

Translation Methods for Animal Images in *Li Sao* (离骚)

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Abstract

Li Sao is the most important part of *Chu Ci* or *The Songs of the South* which has an important position in Chinese literature. There are many cultural images in *Chu Ci*, especially *Li Sao*, and animal images constitute part of the cultural images in the classic. They convey both literal and implicit meanings. In other words, poet Qu Yuan uses them to symbolize good or bad things in the source text. The implied meaning of the animal images can only be grasped by putting them into the specific context. The translations in this study use various translating methods such as literal translation, substitution and interpretation to represent the symbolic meanings of the animal images, but sometimes it is seen that the translators fail to convey the original meaning correctly. It is assumed that only by achieving optimal relevance can target readers understand the original images easily.

Keywords: *Li Sao*; Animal images; Translation methods; Relevance theory.



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1. Introduction

Chu Ci (楚辞), or *The Songs of the South* by Qu Yuan (屈原) and other poets, occupies a very important place in Chinese literature. And *Li Sao* (离骚), or *Encountering Sorrow* by Qu Yuan, is the most important part of *Chu Ci*. As a cultural and literary canon, *Li Sao* is full of cultural images, especially animal images which create great challenges for translators. In this study, we will briefly discuss the methods for translating animal images in the English translations of *Li Sao* by Xu (1994), Yang and Yang (2001), Zhuo (2006) and Hawkes (1959) in light of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). The theory holds that an assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context and that optimal relevance lies in the achievement of the greatest contextual effect with the least processing effort (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). It sheds light on the translation of animal images with profound meanings in *Li Sao*.

2. Animal Images in *Li Sao*

According to Xie (1999), a cultural image can be a kind of plant, such as a bamboo in Chinese culture or an oak in American and European culture. It can be an animal or bird in reality or in tales, such as a crow in China or an owl in English-speaking countries. It can be an idiom, a proverb or even a number.

According to Nida (2004), culture is divided into five categories: ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture and linguistic culture. *Li Sao* is one of the oldest literary works in China in which there are many plant images, animal images, historical images, geographical images and mythological images which contain rich cultural connotations. When they are translated into English, not only the literal meaning but also the cultural information contained in the source text (ST) should be translated. It is difficult for foreign readers to understand the cultural images in the translations. To figure out the transmission methods and effects of the cultural images in the classic, we make a comparative study on the English versions of it by Xu Yuanchong, Yang Hsien-yi & Gladys Yang, Zhuo Zhenying and David Hawkes (henceforth “Xu”, “Yang & Yang”, “Zhuo” and “Hawkes”). Based on the classification of culture by Nida (2004), and the cultural images appearing in *Li Sao*, we divide the cultural images in *Li Sao* into the following categories: ecological images, historical images, geographical images and mythological images. These four categories may well cover most of the cultural images in *Li Sao* and animal images are part of ecological images.

There are many animal images in *Li Sao*, such as “骐骥” (*qi ji*), “飞龙” (*fei long*), “蛟龙” (*jiao long*), “虬龙” (*qiu long*), “鸾皇” (*luan huang*), “鹭鸟” (*zhi niao*), “鸩” (*zhen*), “鸠” (*jiu*), “鹑鷔” (*ti jue*), and so on, which can evoke target readers’ much imagination and association. Among these animals, dragon (蛟龙) and phoenix (鸾皇) seem to be the most common animals.

3. Translation Methods for Animal Images in *Li Sao*

The animal images and their translations in the four English versions are as follows (see Table 1):

Table-1. Animal Images and Their Translations

ST	Xu	Yang	Zhuo	Hawkes
玉虬	Dragon	Jade-green dragons	Four draught dragons	jade dragons
鸞	phoenix	birds with plumage gold	Phoenix carriage	Phoenix-figured car
鸾凰	phoenixes	royal blue bird	Phoenixes	Bird of Heaven
凤鸟	Giant bird	The phoenix	Phoenixes	phoenixes
鸮	Falcon	falcon	The bird Zhen	magpie
雄鸮	Turtledove	Turtle-dove	Turtle-Dove	magpie
鸛鳩	Autumn birds	cuckoos	cuckoos	shrike
蛟龙	Dragon	dragons	Dragons	Water-dragons
八龙	Eight-dragon-steeds	Eight horses	Eight dragon-steeds	Eight dragon steeds
马	steeds	dragons	draught beasts	dragon steeds

Example 1

驯玉虬以桀鸞兮，溘埃风余上征。(Wang, 2017)

Table-2. Rendering of “玉虬” and “鸞” in the Translations

ST	Xu	Yang & Yang	Zhuo	Hawkes
玉虬	dragon	jade-green dragons	four draught dragons	jade dragons
鸞	phoenix	birds with plumage gold	phoenix carriage	phoenix-figured car

Xu Dragon and phoenix star my race, oh!
I rise on wind into the blue.
Yang & Yang Swift jade-green dragons, birds with plumage gold,
I harnessed to the whirlwind, and behold.
Zhuo Towards the sky, riding on a dust-raising gale,
My phoenix carriage and four draught dragons does sail!
Hawkes I yoked a team of jade dragons to a phoenix-figured car,
And waited for the wind to come, to soar up on my journey.

According to Wang (2017), the image “虬” refers to a young dragon without horns, while the image “鸞” refers to a phoenix with rainbow colors. On the contrary, the image “虬” (see Figure 1) is described as a young dragon with horns in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海经). The four translators translate the image “玉虬” into “dragon” or “jade dragons” without any explanation (see Table 2).

“鸞” is another name of “鸾鸟” in Chinese culture which symbolizes a man of noble character, and represents virtuous officials in *Li Sao*. In Greek mythology, a phoenix is a long-lived mythical bird that can come back to life in cycles, which symbolizes eternity. Although the image of phoenix is endowed with a slightly different cultural connotation from that of “鸞”, both of them can be associated with a sacred animal. However, the differences arise in whether the image “鸞” refers to an animal or a carriage with animal patterns in the translations. Xu, Zhuo and Hawkes translate the image “鸞” into “phoenix”, while Yang & Yang adopt the method of interpretation and translate “鸞” as “birds with plumage gold”. The target readers may get the optimal relevance in the Yangs’ version, for their description of the image “鸞” can enable the target readers to associate it with a holy bird with few processing efforts.

Figure-1. Pictures of qilong (虬龙), yi (鸞) and phoenix



Example 2

恐鵓之先鸣兮，使夫百草为之不芳 (Wang, 2017).

Table-3. Rendering of “鵓” in the translations

ST	Xu	Yang & Yang	Zhuo	Hawkes
鵓	autumn birds	cuckoos	cuckoos	shrike

Xu But autumn birds may cry in tears, oh!

And fragrant grass no longer sweet.

Yang & Yang Spring is but brief, when cuckoos start to sing,

And flowers will fade that once did spread and spring.

Zhuo Otherwise, once the cuckoos begin to chuckle,

The Fragrant Flowers will stand no chance to survive.

Hawkes Beware lest the shrike sound his note before the equinox,

Causing all the flowers to lose their fine fragrance.

According to Wang (2017), “鵓” refers to a bird which tweets in late spring. “鵓”, also called “杜鹃” or “子规”, is very common in classical Chinese poetry (see Figure 2). “杜鹃” is always linked with spring and love, and its associative meaning is quite similar between classical Chinese poetry and Western poetry. In Chinese culture, the image “杜鹃” expresses the theme of homesickness, melancholy and grieving over spring. In *Li Sao*, the image “鵓” symbolizes the feeling of grieving over spring. In other words, the crowing of “鵓” means that spring is fleeting and will elapse soon. According to the Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuckoo>), the cuckoo which is distributed widely has played a role in human culture for thousands of years. In Greek mythology, it is recognized as sacred due to its relation to the goddess Hera. In India, cuckoos are sacred due to its relation to Kamadeva, the god of desire and longing. In Japan, the cuckoo symbolizes unrequited love. In Europe, it is associated with spring, and with cuckoldry, for example, in Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.

The Yangs and Zhuo adopt the method of literal translation to translate the image “鵓” into “cuckoos” (see Table 3). Due to the similar association of “鵓” between Chinese and Western culture, their translation can achieve an adequate contextual effect without many processing efforts. Shrikes are also known as butcherbirds for their feeding habit that they impale the dead or wounded prey with a thorn or any available sharp pointed object to help themselves to tear the flesh into small pieces. Hawkes replaces the image “鵓” with “shrikes” without a note. The target readers may associate shrikes with fierceness and brutality, which makes it difficult for them to grasp the intended meaning of “鵓” readily. In other words, they have to make great processing effort to understand the target text (TT) and thus the translation fails to achieve the optimal relevance.

Figure-2. Pictures of dujuan (杜鹃), cuckoo and shrike



According to the data analysis, the frequency of the translation methods used by the four translators to translate animal images is listed in the table below (see Table 4).

Table-4. Translation Methods for Animal Images

	T	L	A	O	S	I
Xu		4			4	2
Yang & Yang		5			3	2
Zhuo	1	5			3	1

Hawkes		4		4	2
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Note: T= transliteration L= literal translation A=annotation
O=omission S=substitution I=interpretation

The data in Table 4 clearly shows that literal translation and substitution are two main translation methods for animal images used by the four translators.

4. Concluding Remarks

It is well-known that there are many animal images used in *Chu Ci* and that these images have both literal and metaphorical meanings. In other words, poet Qu Yuan use them to symbolize good and bad people or things. Their implicit meaning can only be grasped by putting them in the specific context in which Qu Yuan often mentions and worries about his native country and people. In translating *Li Sao*, special attention should be paid to the animals with symbolic meanings. As has been discussed above, the translators sometimes fail to represent the implied meaning expressed by the plant images in the classic, even though they use various translating methods, such as literal translation, interpretation, substitution and transliteration. Only by achieving the optimal relevance in the target text can target readers understand the original cultural images easily. But this is not an easy job for translators in rendering ancient classics.

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