

The Reincarnation of Phantasms from the Chinese Studio: Georges Soulié De Morant's English Translation of *Liaozhai* *Zhiyi* as Translational Reconstruction and the Other

Yadi Wang

(School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Wuhan University, China)

ABSTRACT : *Georges Soulié de Morant's 1913 English translation of Liaozhai Zhiyi (Strange Stories from the Lodge of Leisures) highlights the complexities of translation. Framed by Itamar Even-Zohar's Polysystem Theory, this study moves beyond the binary opposition of source text and target text to investigate the generative mechanism of the translated text as a functional sign within the target culture. The nature of Soulié de Morant's version is effectively a creative translational practice dominated by the translator. Through systematic strategies of addition, omission, and rewriting, Soulié de Morant intensified the phantasmagorical qualities of the text, deliberately crafting a divergence from Chinese reality. His operations of cultural metonymy shaped a distinct, "otherworldly" version of Liaozhai. The reception logic of this translation demonstrates that when a literary system is at a turning point, the selection of source texts for (pseudo) translation, the translation strategies employed, and the value of the translated work are all in interactive dialogue with the target culture.*

KEYWORDS - *Liaozhai zhiyi, Soulié de Morant, Pseudo translation, Creative Translation, Polysystem*

I. INTRODUCTION

Liaozhai zhiyi is one of China's most renowned collections of classical-Chinese short zhiguai tales. In 1913, the English translation of *Liaozhai zhiyi* by the French diplomat in China George Soulié de Morant (1878–1955), published under the title *Strange Stories from the Lodge of Leisures*, was issued respectively by Houghton Mifflin in New York and by Constable & Company Ltd in the United Kingdom; the two editions are identical except that the British edition includes two pages of publisher advertisements for other books. Soulié's volume was the second standalone book in the history of English translations of *Liaozhai*; in the preface he states that this book consists of selected stories translated from Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi*.

At present, however, Chinese scholars have found it difficult to reach a definitive conclusion regarding the translation category of this volume. Li Haijun has demonstrated through research that among the twenty-five stories in the book, five do not appear in *Liaozhaizhiyi* and thus constitute pseudo-translations. Subsequently, Li Haijun and Jiang Fengmei argue that Soulié carried out extensive rewriting when translating the *Liaozhai* stories; therefore, the volume is "creative writing under the name of translation": he essentially created on the basis of the original plots, performing creative work through such means as merging stories and adding descriptions. By contrast, Wang Wenqiang maintains that Soulié's *Liaozhai* is not "pseudo-translation," but rather that because the translator substantially adapted certain pieces, the source base (*diben*) becomes difficult to identify. Wang suggests that the translator very likely conflated *Liaozhaizhiyi* with similar Classical Chinese

tales of the supernatural (zhiguai fiction); in addition to selecting from *Liaozhai zhiyi*, the sources used may also have included *Jiandengxinhua*, *Kechuangxianhua*, *Nü Liaozhai zhiyi*, and *Zi buyu*.

Toury defines pseudo-translation as follows: “[pseudo-translation] is texts which have been presented as translations with no corresponding source texts in other languages ever having existed—hence no factual ‘transfer operations’ and translation relationships.” André Lefevere argues that pseudo-translation is a translation lacking an original, or more precisely, “[a] pseudo translation is a translation for which there is no original, or rather, a text that purports to be a translation while actually being an original.” Xu Jun holds that a pseudo-translated work is in fact a work that does not rely on any source text but is self-created by the author; it lacks the necessary prerequisite of translation—namely, that it be transformed from a specific source text.

Despite differences in phrasing, these definitions all indicate that in pseudo-translation the source text has become irrelevant; what matters is the pseudo-translated text itself. Toury argues that what makes a translation crucial is that it is “as facts of the culture that would host them”: some texts appear in the guise of translation, and the concept of translation and the related realities are endowed with specific functions in that culture; more importantly, these functions are accepted and recognized by members of that culture.

There is no doubt that this version of *Liaozhai zhiyi* diverges greatly from the Pu Songling text commonly circulated today, making it difficult to distinguish among translation, pseudo-translation, and creation. The pursuit of aesthetic effect in writing may drive the translator’s attention to the source text down to a minimum, such that translation can become a means to achieve creative ends. This study does not aim to discuss the binary relationship between the translated text and the original; rather, it focuses on the cultural function of the translation as an independent text. Specifically, it foregrounds Soulié as the agent of artistic re-creation and examines how the translation was accepted and endowed with meaning in the target culture, thereby revealing the cultural logic behind translation—namely, the ways the English-speaking world has viewed China.

II. MOTIVATION FOR TRANSLATION: PRACTICE IN A MODERNIST CONTEXT

George Soulié de Morant became acquainted early in life with Judith Gautier (1845–1917), who was passionate about Chinese language and culture. With Gautier’s help, Soulié began studying Chinese. In the early twentieth century, he became a diplomat stationed in China.

Gautier’s best-known work is *Le livre de Jade* (*The Book of Jade*), first published in 1867. Upon publication it attracted a large European readership with its poetic themes of an ancient Eastern country and its highly refined aesthetic artistry. The book presented itself as a French translation of classical Chinese poetry; in reality, most poems in the collection are not translations in the strict sense, but creations produced by Gautier through imaginative elaboration based on common themes, images, or even a single word in Chinese classical poems.

Soulié’s Chinese proficiency was excellent, and he likely knew that *The Book of Jade* contained extensive rewriting and pseudo-translation. Yet in 1912—one year before his *Liaozhai* translation appeared—Soulié praised Gautier’s translation skills in *Essai sur la littérature chinoise* (Essay on Chinese Literature): “...nous ne connaissons qu’une traduction réellement belle des poèmes chinois, le Livre de Jade de Mme Judith Gautier, qui, à la conscience et la fidélité dans la traduction, a su joindre l’expression poétique du sentiment: elle a vu et fait voir tout ce que les poèmes contenaient de beauté et de délicatesse...” And at the same time he seemed to defend the inaccuracies and pseudo-translations in *The Book of Jade*: “Les traductions, toujours traîtresses (traducteur traditore, disent les Italiens), sont particulièrement décevantes lorsqu’ils’agit de poésie. En employant une autre langue, tous les effets du rythme et de la sonorité disparaissent; il ne reste que l’idée poétique.”

Not coincidentally, the Italian proverb Soulié cites—“traduttore, traditore” (“translation is betrayal”)—appears both here and in the preface to his *Liaozhai* translation. Gautier’s *The Book of Jade* itself mixes translation, creation, and pseudo-translation. Given Soulié’s enthusiastic praise of *The Book of Jade* and the translation-theoretical views revealed in his commentary, it is possible that when translating *Liaozhai zhiyi* he also drew on Gautier’s methods for translating Chinese poetry.

For Soulié, the process of literary translation was comparable to creation. He argues: "...pour la comprendre, en dehors de toute connaissance des textes, il faut être déjà poète: pour la modeler de nouveau, il faut être aussi grand poète et aussi parfait littérateur que l'auteur même que l'on traduit." If this proposition applies to novel translation, then the translator's talent for fiction writing and literary cultivation must be comparable to that of a novelist. Soulié firmly believed that he understood the themes involved in *Liaozhai zhiyi*; he was familiar with "all the superstitions of the lower classes, with all the splendid mental and intellectual training of the learned." Creatively translating Liaozhai stories and mixing his own creation into the translated text gave Soulié an opportunity to display his talent for fiction-writing. This may explain why Li Haijun and Jiang Fengmei judge his Liaozhai translation to be free creation under the name of translation.

However, Soulié was French, and most of his works were written in French. His motivation for translating Liaozhai into English in particular can be explored by comparing *The Book of Jade* with France's influence on Imagism at the time.

After publication, *The Book of Jade* was enthusiastically received in European literary circles, at a moment when Romanticism was flourishing. Romanticism opposed rigid conformity and advocated innovation. The Chinese American scholar Pauline Yu regards Gautier as belonging to the generation of Symbolist and Imagist poets, arguing that Gautier began with the intention of translating classical Chinese poetry but ultimately succeeded in turning the collection into an artwork. Yu argues that *The Book of Jade* not only made a notable contribution to French literature but also served as a principal medium through which nineteenth-century Chinese poetry entered Europe. The American poet Kenneth Rexroth (1905–1982) pointed out that *The Book of Jade* inspired Imagist poets such as Amy Lowell, Witter Bynner, and Ezra Pound, prompting them to play important roles in translating classical Chinese poetry into English. Pound's *Cathay* is undoubtedly the most famous example. *Cathay* was produced on the basis of manuscripts by the American Japanologist Ernest Fenollosa, a scholar of Japanese art and Sino-Japanese cultural exchange, while Pound's Chinese proficiency at the time was close to nonexistent. Thus, *Cathay* is not a literal translation of Chinese poetry; nevertheless, it has been venerated as an important work and helped establish Pound's reputation as a leading modernist and Imagist poet.

The crisis of Western poetics gave rise to Symbolism, and its interest in Chinese poetry in fact served to resolve its own problems: both translation selection and translation methods were mobilized toward that end. Pound's *Cathay* follows the same logic: readers reconstructed Western poetic cognition through the myth of "Chinese poetry," while the problem itself remained internal to the English poetic tradition. Translation, rewriting, and at times even pseudo-translation of Chinese poetry were used to respond to problems within the Western literary tradition.

Soulié translated Liaozhai at the turn of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period the West experienced a series of social and political crises, which contributed to the emergence of modernism. Modernism was a product of this crisis, and the modernist novel formed part of the modernist movement. The modernist novel responded to the pressures of social transformation in the 1890s, and one mode of response was to challenge the realism prevalent in the novel at the time. Between 1890 and 1913, many English modernist novels appeared, including Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900), as well as D. H. Lawrence's *The White Peacock* (1911) and *The Trespasser* (1912). French novels also constituted an important component of this modernist movement; however, the first volume of Marcel Proust's modernist masterpiece *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) was not published until 1913—the same year as Soulié's *Liaozhai*.

In this context, Soulié's translation can be interpreted as an attempt to participate in experimental new modes of novel writing. At the time, most such experiments were conducted by writers using English; perhaps for this reason Soulié chose to translate Liaozhai into English rather than his native French. He employed Chinese elements to create an exotic defamiliarizing effect, both avoiding the pressures of realist social critique and injecting the novel with novel forms. This is consistent in logic with the Symbolists' appropriation of Chinese poetry to resolve the crisis of Western poetics: both practices use the imagined "Other" to repair fissures in the local literary tradition.

III. TEXTUAL TRANSFORMATION: A LIAOZHAI PHANTASMAGORIA UNDER TRANSLATION

As soon as it was published, Liaozhai almost immediately attracted the attention of the modernist writer Virginia Woolf. Her review appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* on May 1, 1913, not long after Soulié's translation came out. Woolf makes an intriguing comparison between the translated Liaozhai and English novels of the latter half of the eighteenth century: "The twenty-five stories in *Strange Stories from the Lodge of Leisure*, translated from the Chinese by George Soulié, were written in the second half of the eighteenth century by P'ou Song-Lin, at a time, that is, when with Fielding and Richardson our fiction was becoming increasingly robust and realistic. To give any idea of the slightness and queerness of these stories one must compare them to dreams, or the airy, fantastic, and inconsequent flight of a butterfly."

Woolf suggests that the Chinese stories Soulié introduced offered readers an alternative beyond Fielding and Richardson. Their works propelled the English novel toward realism—precisely what modernists sought to change. By contrast, these stories translated from Chinese were recognized by modernists and resonated with them because of their non-realistic qualities and supernatural coloring.

Soulié's decision to translate Liaozhai stories may have aimed to demonstrate the possibility of novel writing that transcends realism, since Liaozhai, as a collection of zhiguai tales, stands in opposition to realism. Of course, many stories in Liaozhai contain extensive social critique by the author, and Soulié sometimes omitted such realist elements in translation. Take his changes in translating "Wang Shi (The River of Sorrows)" as an example. The original tells how Wang Shi, smuggling salt across the border, is mistakenly seized by underworld messengers; detained in the underworld, he witnesses the King of Hell judging tyrannical officials and unscrupulous merchants, and when tasked with overseeing an engineering project he takes the opportunity to punish salt merchants in the human world, exposing their monopoly pricing and collusion with officials. In the Chinese original, Pu Songling's proxy commentator "Yishishi" offers a lengthy, incisive critique of officialdom and of the oppression of common people by greedy salt merchants, and also mentions a real historical figure, the Zichuan county magistrate Zhang Shinian, for his just judgment; yet in Soulié's translation this critique and the realist narration disappear entirely.

Pu Songling's movement between dreams, illusions, and reality makes non-realistic spaces central to Liaozhai. The illusory spaces in Liaozhai has been praised as "range beyond the heavens in imaginative flight". However, the illusory quality Woolf reads from the Liaozhai tales stems not only from the Chinese original but also from Soulié's deliberate construction. He often adds scenic description not found in the Liaozhai original, and these additions frequently create an uncanny atmosphere. For example, when translating "Wang Shi," Soulié adds the following sentence before the story begins: "Along the path leading to the city of All-virtues, in the obscure night, a poor coolie, grumbling under a heavy load of salt, was trudging on as fast as he could."

The original—"高苑民王十，负盐于博兴。夜为二人所获。"—does not foreground the specific setting of "obscure night". By rendering visual vagueness and uncertainty and by conveying the character's solitude under a heavy burden, this addition proactively establishes a mysterious, oppressive, even ominous tone. It markedly heightens both the plausibility and the impact of the subsequent supernatural events, thereby shaping in the translation an illusory atmosphere more explicit than that of the original.

In another story, "Hai Gongzi (The Mysterious Island)," Soulié cleverly adapts the ending sentence of the Chinese original to enhance the sense of unreality. The tale recounts the protagonist's encounter with a snake demon on an isolated island. The original ends with "疑女子亦蛇精也", which could be directly translated as "It was suspected that the lady was a snake demon as well". Soulié translates it as: "when he spoke of his experience, he always said that, to his mind, it was the beautiful girl he had seen at first who had come again in the form of a snake." By rewriting a declarative sentence in this way, he intertwines reality and hallucination, thereby intensifying the dreamlike quality.

Soulié's first translated piece in the volume, "The Loving Ghost," has been shown by Li Wenqiang to be based on "Mudandeng Ji" in *Jiandengxinhua*. The story mainly recounts the love between the scholar Qiao and the female ghost Fu Liqing. In the latter half of the story, the two confess their sins before a Daoist priest;

the priest “呵斥良久，令其供状”，and because the two were “蝇营狗苟”“惑世诬民，违条犯法”，they are sentenced to “烧毁双明之灯，押赴九幽之狱”. This didactic passage does not appear in Soulié’s translation. Instead, the ending of “The Loving Ghost” is a sentence that echoes the Chinese source: “自后云阴之昼，月黑之宵，往往见生与女携手同行”，which Soulié translates as: “Ever since this time, on light clear nights, the passers-by often meet the two lovers entwined together, slowly walking on the road which leads to the lake.” This replaces the latter half’s moral warning about the terrible consequences of human–ghost desire with a brief sentence suffused with otherworldliness, greatly reducing the didactic tone and romanticizing this love that crosses the boundary of life and death.

At the end of her review, Woolf quotes an excerpt from “The Loving Ghost”: He went farther and farther: the moving lights were rarer; ere long he only saw before him the fire of a white lantern decorated with two red peonies. The paper globe was swinging to the steps of a tiny girl clothed in the blue linen that only slaves wore. The light behind showed the elegant silhouette of another woman, this one covered with a long jacket made in a rich pink silk edged with purple. As the student drew nearer the belated walker turned round, showing an oval face and big long eyes wherein shone a bright speck cruel and mysterious.

Woolf uses this quote to support her argument—all tales in *Strange Stories* “have a quality of fantasy and spirituality which sometimes...becomes of real beauty, and is greatly enhanced by the unfamiliar surroundings and exquisite dress.” Yet her observation derives less from the Chinese source text than from Soulié’s translation. First, the Chinese original on which “The Loving Ghost” is based is not part of the *Liaozhai zhiyi* source text Soulié claims. Second, the quoted passage stems from Soulié’s creative translation of two sentences in “Mudandeng Ji”: “游人渐稀，见一丫鬟，挑双头牡丹灯前导，一美人随后，约年十七八，红裙翠袖，婷婷袅袅...生于月下视之，韶颜稚齿，真国色也。”

A comparison between the English passage and the Chinese original shows that environmental description such as “moving lights” and the “bright speck” in the eyes is either nowhere to be found in the Chinese, while costume descriptions such as “blue linen” and “a long jacket made in a rich pink silk edged with purple” reflect Soulié’s adaptations through added detail.

Woolf further uses this depiction to argue that “the atmosphere of these little stories is so queer and inverted.” Yet the very elements that make the excerpt “queer and inverted”—for example, “[t]he paper globe...swinging to the steps of a tiny girl” and “big long eyes wherein shone a bright speck cruel and mysterious”—have no counterpart in the “Mudandeng Ji” original.

In his preface, Soulié claims: “a true translation will be the one that, though sometimes materially inexact, will give the reader the same impression he would have if he were reading the original text.” The kind of transparency the translator intends to establish between the translated text and its readers corresponds to what Lawrence Venuti defines as domestication. Ironically, however, as a modernist experimental method, the domestication strategies Soulié adopts—omission, addition, rewriting, or free adaptations—shape Chinese literature into an image sharply different from British realism, thereby contributing to modernism’s need to rebel against traditional forms. Thus, the illusory quality of *Liaozhai*, like the willow pattern on a porcelain plate, does not constitute a threatening “Other” for the modernist Woolf. On the contrary, she praises this “Other” precisely because of the difference, arguing that Chinese literature’s surreal qualities—such as characters moving freely between life and death and between worlds—break the constraints of Western reality: “They skim from world to world, from life to death. The people they describe may kill each other and die, but we cannot believe either in their blood or in their dissolution. The barriers against which we in the West beat our hands in vain are for them almost as transparent as glass.”

IV. THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE SYMBOLIC POWER OF TRANSLATED LITERATURE

Soulié’s translation practice of *Liaozhai* points sharply to the cultural conditions underlying cross-cultural creative translation and pseudo-translation. Understanding this phenomenon can be grounded in the framework

of Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory. This theory views national literature as a system constituted through the dynamic interaction of "canonized" and "non-canonized" forms, in which translated literature occupies an indispensable position. Even-Zohar notes that under specific conditions translated literature can play a key role in the polysystem; one core situation is when a literature is at a turning point, in crisis, or facing a literary vacuum. At such turning points, literature originating from—or claiming to originate from—outside the crisis literature is used to address problems. Although from the late nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century Chinese literature was relatively weaker than French or British literature, turning points or needs within Western literature itself may have led to the importation of this China-derived work in order to respond to a problem or crisis internal to the target culture. The key point is that the primary driving force behind translation activity at such times is not the value of the source text itself, but rather the specific crisis conditions faced by the target culture and the perceived potential of the translation (or purported translation) to provide solutions or meet needs. In other words, the internal conditions of the target culture override any consideration of fidelity to the source text. It is precisely under such cultural drive power that extensive rewriting of the source text to fit a new context—and, in extreme cases, wholly fabricated works disguised as translations—finds fertile ground. These conditions also profoundly shape how such texts are accepted, understood, and interpreted in the target culture. Therefore, Soulié's overall practice of translational creation in *Liaozhai*, as well as Woolf's reading of the translation, should be understood within this polysystem context dominated by target-culture needs. Toury's descriptive translation studies further emphasize that it is the target culture that determines which texts are selected for translation and in what specific ways they are translated. Accordingly, analyzing Chinese novels' English pseudo-translations that reflect realities of the target-language culture can reveal the cognitive patterns and imaginings through which the English-speaking world perceived China in a specific historical period.

The modernist movement influenced the ways Soulié translated these Chinese stories, and his translation in turn shaped Woolf's perspective—an important modernist—on Chinese literature and culture. The ethereal, unreal, reality-transcending atmosphere Soulié constructs in his *Liaozhai* collection forms a strong contrast with the realism Woolf identifies in the English novel tradition. At the end of her review, Woolf compares the experience of reading *Liaozhai* stories to "trying to walk over the bridge in a willow pattern plate". The willow-pattern plate is a household object originating from China and widely popular in British society, with many examples displayed in museums; it represents a Western imagination of China and a typical symbol of difference. In fact, both Woolf and Soulié emphasize the differences between Chinese culture and their own in their discussions. For instance, in comparing *Liaozhai* with Fielding and Richardson, Woolf notes that "[Chinese people] may resemble us in their craving for something lighter... but in all else how different they are." Soulié, in the preface to his translation, similarly states that "[t]he Chinese mind is radically different from ours, and has grown, in every generation, more different by reason of a different training and a different ideal in life. The Chinese writing, moreover, has strengthened those differences." The *Liaozhai* he translated in effect highlights the difference between the English-speaking world and China.

Although a single novel and one reviewer's interpretation are not sufficient to quantify precisely the degree of influence Chinese classical fiction exerted on Western modernist fiction, the translator's practice itself is deeply revealing: the selection of texts and strategies in translation is, in essence, profoundly shaped by the cultural context of its time. The translator's choices and interpretations, made from within a particular cultural perspective, offer a lens onto the target culture's specific needs and imaginings regarding the source text. Even-Zohar's polysystem theory points out that when the target culture encounters a turning point, crisis, or literary vacuum, translated literature may come to occupy a central position. The entry of Chinese classical fiction into the English-speaking world was the outcome of a dynamic interaction with Western modernist literary currents, and such interaction constituted a key pathway through which it could be integrated into another culture's system. This does not mean, however, that all translated works can automatically play a central role in the target polysystem (Soulié's *Liaozhai* translation is a case in point); its position depends on multiple factors. It is therefore important to study which texts, and under what conditions, can successfully assume such a central role. The deepening of Sino-Western exchanges at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continually shaped Western approaches to translating traditional Chinese fiction. The case of *Liaozhai* translation shows

clearly that the cultural and literary currents of Britain at the time—an interest in exoticism, psychological depth, and the supernatural—deeply permeated the translation and intertwined with Chinese literary traditions. It is precisely this deep cultural interweaving that renders the boundaries among translation, creation, and even pseudo-translation in Soulié's version of *Liaozhai* extremely blurred. Ultimately, the image of China presented by the work is essentially a specific product generated when a British cultural perspective encountered and reconstructed traditional Chinese fiction.

V. CONCLUSION

This study, grounded in Even-Zohar's Polysystem Theory, examines George Soulié de Morant's 1913 English translation of *Liaozhai zhiyi* as a case of cross-cultural translational reconstruction. The core advantage of this research lies in moving beyond the traditional source-text-target-text binary to focus on the translation's functional role in the target cultural context, revealing the dynamic interaction between translation practice and modernist literary currents.

A key limitation is that the analysis centers on a single translation and one reviewer's response, which may not fully represent the broader reception of Chinese classical fiction in Western modernism. Future research could expand the scope to include more translations of zhiguai tales and comparative analyses of multiple Western critical responses.

Practically, this study offers insights for cross-cultural literary translation: when translating works from different cultural traditions, translators should recognize the influence of target cultural contexts and balance creative adaptation with cultural authenticity. Theoretically, it enriches the application of Polysystem Theory in the study of pseudo-translation and creative translation, providing a framework for understanding how translated literature participates in shaping target cultural discourses.

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