

Qu Yuan's Image Construction in English Translations of "Tianwen": A Corpus-Based Study

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Abstract: Drawing on a parallel corpus of six English translations of "Tianwen", this study examines translators' linguistic choices and the manifestation of translator subjectivity across four dimensions: textual form, interrogative structures, modality, and affective lexis. The findings reveal that translators construct distinct images of Qu Yuan through different configurations of linguistic resources, portraying him variously as a tragic sage, historical sufferer, moral poet, cultural explorer, cultural hero, and philosophical questioner. The study argues that the image of Qu Yuan in English translations of "Tianwen" is not a straightforward reproduction of the source text but a dynamic process of construction shaped by the interplay of translator subjectivity, cultural context, and translation strategies.

1. Introduction

The cross-cultural circulation of classical Chinese literature inevitably involves the reconstruction of literary images. Once a literary work enters a foreign cultural system, its meaning does not remain entirely stable; rather, new interpretive possibilities emerge through the interaction among translators, reception contexts, and expectations in the target culture. As a major representative of pre-Qin Chinese literature, *Chu Ci* has long been an important object of Western Sinological scholarship and a significant vehicle for the international dissemination of Chinese literature. From James Legge's scholarly translation, shaped by the intellectual framework of missionary Sinology, through David Hawkes's poetic reconstruction of the text as a literary classic for English-speaking readers in the mid-twentieth century, to the coexistence of diverse translations across contemporary cultural contexts, the history of *Chu Ci* translation into English has followed a dynamic trajectory. In the process, its central figure, Qu Yuan, has acquired different cultural images through different acts of translation.

Research on the English translation of *Chu Ci* has expanded considerably in recent years, focusing mainly on poetic translation strategies and processes of cultural transformation. Nevertheless, two limitations remain. First, existing studies tend to examine one or two translations through localized textual comparisons, while systematic quantitative comparison of multiple translations within a unified theoretical framework remains relatively scarce. In particular, how translators construct different images of Qu Yuan through their linguistic choices has yet to receive sufficient empirical investigation based on corpus data. Second, studies of Qu Yuan's image in

overseas contexts have generally emphasized qualitative interpretations of cultural meaning, with comparatively little attention to the specific linguistic mechanisms through which such images are constructed. Overall, existing research on *Chu Ci* translation tends to privilege individual cases over systematic comparison and translation strategies over image construction, highlighting the need for more systematic empirical research.

Among the works of *Chu Ci*, “Tianwen” is distinctive for its unique genre of cosmic questioning. The text unfolds through a sustained sequence of questions concerning the origins of the cosmos, mythological traditions, historical events, and political and ethical issues. Its significance lies not in the provision of explicit answers but in the open intellectual space generated through this continual process of questioning. Translating “Tianwen”, therefore, presents distinctive interpretive challenges. Translators must negotiate a substantial amount of culturally loaded material while also deciding how far to preserve the uncertainty and philosophical openness of the original. When they add explanatory language, intensify emotional expression, or modify evaluative orientations, they inevitably participate in the reconstruction of textual meaning.

Against this background, the present study examines six representative English translations of “Tianwen”. A parallel corpus is constructed to identify and quantify salient linguistic features across the translations, while perspectives from the sociology of translation and imagology are combined with considerations of translator identity and translatorial habitus to account for the mechanisms underlying these linguistic patterns. The study thus establishes an analytical trajectory from “linguistic choices” to “translator identity” and ultimately to “image construction”. Specifically, it addresses the following three research questions: (1) What differences in linguistic style and modes of expression can be identified across the English translations of “Tianwen”? (2) How do these linguistic differences reflect the influence of translator identity, translation purpose, and cultural positioning? (3) How do different linguistic choices contribute to the construction of Qu Yuan’s image in the English-speaking world?

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methods

2.1 A Corpus-Based Translation Studies Perspective

The present study adopts a corpus-based approach to translation studies as its primary methodological framework. Corpus methods emphasize observable and quantifiable linguistic patterns as a means of investigating translators’ decision-making processes, thereby providing an empirical basis for translation research. Since Baker (1993) introduced corpus methods into translation studies, Laviosa (2002) has further demonstrated that corpora provide not only quantitative tools for analysis but also a means of identifying, at a macro level, recurrent linguistic patterns, translation strategies, and translation norms in translated texts. [1,2] In literary translation research, corpus methods are particularly useful for revealing how different translators interpret and express the same source text through systematic comparison across multiple translations.

The English translations of “Tianwen” are particularly well suitable for corpus-based analysis. On the one hand, the six translations differ considerably in poetic form, lexical choice, interrogative structures, modal resources, and the distribution of affective lexis. These differences can be captured through quantitative measures such as normalized frequency, lexical density, and modal ratios. On the other hand, translator subjectivity is not always directly articulated in translators’ prefaces or critical statements; it may instead be embedded in the processes of meaning construction manifested through specific linguistic choices. Accordingly, this study constructs a parallel corpus comprising six English translations of “Tianwen” and examines textual form, interrogative structures, modality, affective lexis, and subjective voice. These linguistic indicators not only reveal the stylistic features and translation strategies across the six versions but also provide empirical

evidence for subsequent analysis of translator subjectivity and the cross-cultural construction of Qu Yuan's image.

2.2 A Sociological Perspective on Translation

Describing differences among translations solely at the linguistic level is insufficient to explain why translators make different choices. The present study therefore adopts a sociological perspective on translation, viewing translators as agents operating within specific cultural fields. Applying Bourdieu's (1990) theory of social practice to translation studies suggests that translators' linguistic choices are closely related to their educational backgrounds, scholarly identities, cultural capital, and conceptions of their target readers.[3] Translators are not neutral transmitters of information; rather, they participate in the construction of textual meaning within particular cultural fields. Simeoni (1998) further argues that translators' practices are shaped by publishing institutions, literary norms, and broader social expectations. [4] Their choices thus reflect both individual dispositions and the normative constraints of their sociocultural environments. Differences among the English translations of "Tianwen" are consequently not merely linguistic phenomena but outcomes of the interaction among translator identity, translation purpose, and cultural positioning.

Drawing on the sociology of translation, this study seeks to explain why different translations exhibit different linguistic patterns and, further, how these patterns contribute to the cross-cultural circulation and reconstruction of Qu Yuan's image.

2.3 An Imagological Perspective

Literary images are not fixed entities permanently embedded in texts; rather, they are dynamic structures of meaning that are continually produced and transformed through cross-cultural circulation. Pageaux (1994) argues that a literary image is fundamentally a way in which one cultural system understands and represents another through literary texts. [5] When a literary work enters a new cultural context, therefore, its representation of a literary figure may acquire new meanings under the influence of translators' choices and values within the target culture. Beller and Leerssen (2007) further demonstrate that the formation of literary images is shaped by ideology, cultural expectations, and mechanisms of reception during the process of cultural circulation.[6]

From this perspective, translators do not merely transfer linguistic signs; they also participate in the selection and reconstruction of literary images through translation. Qu Yuan in "Tianwen" is not constructed through a coherent narrative but emerges through continuous questioning, historical inquiry, and emotional expression, leaving considerable room for interpretation. Through choices involving interrogative structures, modal resources, and affective lexis, different translators may foreground different dimensions of Qu Yuan's identity, portraying him, for example, as a historical sufferer, moral hero, or intellectual explorer. This study therefore conceptualizes the image of Qu Yuan as a dynamic cultural construct generated through translation and examines how the six translations participate in its cross-cultural construction through different configurations of linguistic resources.

2.4 Corpus and Analytical Methods

Following three principles—historical representativeness, diversity of translator identities, and textual completeness—this study selects six translations of "Tianwen" for inclusion in a self-constructed parallel corpus of English translations of *Chu Ci*: those by David Hawkes, Stephen Lee Field, Xu Yuanchong, Victor H. Mair, Zhuo Zhenying, and Gopal Sukhu. (see Table 1) First, these translations possess substantial scholarly influence or dissemination value and represent different

stages in the development of English translations of “Tianwen”. Second, the six translators differ in cultural identity and translational backgrounds, including Sinological scholars, poet-translators, and translators oriented toward the international dissemination of Chinese literature. They therefore provide a differentiated sample of translational practices. Finally, all six are complete translations of “Tianwen” and are consequently suitable for parallel-corpus comparison.

Table 1 Basic information on the six English translations of “Tianwen”

Translator	Translator Profile	Translation (Source, Publication Year)
David Hawkes (1923–2009)	British Sinologist; specialist in <i>Chu Ci</i> and <i>Dream of the Red Chamber</i>	“Heavenly Questions” (<i>The Songs of the South: An Ancient Chinese Anthology of Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets</i> , 1985)
Stephen Lee Field (1951–)	American Sinologist and poet; specialist in ancient Chinese astronomy, mythology, and <i>The Yijing</i>	<i>Tian Wen: A Chinese Book of Origins</i> (1986)
Xu Yuanchong (1921–2021)	Chinese translator and poet; proponent of the “Three Beauties” Theory	“Asking Heaven” (<i>Poetry of the South</i> , 1994)
Victor H. Mair (1943–2026)	American Sinologist; specialist in Dunhuang studies, anthropology, and cultural history	“Heavenly Questions” (<i>The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature</i> , 2000)
Zhuo Zhenying (1945–)	Chinese translator; specialist in classical-text translation and the international dissemination of Chinese literature	“Inquiries into the Universe” (<i>The Verse of Chu</i> , 2006)
Gopal Sukhu (1949–2024)	American Sinologist; specialist in <i>Chu Ci</i> ; classical Chinese poetry, Asian literature, and religious culture	“Ask the Sky” (<i>The Songs of Chu: An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poetry by Qu Yuan and Others</i> , 2017)

The parallel corpus contains approximately 14,708 tokens. Each translation is aligned primarily at the stanza level, with line-level alignment serving as a supplementary layer to accommodate differences in poetic lineation across versions. After cleaning, the corpus was uniformly converted to UTF-8 text and assigned a structured annotation scheme. At the basic level, CLAWS7 was used for part-of-speech tagging, followed by manual correction. At the translation level, culturally loaded terms were manually annotated. At the analytical level, modal verbs were classified as epistemic or deontic, and affective lexical items were categorized into relevant semantic groups.

The analysis combines quantitative and qualitative methods and employs AntConc and WordSmith for corpus retrieval and statistical analysis. First, overall textual features are examined through measures including token count, type count, line count, average sentence/line length (ASL), lexical density, and standardized type-token ratio (STTR). Second, the frequency of interrogative words and structures is analyzed to examine how translators reproduce the central questioning pattern of “Tianwen”. Third, modal verbs are classified and counted to compare the degrees of epistemic judgment and evaluative intervention across the translations. Finally, the frequencies of lament-related and heroic/moral lexical groups are compared to identify differences in affective

orientations, while first-person pronouns and related grammatical structures are examined to investigate the presentation of the poet's subjective voice.

3. Quantitative Analysis of Linguistic Features in the Six Translations

Corpus-based translation research assumes that linguistic choices in translated texts are not random but exhibit systematic patterns shaped by translators' cognitive orientations, translation purposes, and target-culture norms. Examining the distribution of linguistic resources across different translations can therefore reveal formal differences among versions and provide empirical evidence for analyzing translator subjectivity and the mechanisms through which literary images are constructed.

3.1 Textual Form and Linguistic Complexity

The study first calculates the basic textual features of the six translations, including total token count, type count, line count, ASL, lexical density, and STTR, to examine differences in translators' treatment of the poetic form and linguistic organization of "Tianwen" (Table 2).

Table 2 Textual size and linguistic complexity of the six English translations of "Tianwen"

Translation	Tokens	Types	Lines	ASL (words/line)	Lexical density	STTR
Hawkes (1985)	2,638	844	205	12.87	50.23%	41
Field (1986)	2,255	887	374	6.03	39.33%	45.9
Xu (1994)	2,032	775	380	5.35	38.14%	45.8
Mair (2000)	2,587	975	377	6.86	47.74%	46.9
Zhuo (2006)	2,540	997	373	6.81	39.30%	47.6
Sukhu (2017)	2,656	1,156	376	7.06	49.70%	45.2

In terms of overall textual size, Sukhu's translation contains the largest number of tokens (2,656), followed by Hawkes's (2,638), whereas Xu's contains the fewest (2,032). This variation suggests that translators differ in the extent to which they unpack information implicit in the source poem. Versions with higher token counts tend to supplement implicit meanings through explanatory language, whereas versions with lower token counts place greater emphasis on concision and preservation of poetic form.

The original "Tianwen" generally consists of four to five Chinese characters per line, with each line typically forming one interrogative unit and generating an urgent, continuous rhythm of questioning through a pattern of "four-character questions". Hawkes's translation has the longest ASL (12.87), while Xu's has the shortest (5.35). Hawkes tends to expand the original brief questions into complete English syntactic units and to incorporate additional information into the sentence. A short Chinese clause is frequently rendered as a complex structure containing a main clause, subordinate clauses, modifiers, and supplementary explanations, producing long lines that approximate the narrative organization of English blank verse. For example, the line "yin yang san he, he ben he hua" ("The yin and yang forces intermingle to give birth to all things; what is the origin and what is the evolution?") is rendered by Hawkes as "How did Yin and Yang come together, and how could they originate and transform all things that are by their commingling?" (Hawkes, 1985). This explanatory approach sacrifices some of the abruptness of the original questioning in favor of discursive logical fluency, reflecting a Sinological habitus that prioritizes the accurate transmission of cultural and historical knowledge. Other translations more frequently employ short lines beginning with "Why", "How", or "Where", giving their English versions the characteristics of modern free verse. In Xu's translation, the passage concerning yin and yang is divided into two lines—"How did light and shade strange / Originate and change?" (Xu, 1994)—thereby retaining the

discontinuity and conceptual leaps of the original while eliminating redundant function words. This reflects the Xu's emphasis on rhythmic reproduction and the aesthetic tendency of modern free verse toward defamiliarization. ASL therefore reflects not only two contrasting approaches to translation poetics—narrative exposition and lyrical interrogation—but also translators' different responses to the question of whether “Tianwen” should be approached primarily as “a cultural text that requires explanation” or “a poem that calls for recitation”.

Lexical density and STTR further reveal differences in the organization of the translations. Hawkes's (50.23%) and Sukhu's (49.70%) versions have the highest lexical density, making relatively extensive use of noun phrases, compressed modifying structures, and few function words and thereby producing a strongly documentary and formal register. Xu's translation has the lowest lexical density (38.14%), with a greater use of conjunctions, modal expressions, and explanatory elements. This facilitates the reproduction of what Xu's translation theory terms “beauty in sound” and “beauty in meaning” while enhancing fluency for English readers. STTR provides an indication of lexical variation. Zhuo's translation has the highest STTR (47.6%), followed by Mair's (46.9%), while Hawkes's has the lowest (41%). This suggests that Zhuo and Mair employ a more varied vocabulary, using different lexical forms to express similar concepts and thereby reducing repetition. In Hawkes's version, by contrast, certain key terms recur more frequently, preserving the repetitive structure of the source text and reinforcing its ritual quality and sustained pattern of questioning.

Overall, the six translations exhibit marked differences in textual form. Sukhu and Hawkes tend to expand information more extensively; Xu and Field place greater emphasis on poetic concision; and Zhuo and Mair display greater lexical diversity.

3.2 Interrogative Structures and the Questioning Pattern

The central artistic feature of “Tianwen” is its sustained pattern of questioning. The text unfolds through a sequence of questions, with meaning developing not through event-based narration but through the continual posing of questions. Translators' treatment of interrogative structures therefore directly affects how English readers perceive Qu Yuan's subjective voice. This study counts interrogative words in the six translations and calculates their normalized frequencies per 1,000 words, while also examining the frequencies of the three most common interrogatives — “How”, “Why”, and “What”(Table 3).

Table 3 Interrogative structures in the six English translations of “Tianwen” (per 1,000 words)

Translation	Normalized Frequency of Interrogatives	How	Why	What
Hawkes (1985)	67.43	23.88	16.30	14.03
Field (1986)	74.67	18.63	16.41	22.17
Xu (1994)	78.60	36.42	16.24	8.86
Mair (2000)	69.23	13.53	11.21	11.98
Zhuo (2006)	62.03	15.77	14.19	13.80
Sukhu (2017)	56.77	20.33	18.45	14.68

The data show that all six translations retain the interrogative character of “Tianwen” to a considerable extent, although the means of realizing it differ. Xu's translation has the highest normalized frequency of interrogative words (78.60), followed by Field's (74.67), while Sukhu's has the lowest (56.77).

A relatively high frequency of interrogative words indicates a tendency to preserve the source text's character as a poem of questioning, whereas a lower frequency may suggest that questions have been transformed into explanatory or narrative formulations, thereby reducing interrogative density and increasing exposition. Further examination of interrogative types reveals differences in

how translators represent the nature of the questions. “How” is used mainly to inquire into mechanisms of cosmic formation, processes underlying mythological events, and historical change; “what” occurs more often in ontological questions; and “why” foregrounds causal inquiry. The distribution of different interrogative forms therefore provides clues to translators’ interpretations of the intellectual character of “Tianwen”.

For example, the line “tian ji yan jia” (“Where is the top of the celestial axis placed?”) is rendered by Hawkes as “Where was the sky’s pole fixed?”[7] Zhuo and Sukhu use “what” to formulate the inquiry, “Th’ rest for Cosmos what can provide?”[8] and “In what hub is the Pole inserted?” [9] respectively. Field, Xu, and Mair use “how”: “How is the Axis raised?”[10], “How was the Pole raised high?”[11], and “How was the Heavenly Pole added to them?”[12] respectively. In “fu he yi bian hua” (“How could such a strange event have come about?”), Zhuo uses a yes/no interrogative, whereas Sukhu uses “what”; the other translations use “how”, foregrounding process-oriented questioning. The relative frequencies of “how”, “why”, and “what” in Hawkes’s, Xu’s, Zhuo’s, and Sukhu’s translations suggest that these translators tend to construe “Tianwen” primarily as an inquiry into the mechanisms of cosmic operation rather than as purely philosophical speculation. Field’s relatively higher frequency of “what”, by contrast, places greater emphasis on cosmological entities, knowledge, and historical facts.

Overall, all six translators recognize questioning as the core formal feature of “Tianwen”, but they employ different strategies to reproduce it. Some place greater emphasis on the frequency and formal realization of questions, whereas others adjust interrogative formulations to foreground the intellectual significance underlying those them. Such differences, in turn, affect the positioning of Qu Yuan as a subjective agent in the translated texts.

3.3 The Modal System and the Degree of Translator Intervention

The modal system constitutes an important linguistic resource for examining translator intervention. In systemic functional linguistics, modality expresses a speaker’s judgment concerning the truth, possibility, or necessity of a proposition.[13] In translation, epistemic modality can reflect a translator’s interpretation of propositional meaning, whereas deontic modality more often encodes evaluation, norms, and value judgments.

This study identifies epistemic modal verbs (can, could, may, might, would, etc.) and deontic modal verbs (should, ought, must, shall, have to, etc.) in the six translations and calculates their frequencies and ratio to examine differences in translator intervention (Table 4).

Table 4 Modal resources in the six English translations of “Tianwen” (per 1,000 words)

Translation	Epistemic Modality	Deontic Modality	Epistemic/Deontic Ratio
Hawkes (1985)	5.69	1.14	4.99
Field (1986)	7.10	1.33	5.34
Xu (1994)	19.69	5.41	3.08
Mair (2000)	9.66	0.39	24.77
Zhuo (2006)	16.93	2.76	6.13
Sukhu (2017)	8.66	0.75	11.55

The six translations differ markedly in their use of epistemic modality. Xu’s translation has the highest frequency (19.69), followed by Zhuo’s (16.93). The relatively high frequency of epistemic modality suggests a greater tendency to interpret source-text meanings through expressions of possibility, probability, and inference. In terms of deontic modality, Xu’s translation again has the highest (5.41), whereas Mair’s has the lowest (0.39). A higher frequency of deontic modality suggests that the translator is doing more than explicating the text and is also introducing evaluative

or normative positioning.

The epistemic/deontic ratio further distinguishes the translations. Mair's and Sukhu's translations have relatively high ratios, indicating a stronger reliance on epistemic and explanatory formulations relative to evaluative or normative ones. Xu's ratio is the lowest, suggesting a comparatively stronger degree of evaluative intervention. The modal system therefore reveals a distinction between explanation and evaluation: some translations primarily facilitate readers' understanding of "Tianwen", while others more actively guide readers toward particular interpretations.

3.4 Affective Lexis and Emotional Positioning

Literary images are shaped not only through events and narrative structures but also through the distribution of affective resources. Although "Tianwen" is primarily organized around a sustained sequence of questions, it contains substantial emotional meanings associated with disaster, political adversity, loyalty, and personal values. Translators' lexical choices in these semantic domains may therefore influence how English readers perceive Qu Yuan's identity. This study divides affective lexis into two categories — lament-related and heroic/moral lexical items — and compares their frequencies and ratios to identify the emotional positioning of different translations (Table 5).

Table 5 Affective lexical items in the six English translations of "Tianwen" (per 1,000 words)

Translation	Lament-related Lexical Items	Heroic/moral Lexical Items	Lament/heroic Ratio
Hawkes (1985)	9.10	7.96	1.14
Field (1986)	3.10	4.43	0.70
Xu (1994)	3.94	4.92	0.80
Mair (2000)	8.89	3.87	2.30
Zhuo (2006)	2.37	4.34	0.55
Sukhu (2017)	4.52	4.52	1.00

The data show substantially higher frequencies of lament-related lexical items in Hawkes's (9.10) and Mair's (8.89) translations, whereas Zhuo's has the lowest frequency (2.37). This indicates significant differences in the extent to which the translations foreground the dimension of suffering in "Tianwen". For heroic/moral lexical items, Hawkes's translation has the highest frequency (7.96), followed by Xu's (4.92). In terms of the lament/heroic ratio, Mair's reaches 2.30, clearly foregrounding the tragic dimension, whereas Zhuo's is the lowest at 0.55, placing comparatively greater emphasis on heroism.

Affective lexis thus contributes to differences in the image positioning of Qu Yuan's image across translations. Lament-related vocabulary intensifies his experience of suffering and tragedy, whereas heroic/moral vocabulary reinforces his spiritual and moral significance. By adjusting the balance between these lexical fields, translators construct different representations of Qu Yuan for English-speaking readers.

3.5 Subjective Voice and the Presentation of the Poet's Identity

Beyond interrogative structures and affective resources, first-person expression provides another important indicator of how the poet is presented as a subjective agent. Although "Tianwen" is primarily formulated as series of objective questioning, its sustained inquiries embody the poet's active exploration of the cosmos, history, and political order. Translators' treatment of first-person expressions therefore affects the extent to which Qu Yuan is presented as an explicitly embodied poetic subject. This study identifies first-person active and passive constructions in the six translations (Table 6).

Table 6 Subjective voice in the six English translations of “Tianwen”

Translation	First-person Active Voice	First-person Passive Voice	Active/Passive Ratio
Hawkes (1985)	0	0	N/A
Field (1986)	0	0	N/A
Xu (1994)	2	0	N/A
Mair (2000)	0	0	N/A
Zhuo (2006)	3	0	N/A
Sukhu (2017)	2	0	N/A

None of the six translations contains a first-person passive structure. Except for Xu, Zhuo, and Sukhu, which retain a small number of first-person active structures, the other translations largely eliminate explicit first-person subjective voice. First-person active structures generally strengthen the poet’s agency, presenting Qu Yuan as an active subject who explores and questions the world; first-person passive structures, by contrast, would be more likely to foreground personal experience and the influence of external forces or fate. The relative absence of explicit first-person voice across the translations may therefore indicate a tendency toward desubjectivization, particularly in versions that foreground the informational or documentary dimensions of the text. In such translations, the text may come to appear less as the voice of a questioning poet and more as an impersonal sequence of questions about the cosmos, history, and human order.

4. Translator Subjectivity and the Construction of Qu Yuan’s Image in English Translations of “Tianwen”

The linguistic analysis of the six translations shows significant differences in textual form, interrogative structures, modal resources, and the distribution of affective lexis. Linguistic form alone, however, cannot fully explain these differences. Translation is not an isolated act of linguistic transfer but a form of meaning production embedded in a particular cultural field.

4.1 Translator Identity, Translatorial Habitus, and Mechanisms of Linguistic Choice

Translator subjectivity is not simply an expression of individual will; rather, it reflects cognitive orientations and translatorial habitus formed within a particular sociocultural environments. From the perspective of Bourdieu’s sociology of translation, translators operate within cultural fields, and their academic backgrounds, professional identities, cultural capital, and positioning of target readers all shape their translational practices. The differences among the six translations of “Tianwen” can therefore be understood, at a fundamental level, as reflecting different ways in which different types of translators construct and mediate the meaning of classical Chinese literature.

In terms of translator type, the six translators can broadly be divided into three groups: Sinological scholars, poet-translators, and dissemination-oriented translators. These translator types perform different cultural functions, and their translation strategies consequently exhibit distinct tendencies.

Hawkes and Mair are representative of the Sinological tradition. Both possess substantial research backgrounds in Chinese literature, and their translations seek not only to recreate the literary qualities of the source text but also to explain and disseminate classical Chinese literature within the English-speaking cultural system. Their translations therefore show a strong orientation toward cultural interpretation. Their interpretive approaches, however, differ because of their distinct scholarly interests and cultural perspectives.

Hawkes was influenced by Western classical literary traditions, and his translational practice

often sought to reposition Chinese literature within a broader system of world literature. In translating “Tianwen”, he does not treat the poem merely as a collection of mythological questions but foregrounds its dimensions of historical fate, political conflict, and personal experience. His translation has relatively high frequencies of both lament-related vocabulary (9.10) and heroic/moral vocabulary (7.96), suggesting that his lexical choices do not foreground tragedy alone but establish a connection between suffering and sublimity. This tendency resonates with the Western tragic-hero paradigm, in which spiritual value is manifested through confrontation with adversity.

Mair likewise demonstrates the cultural-interpretive orientation characteristic of Sinological translation, but his focus is more strongly directed toward historical experience and cultural marginality. His translation contains a lament-related lexical frequency of 8.89, compared with 3.87 for heroic/moral vocabulary, producing the highest lament/heroic ratio among the six versions (2.30). This suggests that Mair does not primarily seek to elevate Qu Yuan through heroicizing language but instead foregrounds his political adversity and psychological suffering as a historical individual. In this translation, “Tianwen” emerges not only as an ancient intellectual text but also a record of a historical subject confronting the crises of his age.

Unlike the Sinological translators, the poet-translators are more concerned with the literary and aesthetic dimensions of the source text. Xu and Field both emphasize poetic expression, but they conceptualize the function of poetic translation differently.

Xu places particular emphasis on artistic recreation in poetry translation, guided by his principle of the unity of “beauty in sound, beauty in meaning, and beauty in form”. In translating “Tianwen”, he does not simply seek to preserve interrogative structure of the source text but tends to intensify its poetic appeal through linguistic adaptation. His translation has markedly higher frequencies of both epistemic and deontic modality than the other versions, indicating a relatively high degree of interpretive and evaluative intervention. Moreover, the frequency of heroic/moral lexical frequency exceeds that of lament-related lexis, suggesting a stronger emphasis on Qu Yuan’s spiritual and moral qualities. Qu Yuan therefore appears in Xu’s translation primarily as a lyrical poet endowed with an idealized personality and moral force.

Field’s translation, by contrast, adopts a relatively restrained poetic treatment. Although he is likewise a poet-translator, he places greater emphasis on the intellectual openness of “Tianwen”. His relatively high use of epistemic modality, combined with comparatively limited use of deontic modality, suggests an attempt to facilitate readers’ understanding while avoiding excessive determination of the text’s meaning. This approach leaves Qu Yuan as a subjective agent continually exploring an unknown world rather than fixing him as a particular moral or cultural symbol.

Zhuo and Sukhu represent two distinct dissemination-oriented approaches. Zhuo places greater emphasis on reception among English-speaking readers and consequently displays a clearly affirmative tendency in his lexical choice. His lament-related lexical frequency is the lowest (2.37), whereas his heroic/moral lexical frequency reaches 4.34, indicating a tendency to attenuate the tragic dimension and strengthen the positive cultural significance of Qu Yuan as a cultural symbol. Sukhu, by contrast, is more closely aligned with contemporary approaches to Sinological dissemination. His translation introduces relatively limited value judgment and preserves the openness of the source text, allowing readers greater latitude to interpret the intellectual significance of “Tianwen” for themselves.

Thus, translator identity does not directly determine the image constructed in translation. Rather, it shapes the selection and configuration of linguistic resources through translatorial habitus, which in turn produces different textual styles and orientations of meaning.

4.2 Linguistic-Resource Configuration and the Differentiated Construction of Qu Yuan's Image

The concrete manifestation of translator subjectivity ultimately lies in the selection and configuration of linguistic resources. Interrogative structures, modality, and affective lexis are not isolated linguistic phenomena but important mechanisms through which Qu Yuan's image is constructed in translation.

First, interrogative structures shape the fundamental character of Qu Yuan's subjective voice. The defining formal feature of "Tianwen" is its sustained questioning, through which Qu Yuan engages with the world and seeks to understand it. Translators' treatment of interrogative forms therefore affects the positioning of Qu Yuan as a subject in the translated text. Versions that retain interrogative structures to a greater extent are more likely to present him as an intellectual explorer. Sukhu's translation, for example, has a relatively low normalized frequency of interrogative words, yet its overall formulation avoids excessive explanatory intervention and preserves the openness of the questions. This weakens the prominence of translator's voice and allows Qu Yuan to emerge more clearly as an active subject confronting an unknown world through questioning. By contrast, translations that modify interrogative structures through explanatory language may improve accessibility for English-speaking readers but also increase the degree of translator intervention in the construction of meaning.

Second, modality reflects how translators negotiate uncertainty and interpretive openness in the source text. Epistemic modality primarily expresses possibility and inference, whereas deontic modality more strongly encodes evaluation and normative positioning. Extensive use of epistemic modality generally indicates a greater degree of interpretive mediation, while an increase in deontic modality suggests a stronger imposition of evaluative judgments on the text. Mair's translation combines a relatively high frequency of epistemic modality with the lowest frequency of deontic modality, indicating that it primarily performs a cultural-explanatory rather than a value-evaluative function. Qu Yuan consequently emerges more as a historical observer and cultural thinker. Xu's translation, by contrast, contains a relatively high frequency of deontic modality. It therefore not only interprets Qu Yuan but also evaluates him, producing a more explicitly moralized representation.

Third, affective lexis directly contributes to the emotional positioning of Qu Yuan. The ratio between lament-related and heroic/moral lexical items provides an indication of how translators negotiate the tragic and sublime dimensions of his image. Mair's lament/heroic ratio reaches 2.30, showing that suffering is strongly foregrounded in his translation; Qu Yuan consequently emerges first and foremost as a historical sufferer. Zhuo's ratio is the lowest, at 0.55, indicating a stronger tendency to reinforce the heroic dimension and thereby present Qu Yuan as a cultural hero with symbolic significance. Sukhu's ratio is relatively balanced at 1, suggesting a more even treatment of suffering and heroism and an attempt to retain both Qu Yuan's tragic experience and spiritual sublimity.

These findings demonstrate that linguistic resources are not merely means of expressing content; they also function as mechanisms through which translators reorganize the meanings associated with literary figures. Different configurations of linguistic resources ultimately generate different images of Qu Yuan.

4.3 A Typology of Qu Yuan's Images across the Six Translations and Its Cultural Significance

Taken together, the linguistic data and analysis of translator identities indicate that the six English translations of "Tianwen" collectively constitute a diversified spectrum of Qu Yuan's images in the English-speaking world. These images do not simply replace one another; rather, they

reveal different dimensions of Qu Yuan's significance in different translational and cultural contexts.

Hawkes constructs an image of the "tragic sage". In this representation, Qu Yuan is both a sufferer of historical tragedy and a thinker endowed with spiritual strength. By reinforcing both lament-related and heroic dimensions, Hawkes's translation brings Qu Yuan into closer proximity with the tragic-hero paradigm of Western classical literature, creating a potential resonance with the tragic tradition within twentieth-century British classical scholarship.

Field constructs the image of a "cultural explorer". Although the heroic dimension is somewhat more prominent in his translation, the emphasis is not primarily moral. Expressions such as mighty and glorious retain an elevated but relatively open characterization, presenting Qu Yuan as a poet whose defining quality lies in his continual questioning of the cosmos and history rather than simply in his status as a sufferer or hero.

Xu constructs an image of the "moral poet". By strengthening evaluative language and aesthetic expression, he presents Qu Yuan as a literary figure endowed with an idealistic spirit and moral force rather than merely as a political hero.

Mair constructs an image of the "historical sufferer". His translation reduces heroicizing expressions while foregrounding suffering, loss, and historical pressure, presenting Qu Yuan as an intellectual reflecting on the crises of his age. This treatment may be situated within broader twentieth-century Western scholarly interests in historical experience, marginality, and representations of suffering.

Zhuo constructs an image of the "cultural hero". By attenuating the tragic dimension and strengthening positive values, he makes Qu Yuan more compatible with the expectations often associated with canonical cultural figures in cross-cultural dissemination: positive value, moral significance, and educational function.

Sukhu constructs an image of the "philosophical questioner". His translation preserves the problem-oriented character of "Tianwen" while avoiding a singular characterization and strong affective bias. Qu Yuan consequently emerges as an intellectual subject continually exploring the cosmos, history, and human existence. This approach is broadly compatible with contemporary Sinological emphases on polysemy, openness, and intellectual complexity.

Thus, no single, fixed cultural image of Qu Yuan emerges from the English translations of "Tianwen". Instead, a diversified network of meanings develops through translators' practices across different periods and cultural contexts. Translation does not merely disseminate pre-existing images, it also continually participates in their reconstruction and transformation. Through their selection and configuration of linguistic resources, translators open up new interpretive possibilities for Qu Yuan within the English-speaking cultural environment.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on a corpus of six English translations of "Tianwen", this study integrates perspectives from corpus-based translation studies, the sociology of translation, and imagology to examine systematically the linguistic differences among across the translations and the mechanisms through which Qu Yuan's image is constructed. The findings demonstrate that variation across the six versions extends beyond lexical choice and poetic form, reflecting the deeper influence of translator identity, translation purpose, and cultural positioning on the production and mediation of textual meaning.

At the linguistic level, the six translations differ substantially in textual form, lexical density, interrogative structures, modal resources, and the distribution of affective lexis. The Hawkes's and Mair's translations both foreground the historical and tragic dimensions of "Tianwen", but they do

so in different ways. Hawkes creates a sense of tragic sublimity through the interplay of heroic and lament-related expressions, whereas Mair emphasizes on suffering, historical adversity, and psychological experience. Xu and Field both display characteristics associated with poet-translators, yet their approaches differ markedly. Xu strengthens evaluative and personal dimensions, while Field places greater emphasis on intellectual openness of the source text. Zhuo highlights the function of cultural dissemination and enhances the positive significance of Qu Yuan as a canonical figure through heroicizing language, whereas Sukhu maintains greater interpretive openness through relatively limited evaluative intervention.

From the perspective of translator subjectivity, these linguistic differences reflect different translatorial habitus and forms of cultural positioning. Sinological translators tend to approach “Tianwen” through historical and cultural interpretation; poet-translators focus more on aesthetic and spiritual expression; and dissemination-oriented translators place greater emphasis on target-reader reception and the cultural function of translation. Translator identity does not directly determine the outcome of translation. Rather, it influences the production of textual meaning through concrete choices concerning linguistic resources, poetic form, and modes of interpretation.

From the perspective of image construction, the six translations collectively constitute a diversified spectrum of Qu Yuan’s images in the English-speaking world. Hawkes constructs the tragic sage, Field the cultural explorer, Xu the moral poet, Mair the historical sufferer, Zhuo the cultural hero, and Sukhu the philosophical questioner. These images are not mutually exclusive or definitive. Rather, they foreground different dimensions of Qu Yuan’s cultural significance and demonstrate the plurality of meanings that can emerge through cross-cultural translation.

The study therefore argues that the translation of “Tianwen” is not merely a process of linguistic transfer but also a process of cross-cultural image construction. Through choices involving lexical, syntactic, modal, and affective resources, translators reshape the ways in which an ancient Chinese poet is perceived and interpreted in a different cultural environment. Corpus-based methods can consequently reveal not only recurrent linguistic patterns in translated texts but also provide an empirical means of investigating how translator subjectivity and cultural positioning contribute to the reconstruction of literary images in the international dissemination of Chinese literature.

Note

The annotations to “Tianwen” cited in the original Chinese manuscript are based on Sun Jiashun et al., *Chuci: Translation, Annotation, and Commentary* (Chongwen Publishing House, 2018), pp. 64 and 67.

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