

A Study on the Translation of Culture-Specific Items in Character Depiction in the English Version of Pu Songling's *Liaozhai Zhiyi*

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Abstract

The characterization through literary translation is crucial to the international dissemination and reception of literary works. Nevertheless, the research on the translation of character depiction in *Liaozhai Zhiyi* greatly falls behind other translation themes of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*. This study is intended to explore the translation of culture-specific items (CSIs) in character depiction in *Liaozhai Zhiyi* from Chinese to English, within the framework of character's three dimensions: physiological, sociological and psychological. This study reveals the shifts in the characterization by investigating translator's strategies, and the significant integration of CSIs and character depiction. The findings demonstrate that the translator's choice of strategies influences the rendering of character depiction. It is found that the character depiction in the original text of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* is more mysterious, whereas in the translated text, it seems to possess a stronger sense of intimacy. This study suggests that translators thoroughly consider the culture-specific elements in character depiction, and take into account the combination of multi-strategies. It is hoped that this study contributes to the research field of character depiction translation in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, and sheds light on the translation of ancient Chinese classics.

Keywords: Literary translation, character depiction, culture-specific items, *Liaozhai Zhiyi*

1. Introduction

Liaozhai Zhiyi 聊斋志异 is a collection of nearly five hundred strange tales created by Chinese novelist Pu Songling 蒲松龄 (1640-1715) in the Qing Dynasty of ancient China. "Liaozhai", which signifies the "Studio of Leisure" or "Studio of Conversation", is the scholarly sobriquet of Pu Songling (Zeitlin, 1993, p. 1). "Liaozhai Zhiyi" means strange stories recorded in the Studio of Liaozhai. The strange stories belong to a literary genre of ancient China that employs classical Chinese language to create and narrate events, characterized by its narrativity, hearsay, fictionality, and vividness, concentrated on ghosts, immortals, spirits, strange creatures and phenomenon (Jin, 2016, p. 11). They can be regarded as fiction with developed plots and strengthened characterization (Minford, 2006, p. xiii). The heterogeneous animals and spirits in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, which are depicted by Pu Songling in a fascinating way, have animality and anthropomorphic features, including animals appearing in their original form, animals that transform into humans, and humans who transform into animals.

There remains still a very broad research space on the English translation of Chinese classics (Fan, 2008, p. 61). The English translation of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* has a history of more than 170 years, and has a wide range of overseas dissemination and considerable influence (Xie & Huang, 2022, p.7). Even though the English translated versions of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* are rich and diverse, the translation studies on *Liaozhai Zhiyi* both in Eastern and Western academia are relatively late and insufficient (Jin, 2021, p. 828).

In particular, characterization is seen as the most important part of literary translation (Chen, 2012, p. 46). Any element in the text can construct characterization, and translation may reconstruct characterization (Lee, 2018, p. 284). As one of the ancient classics, *Liaozhai Zhiyi* is written in classical Chinese language, containing rich of specific terms and culturally loaded words (Li & Jiang, 2017, p. 133). The differences between Chinese and Western cultures in fictional characters' languages can be regarded as a great challenge to translators (Cao, Mansor, & Ujum, 2023, p. 364).

Previous studies on the English translation of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* also touched upon the translation of character depiction (e.g., Chen, 2012; Chen, 2014; Liang, 2020; Zhou & Xu, 2024). However, they did not consider the culture-specific elements that influence how translators reconstruct character portraits in their translations. Nevertheless, when rendering original character depiction, translators' choice of strategies is often influenced by difference between original culture and target culture. The culture-specific elements should not be neglected in the translation of characterization. It is thus worth further exploring the translation of culture-specific items (CSIs) in character depiction in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Fictional Character and Characterization

In the past few decades, numerous discussions have been conducted around the fictional character and characterization. Gill (1995, p. 127) defined that characterization is the method to create a character, whereas a character is the product in a literary work. Eder (2010, p. 17) argued that characters include not only human beings, but also all kinds of creatures and even shapes. Most of researchers divided fictional characters into two types, flat (simple) characters defined by only one or a few traits, and round (complex) characters portrayed in greater depth and in more detail, showing more lifelikeness (Kenney, 1966, p. 28-29; Kennedy & Gioia, 2010, p. 77).

There is a scarcity of research on the translation of characters in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*. Chen (2012) applied the theoretical perspective of mythology to analyze three important aspects in the translation of mythical characters in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, including the connotation of the basic concepts related to mythical characters, the strategy of gloss related to cultural details and backgrounds of mythical characters, and the translation of the female fox images. As the depiction of mythical characters varies between Chinese and Western folktales, translators should take into account the etymological connotations and adopt the strategy of gloss in translating mythical characters (Chen, 2012).

Cruveillé (2013) focused on the erotic language of fox in *Liaozhai Zhiyi* and discussed the narrative, recurring elements, and descriptions of characters. Her study highlighted that the symbols, colors, natural elements, animal attributes, poetry, and metaphors in fox stories blend three aspects of fox spirit: animal, lover, and demon.

Grounded in feminist translation theory, Chen (2014) proposed and examined three translation strategies for the images of female spirit in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*. The psychology of female characters is shaped by contemporary values and influenced by social environment, manifesting in character language (Chen, 2014). It is important to translate and portray the subtle psychological shifts, various scenes and poetic descriptions related to female characters (Chen, 2014).

Within the theoretical framework of imagology and sociology, Liang's (2020) study focused on the images of Chinese women in the English translations of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*. Liang (2020) showed that the socio-cultural factors in translators' social contextualization influences their behavior in the translation process and plays an important role in the characterization.

Zhou and Xu (2024) discussed the translator's narrative voice in characterization of Yingning the laughing fox girl from *Liaozhai Zhiyi*. Their study revealed that the translator's insertion of additional text in terms of characterization highlights the female protagonist's emotionality, constructed her a more outlandish fox spirit, accentuated the strangeness and exoticism in the translated text.

2.2 Three-Dimensional Character

Egri (1960) proposed the bone structure of the three-dimensional character and argued that every character has three dimensions. The first dimension refers to the physiological features of a character, such as appearance, age, height and weight, posture. Physiology serves as a basis and influences character's mental development.

The second dimension is the sociological, such as the social background, growth environment, education, hobbies, home life and occupation of a character.

The third dimension is the psychological traits of a character, such as temperament, abilities and qualities. Specially, the combined of physiological dimension and sociological dimension influence psychological dimension. A character's mental state is associated with background, physiology, heredity and education.

Egri's (1960) three-dimensional character theory is supported and applied by many scholars. Arp and Johnson (2006, p. 163-164) stated that a round character has the three-dimensional quality of real people. Barnet, Burto and Cain (2011) indicated that a flat character is two-dimensional, while a round character is three-dimensional with depth and complexity. Based on Egri's theory, Aristo and Sijono (2018) analyzed the characteristic of Albus Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and Deathly Hollow*, Maharani (2020) investigated the three-dimensional aspects and the function of the main character in Fitzgerald's novel of *The Great Gatsby*, Wibawa (2021) explored the main character in the movie of *Kung Fu Panda* and confirmed that the three dimensions can build up the characterization in literary work.

2.3 Cultural-Specific Items (CSI)

The purpose of the cultural transmission can be regarded as a priority during the process of translating the classic works (Zheng, Bi, & Zheng, 2016, p. 737). As there is a large quantity of CSIs in literary works, the cultural gap is the most evident in literary works and it is more difficult to translate them than other types of texts (Daghoughi & Hashemian, 2016, p.171; Aljabri, 2021, p. 3). Aixelá (1996) firstly put forward the basic term of culture-specific items with its abbreviation CSIs, and defined it as the result of a translation problem between source language and target language. The source item does not exist in the target language or the source item has different value in the target language. CSIs are divided by Aixelá into two basic categories: proper nouns and common expressions.

According to Aixelá (1996, p. 61-65), the translation strategies of CSIs include conservation strategies, substitution strategies, and potential strategies. (1) Conservation strategies include "repetition" (copy directly from the source language), "orthographic adaptation" (transliteration), "linguistic (non-cultural) translation" (preserving the denotative meaning of the source language), "extratextual gloss" (explanation separated from the text, such as footnote, endnote, glossary, commentary), "intratextual gloss" (the gloss integrated into the main text to avoid disturbing readers). (2) Substitution strategies include "synonymy" (translating the same CSI in different ways to avoid repetition), "limited universalization" (using another CSI of the source language that are more familiar to the target readers), "absolute

universalization” (using a non-CSI to translate the CSI), “naturalization”(selecting a CSI of the target language to translate the CSI of the source language), “deletion” (omitting the CSI in the target text), “autonomous creation”(creating words or introduces in the target language a CSI which do not exist in the source language). (3) Potential strategies include “compensation” (deletion and autonomous creation with a similar effect), “dislocation” (displacement of the same CSI), “attenuation” (replacement of something unacceptable ideologically)”.

Chang (2004) conducted a critical introduction to Aixelá’s translation theory, and analyzed Chinese and Western translation studies critics. He argued that Aixelá’s translation strategies are detailed and comprehensive, which can be used for English-Chinese translation practice after being adapted. Moreover, Fan (2008) supported the approaches of Aixelá by exploring the translation strategies of CSIs in *Wen Xin Diao Long* and the constraining factors of the choice of strategies. Wang Kefei and Wang Yingchong (2016) explored translation of Chinese CSIs and conjectured its future research situation, revealed the difficulty of “complete cultural blank” and “partial cultural blank” involved in translating Chinese CSIs and proposed accordingly corresponding translation strategies, indicated that Aixelá’s theory can help translators choose the most appropriate from various translation strategies and can explain the rationality of one CSI with multi-meanings.

3. Method

In this study, *Liaozhai Zhiyi* annotated by Zhao Botao (2016) is treated as the source text (ST). The rationale for using Zhao Botao’s annotated edition of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (2016) as the ST is that his edition combines the strengths of previous Chinese editions of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, and adds extremely detailed annotations with new comments (Yuan, 2016, p.3-4).

Furthermore, in order to demonstrate the most original characterization in the ST with academic support, this study collects annotations and commentaries by experts on *Liaozhai* studies from three Chinese editions, including Zhao Botao’s (2016) *Liaozhai Zhiyi Xiangzhu Xinping* [Detailed annotated complete edition with new commentary of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*], Yu Tianchi and Sun Tonghai’s (2015) *Liaozhai Zhiyi Quanben Quanzhu Quanyi* [Annotated complete edition with vernacular Chinese translated text of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*], Zhu Qikai’s (1989) *Liaozhai Zhiyi Quanben Xinzhu* [New annotated complete edition of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*].

Sondergard’s complete English translation of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, published consecutively in total of 6 volumes from 2008 to 2014, is recorded as target text (TT) of this study: *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*. His version holds a milestone significance in the English translation history of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (Li & Jiang, 2017, p. 128). On one hand, it ends the history of incomplete English translations of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, presenting the complete version of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* to the English-speaking readers for the first time (Li & Jiang, 2017, p. 128). On the other hand, it respects the original text and minimizes manipulation in the translation, which is crucial for preserving the original appearance of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (Li & Jiang, 2017, p. 128). Moreover, Sondergard follows Pu Songling’s syntax, punctuation, phrasings faithfully, and provides annotations of literary allusions, personages and events unfamiliar to English readers (Sondergard, 2008, vol. I, p. ix).

Owing to the vast array of stories and enormous number of characters in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, this study selects twelve examples from eight stories for data collection and analysis: *The Snake Man* [蛇人 shé rén], *The Frogs Song* [蛙曲 wā qǔ], *The Two Bans* [二班 èr bān], *Princess Lotus* [莲花公主 lián huā gōng zhǔ], *Girl in Green* [绿衣女 lǜ yī nǚ], *Jiaona* [娇娜 jiāo nuó], *A Pair of Lanterns*[双灯 shuāng dēng], *Raining Coins* [雨钱 yǔ qián]. The commonality among these eight stories is that they all share an association with animals. Specifically, the protagonists in *The Snake Man and The Frogs Song* are animals in their original form, while the protagonists of the other six stories are animals that transform into humans. This selection seeks to uncover the commonalities in translation of character portrayal across these seven stories.

This study applies the method of qualitative content analysis for data analysis. The reason for choosing this method is that qualitative content analysis concentrates on subject and context, and highlights the shifts in the text, such as similarities and differences (Graneheim, Lindgren, & Lundman, 2017, p. 29). The results of qualitative content analysis are presented as categories or themes (Graneheim, Lindgren, & Lundman, 2017, p. 32). The data are firstly categorized based on three-dimensional character portrayal, including the physiological dimension, the sociological dimension and the psychological dimension, and then paired into a ST and a TT for comparison. Within the framework of the three-dimensional character theory of Egri (1960) and the CSIs theory of Aixelá (1996), this study analyzes the strategies in translating the CSIs in character depiction in *Liaozhai Zhiyi* and examines the shifts in the characterization.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Translation of Physiological Dimension

The physiological traits of a character include “sex, age, height and weight, color of hair, eyes, skin, posture, appearance, defects, heredity” (Egri, 1960, p. 36). The transformation between animals and humans in *Liaozhai Zhiyi* can be divided into three categories. The first category is animals appearing in their original form; the second category, which accounts for the majority in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, is the animals that transform into humans. The third category is the humans who transform into animals. The animals in *Liaozhai Zhiyi* demonstrate simultaneously animal’s and human’s features. In addition, transformations between animals and humans are not created by the author out of nothing, but human characters are replaced with animal characters that act based on human behavior, in order to enhance the artistic effect that will inevitably be weakened due to restraint when the character is performed by human (Chen, 1989, p. 92).

Example 1

ST: 二蛇相见，交缠如饴糖状，久之始开。(Pu, 蛇人 shé rén, p. 78)

TT: The two snakes exchanged glances, then wrapped themselves around each other like candy confections and stayed that way for quite some time before parting. (Sondergard, *The Snake Man*, p. 70)

The CSI “饴糖 yí táng” is known as maltose or barley sugar, a syrup made from grains such as rice, malt, corn, barley, wheat, millet, or maize (Zhao, 2016, p. 80; Wang et al., 2016, p. 482). It is also a traditional Chinese medicine with a sweet and warm nature, which is mainly used to tonify the spleen, relieve pain slowly, moisten the lungs and relieve cough. The appearance of maltose is like honey, a sticky and twisted liquid. It is used in the original text as a metaphor for the intimacy of two snakes twisted together, as well as their unique spirituality, already inseparable from each other (Zhao, 2016, p. 80). Sondergard adopts the absolute universalization strategy and chooses the general term “candy confections” which is a non-CSI to translate it. In the translated text, the meaning of “candy confections” is not exactly the same as the “饴糖 yí táng”. The item “candy confections” fills the cognitive gap caused by the differences between Chinese and English language and culture, and depicts the intimate image of two snakes from another cultural level.

Example 2

ST: 生如其教，果见娇娜偕两人来，画黛弯蛾，莲钩蹴凤，与娇娜相伯仲也。(Pu, 娇娜 jiāo nuó, p. 104)

TT: Kong did as he was instructed and as a result saw Jiaona arrive in the company of a real beauty, her painted black eyebrows curved like moth antennae, her tiny feet adorned in phoenix slippers, in appearance Jiaona's equal. (Sondergard, *Jiaona*, p. 91)

This example depicts the appearance features of two beauties transformed from fox spirits. Sondergard uses the strategy of intratextual gloss to render the CSI “画黛弯蛾 huà dài wān é” into “painted black eyebrows curved like moth antennae”, preserving the cultural meaning of the original text. The CSI “画黛弯蛾 huà dài wān é” means painted eyebrows, curved and slender like a pair of antennae of a silkworm moth (Zhu, 1989, p. 66; Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 122; Zhao, 2016, p. 110). The word “黛 dài” is a kind of blue black pigment used by women of ancient China to paint their eyebrows. The word “蛾 é” means silk moths which have black, slender, and curved antennae. In ancient China, the term “moth eyebrows” is often used to describe women’s thin eyebrows. Sondergard deals with the CSI “莲钩蹴凤 lián gōu cù fēng” through multi-strategies and preserves the connotation of the original text. The CSI “莲钩 lián gōu” is also called “golden lotus”, metaphorically refers to women’s slim little feet that used to wrap around in ancient China (Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 122; Zhao, 2016, p. 111). Sondergard adopts the strategy of limited universalization to translate it and chooses another CSI “tiny feet” of the source language that are more familiar to the target readers, but abandons the metaphor of lotus. The CSI “蹴凤 cù fēng” means wearing shoes on which the phoenix are embroidered (Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 122; Zhao, 2016, p. 111). Sondergard employs the strategy of intratextual gloss and renders it into “adorned in phoenix slippers”. The CSI “相伯仲 xiāng bó zhòng” means literally neither above nor below among brothers, the elder is called “伯 bó” and the younger is “仲 zhòng”, with cultural connotation that it is difficult to distinguish (Zhu, 1989, p. 66; Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 123; Zhao, 2016, p. 111). When literal meaning and cultural connotation cannot be balanced, Sondergard adopts the absolute universalization strategy and translates it into “in appearance someone’s equal”, which can be seen as translator’s consideration on target readers. Sondergard’s translation demonstrates the exotic feature of the original text, and fills up the blank of the cognitive bias caused by the overly obscure language expression, which is conducive to portray the character of the fox beauty. Compared with the original text, Sondergard’s characterization of the fox beauty seems less complex with a stronger sense of intimacy.

Example 3

ST: 有款门者，启视，则皤然一翁，形貌甚古。(Pu, 雨钱 yǔ qián, p. 853)

TT: There came a knock at the door, and when he opened it to look out, he found a white-haired man, dressed in an archaically elegant style. (Sondergard, *Raining Coins*, p. 695).

This example is extracted from the tale about a knowledgeable fox immortal and a scholar. Due to poverty, the scholar hoped that the fox could give him some unexpected money. Unexpectedly, he was teased by the fox and scolded with righteous words. The CSI “皤然 pó rán” is translated by Sondergard into “white-haired” which preserves the original meaning of “white hair and beard” (Zhu, 1989, p. 516; Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 1008; Zhao, 2016, p. 854). The CSI “古 gǔ” is used to describe an extraordinary and elegant appearance (Zhu, 1989, p. 516; Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 1008; Zhao, 2016, p. 854). It is rendered by Sondergard into “an archaically elegant style”, which is consistent with the original meaning. Sondergard uses the strategy of intratextual gloss to translate these two CSIs, which enables readers to more vividly visualize the appearance of the fox immortal.

Example 4

ST: 媪亦以陶碗自酌，谈饮俱豪，不类巾幗。(Pu, 二班 èr bān, p. 2864)

TT: The old lady also took a pottery bowl and helped herself to some wine, chatting as they drank with great exuberance, not at all like what one would expect from a woman. (Sondergard, *The Two Bans*, p. 2281)

This example is extracted from the tale of *The Two Bans*. The two Bans are two tigers that transform into humans, in order to seek treatment for old tiger mother. The CSI “巾幗 jīn guó” is originally a type of headscarf and hair accessory used by ancient Chinese women, but is later extended to be a synonym for woman (Zhu, 1989, p. 1559; Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 3040; Zhao, 2016, p. 2865). The CSI “巾幗 jīn guó” can also be used as an honorific and respectful title for heroic women. Sondergard uses the strategy of intratextual gloss to render it into “what one would expect from a woman”, which describes the generous features of the original characterization and implies that the

tiger mother seems not an ordinary woman.

4.2 Translation of Sociological Dimension

The sociological dimension refers to the social background and growth environment of a character, including also “class, occupation, education, home life, religion, race, nationality, place in community, political affiliations, amusements, hobbies” (Egri, 1960, p. 36-37). Deep mountains, ancient temples, mound and tombs in the wilderness, scholarly sobriquet and remote inns are usually the scenes where various animals and spirits of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* appear. Moreover, some animals domesticated by humans have also established social connections through human intermediary. The portrayal of a character’s social background and appearance scene can enhance the allure of strangeness and exoticism of the story.

Example 5

ST: 入其家，则金沔浮钉，宛然世族。[...] 回视旧居，无复闲阒，惟见高冢岿然，巨穴无底。(Pu, 娇娜 jiāo nuó, p. 105)

TT: Entering the young master’s house, he noticed the door’s decorative gold nails, the sure sigh of a powerful family with generations of influence. [...] When he turned around to look at where they’d been living, the gate was no longer there-in its place he saw a towering grave mound and a cavernous, bottomless pit. (Sondergard, *Jiaona*, p. 93-94)

This example depicts the residence of a family of fox spirits, whose surname is Huangfu. The male protagonist saw at first the mansion of fox spirits’ house that has been enchanted, golden and magnificent, like an aristocratic family. When the spell disappeared later, it was actually a bottomless pit beneath a huge mound. The CSI “金沔浮钉 jīn ōu fú dīng” refers to the gilded round nails resembling bubbles adorned on the gate which are the door decorations of ancient aristocratic families (Zhu, 1989, p. 67; Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 126; Zhao, 2016, p. 112). Sondergard uses the strategy of literal translation and translates it into “the door’s decorative gold nails”, depicting the magnificent feature of the fox spirits’ house. The CSI “世族 shì zú” originally refers to an official family with meritorious service in previous generations, later commonly refers to aristocratic family (Zhao, 2016, p. 112). Sondergard adopts the strategy of intratextual gloss and renders it into “a powerful family with generations of influence”, preserving the cultural connotation of the original text. The CSI “高冢岿然 gāo zhǒng kuī rán” refers to the magnificent tomb (Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 127). Sondergard adopts the strategy of literal translation to render it into “a towering grave mound”, and depicts the tomb environment where fox spirits lived, giving readers a more visual experience.

Example 6

ST: 转过墙屋，导至一处，叠阁重楼，万椽相接，曲折而行，觉万户千门，迥非人世。又见宫人女官往来甚夥[...] (Pu, 莲花公主 lián huā gōng zhǔ, p. 1146)

TT: They turned and passed by house walls till they came to a compound where there were a vast number of pavilions and multi-storied buildings, with rafters everywhere joining them together, and a whole complex of support columns. It seemed like it must have ten thousand doorways and a thousand gates, totally unlike anything in the mortal realm. Then Dou saw that the servants and officials there were women, coming and going in great numbers [...] (Sondergard, *Princess Lotus*, p. 933)

This example is extracted from the tale of *Princess Lotus* which tells of a scholar who, at the invitation of the Bee King, went to the Bee Kingdom as a guest. He married the Bee Princess and later helped the Bee Kingdom eliminate the snake monster. This example depicts the architecture of the Bee Kingdom, implying the building structure feature of the hive. The CSI “叠阁重楼 di é gé chóng lóu” is a Chinese idiom that describes the multi-storied pavilions and buildings which are towering and magnificent, commonly used to describe ancient palaces, temples, or other important buildings in ancient China (Mei, 2016, p. 253). The CSI “万户千门 wàn hù qiān mén” is also a Chinese idiom that does not refer to an accurate number but describes numerous households or a large number of residents (Mei, 2016, p. 1141). Dealing with these two idioms, Sondergard employs the strategy of linguistic (non-cultural) translation to translate them into “a vast number of pavilions and multi-storied buildings”, “ten thousand doorways and a thousand gates”, which demonstrates the exotic and magnificent structure of the Bee Kingdom to target readers. The CSI “宫人女官 gōng rén nǚ guān” refers to concubines and maids in the palace, and female official who is usually a knowledgeable woman in charge of affairs related to the Queen’s etiquette, or responsible for writing documents (Zhu, 1989, p. 673; Zhao, 2016, p. 1149). Sondergard adopts the strategy of linguistic (non-cultural) translation to render them into “the servants and officials there were women”. In English culture, “servants” are not necessarily working in the palace, nor do they mean concubines. In the characterization of the maids, concubines and female officials transformed from bee spirits, Sondergard’s overall description is consistent with the original text.

Example 7

ST: 于生名璟，字小宋，益都人，读书醴泉寺。夜方披诵，忽一女子在窗外赞曰：“于相公勤读哉！”(Pu, 绿衣女 lǜ yī nǚ, p. 1156)

TT: Scholar Yu Jing, whose courtesy name was Xiaosong, lived in Yidu. He happened to be studying at the Sweet Spring Temple. One night while he was leafing through a book and reading aloud, suddenly a girl outside his window commended him by saying, “Master Yu is always reading!” (Sondergard, *Girl in Green*, p. 942)

This example is extracted from the tale of *Girl in Green* which tells of an extraordinary encounter between a scholar and a beauty who transforms from a little green bee spirit. According to Zhao (2016, p. 1157), the CSI “醴泉寺 lǐ quán sì” refers to an ancient temple with thousands of years which is located in Shandong Province, in the middle of Changbai Mountains. It was first built in the late Southern and

Northern Dynasties (Zhao, 2016, p. 1157). During the Tang Dynasty, a monk rebuilt the temple, and a spring gushed out from the east mountain (Zhao, 2016, p. 1157). Sondergard adopts the strategy of linguistic (non-cultural) translation and renders “醴泉” into “sweet spring”, retaining the meaning of the original text. However, most of English-speaking readers do not have Chinese cultural background knowledge and might not understand the geographical and historical meaning of “醴泉寺 lǐ quán sì”. Hence, the mystery and strangeness of the tale are weakened to a certain extent. If some extratextual gloss such as footnote and endnote can be added, which may help readers to better understand the cultural background. The girl in green appeared in the night in an ancient temple surrounded by deep mountains, location and time of her appearance confuse the male protagonist as well as readers about her image whether she is human or spirit, reflecting the mysterious feature of the tale.

Example 8

ST: 或与金钱，则乱击蛙顶，如拊云锣，宫商词曲，了了可辨。(Pu, 蛙曲 wā qǔ, p. 975)

TT: “But if someone happened to offer him money, he’d more rashly knock them on their heads, like someone hitting an ancient copper gong, and they’d begin singing poetry that could be understood with perfect clarity.” (Sondergard, *The Frogs Song*, p. 788).

This example is extracted from the tale about using frog croaking as a play. The CSI “云锣 yún luō” refers to a type of chimes in ancient China, usually consisting of ten small copper gongs arranged and suspended on a checkered wooden frame, are played with small wooden hammers, each gong has the same size but different thickness, so it produces different sounds (Zhao, 2016, p. 975). Sondergard adopts the strategy of intratextual gloss to translate it into “an ancient copper gong”, demonstrating the mystery and fantastic feature of frog croaking. The CSI “宫商词曲 gōng shāng cí qǔ” means music and tone. The five tones in ancient Chin include 宫 gōng, 商 shāng, 角 jué 徵 zhǐ, and 羽 yǔ (Zhu, 1989, p. 581; Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 1141; Zhao, 2016, p. 975). Sondergard employs the strategy of absolute universalization and the general term “poetry” to translate it. His translation allows readers to imagine what it would be like frog songs.

4.3 Translation of Psychological Dimension

The combined of physiological dimension and sociological dimension influence psychological dimension of characterization, which includes “sex life, moral standards, personal premise, ambition, frustrations, chief disappointments, temperament, attitude toward life, complexes, extrovert, introvert, ambivert, abilities, qualities” (Egri, 1960, p. 37). The animals and spirits in *Liaozhai Zhiyi* can be categorized into those that actively approach humans and those approached by humans. The psychological traits of animals and spirits approached by humans are manifested by human observation perspectives. Animals and spirits that actively approach humans have the purposes such as repaying kindness, admiration and seduction. These different purposes are all part of their psychological portrayal, which are usually reflected through their expressions and languages.

Example 9

ST: 小蛇虽不去，然瑟缩不敢食。二青含哺之，宛似主人之让客者。(Pu, 蛇人 shé rén, p. 77)

TT: The little snake, however, wouldn’t move towards them, being so timid and frightened that it wouldn’t venture near the food. Green the Second took some in its mouth to feed it, in the same way that a host might offer some to a guest. (Sondergard, *The Snake Man*, p. 68)

This is a story about the friendship between humans and snakes, and between snakes themselves. The original meaning of the CSI “瑟缩 sèsuō” means cowering, a description of the appearance of fear (Zhu, 1989, p. 48; Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 87; Zhao, 2016, p. 79). This portrayal captures the little snake’s psychology of fear and shyness. Sondergard employs the strategy of intratextual gloss to shape the image of the little snake, enabling readers to more vividly perceive and empathize with its psychological portrayal.

Example 10

ST: 翁自言：“养真，姓胡，实乃狐仙。慕君高雅，愿共晨夕。”(Pu, 雨钱 yǔ qián, p. 853)

TT: The old man informed him, “I’m called Yangzhen, Hu Yangzhen, and the truth is that I’m a fox immortal. I admire your refined mind very highly, and I hope we can become close friends.” (Sondergard, *Raining Coins*, p. 695).

The word “仙 xiān” refers to the belief in immortals and immortality in the religious culture of Taoism in China (Zhang & Yin, 2014, p. 1607). Sondergard adopts the strategy of literal translation and renders “狐仙 hú xiān” into “a fox immortal”. His translation demonstrates the portrait of a powerful and mysterious spirit same as that in the original text. The CSI “共晨夕 gòng chén xī” literally means spending day and night together. Its cultural connotation implies keeping contact with each other, maintaining close ties with someone (Zhu, 1989, p. 517; Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 1008; Zhao, 2016, p. 854). When the literal meaning and cultural connotation cannot be balanced, Sondergard abandons the literal meaning, employs the strategy of absolute universalization and renders it into “become close friends”. Sondergard’s characterization eliminates the target readers’ unfamiliarity with the source language and culture, while retaining literary aesthetic space for readers. His translation enables readers to understand the psychological traits of the fox immortal seeking friendship of, which is conducive to shaping the character’s image.

Example 11

ST: 魏近就之，女援之，逾垣而出，把手而告曰：“今与君别矣。请送我数武，以表半载绸缪之义。”(Pu, 双灯 shuāng dēng, p. 930-931)

TT: Wei hurried over to her. He helped her down from the wall, and as she stepped away from it, she took his hand and told him, “It’s time now for me to leave you. Please accompany me for a few steps, to acknowledge that we’ve loved each other for these past six

months.” (Sondergard, *A Pair of Lanterns*, p. 753)

This example is extracted from the tale of a scholar and a fox beauty with two lanterns. The CSI “绸缪之义 chóu móu zhī yì” describes the lingering relationship between lovers (Zhu, 1989, p. 558; Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 1094; Zhao, 2016, p. 932). Sondergard adopts the strategy of absolute universalization and uses the non-CSI “loved each other”. His translation portrays the fox spirit as a woman with a strong sense of loyalty and righteousness.

Example 12

ST: 子曰：“卿声娇细，倘度一曲，必能消魂。”(Pu, 绿衣女 lǜ yī nǚ, p. 1156)

TT: “Your voice is lovely and delicate,” Yu said, “and if you were to sing a song, my spirit would be utterly transported.” (Sondergard, *Girl in Green*, p. 942)

This passage depicts the sound of the girl in green who transformed from green bee, implying her animalistic nature, which is associated with the buzzing of green bee. The CSI “消魂 xiāo hún” means that the soul is detached from the body, describing emotions that are very excited and extremely joy (Zhu, 1989, p. 676; Yu & Sun, 2015, p. 1382; Zhao, 2016, p. 1158). In this example, the voice of the girl in green is described as beautiful and pleasant, making people feel as if the spirit follows the song and leaves the body. The word “魂 hún” is a basic concept of Taoism and Taoist medicine, referring to the spiritual energy of a person. Sondergard finds the word “spirit” in the target language that is closest to the “魂 hún” in the source language, which refers to people’s thoughts, feelings and emotions. He adopts the strategy of naturalization to render “消魂 xiāo hún” into “my spirit would be utterly transported”, and portrays the psychological feelings that the voice of the girl in green brought to the scholar.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes the translation of CSIs in character depiction in *Liaozhai Zhiyi* from Chinese to English, in terms of three thematically important dimensions proposed by Egri (1960), physiological, sociological and psychological.

This study argues that characterization is one of the most significant considerations in literary translation. While dealing with character translation, it is necessary to take into account the culture-specific elements in characterization. How to translate the culture-specific elements in characterization and to reconstruct the characters are crucial to the international dissemination and reception of literary works. The findings demonstrate that Sondergard adopted adequate compensation for the culture-specific elements in characterization, and made moderate adjustments to the character images of the original text. The conservation strategies which he adopted, including “intratextual gloss”, “linguistic (non-cultural) translation” and “literal translation”, preserve in various ways the culture-specific elements of the characterization and strong exotic cultural connotations, thus making the readers feel the charm of exotic literature. Meanwhile, the substitution strategies that he adopted, including “limited universalization”, “absolute universalization” and “naturalization”, can interpret the culture-specific elements of the characterization in a way that are easier for target readers to understand. The use of conservation strategies and substitution strategies is not contradictory to each other. When translating character images in literary works, it is important to balance the use of the two categories of translation strategies. It is suggested that the translators thoroughly consider the culture-specific elements in characterization, and take into account the combination of multi-strategies.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that the translator’s choice of strategies influences have jointly influenced the rendering of character depiction, thus making characterization varied. Fictional characters can be categorized as human and non-human, ranging from animals to fantastical creatures, all of which may manifest varying levels of anthropomorphic or hybrid traits (Eder, 2010, p. 37). It is found that the character depiction in the original text of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* is more mysterious, whereas in the translated text, it seems to possess a stronger sense of intimacy.

As Lefevere (1992, p. 9) argued, “translation is the most obviously recognizable type of rewriting, and it is potentially the most influential because it is able to project the image of an author and/or a (series of) work(s) in another culture, lifting that author and/or those works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin”. Indeed, in this sense, the translation of ancient classics presents the original text in a multilingual context and can be considered as a rewriting of the original work.

Confined to its limited dimension of target language selection, this study investigates only the character depiction in English translations of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, which has left space for translated versions of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* in other languages. Therefore, further research is suggested to be conducted in the field of other languages. Another limitation of this study is that it only focuses on analyzing character depiction in the translated text. Future research can be conducted from the perspective of translation reception by collecting comments of international readers on characterization in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, in order to provide various data of character reconstruction in literary translation. In spite of these limitations, it is hoped that the present study contributes to the research field of character depiction translation in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, and sheds light on the translation of ancient Chinese classics.

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Authors’ contributions

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