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Recategorization in Goldblatt's Multimodal Translation of *Shan Hai Jing*

Minghui Long

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing 401331, China

ABSTRACT

Translation is not merely a linguistic transfer, but also a cognitive activity. Due to divergent cognitive frameworks across cultural contexts, cognitive shifts in translation are unavoidable, particularly when rendering classical texts imbued with culture-specific entities inaccessible to another culture. One of the major means of understanding unfamiliar entities is to categorize them. Thus, when translating these entities into another culture, the translator often needs to recategorize them to bridge the gap between source-text taxonomies and target readers' conceptual systems. To elucidate how recategorization functions in the translation of classical texts, this study investigates adaptive recategorization in Goldblatt's multimodal English translation of *Shan Hai Jing*, a remarkable Chinese classic rich in mythical beings and cultural symbolism. Drawing on Xiao & Wen's framework of recategorization, this study analyzes the translation of animal and plant terms. Through quantitative frequency analysis and qualitative case study, this research reveals how recategorization strategies, including category retention, omission, and shifts (e.g., between categories, category members, category prototype, and category levels) are employed to reconcile source-text taxonomies with target readers' cognitive frameworks. It is found that Goldblatt's adaptive recategorization, informed by vernacular annotations and illustrations, mitigates cognitive conflicts, clarifies ambiguities, and preserves the text's interpretive flexibility. This study highlights recategorization as a pivotal mechanism for translating culture-specific concepts, offering insights for rendering classical texts with abundant culturally specific terms.

Keywords: *Shan Hai Jing*; Animal Terms; Multimodal Translation; Recategorization; Category Shifts

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Minghui Long, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing 401331, China;
Email: zjfclmh@126.com

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 17 July 2025 | Revised: 4 August 2025 | Accepted: 20 August 2025 | Published Online: 16 October 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i10.11131

CITATION

Long, M., 2025. Recategorization in Goldblatt's Multimodal Translation of *Shan Hai Jing*. Forum for Linguistic Studies. 7(10): 1237 – 1253.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i10.11131

1. Introduction

The translation of Chinese classics into global languages serves as a vital medium for cross-cultural understanding. Among these classics, *Shan Hai Jing* (*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*), a comprehensive compendium of ancient Chinese knowledge, covering diverse fields such as mythohistory, geography, ethnic groups, mythology, religion, flora and fauna, minerals, and medicine[1], offers unparalleled insight into Chinese cultural values and cosmology. The most remarkable feature of *Shan Hai Jing* lies in its depiction of numerous ancient mythical beings, whose dense cultural symbolism and fantastical imagery pose significant challenges for the readers to achieve adequate perception and understanding. When it comes to its translation, there is no doubt that the translator must navigate these complexities to facilitate the target readers' perception and understanding of these strange creatures.

Translation is fundamentally a cross-linguistic cognitive activity[2], which involves the translator's conceptualization of the source text meaning, his or her re-conceptualization of that meaning in the production of the target text, and the target readers' conceptualization of target text meaning[3]. One of the major operations of conceptualization is categorization, particularly for the production and understanding of texts featuring abundant unfamiliar entities. *Shan Hai Jing* is a good case. For example, the original author classified the myriad mythical beings into categories like "兽" "鸟" "鱼" and "蛇" etc., describing them through analogies to ordinary animals (e.g., goats, dogs, horses and tigers, etc.). While source-language readers decode these taxonomies and analogies via shared cultural frameworks, cross-cultural transmission risks cognitive mismatches. As Wen notes, categorical hierarchies-defined by prototypicality, internal structure, and boundaries-vary across languages due to differing cultural models and cognitive schemas[4]. Such disparities necessitate recategorization and adaptive restructuring in translation to align with the conceptual system of the target language.

Therefore, this study explores how recategorization operates in the production of Goldblatt's *Fantastic Creatures in Mountains and Seas* (2021), an English multimodal translation of *Shan Hai Jing*, to elucidate the mechanism of recategorization in translation. The effects and factors that influence the translator's choice of recategorization strategies are especially examined to shed some light on the translation of classical texts.

2. Categorization and Recategorization in Translation

Categorization serves as one of the most efficient means by which humans comprehend and reshape the natural world. It is "a mental process of classification, and its products are the cognitive categories"[5]. By classifying entities into groups, categorization enables us to perceive the similarities and differences of myriad entities in both the virtual and real world and achieve a deep understanding of them.

Categorization studies have generated two major views of categorization: the Classical Category and the Cognitive Category. The Classical Category View, also known as the Aristotelian view, posits that categories have clear boundaries and are defined by a set of necessary and sufficient features[6]. However, in the 1960s, problems were raised with this view. For example, it is found that the instances of categories do not always seem to share the same properties[7]. In addition, some instances seem "better" than others. For example, in the category of birds, a robin seems a "better" bird than a chicken does. In response to these problems, Cognitive Category View, also known as prototype theory, was proposed by Rosch and other psychologists, and later validated through extensive empirical research[8–10]. Their research shows: a category is characterized by graded membership and fuzzy boundaries; human beings categorize the objects around prototypes, not sets of necessary and sufficient features; instances are assigned to a category on the basis of resemblance to the prototypes of that category, that is, the best members of a category[11].

The Cognitive Category View offers a more nuanced explanation for our classification and perception of the diverse entities in the world. In reality, many entities exhibit graded category membership[8], resisting definitive classification. Since categories are shaped by the cognitive capacities of the human mind[5], and are closely tied to human perception and cultural models, they are not fixed but rather dynamic-their prototypes, internal structures, and boundaries may shift depending on cognitive and cultural frameworks[4]. As a result, different individuals may categorize the same entity differ-

ently, particularly when they come from different cultural backgrounds. This divergence extends beyond the category membership of a specific entity to include variations in the hierarchical structure of categories.

Given that language serves as a label for cognitive categories, and translation entails the cross-cultural transfer of these categories rather than mere linguistic replication, such disparities, along with divergent conceptions of category membership and prototype formation, pose challenges to translation between languages. This necessitates recategorization in the translation process. In translation, according to Wen et al., source-language and target-language categories may exhibit complete category equivalence, category mismatch (partial overlap), or category gap (complete absence of a corresponding category in the target language)[12]. Therefore, in addition to maintaining category equivalence, recategorization in translation is often realized through multiple category shifts including shifts between categories, category members, category prototypes and category levels[3,13]:

1) A shift between categories refers to the conversion of a source text category into another category in the target language, or replacing a category member with an entire category. For example, in the translation of *Shan Hai Jing*, 嚣 (xiao), a "兽 (literally beast)" in Chinese is described as "apparition" in English, and "藻 (algae)" in Chinese is rendered as "aquatic grasses" in English.
2) A shift between category members involves substituting a specific member of the source text with another member within the same category. For example, "栾树 (goldenrain tree)" in Chinese is translated into a different tree "jujubes" in English, and "姑获鸟" is referred to as "oriole" in English, while they are different birds.
3) A shift between category prototypes is a special case of member shift, where the prototypical member of a category in the source text may not align with the prototypical member in the target culture, thus requiring conversion to a more culturally congruent member. For example, in translating *Shan Hai Jing*, "桂树 (Cinnamomum cassia)"—a medicinal and symbolic plant in Chinese culture— is rendered as "laurel tree", as in the category of Lauraceae, laurel tree embodies a stronger prototypical status in English cultural cognition, evoking associations with victory, honor, and poetic tradition.
4) A shift between category levels occurs between superordinate, basic, and subordinate level categories. The shift downward (from superordinate to subordinate) represents concretization, while the shift upward (from subordinate to superordinate) entails abstraction. This type of category shift is particularly prevalent in the translation of *Shan Hai Jing*. For example, most of "兽" in the original text is rendered as "creature" in English, and "草 (grass)" is translated as "plant" or "flora".

Apart from the four types of category shifts, it should be noted that, in some cases, the original category may be omitted either because there is no need to identify its category attribution or because the category attribution remains ambiguous.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Material

As previously mentioned, one of the most remarkable features of *Shan Hai Jing* is its depiction of numerous mythical beings, which attracted the illustrator Chen Siyu to create 150 illustrations thereof, and Sun Jiankun, who had studied *Shan Hai Jing* since childhood, was invited to provide original text excerpts, vernacular translations, and background interpretations for these illustrations, bringing the shape of an illustrated *Shan Hai Jing*, which was published by Tsinghua University Press in 2015. Its English version, *Fantastic Creatures of the Mountains and Seas*, translated by Howard Goldblatt was published in 2021. This new Chinese version of *Shan Hai Jing*, with exquisite illustrations, definitely brings a unique reading experience to the readers. As images contribute to a more complete understanding of messages, drawing attention to the objects, landscapes or persons represented and influencing the way the text acts with the audience[14], the vivid illustrations can not only facilitate Chinese readers' perception and understanding of this classical work, but also give the translator more space to introduce this work to the international readers. Goldblatt's translation of the illustrated *Shan Hai Jing,* different from other monomodal translations, is actually a multimodal translation, as the illustrations are given full consideration in the translation process. This kind of translation may shed some new light on the translation of classical works. Therefore, this study takes the illustrated *Shan Hai Jing* and its English

version *Fantastic Creatures of the Mountains and Seas* as its objects and data sources.

Both the original Chinese text and English rendition focus on the mythical beings in *Shan Hai Jing*. In the original text, they are often described with comparison to the ordinary animals like the fish, bird, snake, dog, horse, tiger and pig etc. To help the readers understand these strange creatures, the original author, in addition to giving them specific names, often made efforts to categorize them into the basic-level categories like "兽" "鱼" "鸟" "马" etc., as "basic level is where the largest amount of information about an item can be obtained with the least cognitive effort[5], and they are the first to be recognized, named, acquired, mastered, and memorized, thus most readily activated for human use[15,16]. However, Chinese zoological categorization may diverge from English taxonomic frameworks due to culturally embedded classification criteria. As most animals in *Shan Hai Jing* are hybrids, it is likely that while the original author categorized an animal into the basic category of fish, the readers in another culture may take it as a bird.

Moreover, the accompanying illustrations may exacerbate categorical ambiguities. As it is argued that "one of the drawbacks of visual messages is the subjectivity of the interpretations"[17], when the illustrations do not present the prototypical features of the entities, the readers' perception may vary. In the illustrated *Shan Hai Jing*, it is often the case that some depictions of the illustrations deviate from the culture-specific prototypes of the depicted beings, whether in holistic morphology (e.g., 讙 [the Huan] does not look like a wild cat as the text describes) or salient anatomical traits (e.g., the body of 鰼鰼鱼 (Xixiyu) looks more like that of a fish rather than a bird).

In addition to the animals, the plants in *Shan Hai Jing* also play a critical role in constructing the ecological context of the supernatural creatures. Although the illustrated edition prioritizes depictions of monstrous beasts and divine beings, it also integrates diverse flora to anchor these beings within their environmental and cultural milieu. Some of these plants may be quite strange to international readers, so when translating them into English, the translator also needs to make some adjustments, including category shifts.

All in all, the illustrations, textual descriptions, cross-linguistic differences, and readers' cognitive frameworks collectively urge the translator to adapt through category shifts to ensure the efficiency and adequate perception and understanding of these entities. Therefore, this study takes the translation of animal and plant terms as the objects to show how recategorization is made through category shifts in the translation process. As Goldblatt's English version is produced based on the vernacular annotation instead of the classical text of *Shan Hai Jing*, the Chinese data is collected from the vernacular text.

3.2. Research Questions and Methods

This study investigates the recategorization strategies in Goldblatt's translation of *Shan Hai Jing*, focusing on the category shifts in the translation of the animal and plant terms to reconcile cultural-cognitive gaps. The following questions will be posed:

QR 1: How do category shifts operate in the translation of the animal and plant terms?

QR 2: What are the effects of these category shifts?

QR 3: What factors shape the translator's adoption of category shifts?

This study combines quantitative and qualitative studies, involving data statistics and detailed case analysis.

1) Data statistics. The frequency of major basic level animal terms (top 15 by frequency in the Chinese vernacular text) and the plant terms is compiled as the starting point of this study. The statistics are made with the tools of Doubao, Microsoft Word and AntConc. In addition, WordArt is used to give a visual representation.
2) Case analysis. Based on the data statistics, a comparison of the source and target texts is made to reveal what specific category shifts are employed in the translation process. Then the effects of these shifts and the factors that influence the translator's adoption of these shifts are examined.

3.3. Data Description

With the help of Doubao, Microsoft Word and AntConc, the frequency of major basic level animal terms is compiled as shown in **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**, as well as **Table 1** and the frequency of the basic level plant terms is shown in **Table 2**. The frequency of different types of category shifts is shown in **Table 3**.

Figure 1. Animal Terms in Chinese.

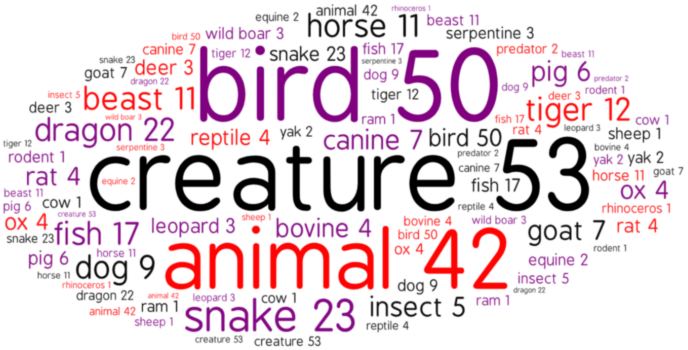

Figure 2. Animal Terms in English.

Table 1. Frequency of Animal Terms.

Chinese Terms	Frequency	English Terms	Frequency	Category Shift Types
兽	86	Creature animal beast apparition	53 42 11 2	Between category levels Between category levels Retention of original categories Between categories
鸟	70	bird	50	Retention of original categories
蛇	70	snake reptile serpentine	23 4 3	Retention of original categories Between category levels Between categories
龙	39	dragon	22	Retention of original categories
鱼	30	fish	17	Retention of original categories
狗/犬	19	dog canine	9 7	Retention of original categories Between category levels
虎	17	tiger	12	Retention of original categories
马	17	horse equine	11 2	Retention of original categories Between category levels
牛	15	bovine ox yak cow rhinoceros	4 4 2 1 1	Between category levels Between category levels Between category levels Between category levels Between categories
猪	13	pig wild boar	6 3	Retention of original categories between category members
羊	12	goat ram sheep	7 1 1	Between category levels Between category levels Between category levels

Table 1. *Cont.*

Chinese Terms	Frequency	English Terms	Frequency	Category Shift Types
鼠	7	rat rodent	4 1	Retention of original categories Between category levels
虫	6	insect	5	Retention of original categories
豹	6	leopard predator	3 2	Between category levels Between category levels
鹿	5	deer	3	Between category levels

Table 2. Frequency of Plant Terms.

Chinese Terms	Frequency	English Terms	Frequency	Types of Category Shifts
树/木	20	tree/trees	19	Retention of original categories
		flower	1	Between categories
		flora	3	Between category levels
草	12	grass	2	Retention of original categories
		plant	2	Between category levels
		weeds	1	Between category levels
		land dwellers	1	Between category levels

Table 3. Frequency of Category Shift Types.

Category Shift Types	Occurrences	Percentage of Total Shifts
Between category levels	144	41%
Between categories	7	2%
Between category members	3	1%
Retention of original categories	197	56%

Regarding the selection of animal terms for statistical analysis, this study prioritized the top 15 most frequent animal terms in the source text, as the study's objective is to demonstrate that category shifts in Goldblatt's translation of *Shan Hai Jing* are systematic and widespread rather than isolated phenomena. These 15 terms typically represent basic-level categories— i.e., the most salient, culturally entrenched concepts in everyday discourse. Translating these terms often involves cultural-linguistic negotiation, as their categorization boundaries are prone to divergence in cross-cultural contexts due to differing cognitive schemas.

Terms ranked beyond the top 15 (e.g. 兔 [rabbit], 鸡 [chicken]) appeared infrequently (1–3 times in total), yielding insufficient data for robust statistical analysis of systemic patterns. Similarly, subordinate animal terms (e.g. 鲤鱼 [carp], 翠鸟 [kingfisher]) were excluded from quantitative counts because they appeared only once or twice. Notably, many of these terms (e.g., 鲤鱼, 翠鸟) have fixed English equivalents (e.g., carp, kingfisher) and thus minimal translational variance. However, instances where subordinate terms exhibit unexpected category shifts will be examined in-depth through qualitative case studies.

For plant terms, the same methodological principle applies. Given the scarcity of plant species mentioned in the illustrated *Shan Hai Jing*, only basic-level terms (草 [grass/herb], 木 [tree]) were selected for statistical analysis. Subordinate terms like 栾树 [Koelreuteria paniculata] and 桂树 [sweet osmanthus]) appeared too infrequently (< 3 instances) to warrant quantitative scrutiny. Their translation patterns, however, will be explored through targeted case studies to reveal subtle shifts in botanical categorization.

When collecting Chinese terms, the author first uses Doubao to extract all the Chinese basic level animal and plant terms with the prompt "Please extract the basic-level animal and plant terms from the document, such as "鱼" "蛇" "牛"etc, and then Wordsmith is employed to calculate their occurrences in the text. After that, when counting the frequency of the basic-level category terms, manual verification is conducted to exclude terms that do not denote animals, such as Toponyms embedded with animal or plant characters like "常羊山 (Changyang Mountain)" (with "羊"as a place-name component). Additionally, specific subordinate category terms are also excluded, such as "鹊鸟 (magpie)". Finally, the proper names for the mythical animals and plants

are excluded, for example "比翼鸟"when counting birds, as these proper nouns are all transliterated in Goldblatt's translation.

When collecting the English terms, the author first manually extracts all the English terms the translator employs for basic-level animal/plant references via comparative analysis of the source text and target text, and then uses AntConc to count their occurrences, with both the singular form and plural form being counted. Based on the results, manual verification is conducted to exclude the compound words that refer to the specific subordinate entities. For example, Wenyao fish, Rupi fish, ginger grass etc. One point should be noted that the Chinese and English terms only approximately correspond, as some English terms are used to signify more than one Chinese term (e.g "creature" and "animal" may be used to render not only "兽", but also any animals like dragon, snake etc.) and "plant" for "草" and "木".

The data clearly demonstrates the varying frequencies of animal and plant terms in Chinese and English texts. In general, the number of English terms (including multiple subordinate terms used to refer to a single Chinese basic-level term) is less than that of the corresponding Chinese ones, which may be caused by the inherent differences between Chinese and English. For instance, in English pronouns are frequently used to substitute for nouns mentioned previously, whereas in Chinese, nouns tend to repeat. Furthermore, when referring to the same entities, compared with Chinese texts, the English text exhibits greater diversity. These terms involve more taxonomic levels, such as the superordinate, basic-level in the translation of "兽". For this diversity of English terms, category shifts employed by the translator may be a major cause.

The statistics of frequency of category shift types (See **Table 3**) indicate that, apart from retaining the original categories, three types of category shifts outlined in Section 2 are employed in the translation of basic-level animal and plant terms, among which the shift between category levels accounts for the highest proportion (41%). While the shift between category prototypes is not identified in the quantitative data, qualitative analysis reveals its occurrence in the translation of subordinate terms. Given the infrequent occurrence of individual subordinate terms, their translation patterns were examined through targeted case studies rather than quantitative counts. Moreover, a close comparison of the source text and target text shows that there are also some original categories being omitted. Therefore, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study demonstrates that the translation of animal/plant terms can sufficiently illustrate Goldblatt's recategorization strategies.

4. Results and Discussion

The above data preliminarily show that when translating the illustrated *Shan Hai Jing*, the translator frequently recategorizes the source text through category shifts. Starting from the data, a close comparison of the source text and target text further reveals the following patterns of recategorization.

1) Direct retention of original categories: When there is complete equivalence between Chinese and English categories, the original categories are typically retained.
2) Omission of original categories: In cases where identifying the category attribution is unnecessary or where the attribution remains ambiguous, or retaining the original category may lead to cognitive confusion or conflicts, the original categories are omitted.
3) Category shifts: Numerous instances of category shifts are observed, including shifts between categories (e.g. replacement with a different category), shifts between category members (e.g. substitution with a related but distinct member), shifts between category prototypes and shifts between category levels (e.g. movement between basic-level and superordinate/subordinate categories).

The above patterns primarily address QR1: How do category shifts operate in the translation of animal/plant terms? However, the effects of these shifts (QR2) and the motivations behind translators' strategic choices (QR3) require deeper analysis. The following case studies will systematically examine these dimensions through contextualized examples.

4.1. Direct Retention of Original Categories

Although cultural variations in categorization exist, cross-linguistic studies demonstrate that certain universal conceptual frameworks underlie human cognition [9]. These

shared cognitive foundations often lead to category equivalence between languages and make direct retention of the original category possible in translation. This phenomenon is evident in the translation of animal and plant terms in *Shan Hai Jing*, where direct category equivalence is often achievable.

For example, most subordinate animal/plant terms retain their English referents unchanged (e.g., "鲤鱼" as "carp", "翠鸟" as "kingfisher", and "茜草" as madder.)

For basic-level category terms, in most cases, Chinese animal terms like "鸟" "鱼" "马" and "虎" are directly translated into English when the described animals possess the prototypical features of these basic-level categories. A typical case is the introduction of "精卫 (Jingwei)":

> *发鸠山上有一种鸟，样子像乌鸦，但长着花脑袋，白嘴喙、红爪子。*[18]
>
> *High up on Fajiu Shan lived a bird that bore some resemblance to a raven but had a colorful head, a white beak, and red talons.* [19]

In this case, Jinwei has prototypical features of the bird, so the English rendering preserves the category of "bird". This literal translation strategy facilitates target readers' immediate category recognition, minimizing cognitive processing load.

Although in some cases, the original text directly identifies some mythical beings as a bird or a fish, or a snake etc. In more cases, the definite classification is avoided by referring to these fantastic beings as "like some animals". For example, the introduction of "旋龟 (Xuangui)":

> *传说在这条河中曾有一种奇怪的龟，样子像是普通的黑乌龟，但却长着鸟的头，毒蛇的尾巴….*[18]
>
> *According to legend, it was once home to a strange, some would say hideous, creature that had the disorienting appearance of a common black turtle but the head of a bird, the tail of a venomous snake……* [19]

In this case, Xuangui closely resembles a turtle in its overall form, despite having the head of a bird and the tail of a snake. Therefore, the translator retains the original category "turtle". Meanwhile, its head has the feature of a prototypical bird's head, tail a prototypical snake's tail, so the terms "bird" and "snake" are also retained. This approach is common in *Shan Hai Jing*, as most creatures are depicted with the fundamental characteristics of a basic-level animal (e.g. a bird, fish, or horse) but incorporate features from other animals. When these features align with prototypical traits of the basic-level animals, the translator preserves the original category to facilitate readers' immediate perception of the mythical beings. However, if the features are atypical or ambiguous, which are often shown in the illustrations, the translator may either omit the original category or apply category shifts to prevent cognitive conflicts.

4.2. Omission of Original Categories

The statistics show that in most cases, English terms (including the total multiple English terms used to refer to a single Chinese term) are fewer than the corresponding Chinese terms. One cause may be that the original categories are omitted in the English version. In Goldblatt's translation, there are many instances of category omission. For example, in describing the mountain where "骄虫 (Jiaochong)" lived:

> *平逢山，寸草不生，山中多砂石。*[18]
>
> *Jiaochong, a strange two-headed, human-like god that was in control of insects with stingers, lived on Pingfeng shan, a barren, rocky mountain that was a gathering place for swarms of bees.* [19]

In this instance, "草" in "寸草不生" is omitted, as the English adjective 'barren' effectively conveys the absence of vegetation (including grasses), and the omission makes the target text more concise.

Another example is "狡 (Jiao)":

> *玉山上陪伴在西王母左右的，有一种吉兽，名字叫狡。它样子像一条大狗，却有一身的豹纹，还长着一对牛角，也有人说是羊角，叫起来声音洪亮威武，像是狗叫。*[18]
>
> *The Jiao, a creature that brought good tidings wherever it roamed on Jade Mountain alongside Queen Mother of the West, was a large canine with spots on the fringes of a thick coat. Sleek as a racing hound, it had long, backward-pointing horns.* [19]

In this case, the original text describes the Jiao as having leopard spots and a pair of horns-specifically, some interpret

them as ox horns, while others suggest they resemble goat horns. If the translation strictly adheres to the textual description, rendering "豹纹"as "leopard spots or markings of a leopard" and "牛角" as "horns like those of an ox" (as seen in Birrell's and Wang Hong's translations, both of which explicitly state that the Jiao has leopard markings and ox-like horns), "羊角" as "goat horns" would be linguistically accurate.

However, as previously discussed, Goldblatt's translation is based on the illustrated version of *Shan Hai Jing*, where the visuals play a crucial role in interpretation. When producing the English version, Goldblatt frequently takes into account the illustrations alongside the text.

In the illustration of the Jiao (see **Figure 3**), the leopard spots are not distinctly prominent, and the horns are ambiguous, neither clearly ox-like nor goat-like. Given the fuzzy boundary between ox horns and goat horns, and the fact that the illustration does not depict a pair of unmistakably typical ox horns or goat horns, the translator opts to omit the category modifiers (leopard, ox, goat) and instead uses the more general terms "spot" and "horn".

Figure 3. Jiao.

Regarding the horns, he provides a detailed description of their appearance, allowing target readers to form a vivid mental image without being distracted by taxonomic classification. This approach also avoids potential discrepancies between the translation and the accompanying illustration.

Another example is the introduction of 嚣 (Ao):

> *这里有一种怪鸟，名叫嚣。它的样子像一种名叫"夸父"的猿猴，长着两对翅膀和狗的尾巴，只有一只眼睛，而且是长在脸的正中间。虽然长得怪，但叫声悦耳动听，如同鹊鸟。*[18]
>
> *Resembling the legendary Kuafu, who chased the blazing sun to ease the misery of the people below, it possessed two sets of wings and the tail of a dog. A single eye dotted the center of its head. Despite its unusual physical characteristics, it had a melodic, pleasant call.*[19]

In this case, the original text describes that Ao's form resembles a kind of ape called "Kuafu" and its call is like a magpie's. However, the ape image of Kuafu is not familiar to ordinary Western readers, as Western adaptations of Chinese myths primarily highlight the story of "Kuafu chasing the sun", rarely emphasizing his "ape-like" physical appearance. Maybe, in most Western readers' cognitive framework, Kuafu has the presence of a man, just like the illustration in the part of Kuafu. To avoid unnecessary cognitive conflicts, the translator omits the category of "ape". Furthermore, the original text tells that Ao's call is melodious like that of a magpie. In Chinese culture, the magpie is a definitive symbol of good fortune, joy, and marital bliss (e.g., "magpie calls herald happiness", "magpies form the bridge for the Cowherd and Weaver Girl"). Its cheerful chirping is considered melodious, embodying positivity. In stark contrast, the English "magpie" carries far more ambiguous and predominantly negative connotations. While some associate it with intelligence and curiosity, the bird is more frequently linked to ill omens, viewed as a thief or harbinger of death in

Scottish folklore, and its "shiny object hoarding" behavior is metaphorically tied to greed or distractibility (e.g. "magpie mind" for scattered attention). Its loud, repetitive calls are often described as grating, symbolizing annoyance rather than celebration. This stark divergence in symbolic meaning makes direct translation of Chinese "鹊鸟" as "magpie" culturally inappropriate, and brings cognitive mismatch in the minds of Western readers. Therefore, the translator directly omits the subordinate category "鹊鸟".

In some other cases, the category is omitted to avoid redundancy. For example, when introducing "犭婴 如 (Yingru)":

> *在这里有一种叫犭婴 如的怪兽，它的外形像鹿，长着白色的尾巴，可它前面的两只脚是人的手，后面两只脚则是马的蹄…*[18]
>
> *Running wild through the forest was a stately, fleet-footed, white-tailed deer called the Yingru, whose tail more closely resembled a horse's and whose front legs ended in human hands with long, tapered fingers, while uncloven hooves tipped the rear legs.*[19]

In this case, the description of Yingru's horse hooves is omitted in the English text. When describing Yingru's tail, the translator adds that its tail resembled a horse's, associating this animal with the horse. To avoid repeated association, when rendering its hooves, the translator omits the category "horse". This omission will not blur the hooves' category attribution, as the illustration clearly shows the horse hooves (see **Figure 4**). Moreover, omitting the category word "horse" and adding the modifier "uncloven", the English description can highlight the distinctive feature of Yingru's hooves.

Figure 4. Yingru.

4.3. Category Shifts

Apart from direct retention and omission of the original categories, in Goldblatt's translation of *Shan Hai Jing*, there are also many instances of category shifts, which involve the shift between categories, category members (including category prototypes), and category levels, quite conforming to the recategorization model proposed by Xiao and Wen [3].

4.3.1. Shift between Categories

In *Shan Hai Jing*, in most cases, the original text clearly states the category attribution of these mystical animals or what other animals they look like, or what other animals' body parts they have. However, in the illustrations, the category attribution of these animals is not always so clear. Because of the fuzziness of the category boundary, if the image does not show the prototypical features of a category, it is likely that the viewers will perceive it as a member of another category. Therefore, when translating the text, the translator, likely influenced by the illustrations or considering the possible response of his target readers, replaces the original category with another category that may be viewed as more aligned with the visual images. A typical example is the translation of 鰼鰼鱼 (Xixiyu):

> *这种鱼的头尾还都是鱼的样子，但却生着鹊鸟身体，而且还长了五对翅膀，翅膀的一端长有鳞片。*[18]
>
> *The Xiao River originated on Zhuoguang shan, three hundred fifty li north of Jiaoming shan, and was home to the Xixi, a slim hybrid creature with the head and body of a fish, five sets of winged fins and a hooked avian beak.*[19]

The original text tells that Xixiyu has the body of a

magpie with five pairs of wings, while the English version describes that it has the body of a fish with five sets of winged fins. Here, "magpie" is changed into another category "fish", and "wings" are changed into "fins" to comply with the fish body. This shift may result from the influence of the illustration (See **Figure 5**), from which, the body is more like that of a fish rather than a bird. In the illustration, the scales, and a fish tail show a typical fish body, and the appendages resemble fish gills or pectoral fins, rather than avian wings. From a semiotic perspective, the iconic dominance of the fish body in the image triggers a translational accommodation. The illustrator's choice to emphasize piscine features (e.g., scales, fin placement) creates a visual contradiction with the text's avian description. To resolve this cognitive dissonance, the translator resorts to the shift between categories to negotiate between text, image, and cognition. However, without the influence of the picture, both Wang Hong and Birrell translate this part literally as "look like a magpie"[20,21].

Figure 5. Xixiyu.

A similar example is 兕 (Si):

在舜帝陵寝的东边，湘水的南岸，生活着一种叫兕的猛兽。它的形状像牛…[18]

A ferocious animal called a Si lived on the southern bank of the Xiang River, just east of the burial site of the legendary ruler Shun. Built like a modern-day rhinoceros….[19]

In this case, the original text relates "Si" to "牛", while the English version states that it is like a rhinoceros. The ox and rhinoceros belong to different categories, although they have some similarities in their appearance. The text tells it is like an ox, but the illustration presents it more like a rhinoceros (See **Figure 6**). First, the picture shows a single, robust horn, rising vertically from the forehead center with longitudinal ridges, which mirrors the Indian rhinoceros's iconic unbranched horn, unlike the cattle's branched, slender horns. Moreover, its rounded, stocky torso with gentle shoulder-to-hip contours and stout, powerful limbs align with rhinoceroses' compact, weight-bearing build, contrasting with the cattle's slender limbs and streamlined frame. Further, the creature in the picture sports a short, thick tail without a tuft, a trait matching rhinoceroses, whereas the cattle have long, bushy tails with distinct tufts. In addition to its appearance, in Western culture, the rhinoceros is also a symbol of a mythical beast. Therefore, the translator makes this shift between the two categories, making the target text more aligned with the target readers' cognition of this strange animal. However, without the reference to the picture, both Wang Hong and Birrell relate "Si" to "ox"[20,21], a very conventional rendition of the source text.

Figure 6. Si.

Sometimes, if the translator wants to highlight the mythical or unusual attributes of the animals, he will also render one category with another. For example, in two cases, the translator describes "兽" as "apparition" to highlight the specific mystical or supernatural qualities of animals.

In the translation of plant terms, this kind of category shift can also be identified. For example, in the description of 钦原 (Qinyuan):

> *但凡被钦原蜇过的，鸟兽当下即死，草木瞬间枯萎。*[18]
>
> *Even flowers and weeds were not exempt from the Qinyuan's deadly poison; a mere few drops made them wither and die.*[19]

In this case, the "草木" in the original text is rendered as "flowers and weeds", terms of different categories. This shift may also result from the influence of the illustration. The illustration (See **Figure 7**) prominently features a withered red flower near the sting of Qingyuan, creating a direct connection between the withering of flowers and Qingyuan's sting. Moreover, grasses are absent from the image, and the tree shows no signs of withering, so to make the text more consistent with the picture, the translator makes such a category shift. Unlike Goldblatt, both Wang Hong and Birrell, without the influence of the picture, translate this part as "If it stings trees, they will all perish"[20] and "When it stings trees they wither"[21] respectively. As the source text of their translation is the classical version "蠚木则枯", there is no mention of "草" in their translations.

Figure 7. Qinyuan.

4.3.2. Shift between Category Members

In *Shan Hai Jing*, the author usually relates the mythical beings to the animals at the basic category level for cognitive efficiency. However, in some cases, the subordinate categories are also used. As it is well known, subordinate categories typically provide more granular distinctions within a parent category, while exhibiting greater cultural specificity. Consequently, category members defined at this level often demonstrate that limited cross-cultural recognizability, that is, entities classified as subordinate categories in one cultural system may be entirely unfamiliar or conceptually hard to perceive in another. Therefore, when translating the members of a subordinate category in the original text, if it is unfamiliar to the target readers and may bring cognitive difficulties, the translator is likely to replace it with another member of the upper category to reduce the cognitive load of the target readers. For example, when introducing 鴸 (Zhu):

> *这山上有一种名叫鴸的鸟，它长得像鹞鹰，但爪子却是人手的样子。*[18]
>
> *Closely resembling a sparrow hawk, the Zhu had human hands and slender fingers in place of talons.*[19]

The original text tells that Zhu looks like a kite, while the English version replaces it with a sparrow hawk. Both of them are subordinate members of Accipitridae. Here, the translator makes a shift between the category members. The reason may be that sparrow hawks are significantly more familiar and recognizable to Western readers than kites. Firstly, sparrow hawks are widely distributed across Eurasia and North America, with certain species (e.g., the American kestrel, Falco sparverius) being common urban raptors frequently observed in parks, farmlands, and other human-modified landscapes[22]. In contrast, kites primarily inhabit wetlands and grasslands-often remote or less

accessible environments-which limits Western observers' encounters with them[23]. Therefore, to replace the kite with a sparrow hawk is more likely to invoke the target readers' immediate imagination of this bird and facilitate their perception and understanding.

Another example can be identified in the translation of 羽人 (Yuren):

靠食用鸾鸟的蛋为生。[18]

They fed on the eggs of such fabled birds as the phoenix. [19]

In this case, the translator replaces Luanniao with phoenix. Both Luanniao and phoenix are subordinate members of the bird with similar symbolic meanings in Chinese mythology. In Western literature, the phoenix is also a well-established cultural icon, but there is no corresponding image of Luaniao in Western culture. In other words, as to Luanniao, there exists a cognitive gap between English culture and Chinese culture. While in this case, the major purpose is to introduce Yuren, not Luaniao, and the presence of Luaniao is to help the readers understand Yuren's unique diet. Therefore, to reduce cognitive load for target readers[24], the translator replaces "鸾鸟" with "phoenix", which proves to be a cognitively efficient strategy that leverages Western mythological familiarity to ensure comprehension. However, this approach risks homogenizing Chinese mythology into Western frameworks[25]. Meanwhile, the cultural information represented by Luanniao is lost. Just like the rendering of the plant term "薰华草" as "morning glory", this cultural simplification not only flattens the source text's cultural distinctiveness but also diminishes the poetic resonance integral to *Shan Hai Jing's* ancient worldview.

The practice of substituting unfamiliar source-culture category members with prototypical target-culture counterparts is a typical case of domestication, a translation strategy prioritizing immediate comprehensibility for target readers. While this approach mitigates cognitive barriers, it risks obliterating cultural specificity and flattening exoticism. Therefore, this kind of shift should be cautiously applied. If the cultural meaning of the original object is of paramount importance, it is advisable to adopt foreignization to preserve the original image. Transliteration paired with annotations emerges as a pragmatic strategy, particularly in a multimodal translation context, wherein visual scaffolding (e.g.illustrations) alleviates the strangeness of entities and linguistic terms while preserving their symbolic integrity. This hybrid approach, aligning with intersemiotic complementarity, can ensure cross-cultural intelligibility without sacrificing the source text's cultural essence.

4.3.3. Shift between Category Prototypes

The shift between category prototypes, a strategic substitution of a source culture's prototypical category member with a target culture's more culturally resonant counterpart, is rarer in the translation of animal terms but more evident in plant terms. For instance, the Chinese medicinal and symbolic plant "桂树 (Cinnamomum cassia)", deeply embedded in Chinese cultural narratives, is rendered as "laurel tree" in Howard Goldblatt's English translation. While both belong to the Lauraceae family, they represent distinct cultural prototypes:

In Chinese contexts, "桂树" is prototypical of auspiciousness, immortality and divine connection, as its appearance in the tale of *Wu Gang Chopping the Cassia Tree* and Chinese idiom 蟾宫折桂 (Changong Zhe Gui, to pluck osmanthus in the Moon Palace, symbolizing success in the imperial examination).

In English contexts, the laurel tree is the quintessential Lauraceae representative, emblematic of victory (laurels in sports/honorifics), poetic tradition (Poet Laureate), and classical mythology (Apollo's wreath).

Goldblatt's translation of "桂树" as "laurel tree" is thus a tactic act of intercultural mediation. By invoking the laurel's Western cultural primacy, he bridges the gap between the source text's mythic resonance and target readers' associative frameworks.

4.3.4. Shift between Category Levels

In the original text of *Shan Hai Jing*, the author usually explicitly categorizes mythical beings by labeling them as "兽" "鱼" "鸟" and "蛇" etc., or describes them as having the forms or body parts of other animals. While some of these terms, such as "鱼、鸟、蛇", have direct English equivalents at the same category level, others like "牛" |and "羊" lack precise basic-level category terms in English due to cultural differences. Even when superficially equivalent terms exist in two languages, such as "兽" and "beast", they often carry distinct cultural connotations and are not truly equivalent. All these phenomena, added by the fuzzy boundary between the categories, complicate translation, making it

nearly impossible to achieve a one-to-one equivalent transfer between Chinese and English. To address this, the shift between category levels, that is, rendering the terms with their superordinate category terms or subordinate category terms becomes a feasible choice. This is also the category shift employed with the highest frequency in Goldblatt's translation of *Shan Hai Jing*.

(1)The Shift to Superordinate Category

The most typical example of rendering the terms with their superordinate terms is the translation of "兽". From the statistics in **Table 1**, it can be seen that in the original text of *Shan Hai Jing*, the term "兽" is used with high frequency to refer to mythical beings, encompassing a broad spectrum of creatures-both real and supernatural. However, in Goldblatt's English translation, the literal equivalent "beast" appears only 11 times, suggesting a deliberate avoidance of this term. Instead, the translator relies predominantly on the superordinate terms "creature" (most frequent) and "animal", which carry broader semantic ranges than "兽". Similarly, in Wang Hong's and Birrell's translations of *Shan Hai Jing*, beast is seldom used. Instead, in their translations, animal is used with high frequency.

This strategic shift between category levels may result from the differences in cultural connotations between English and Chinese terms. While "兽" in classical Chinese carries a neutral-to-mythical tone (encompassing both real and fantastical beasts), "beast" in English often bears negative connotations (savage, brutal, or demonic). For example, biblical or medieval European "beasts" (e.g., the Beast of Revelation) are typically symbols of evil, whereas "兽" in *Shan Hai Jing* includes benevolent or neutral entities, such as many auspicious animals like Lushu, Jiao and Tianma etc. "Creature", by contrast, is culturally neutral in English, accommodating both natural and supernatural beings without implying ferocity. Animal is also a neutral term with wide coverage of meaning. Thus, using "creature" and "animal" can avoid the cognitive conflicts at the level of cultural association.

Using superordinate category terms for a wide coverage of meaning is also applied to the translation of plant terms, for example, in some cases, "草" is rendered as "plant", "flora", "land dwellers" instead of "grass". Similarly, in Wang Hong's and Birrell's translations, "plant" is predominantly used. While "草"broadly corresponds to "grass" in botanical terms, its usage in everyday or literary contexts often blurs boundaries with other low-lying vegetation, such as shrubs or forbs, which share similar growth habits (e.g., short stature, ground coverage) but belong to distinct botanical categories. This taxonomic vagueness-compounded by cultural perceptions of "草" as a catch-all for non-woody, land-dwelling plants—creates challenges for precise translation. Therefore, category shift is a feasible means to preserve the potential wide meanings of the Chinese term.

Moreover, using superordinate category terms can avoid further fine-grained categorization of hybrid beings. In many cases, precisely classifying the hybrids in *Shan Hai Jing* is challenging. Due to their hybrid nature, different individuals may assign them to varying categories-some might identify them as birds, others as fish or beasts. When cultural backgrounds differ, such discrepancies become even more pronounced. In such instances, employing superordinate terms proves to be an appropriate solution.

For example, the creature 鯥 (Lu), which combines features of birds, beasts, fish, and snakes, is classified as a fish in the original text. However, some readers might categorize it as a beast. By using a superordinate term, such as Goldblatt's translation, "a water creature"—this ambiguity can be effectively avoided.

In this way, the use of superordinate terms is helpful to preserve the text's interpretive flexibility, which resonates with the *Shan Hai Jing*'s inherent polysemy, inviting iterative reinterpretations across eras.

Compared with "animal", Goldblatt prefers the use of "creature" (53 times in the English version), which may also reflect his literary adaptability across genres. This term appears frequently in Western fantasy and mythological literary works (e.g. Tolkien's "Middle-earth" and Rowling's *Harry Potter*), so the use of this term in *Shan Hai Jing* can connect this Chinese classic with Western fantastical storytelling, making this work resonate more easily with contemporary English readers.

Despite the advantages of the use of superordinate terms, this approach will inevitably sacrifice taxonomic precision. Anyhow, the loss is often mitigated by the translator's detailed description of the creatures and the illustrations, which can reconstruct the creatures' visual and behavioral traits, bridging the gap between generic terms and specific entities.

(2) The Shift to Subordinate Category

In addition to relying on the superordinate terms, rendering the basic-level category with subordinate terms is also very common in Goldblatt's translation of *Shang Hai Jing*. This kind of shift is often employed when in the target language there is no corresponding category level for the original category, such as "牛" and "羊". For these basic level category terms, there are only superordinate terms and subordinate terms in English. When translating them, the translator has no other choice but to make category shifts. However, the selection of the subordinate terms is not so easy when there is no detailed description of the attributes of the entities. Take "羊" for example. From **Table 1**, it can be found that three English subordinate terms of "羊" are used in Goldblatt's translation. They are "goat, ram, sheep". In the original text, the author often just tells that some mythical animals look like "羊", without further explanation of what kind of "羊" they look like, which makes it difficult to identify the subordinate English term for "羊". For example, when translating "土蝼", the original text just states that "这土蝼外形如羊". If the translation is made only based on this description, the target text may be diverse. This is why Birrell translates it as "ram"[21], Wang Hong translates it as "sheep"[20], while Goldblatt translates it as "goat". As we all know, the three subordinate members of "羊" are diverse in appearance, habitat and cultural association, which can help the translator to make a choice. However, the original classical text based on which Birrell and Wang Hong produce their English versions does not give this type of information, while the source text of Goldblatt's translation, the vernacular version, gives more information than the original classical one. The vernacular version explains:

> *这土蝼外形如羊，但比羊多长了一对角，并且比羊要凶残得多，不但吃人，而且但凡被它撞过的动物，都会当场死亡，无一幸免。*
> *[The Tulu resembles a yang but grows two extra horns (four in total), and is far more ferocious. It devours humans, and any creature struck by its horns dies instantly without exception.]*[18]

This explanation tells that Tulou is ferocious, which is more closely related to the goat's character trait, followed by the ram, and the sheep does not have this trait. Therefore, Goldblatt renders it as "goat", and this choice may be further confirmed by the illustration (see **Figure 8**). The picture clearly presents Tulou's resemblance to a goat. First, its body structure, with slender limbs and a robust torso, matches a goat's posture when foraging or alert in nature, showing the typical stability and agility of goat-like animals. The curved, textured horns are a signature of the Capra genus; many wild goats, like the Siberian ibex, have such horns for mating fights and defense, highly matching a goat's horn shape. Finally, its short, relatively smooth fur resembles a wild goat's, unlike a sheep's thick, curly wool. In contrast to Goldblatt's translation, which is grounded in non-verbal cues and contextual specifics, Wang Hong's choice to render it as "sheep" appears more arbitrary, while Birrell's choice of "ram" is also close to the image of Tulou, which may result from Birrell's in-depth study of this creature.

Figure 8. QTulou.

This case demonstrates that when translating an unfamiliar entity whose textual description lacks explicit categorical attribution, translators may infer its subordinate category based on contextual clues. If the text alone provides insufficient information, visual aids (e.g. images) can serve as critical supplementary resources. This highlights the pivotal

role of multimodal elements, particularly images, in disambiguating implicit or ambiguous textual meanings, thereby improving translation accuracy.

Furthermore, in multimodal translation, translators must systematically integrate information from both text and images to ensure coherence between the target text and visual content. Failure to do so may lead to cognitive dissonance or misinterpretation among target readers. This alignment challenge might explain why Goldblatt's translation exhibits significant deviations from other English versions, as his approach to reconciling textual and visual information likely differs from conventional methods.

5. Conclusions

Translation is not just a linguistic transfer, but also a cognitive activity. Owing to cross-cultural variations in cognitive frameworks, cognitive shifts in translation are inevitable, particularly when dealing with classical texts, which are imbued with culture-specific entities and reflect the ancient worldview of their originating culture. Among various types of cognitive shifts in translation, recategorization through category shifts is the most prominent, as categorization is the basic way people perceive and understand the world. A case in point is Goldblatt's translation of the illustrated *Shan Hai Jing*. When dealing with the animal and plant terms, the translator, combined the original text (the vernacular annotations) with the illustrations, apart from retaining and omitting the original category, adopts flexible shifts between categories, category members and category levels. These shifts, which are made out of the translator's full consideration of the target readers' cognitive frameworks and the coherence between the target text and the illustrations, as well as the inherent interpretation flexibility of *Shan Hai Jing*, help to produce a new canon in English that can be well-understood by Western readers. Despite the loss of some cultural information and classification precision, these category shifts clarify unnecessary ambiguities, avoid cognitive conflicts, reduce the target readers' difficulties in understanding unfamiliar entities from another culture, and preserve the openness of the original text. Although this study has limitations in its sample size and research objects (focusing solely on animal and plant terms), the rich cases of category shifts, their translation effects, and the various factors behind their use will definitely shed light on translating similar texts with abundant culture-specific terms.

Funding

This study is supported by Chongqing Normal University's Talent Introduction Project "Research on Multimodal Translation in the Digital Era (202009000441)."

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created in this study. The data used in this research were collected and compiled by the author. Due to the nature of the research, the data are not publicly available. However, the data can be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the valuable contributions of the two reviewers, whose rigorous evaluations and expert recommendations enhanced the clarity, validity, and academic rigor of this work.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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