

# An Analysis of the Classical of Mountains and Seas from Three Dimensional Transplantation --Illustrated by the case of Birrell's English translation

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**ABSTRACT.** Illustrated by the example of Birrell's English translation, this paper analyzes *The Classical of Mountains and Seas* from three aspects: linguistic dimension, cultural dimension and communicative dimension. It is found that Birrell adopts annotation and thick translation, as well as abundant preface, postscript, illustration and other sub texts, which reflect the translation thought of reproducing the original text, and represents a picture of the unique experience of ancient Chinese to the target readers. Although misinterpretation in her translation can not be avoided, Birrell's translation is a powerful attempt by Western Sinologists to translate Chinese culture, which has played a positive role in the spread of Chinese culture.

**KEYWORDS:** Linguistic dimension, Cultural dimension, Communicative dimension, Translation strategy

## 1. Introduction

The *Classical of Mountains and Seas* is a wonderful cultural book with thousands of years of history. This great and wonderful mysterious work covers a wide range of contents, which is beyond the competition of all previous books. All kinds of mountains, rivers, gold and jade, exotic wonders, folk taboos and the legend of five emperors run through the whole book. It preserves rich information and historical data of ancient society, which is an important document to study ancient society.

Anne Birrell is a famous British sinologist, mythologist and translator. She has studied in the University of Cambridge, Manchester University, University of London, University of Michigan and other universities and obtained her doctorate from Columbia University. Birrell is well versed in Chinese and western culture. He has made great achievements in the study of ancient Chinese myths. Therefore, the study of the translation of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* is not only helpful for us to have a comprehensive understanding of the current translation situation of ancient Chinese myths, but also provides a way to explore the laws and strategies of the translation of Chinese myths.

## 2. Research on the Three Dimensional Transplantation of the Classical of Mountains and Seas

The process of translation is the process of “multi-dimensional adaptation and selection”, which focuses on the adaptive selection and transformation of language, culture and communication. That is to say, the translator should not only pay attention to the linguistic features and forms of the original, but also focus on the transmission of English and Chinese cultures and the communicative intention of the original. Due to the great distinctions between English and Chinese in expression habits, culture and ways of thinking, it puts forward higher requirements for translators' quality. As a famous sinologist, Anne Birrell is not only proficient in English, but also has a good command of Chinese. Her English translation of *The Classical of Mountains and Seas* is of great value to later studies.

### 2.1 Linguistic Dimension

Transplantation of linguistic dimension is carried out in different aspects and at different levels. From the perspective of specific language, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* is not so sophisticated and complex. Indeed, it is concise and clear but implicit. One of the biggest characteristics of Chinese is homonym. If transliterated, it is hard to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding. One of Annie Birrell's translation methods is to translate every

name, so it is of importance to seek the equivalent words. For example, “女娃” in *The Classic of The Northern Mountains* and “女娲” in *The Classic of the Great Wilderness* are homonyms. If both of them are transliterated, it is easy to cause misunderstanding. Birrell’s strategy is to retain the meaning of “女” -- “female”. The meaning of “娃” is translated into “lovely”, while another “娲” is transliterated. Therefore, “女娃” and “女娲” are translated respectively into “Girl Kua” and “Girl Lovely, which not only avoids ambiguity but also is vivid. Another example:

貳負之臣曰危,危與貳負殺寃竊。

Twain Load’s officer was called Peril. Peril and Twain Load murdered Notch Flaw.

For the ancient character “貳”, Birrell translated it into “twain” instead of “two”, which preserved the language style of the source language. Birrell’s other translation strategy is to chose Anglo-Saxon words rather than Latinate words. Her main aim is to try to suggest through this linguistic strategy the existence of an older world of China before its regional and linguistic variation became eroded by the policies of standardization that come with the imperial political machine. In this linguistic analogy, Anglo-Saxon vocabulary represents the old order of pre-imperial China, while the Latinate vocabulary of some versions might be seen as representing the dominant order of the new era of the Ch'in-Han empire. *The Classical of Mountains and Seas* is one of the oldest classical works in the history of Chinese literature. This is consistent with her intention to spread Chinese culture in an original way.

## 2.2 Cultural Dimension

Transformation of cultural dimension means that the translator emphasizes on the transmission and interpretation of bilingual cultural connotation in the process of translation. Translators should focus more on the differences between the source culture and the target culture, and avoid misinterpreting of the original culture.

“As far as language itself is concerned, it is not difficult to understand its surface meaning. But we need to make great efforts to acquire its deep meaning, associative meaning and illocutionary meaning. Besides, here are also problems in context, fuzziness of language, dialect jargon and so on. If it is ancient (even in the last century) works or materials, it is more difficult to understand”.

For example in Chinese mythology, “龙” and “凤”， are very famous images, but embodies quiet dissimilar connotations in Chinese and Western countries. In order to express the differences, Birrell adopted an annotated translation strategy. That is, “relevant notes and annotations are included in the translation to make it rich in language and cultural context”<sup>[5]</sup>. She believes that annotated translation can fully convey the original message, and can present the whole picture of the original text. In fact, there are 75 pages of annotations in *The Classical of Mountains and Seas*, accounting for nearly one-third of the whole book, which explains the unique image of China.

In ancient China, “龙” was regarded as a symbol of imperial power. Until now, the “龙” is still highly revered, and it represents wealth, wisdom, success, power and luck. While western dragon is evil and the incarnation of Satan. It is also often used as a monster and a guard of treasures. In ancient Egyptian mythology, there is no typical image of the dragon, nor is there a clear story about the dragon as the leading role.

So, Birrell translate “龙” in to “Dragon”, and she added annotation: a mythical creature, denoting rain and the executioner of a great god. Although in later Chinese culture this creature became a multivalenced fabulous animal, its functions in this text are punishment, travel, and its control of rain and drought. It is also the attribute of many gods, who ride a pair of dragons through the sky. In this text the dragon is mostly aerial, but in the later tradition it was also aquatic.

The word for “凤凰” in English, comes from Greek. The immortal bird is the first legend about phoenix that Westerners are acquainted with. It symbols beautiful things, even love. However, it can not be reborn of fire. In Chinese culture, “凤凰” origins the myth and legend, which is evolved from the bird totem of the Oriental Yan family. The Chinese people combined the “凤”with the “龙”. They are admired and worshiped by the Chinese people for generations, thus creating a rich and splendid culture. In Chinese culture, “凤凰” is a symbol of peace, talent and happiness. Birrell translate “凤凰” into “Divine bird”, “Divine Wind” or “Wonderbird” and she also add annotations about Divine bird: Ornithological myths are numerous in classical Chinese mythology. Many Divine birds are named, such as Divine birds, Divine Wind or Wonderbird. Sometimes the Chinese names for these birds are translated as “phoenix”, but this gives entirely the wrong connotation. Instead of translating “凤”

into “phoenix”, Birrell tried to distinguish it with phonex in the western culture, which is worthy of affirmation.

### 2.3 Communicative Dimension

conjunction refers to the use of formal markers to link sentences, clauses and paragraphs. In order to help the target language readers better understand Chinese culture, Birrell used 2646 common conjunctions in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. However, Chinese lay more emphasis on parataxis, few or even no formal connection means between sentences, pay more attention to implicit coherence, logical order, function and meaning, and stress theocratic form. There are few words that directly show conjunctions in the text. In the process of translation, Birrell used different conjunctions to express the inner relations implied in the original text, so that the target readers can clearly understand it better. For example:

有轩辕之台,射者不敢西向射,畏轩辕之台.

Here is the Terrace of Cart Shaft the god-bowmen do not dare to shoot in the direction of its westside, because they are in such awe of the Terrace of CartShaft.

In the original text, “射者不敢西向射” and “畏轩辕之台” have no conjunction indicating causality, but according to the context, it can be inferred that the two are cause and effect. So Anne Birrell added the word “because” to express the reason, making the logic between the whole sentence more clear.

Wang Li (2002) once said that “the subject is not required by Chinese grammar, so when the subject is clearly known, it is often omitted”. Ellipsis is a prominent feature of Chinese, but it does not conform to English grammar. Therefore, when translates, the translator needs to complete the implied subject and its relationship. In order to meet the needs of communication and avoid misunderstanding of the original text, Birrell added the subjects which was omitted in the original text, for example:

渴欲得饮,饮于河渭;河渭不足,北饮大泽[12].

He became so parched that he longed to drink, and he drank from the Great River and the River Rapids. But the Great River and the River Rapids were not enough, so Boast Father went north to drink from Big Marsh[13].

As can be seen from the example, the language in the original text is concise without any subject. According to the context, we can know that this sentence describes the process of Boast Father chasing the Sun: Boast Father thirsts for water, so he comes to the Great Rive and the River Rapids; but the water is not enough, so he goes to Big Marsh to drink. In the translation, Birrell complemented the subject “he” or “Boast Father” in each sentence, and made explicit the subject of the sentence so that the reader can understand the personal reference in the translation.

## 3. Conclusion

To sum up, Birrell’s translation strategy embodies her translation thought of reproducing the original text as fully and completely as possible, reflecting her interpretation of ancient Chinese mythology as a mythologist and a mythological translator. There is no doubt that her pioneering translation of many proper names into English has given birth to *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. Although there are occasional mistranslation and omissions, there are no hidden defects after all. As Venuti pointed out, the evaluation of translation should be based on its potential or actual impact on the culture and social institutions of the target language; whether it can challenges the dominant style, genre or discourse; whether it can stimulates new thinking, research and writing[14]. This study shows that the analysis of linguistic dimension, cultural dimension and communicative dimension is helpful to understand the translator’s translation thoughts clearly and comprehensively, thus promoting the further exploration of translation rules and principles.

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