

# The Translation and Introduction of Chinese Myth in English World

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Different from Greek myth, Chinese myth is scattered among many kinds of ancient books such as *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, *Chuci*, *Huainanzi*, etc. There is no Chinese classic that records mythology like the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. After the 20th century, Chinese scholars began to collect and study myths. In the English world, missionaries began to translate and introduce Chinese myths from the middle and late 19th century, and then Chinese scholars and sinologists have been translating and introducing Chinese myths. At present, the English translation of Chinese mythology has made a lot of achievements, but there are also many misunderstandings. This paper explores the current situation of the English translation of Chinese mythology by analyzing several well-known translations.

*Keywords:* Chinese myth, translation and introduction, English world

## Introduction

There was no concept of myth in ancient China. In the early 20th century, influenced by the eastward spread of Western learning, China began to establish modern mythology, and Chinese scholars began to pay attention to collecting and sorting mythological fragments from the huge library of ancient Chinese books. There are many magnificent myths in China, such as Pangu opening up heaven and earth, Nuwa creating humanity, Nuwa mending the sky, Yi shooting the sun, Yu quelling the water, etc., which show the early Chinese people's understanding and imagination of the world. Chinese mythology has a very obvious characteristics of historicization and fragmentation, that is, Chinese mythology and history are mixed with legends and histories; there are no ancient classics; Chinese mythology has a very obvious historical and fragmentary character, i.e., Chinese myths are mixed with history and legends, and there are no ancient classics dedicated to recording myths. Fragments of Chinese mythological stories with the same character or the same theme appear in different ancient books in the form of Classical Chinese, which need to be reassembled in order to restore the original appearance of Chinese myths. However, they are often not identical or even contradictory, which creates a certain amount of trouble in retelling Chinese myths and translating them to foreign countries. Fortunately, although Chinese scholars do not have a completely clear definition of what elements are specifically included in Chinese myths, they basically introduce and study Chinese myths according to a narrow scope, i.e., they do not treat religious beliefs, legends, folktales, and novels about supernaturals as myths, and they have already accomplished the selection and restoration of the materials of most of the myths and stories, which has provided a reference of the

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source texts for the English translation of Chinese myths. However, there are obvious differences between Chinese and foreign scholars' understanding of Chinese mythology and translation, and most English translations of Chinese Myths have major misunderstandings. On the whole, there are still many deficiencies in English translation of Chinese myth.

## **Translation and Introduction of Chinese Myth in the English World**

### **Early Introduction of Chinese Myth by Missionaries**

The English translation of Chinese mythology was initially carried out by Christian missionaries, who mostly translated Chinese mythology with the purpose of preaching, so they had obvious manipulation on the selection and translation of Chinese mythology materials. Missionaries paid more attention to Chinese creation myths, and used to introduce Chinese myths by analogy with characters and plots in the Bible, especially "Genesis", to promote "Chinese civilization originated from the West" through Chinese myths, in order to prove that all human beings are the descendants of Adam and Eve. They are especially apt to identify Chinese ancestors as Noah. In 1872, Sinensis pointed that Pangu was either Adam or Noah, Fuxi, Shennong, and the Yellow Emperor were his three sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Sinensis, 1872, p. 217). J. S. McIlvaine argued and inferred that Noah was the Fuxi in Chinese mythology, His other name is Taiyi, believing that Noah created all things after coming to China on the ark, and then there were Three Emperors and Five Sovereigns, and Chinese history began from there (McIlvaine, 1880, p. 253).

The early introduction of Chinese mythology in the English world was mainly carried out by missionaries through scattered publications in various newspapers. In 1894, American missionary William Alexander Parsons Martin published *Chinese Legends and Other Poems*. An additional edition *Chinese Legends and Lyrics* was published in 1912. Although there is no obvious word of myth or mythology in these two books, they contain some mythological content. This book introduces a few Chinese myths in the form of poetry. It is found that there are no other works translating Chinese myths in the form of poetry in monographs introducing Chinese myths in English. Martin's introducing Chinese myths and legends in the form of poetry is relatively rare. It is very difficult to translate and compose poems, for the translator should not only preserve the authenticity of the original text as much as possible, but also pay attention to the rhythm of the poems. At the same time, as a missionary, Martin has given consideration to the purpose of preaching, and has obviously manipulated the translation and creation of the selected stories, not only attaching a large number of Christian terms to Chinese cultural elements, but also adding content of his own imagination. These manipulations also affect the introduction of Chinese myths to a greater or lesser extent.

Most missionaries introduced Chinese myths, especially creation myths, for political and religious purposes, hoping to prove that "Chinese people can be the target of preaching" through the introduction of Chinese myths, so as to obtain the support of the church and achieve political purposes. At the same time, they linked Chinese myths with the Bible, so as to facilitate the continuation of preaching and gain the support of the congregation, to achieve the purpose of religious dissemination. Due to the missionaries' lack of knowledge of Chinese mythology and the limitation of their religious identity, the translation of Chinese mythology into English had many misunderstandings. Such wrong cognition and prejudice greatly influenced the later overseas scholars and translators of Chinese mythology.

### Translations of Famous Sinologists

In 1922, Edward Theodore Chalmers Werner, a British diplomat, published *Myths and Legends of China*, the first monographer to introduce Chinese myths in the English world. Unlike the missionaries, Werner focused on Chinese myth and mythology. His purpose was to introduce those which live in the minds of the people and are referred to most frequently in their literature, not those which are merely diverting without being typical or instructive, in short, a true, not a distorted image (Werner, 1984). *Myths and Legends of China*, which has been reprinted and republished in many places, is one of the most influential works introducing Chinese myths and legends in the English world and the most discussed by mythology scholars. In addition, based on the entries in this book, Werner published *A Dictionary of Chinese Mythology* in 1932, which is the first and only dictionary on Chinese mythology in English, and contains more than 5,000 entries. However, Werner is criticized by many scholars that this two works selected *Li tai shên hsien t'ung chien*, *Sh ên hsien lieh chuan*, *F êng sh ên yen i*, and *Sou Sh ên chi* as the main sources of material, and these four books are mainly books about supernaturals rather than mythological gods. In addition, he has a serious prejudice against Chinese myths and Chinese people. He thinks that Chinese myths belong to the “poor” category, and the reason for this is the intellectual aspect of the Chinese people, and similar views are elaborated in the book.

In 1928, Canon John Arnott MacCulloch edited and published the *Mythology of All Races*, the eighth volume of which was Chinese mythology and Japanese Mythology. Among them, the Chinese mythology part was written by John C. Ferguson, an American Sinologist and missionary. The book did not publicize the mental inferiority of the Chinese people and the Chinese civilization originated from the west, which was a significant progress compared with the early missionaries and sinologists, but the book was also criticized for its material selection. Feng Hanji and Sinologist John Knight Shryock published an article, “Chinese Mythology and Dr. Ferguson”, which made a sharp but relevant evaluation of Ferguson’s insight and description of Chinese mythology in *The Myth of All Races*. The general view of the two scholars is that Ferguson quoted many ancient Chinese books, but did not clearly mark the specific references, and the selection of individual mythological materials did not choose early historical materials; Ferguson’s cognition of Chinese culture is biased, he confuses Daoism with Taoism when introducing myths; The selection of materials is not critical, regarding the gods intentionally created by later generations as Chinese myth; The historical lineage of the evolution of the myths is not presented in detail. In addition, the two scholars stressed the need to search for relevant materials from many ancient books, while lamenting the difficulty of finding materials from many sources to introduce Chinese myths (Feng & Shryock, 1933).

Cyril Birch, an American Sinologist and translator, published *Chinese Myths and Fantasies* in 1961 as part of the Oxford Myths and Legends series. The first part of this book, *The Conquerors of Chaos*, introduces three sections: “Heaven and Earth and Man”, “The Greatest Archer”, and “The Quellers of the Flood”. The stories of Pangu, Nuwa, Fuxi, Yi, and Yu are included and introduced in detail. Birch makes a lot of adaptations and additions in the translation and introduction of these mythologies, and gives a more detailed description of the environment, psychology, movement, and speakings. As a literary translation, different from the academic version that pursues for objectivity, completeness, and accuracy, Birch has more room for operation in the retelling of Chinese mythology, and he has a very obvious manipulation of material selection and use. Birch’s literary version is a bold attempt to introduce Chinese myth. The book has no footnotes or endnotes, and there is no subjective comment in the text. Instead, it presents Chinese myth in a form most suitable for readers with

literary language, a complete and coherent storyline, and beautiful illustrations. Although it is a retelling of myths, Birch only supplements the original plot and does not rewrite the backbone of the story, which is a great attempt to restore the literary nature of Chinese mythic stories. But in this book, he does not label which belong to the category of myths and which belong to the category of fantasies, which is easy to confuse the concept of Chinese mythology for ordinary readers in the West.

In 1993, Sinologist Anne Birrell published *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*, this book refers to Mr. Yuan Ke's *The Mythology of Ancient China, One Hundred Myths: An Anthology with an Annotated Translation, A Source Book of Chinese Myth Texts*, and *A Dictionary of Chinese Myths and Legends*, which selects and translates more than 300 narratives from more than 100 classical Chinese books, studies and translates Chinese myths and legends. Birrell does not adhere to the theory of a certain discipline or a certain school, but adopts the interdisciplinary classification method of mythology adopted by William G. Doty, and makes a clear distinction between myth, legend, and folk story. When determining the object of study and introduction, classical myths that do not originate in China, myths of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, and local beliefs and religious beliefs were not included in the scope of investigation. According to the common theme classification and motifs of world mythology, Birrell divides the 16 major parts of Chinese mythology into three periods: "the Pre-Han Dynasty or the early classical period (from the Zhou Dynasty to the middle to the later period)", "the late Classical period (221 BC-5th century AD)", and "the traditional period (6th century-17th century)". The objects introduced and studied basically belong to the scope of narrow myth and contain most of them. This book is a typical academic translation, but unlike previous scholars who have focused on a certain discipline or a certain theory to study a single or a certain system of Chinese myths, Birrell researches and introduces the whole of Chinese myths in the context of a variety of interdisciplinary theories. The book not only shows the variation of Chinese myths in different documents and periods, but also examines the phenomena behind Chinese myths from comparative mythology and a variety of professional perspectives. Yuan Ke commented in the preface that the book is a more advanced book on Chinese mythology than has yet appeared in any language (Birrell, 1993, p. 13). Up to now, the book is still a representative work of sinologists on the translation and research of Chinese mythology.

### **Translations of Chinese Scholars**

In 1988, Ding Wangdao published *100 Chinese Myths and Fantasies*, which gave a broad understanding of the scope of myths and introduced the stories about gods, ghosts, and sprites besides ancient myths and legends as mythical stories. Ding Wangdao directly selects classical Chinese for translation, and retains its structure as much as possible during translation, which is difficult, but the translation quality and fidelity are relatively high. However, to reproduce a complete myth requires the selection and processing of multiple mythological fragments. Ding's introduction to mythology generally only selects a single record in a single document, which is inevitably one-sided for the introduction of Chinese mythology. When republishing in the Chinese Mainland, Mr. Ding mentioned that the republication is "to meet the needs of mainland readers to learn English" (Ding, 1991). This English-Chinese bilingual text is indeed a good choice for teaching material, but it is not comprehensive enough and a little boring for a general audience in the English world. In addition, the book, like Birch's work, tends to confuse Western readers with myth and fantasy.

In February 1991, Ke Wenli and Hou Meixue jointly compiled *Stories from Chinese Mythology*. This book

mainly selects and translates 65 myths based on Mr. Yuan Ke's *Chinese Myths Retold* (《神话故事新编》).<sup>1</sup> Only about two-thirds of these stories fall within the narrow scope of myth. The introduction of myth in *Chinese Myths Retold* is a pure literary translation and rewriting by Mr. Yuan Ke with much personal subjective emotions, without academic comments. In the interlingual translation from modern Chinese to English, Ke Wenli and Hou Meixue almost did not do any special operation to the content of *Chinese Myths Retold*, but carried out a faithful language conversion, and naturally translated the emotion injected by Mr. Yuan Ke into the story almost completely. This book is the first literary English translation text of Chinese mythology by Chinese scholars. Compared with Ding Wangdao's direct translation from classical Chinese to English, this book has a more comprehensive introduction to the story and a stronger literary meaning. However, the translator's subjectivity plays a role twice in the two translations, and the translation presents strong subjectivity.

In March 1991, Kim Echlin and Nie Zhixiong co-translated another book *Dragons and Dynasties: An Introduction to Chinese Mythology* of Mr. Yuan Ke, but did not identify the source of the material. It is also a literary translation, but compared with the book *Stories from Chinese Mythology*, this book is clearly divided into six chapters according to the timeline, and each chapter is divided into sub-sections according to the myths belonging to the same person or category. The stories of different times are clearly distinguished, and relevant introductions are added at the beginning of many chapters and after the end of the story. In the case of hardly affecting the reading, it can make the reader have a relatively certain recognition of the whole Chinese myth. By comparison, the *Stories from Chinese Mythology* is more story-telling and readable, with more abundant expression, and more beautiful words, while the *Dragon and Dynasty: Introduction to Chinese Mythology* is more systematic, which is more conducive to readers' control of the cognition of the whole and part of Chinese mythology.

In 2005, the *Handbook of Chinese Mythology* co-authored by Yang Lihui and Anderming was published by ABC-CLIO and included in the *Handbooks of World Mythology*. Compared with previous translations, this book not only introduces myths in ancient documents but also oral myths that still circulate among the Han and other ethnic minorities, but does not include folk tales, legends, and religious beliefs, and the selected items are mostly myths recognized by scholars of Chinese mythology. This book is a handbook for Chinese scholars of indigenous mythological positions to introduce the study of Chinese mythology and Chinese myths. The number of mythological materials selected in this translation is significantly greater than that of the Birrell's work, and the existence of a certain myth in various materials at various times is presented in detail. *Handbook of Chinese Mythology* represents the overall understanding of Chinese mythology by Chinese scholars. It introduces the narrow sense of Chinese myth recognized by the academia of Chinese mythology, and for the first time presents myth and mythology research under the view of Chinese mythology to English world in the form of a monograph. In addition, the book is well arranged and translated, which is very useful for both researchers and general readers of Chinese myth.

In 2009, Chen Lianshan published *Chinese Myths & Legends: Legends of the Universe, Deities and Heroes*, this book is written from the perspective of spreading Chinese culture represented by Chinese myths. After a brief introduction to mythology and Chinese myth, the introduction begins with the difference between Chinese myths and Greek myths. In order to make it easier for Western readers to grasp the whole and details of Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> This book selected 63 stories from *Chinese Myths Retold*, and two stories from *One Hundred Myths: An Anthology with an Annotated Translation*, but the two were generally not considered as myth.

mythology, the introductions of Chinese myths and legends were compiled on the basis of differences between traditional Chinese and Western cultures (Chen, 2016, p. 4). Although this book is small in length, it basically covers the most well-known parts of Chinese myths and legends. Also as a literary translation, the book is more objective than the rewrites of *Dragons and Dynasties: An Introduction to Chinese Mythology* and *Stories from Chinese Mythology*. However, there are some problems in the translation of the book, especially in the translation of proper nouns, which need to be improved.

### **Translations by Non-professional Scholars**

After the 1980s, especially since the new century, there has been a steady flow of English versions and introductions of Chinese myth under the theme of “Chinese Myth/Mythology”, and almost every year there are new works coming out. Up to now, the author has collected more than 80 English works with the entry “Chinese myth”, a large number, and a very rich genre, both academic and literary translations, subdivided into research works, reference books, story books, juvenile books, comic books, and so on. The quality of the works is uneven, and there is an obvious polarization. One pole is the introduction of Chinese mythology by well-known domestic scholars and foreign sinologists. The number of these translated works is not large, and most of them have strong academic and high quality; At the other end of the spectrum, the vast majority of translations are compiled by non-professionals, and the content is too complex to show the true picture of Chinese mythology.

Birrell pointed out that most of the books on Chinese mythology that flooded the European and American markets at that time could not be used as her reference, because those books combined and confused myths of completely different mythological traditions, such as Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, local hero worship, and local denominations, without distinction, so much so that the average reader cannot distinguish their boundaries or ages. Moreover, those books were not translations of texts, but adaptations of myths; Even worse, it does not indicate the source of the selected materials, not from ancient Chinese books or the works of modern Chinese scholars, but from Chinese mythological materials accidentally translated into the European and American markets, which are often contradictory, but the author still uses them, so as to create new myths (Birrell, 1993, p. 8). *Chinese Mythology: An introduction* has been published for more than 30 years, and in the past 30 years, there have been many English translations of Chinese mythology in the European and American markets. However, most English translations and introduction books still confuse myths with religious worship, hero worship, folk stories, legends, etc. The “Immortals” in Taoism, the “Buddhas” and “Bodhisattvas” in Buddhism, the gods in folk beliefs such as “Mazu” and “Guan Yu”, and the “Butterfly Lovers”, “Meng Jiangnu” in folktales, and the “Monkey King” in novels are all mixed into Chinese mythology. Some even went so far as to include the stories of “Huang Tai Sin”, “Zombie”, and “Fox fairy” into the myth. In the process of story processing and reconstruction of Chinese mythological stories, they seldom pay attention to the Chinese mythological materials in ancient books and the works of modern Chinese scholars, and only refer to the misunderstood translations in the English world. The translation and introduction of these contents did spread the colorful Chinese story to the readers of the English world, but at the same time, it distorted the original appearance of the myth to a certain extent.

### **Conclusion**

Great achievements have been made in the translation and introduction of Chinese myths in the English world, showing the colorful Chinese myths. On the whole, academic translation of Chinese mythology has

achieved more achievements than literary translation. However, academic translation is more boring and more suitable for scholars to study Chinese mythology. Although high-quality translations have been produced, such as *Handbook of Chinese Mythology* and *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*, in recent years scholars have collected new mythological material from ancient books, archaeology, and oral text, much of which has not yet been translated into English. On the other hand, literary versions are more suitable for general readers to understand Chinese myths. However, except for the above-mentioned translations, most literary versions fail to show what Chinese people think of Chinese myths, especially those by non-professional scholars who also introduce many religious beliefs and superstitions as Chinese myths. All this deepens Western readers' misunderstanding of Chinese myth. Although some achievements have been made in the translation and introduction of Chinese myths, there is still a shortage of high-quality translations, especially high-quality literary translations.

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