

Chinese "YaoGuai" Culture: Translation Strategies and Cultural Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

The concept of YaoGuai combines ethical warnings with unique forms, rooted in Taoist animism and Buddhist ideas, and has carried multiple functions in traditional society. Its connotation is essentially different from that of the Western "monster/demon" and the Japanese "yōkai", which often leads to misunderstandings in translation. To ensure accurate dissemination, this paper proposes translation strategies: adopting the "transliteration plus annotation method" to retain uniqueness, and supplementing with multimodal means such as illustrations and footnotes to assist understanding; Moreover, strategies need to be flexibly adjusted according to the text type, and this research emphasizes that standardizing terminology, resisting Orientalist misinterpretation, and making good use of digital media "visual translation" are significant for the accurate dissemination of culture.

Keywords: Cross-cultural translation, Translation strategy, Cultural dissemination, YaoGuai culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2024, the global popularity of the domestically developed game *"Black Myth: Wukong"* not only sparked a frenzy in the gaming industry but also brought China's rich tradition of YaoGuai (supernatural beings) culture into the international spotlight. Rooted in indigenous philosophical thought, folklore, and literary traditions, Chinese "YaoGuai" culture differs significantly from Western concepts such as "monster" or "demon". This uniqueness presents unique challenges in cross-cultural communication. As Wang put it, "Translation should also be regarded as an act of cross-cultural interpretation." [1] Translation, serving as a crucial medium for cultural dissemination, determines whether international audiences can accurately comprehend Chinese "YaoGuai" culture. Consequently, this paper focuses on the translation of the YaoGuai concept. By examining classical texts and comparing representative cases, it explores effective strategies for conveying the rich cultural connotations embedded in YaoGuai and aims to fill existing gaps in the study of "YaoGuai" culture translation, while providing practical translation strategies for the global dissemination of Chinese literature, film, television, and games,

ultimately facilitating the international transmission of China's cultural heritage.

2. CULTURAL GENEALOGY OF CHINESE YAOGUAI

2.1 Semantic Definition of Terms Such as "YaoGuai"

Tracing back to the origin of "YaoGuai", its semantic core derives from the combination of "yao" and "guai": "yao" in "Shuowen Jiezi" refers to female-induced disasters, while "guai" emphasizes the strange nature of things." Their combination, retaining "yao"'s ethical warning and absorbing "guai"'s morphological alienation, forms the core meaning of "a supernatural being that violates order and has an abnormal form". Nowadays, modern scholars argue that in traditional Chinese culture, "YaoGuai" in a broad sense generally refers to abnormal and evil phenomena, while in a narrow sense, it specifically denotes supernatural spirits capable of transforming into human form.[2] In addition to the commonly known "YaoGuai", there are many other supernatural phenomena in traditional Chinese culture, each with its own rich semantic connotations. For example: "Jing" refers to entities formed through cultivation and

transformation; "Gui" refers to beings transformed from the souls of the deceased; "Xian" refers to those who have achieved positive transcendence.

2.2 Philosophical Positioning of YaoGuai

Within the framework of traditional Chinese philosophy, the cultural essence of "YaoGuai" is deeply compatible with Taoism's concept of "animism of all things". Taoism holds that all things in heaven and earth contain "spiritual energy"; ordinary objects, after long-term nourishment by this spirituality and thousands of years of cultivation, can "transcend their original form" and break through their natural attributes to become "YaoGuai". Meanwhile, Buddhist concepts of "reincarnation" and "karmic retribution" have intermingled with local "YaoGuai" culture, injecting new connotations into its Logic of behaviour.

2.3 Social Functions of YaoGuai

"YaoGuai" served multiple functions in traditional society: as a carrier of folk beliefs, it acted as a "taboo symbol" to exert a warning effect. For instance, legends of Huli Jing (狐狸精, fox spirit) enchanting humans served to discipline excessive lust; As a literary motif, it became a metaphorical vehicle for social criticism and humanistic reflection. As a tool for moral education, its endings of good and evil reinforce ethical order. For instance, the transformation between good and evil of the snake yao in *"The Legend of the White Snake"* echoes the concept of "karmic retribution"; As a symbol of group identity, its localized images consolidate local cultural memories and strengthen the sense of community belonging.

3. DILEMMAS IN TRANSLATION PRACTICE

The cross-cultural translation of "YaoGuai" culture is not merely a simple language conversion but faces multiple complex challenges. For one thing, there are essential differences between concepts such as "YaoGuai" and "monster/demon" in the cultural contexts of China and the West. The lack of precise corresponding words leads to misunderstandings. For another thing, the overseas influence of Japanese "yōkai" culture is prone to cause cross-cultural interference. Coupled with the difficulty in accurately capturing the deep cultural connotations of the "yōkai" image in classic texts, these dilemmas jointly constitute the main obstacles

to the translation and dissemination of "yo-kai" culture.

3.1 Conceptual Inequivalence in Western Contexts

The term "YaoGuai" in Chinese has a special cultural meaning and there is no exact corresponding word in English. This difference in meaning directly leads to misunderstandings during translation. For instance, in Western terms, "monster" is more valued for its strange appearance and the potential to cause actual harm. Like the Cyclops in Greek mythology, its key is "something abnormal and terrifying". "Demon" has a deep connection with Christian theology, referring to evil souls that oppose God and carry religious moral judgments. "Ghost" mainly refers to "the appearance of the soul of the dead", emphasizing the continuation of the world after a person's death. "Spirit" leans more towards an abstract spiritual entity, which could be either good or bad. These English words carry a strong sense of Christian culture and cannot accurately express the complex moral concepts and views on the world in Chinese "YaoGuai" culture. The "YaoGuai" culture in Japan has a significant influence, such as *Kappa* and *Tengu*, which is very famous in the West. Many translators or readers tend to unconsciously use the term "yōkai" to understand "YaoGuai" in China. However, China's YaoGuai system differs from Japanese yōkai in origin, classification, and social significance. Such cross-cultural interference may lead to the misclassification of Chinese YaoGuai and even diminish their uniqueness.

3.2 Analysis of Typical Cases

In China's tradition of zhiguai (supernatural tales), *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*"Liaozhai Zhiyi"*) is undoubtedly the most representative classic text. This work, an encyclopaedia of the Chinese psyche, focuses on intriguing interpersonal relationships; unlike Hitchcockian horror narratives about ghosts and monsters, it depicts real people and their levels of consciousness.[3] This unique literary expression has made *"Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio"* face special translation dilemmas in cross-cultural communication. Western translators often struggle to grasp the psychological symbolic meanings of the spirit-like figures, easily reducing them to monster images in horror literature. For instance, translating "狐仙" (fox immortal) as "fox demon" completely negates the complex traits of wisdom,

charm, and danger that the figure may embody in the original text, and erases the unique cosmology in Chinese culture where animals attain spiritual form through cultivation.

4. SELECTION OF TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

4.1 Transliteration with Annotation

The combination of transliteration and annotation is an effective way to preserve the uniqueness of culture-specific items. This approach, which uses Pinyin to retain the cultural authenticity of Chinese characteristic words while supplementing necessary socio-cultural background information through annotations for target-language readers, facilitates cross-cultural communication.[4] The translation practice of Japan's "yōkai" provides a mature model for this. After entering the English-speaking world through transliteration, with the help of annotations to clarify its connotation as (a traditional Japanese supernatural existence, covering various forms such as natural spirits and strange phenomena), "yōkai" gradually became a widely accepted cultural symbol. This model can be applied to the translation of the Chinese term: transliterating "妖怪" as "YaoGuai" and supplementing its core characteristics through annotations, (a being with spiritual properties formed by natural objects through cultivation, possessing both good and evil attributes.) This not only avoids being restricted by words like "monster." but also eliminates the obstacles in understanding through explanation. For instance, the "狐妖" in *"Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio"* can be translated as "huyao (a fox YaoGuai, formed through spiritual cultivation, capable of interacting with humans). This way, cultural distinctiveness is retained. and also sets up a framework of understanding for the readers.

4.2 Multi-Form Assistance

Various forms can well make up for the deficiencies of text translation. Illustrations serve as a visual supplement and can directly present the physical characteristics of YaoGuai. Just like the description of the nine-tailed fox in *"The Classics of Mountains and Seas"*, illustrations can greatly reduce the different understandings caused by textual descriptions. Footnotes can play a role in explaining culture and provide simple explanations of core concepts such as "cultivation" and "overcoming tribulation". It won't affect the reading

of the main text. In the context of digital publishing, hypertext technology makes in-depth interpretation possible. View detailed cultural background information, related monster story genealogies or academic research through link jumps to meet the diverse needs of different readers. Various forms of assistance transform text translation from a single perspective into a three-dimensional system of "text - image - interaction", building a richer cognitive channel for cross-cultural understanding.

4.3 Dynamic Adaptation to Context

The essence of language application is a continuous process of choosing language at different levels of consciousness based on internal and external factors, which requires dynamic adaptation. The same is true for the language selection of Chinese translations, and adaptation needs to be adjusted according to the context. [5] Similarly, translation strategies need to be dynamically adjusted based on differences in text types. For zhiguai novels such as *"Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio"*, their literariness and narrativity require translations to balance aesthetic experience and cultural transmission. Academic annotations can be appropriately downplayed, allowing cultural information to be naturally revealed through the context. For folkloric texts, precise terms are required. By using the method of "transliteration plus systematic annotation", the origin, symbolic meaning and role of monsters in cultural rituals are elaborated in detail, thereby meeting the academic research's demand for complete information. This flexible adjustment approach can avoid the problem of "too many annotations" in literary translation. It can also ensure the precision of academic texts.

5. ENLIGHTENMENTS FOR CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The translation methods mentioned earlier, such as transliteration with annotations, multi-form assistance, and dynamic adaptation, have pointed out specific paths for the accurate dissemination of the "YaoGuai" culture. Translation is the core link in cultural dissemination. Its ultimate goal is not merely to express in a different language, but also to promote effective dialogue and mutual understanding among cultures. After determining the translation approach, it is necessary to further consider the overall idea of the international dissemination of the "YaoGuai" culture from aspects such as terminology norms, ethical

adherence, and innovation in dissemination carriers, providing systematic guidance for it to break through cross-cultural barriers.

5.1 Recommendations for Terminological Standardization

The current translation situation of "YaoGuai" and related terms such as "jing" (精), "guai" (怪), "ling" (灵), and "gui" (鬼), is essentially due to the lack of a unified reference standard for terms. To ensure the consistency and accuracy of the translation of Chinese "YaoGuai" culture, it is important to establish a dedicated terminology database and systematically classify key concepts. The specialized terminology database should include the transliteration norms and semantic genealogies of core terms. And clearly define the boundaries with concepts such as "yōkai" and "demon", as well as provide annotations on their cultural connotations. At the same time, use typical examples to offer authoritative references for translation practice, academic research, and cultural product output. This effort requires collaboration among sinologists, translators, and folklorists to ensure both academic precision and communicative accessibility, thereby avoiding cultural misinterpretations caused by vague concepts.

5.2 Reflections on Translation Ethics

Cultural translation and communication, in essence, are two-way exchanges rooted in two languages, shaped by multiple internal and external factors such as history, culture, society, politics, poetics, and ideology.[6] In the process of spreading the "YaoGuai" culture, the core lies in avoiding a distorted interpretation of the monster culture from an "Orientalist" perspective. Some Western translations simplify Chinese "YaoGuai" as "mysterious Oriental curiosity symbols" or deliberately magnify their "horror" to cater to stereotypes. This translation strategy essentially dissolves the cultural subjectivity. Actually, the "YaoGuai" in Pu Songling's works are, in essence, mirrors of human nature. Translation and communication should aim their core trait as "psychological projections of humanity" and reject reducing them to "exotic exhibits" that satisfy Western imaginations. Translators also need to uphold cultural equality, conveying not only fantastical narratives but also preserving the underlying social criticism and humanistic care, allowing overseas audiences to perceive the

"human" essence of "YaoGuai" culture rather than the superficial "monstrosity."

5.3 Opportunities in the Digital Age

Without digital technology, there would be no such prosperous cultural scene as today, and without cultural content, there would be no such broad application field for digital technology. [7] Digital media have brought new ways for the dissemination of "YaoGuai" culture, which can go beyond the limitations of text translation itself. "Visual translation" in films, TV series and games can be the top choice. For instance, games like "Genshin Impact" transform the majesty and spirituality of the "loong-shaped monster" into visual symbols that can be directly seen through character design, action effects and scene narrative. Its English version retains the original names of the characters, and with the cultural implications in the visual elements, it achieves a dual transmission of "form" and "meaning". This "visual-first" communication approach can avoid the semantic barriers of text translation and directly evoke emotional resonance among the audience. In the future, we can further try the integration method of "text translation + visual annotation + interactive experience", such as placing cultural surprises in games and adding dynamic annotation links in film and television subtitles, so that the audience can naturally understand the deeper meaning of monster culture in an immersive experience.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of Findings

This paper analyzes the complex situation of cross-cultural translation of "YaoGuai" culture in China. The term "YaoGuai" integrates the ethical warnings of "yao" and the morphological changes of "guai", developing in the philosophy of Taoism and Buddhism, and has multiple functions such as faith and literature in traditional society. While the Western terms "monster" and "demon" are influenced by Christianity, they are difficult to correspond to the connotation of "YaoGuai". Meanwhile, the Japanese "yōkai" culture has intensified confusion, leading to the frequent misinterpretation of the image of "YaoGuai" in the translation of classic works such as "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio". To address this dilemma, transliteration with annotations can preserve cultural uniqueness. Moreover, strategies should be flexibly adjusted according to the type of text.

The translation and dissemination of “YaoGuai” culture to the outside world is not merely a language conversion, but also a cross-cultural dialogue across time and space. From “The Classics of Mountains and Seas” to “Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio” and then to “Black Myth: Wukong”, the “YaoGuai” culture carries the unique thoughts of the Chinese people on nature, ethics and the universe. Nowadays, how to ensure that this cultural treasure is accurately understood by the world is an important task for translation researchers and practitioners.

6.2 Deficiencies and Future Research Suggestions

This paper still has some deficiencies. Firstly, the case analysis mainly focuses on classic texts like “Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio”, and pays little attention to the translation of “YaoGuai” in current and contemporary films, TV series and games, failing to comprehensively cover the dissemination characteristics of different media. Secondly, the proposed translation methods have not yet been widely verified in practice. Whether they are effective in actual dissemination still needs to be further confirmed.

Future research can be conducted from three aspects. First, expand the scope of research, incorporate more diverse text types and dissemination carriers, and analyse whether translation methods are appropriate in different contexts. Second, conduct practical research. By surveying the audience and making cross-cultural comparisons, see how effective the strategies are in reality and then make some improvements. Third, international cooperation should be strengthened. Scholars and translators from China and abroad should join hands to standardize terms and promote accurate interpretation of “YaoGuai” culture and global dialogue.

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