic and cultural capital, thereby enhancing the country’s global cultural influence.

Howard Goldblatt’s English edition was published by *Arcade Publishing* in the United States under license from *Tsinghua University Press*. The translation was also featured in the 12th edition of the *Xinhua Recommended Books* list, curated by *Xinhua News Agency*. *Arcade Publishing*, a subsidiary of *Skyhorse Publishing*, ranks among the top five cultural publishers in the United States. Known for its robust funding, extensive distribution network, and strong promotional capabilities, *Arcade* provided Goldblatt’s translation with a broad international platform. Goldblatt’s

reputation as a leading sinologist and his critically acclaimed previous works were key factors influencing *Tsinghua University Press* to collaborate with him.

Anne Birrell's translation of the *Shan Hai Jing* was commissioned by *Penguin Books* as part of its renowned *Penguin Classics* series. This series is among the most prestigious imprints in English-language publishing and has been referred to as the "Oscars" of classic literature publishing. With a strong reputation in cultural translation and a vast international readership, *Penguin Classics* offers a major platform for the global dissemination of literary and mythological texts (Yin, 2017).

4. Reader Feedback and Reception

The reception of the English translations of the *Shan Hai Jing* can be assessed through user ratings and reviews on major online platforms, specifically Amazon and Goodreads. Relevant user feedback from both platforms was collected and analyzed by the author. A summary of the findings is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1
OVERVIEW OF READER REVIEWS ON AMAZON AND GOODREADS

No.	Translator	Title	Platform	Rating	Valid Reviews
1	Wang Hong	<i>The Classic of Mountains and Seas</i>	Amazon	0.0	0
			Goodreads	0.0	0
2	Howard Goldblatt	<i>Fantastic Creatures of the Mountains and Seas: A Chinese Classic</i>	Amazon	4.8	18
			Goodreads	4.41	15
3	Anne Birrell	<i>The Classic of Mountains and Seas</i>	Amazon	4.2	13
			Goodreads	3.7	16

As shown in Table 1, Wang Hong's English translation received no reader reviews or ratings on either Amazon or Goodreads. In contrast, Howard Goldblatt's version received the highest ratings on both platforms, with an Amazon average of 4.8 and a Goodreads rating of 4.41, along with the largest number of verified reviews. Most user comments were positive, highlighting the translation's clarity, cultural richness, and overall accessibility. Anne Birrell's translation ranked second in terms of overall reception, with an Amazon rating of 4.2 and a Goodreads score of 3.7. However, it received fewer reviews than Goldblatt's edition and garnered a comparatively higher proportion of critical feedback.

Reader reviews may be further examined from both positive and negative perspectives:

Positive feedback is primarily directed toward Howard Goldblatt's English translation. Readers commend the work for offering a valuable introduction to the origins of Chinese mythology, often describing it as a gateway to understanding Chinese culture. It is widely regarded as one of the most visually striking books on Chinese mythology currently available in the international market. Its illustrations are frequently described as exquisite, and Goldblatt's language is praised for its poetic quality. This version is also considered the most accessible and reader-friendly, with many reviewers emphasizing its enjoyable reading experience and suitability for repeated engagement. Positive reviews of Anne Birrell's translation emphasize its close alignment with the original Chinese text, making it particularly useful for bilingual learning. The paratextual content is lauded for its scholarly depth, rendering the translation a valuable resource for academic research. Reviewers also appreciated the clear layout and well-organized index, which facilitates easy navigation of the content.

In contrast, negative feedback is largely directed at Birrell's translation. A common critique concerns the lack of citations for reference materials, which presents challenges for readers engaging in academic study of Chinese mythology. Additionally, many translations of mythological creatures and geographical names are regarded as overly domesticated, thereby diminishing the text's exotic and archaic character. The paratextual materials are also criticized as overly lengthy and only marginally relevant to the main text, which diminishes reader engagement. The translation's entry-based format is viewed as lacking narrative cohesion and contextual background, rendering the content obscure and difficult to retain. Furthermore, inaccuracies in translating proper nouns are reported to hinder comprehension. Criticism of Goldblatt's version centers on its abridged format. Readers note that this abridgment limits a comprehensive understanding of the original *Shan Hai Jing*. Some depictions of mythical creatures are regarded as excessively exaggerated or grotesque, making them difficult to visualize. Others point out a lack of clarity regarding the hierarchical status of deities in the source culture. Instances of mistranslation are also noted. No reviews were found for Wang Hong's version on either Amazon or Goodreads, suggesting that its visibility and readership remain significantly lower than those of Goldblatt's and Birrell's translations.

Based on the above analysis, negative feedback regarding the English translations of the *Shan Hai Jing* primarily arises from two key factors. First, the original text is stylistically fragmented, with content that is often terse and abstract, leading to reduced reader engagement. Second, translation-related issues—such as mistranslations and insufficient cultural annotations—can result in a diminished reading experience. Additionally, the use of abridged formats in certain editions further restricts readers' access to the complete scope of the original work. By contrast, positive reviews indicate that English-speaking readers favor translations that incorporate vivid illustrations, comprehensive content, narrative-based mythological presentation, coherent plots, and well-integrated cultural context. These findings offer meaningful guidance for the future publication and dissemination of Chinese mythological texts to international audiences.

B. Non-Textual Forms of Translation and Reception

“Modality” refers to sign systems, or the various channels through which humans perceive and interact with the external world via sensory experience. Multimodality, therefore, entails the integration of multiple sensory modes and is defined as “a constellation of meanings originating from different semiotic systems” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Meaning is generated contextually through the interplay of symbolic modes—including language, imagery, and sound—structured in particular ways and transmitted via specific media channels (Wu, 2021).

(a). Illustrations

Among the three selected English translations of the *Shan Hai Jing*, only Howard Goldblatt’s edition incorporates illustrations. In this edition, visual imagery is intentionally integrated with textual content to form a cohesive communicative whole, providing readers with a rich and immersive experience. Visual culture plays a vital role in translation, especially in texts involving mythological content. As noted by theorist Béla Balázs, visual culture conveys, interprets, and constructs meaning through intuitive forms and symbolic imagery.

The illustrations in Goldblatt’s translation are professionally designed and constitute a prominent feature of the book’s overall presentation. Drawing on Charles Peirce’s semiotic theory, signs are classified into three categories: icons, indices, and symbols. Iconic signs refer to instances where the signifier closely resembles the signified. The illustrations in Goldblatt’s edition function as iconic signs, visually depicting the central figures of each myth. Each image directly follows its corresponding narrative, reinforcing the textual content and anchoring readers’ imaginative interpretation. This approach reflects the principle of symbolic prefiguration, wherein the expectations of the target-language audience are anticipated during publication and inform content adaptation. The consistent use of visual symbolism—executed through minimalist lines and a limited palette of black and red—embodies an aesthetic that resonates with the mythological origins of civilization. This visual restraint harmonizes with the thematic tone of the *Shan Hai Jing*, appealing to Western readers’ fascination with the mystical and ancient dimensions of Chinese mythology.

(b). Documentary

With the advancement of China’s “Go Global” cultural strategy, the translation and dissemination of the *Shan Hai Jing* have expanded beyond traditional textual forms. Video, as a contemporary form of social semiotics, offers distinctive aesthetic value and plays an increasingly vital role in conveying Chinese culture internationally through audiovisual storytelling.

The documentary series *A Hazy Dream World from Ancient China* was produced by the Documentary Center of China Media Group (CMG) and aired on various platforms, including the CCTV Documentary Channel, China Media Group Mobile, and Bilibili’s documentary section. Inspired by the ancient mythological classic *Shan Hai Jing*, the series comprises eight episodes, each centered on a specific mythological narrative: the creation of humanity by NvWa; Fuxi’s attempt to link heaven and earth; Zhulong’s blinking that controls day and night; the man-eating beast Taotie; the solar deity Di Jun and his family; Hou Yi shooting down nine suns; and the unicorn-like beast Kui. These stories are presented through animated sequences, supplemented by expert commentary offering historical and mythological insights. Since its release, the series has received widespread acclaim for its rich content and innovative presentation.

As a form of mass media, the documentary operates through the use of “dominant codes,” which are encoded in alignment with prevailing political, economic, and cultural structures. Such media productions not only reflect societal power but also act as vehicles for conveying Chinese cultural identity and values to international audiences. The documentary integrates multiple symbolic elements—such as visuals, music, and text—to encode complex layers of cultural meaning. In *A Hazy Dream World from Ancient China*, animation serves as the primary narrative medium. It is complemented by diverse traditional art forms including dance, light and shadow performances, and shadow puppetry. These multimodal strategies enrich the storytelling, bringing the myths of the *Shan Hai Jing* to life for a global audience.

The documentary is not merely a process of encoding meaning but also involves decoding. During the decoding stage, audience needs—especially the expectations of Western viewers whose cultural backgrounds differ markedly from the source culture—are prioritized.

The translation and dissemination of Chinese mythology represent a form of cross-cultural communication. However, fundamental differences between Chinese and Western cultural frameworks and social values often give rise to misunderstandings. A major cause of these challenges is the absence of adequate cultural presuppositions, defined by Nida (1981) as “assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives deeply rooted in a culture and commonly shared by its members, yet often operating at a subconscious level.” *A Hazy Dream World from Ancient China* addresses this gap by combining animation with expert commentary to supplement the cultural knowledge and imagery that Western viewers may lack. This multimodal approach effectively reduces cultural distance and facilitates improved understanding across cultural boundaries.

Modern animation technology is employed not only for expressive and aesthetic purposes but also to fulfill practical functions of reference and narration (Li, 2021). By visualizing mythological narratives, animation facilitates the explanation of the origins, development, and meanings of each story. The integration of animated sequences into the documentary format broadens its audience to include children and adolescents. In this way, it combines entertainment with scholarly rigor, transforming fragmentary mythological narratives into cohesive and engaging episodes enriched with contextual background. The use of animated texts introduces a tangible and dynamic system of symbolic meaning.

This enables viewers—especially those from overseas—to engage in introspection through imaginative immersion, encouraging them to explore cultural parallels within a cross-cultural framework. In turn, this fosters a deeper resonance with universal human experiences of origin, existence, and development.

(c). *Audience Feedback and Reception*

To assess audience reception and engagement with the documentary *A Hazy Dream World from Ancient China*, the author collected and analyzed viewership data from YouTube, where the series is accessible to international audiences. By analyzing this data, this section aims to identify key patterns in viewer behavior and provide insights to inform future efforts promoting Chinese mythology through documentary formats.

TABLE 2
VIEWERSHIP DATA FOR *A HAZY DREAM WORLD FROM ANCIENT CHINA* ON YOUTUBE

No.	Episode Title	Views	Likes	Comments
1	<i>The Shan Hai Jing: Divine Thought from the Earth</i>	120,000	1,547	22
2	<i>Nvwa: Where Do I Come From</i>	23,000	429	2
3	<i>Fuxi: Exploring the Path to the Heavens</i>	24,000	457	2
4	<i>Zhulong: The God Who Created Time</i>	13,000	247	2
5	<i>Taotie: The Birth of Desire</i>	11,000	212	6
6	<i>Di Jun: What a Family!</i>	14,000	258	1
7	<i>Hou Yi: The Hero Who Shot Down the Suns</i>	10,000	224	1
8	<i>Kui: Singing in Harmony</i>	7,681	167	2

As of January 21, 2024, the statistical data presented above reflect the YouTube performance of *A Hazy Dream World from Ancient China*. As shown in Table 2, the first episode—serving as a general introduction—garnered the highest number of views and likes, whereas the final episode recorded the lowest. A clear downward trend is evident throughout the series, with the first three episodes significantly outperforming the latter five in terms of viewership. Several factors contribute to this pattern: short episode durations limited the time available to adequately supplement mythological storytelling with cultural background information. The subject matter—Chinese mythology—is relatively niche, attracting a limited target audience within the global media landscape. The episodic structure lacks coherence, with each myth presented as an isolated narrative. This inhibits viewers from forming an integrated understanding or comprehensive knowledge framework of the mythological system. Promotional efforts were insufficient, and the slow release schedule of the episodes may have undermined viewer retention and loyalty. Collectively, these factors explain the strong initial interest followed by a rapid decline in engagement, resulting in what may be described as a “strong start, weak finish” phenomenon.

Viewer feedback, however, remains predominantly positive. Many viewers expressed fascination with the mythological narratives and appreciated the diverse elements—such as animation, expert commentary, and traditional cultural motifs—that enriched their understanding of Chinese culture. The documentary’s production quality also garnered praise. A smaller proportion of viewers reported discovering the series through personal recommendations, which further underscores the documentary’s limited promotional reach and missed opportunities to expand its audience base.

While incorporating multiple elements of traditional Chinese culture into the documentary format constitutes an effective strategy for mythological promotion, the narrative presentation remains fragmented. Western viewers, lacking a structured introduction to Chinese mythology, may find it challenging to systematically contextualize the myths or to meaningfully compare them with Western mythological frameworks. This gap limits the potential to construct a coherent cross-cultural knowledge system.

IV. CHINESE CULTURE IN TRANSLATION

The holistic wisdom and profound insights into the cosmos and human existence embodied in Chinese classical texts possess a timeless spiritual appeal that transcends historical and cultural boundaries. These texts form the core of China’s enduring cultural soft power and offer meaningful inspiration amidst contemporary global trends of consumerism and digitalization.

Effectively telling China’s stories and conveying its voice are key priorities for cultural diplomacy. Promoting the dissemination of Chinese culture fosters mutual understanding and cultural exchange between China and the international community. Recent efforts have concentrated on increasing the supply of high-quality cultural translation products and launching a series of flagship publishing initiatives, including *Understanding China*, *Library of Chinese Classics*, *Beautiful China*, *Glorious China*, *People’s China*, *Silk Road Cities*, and *Translations of 100 Chinese Academic Classics*. These projects aim to present an authentic and compelling narrative of China to the global community. To strengthen international collaboration, initiatives such as the establishment of overseas editorial offices for China-themed books have been promoted to ensure effective localization and reception in foreign markets. Additionally, the Chinese publishing industry has been encouraged to develop cultural dissemination brands and expand into emerging sectors such as animation and the cultural and creative industries (Du, 2021). Mainstream media, leveraging their credibility and public influence, are tasked with shaping China’s national image and guiding cultural interpretation. By adopting digital media formats and multimodal symbolic systems, they assist Western readers and audiences in gaining new perspectives on

Chinese mythology. These efforts enrich global understanding of Chinese culture and continuously project Chinese cultural elements to international audiences. Ultimately, these efforts contribute to constructing an image of China that is perceived as trustworthy, appealing, and respectable. Such developments provide renewed direction and strategic pathways for the ongoing translation of Chinese classical texts, reaffirming cultural translation's role as a central pillar in China's international cultural engagement.

V. CONCLUSION

Against the broader backdrop of China's "Go Global" strategy and the widespread application of mass media, multimodal translation has emerged as a vital approach to cultural dissemination. This study identifies four key elements—translation theme, translator subjectivity and strategies, publishing institutions and sponsorship, and reader feedback and reception—as central factors shaping the translation and reception of the *Shan Hai Jing* in the English-speaking world. Close monitoring of reader and audience feedback is essential to gaining insights into Western preferences and expectations regarding individual reading experiences. The analysis indicates that English-language readers generally favor editions featuring high-quality illustrations, narrative cohesion, rich plots, and well-contextualized foreign cultural elements, all of which enhance engagement and comprehension of Chinese mythology. Regarding non-textual translation forms such as documentary formats, it is crucial to encode distinctive Chinese cultural elements using multimodal semiotic systems. Audience needs must be prioritized, with particular attention to enhancing cultural presuppositions—an indispensable condition for bridging cognitive and cultural divides. The ultimate goal is to construct a compelling image of China through mythology, evoking resonance in Western viewers with shared human experiences of survival, identity, and development. Concerning the documentary, *A Hazy Dream World from Ancient China*, audience feedback suggests that future productions should aim for greater narrative coherence and systematic presentation of mythological content, supported by sustained promotional efforts to maintain viewer engagement. Ultimately, the translation of Chinese classics transcends mere linguistic transformation. It is a culturally grounded endeavor in diplomacy and soft power, aiming to project a positive, responsible, and culturally rich image of China. Through this process, Chinese civilization—with its enduring heritage and spirit of perseverance, unity, and sacrifice—can engage in deeper spiritual dialogue and cultural exchange with the Western world, thereby continuously enhancing the global reception and appreciation of Chinese culture.

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