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Metaphorical Translation and Cultural Cognition in Mazu Texts: Insights from Sino-English Translation

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Abstract
Spiritual experiences like cultivation practices, divine manifestations and dream revelations are commonly recorded in Mazu scriptures using metaphorical and analogical language based on cognitive models. These metaphorical characteristics make the process of translation of Mazu-related texts a two-level process of metaphoric interpretation and re-conceptualization. Using the case study of *Tianfei niangma zhuan* (The Biography of the Empress of Heaven) and *Tianfei xiansheng lu* (Records of the Miracles of the Heavenly Empress), this paper explores the cognitive features of the metaphorical language of the Mazu scriptures. It posits that the use of Sino-English-which is defined as a literal translation accompanied by an interpretative annotation- can be a good approach to the translation of culturally specific religious ideas. This is not only useful in bridging conceptual gaps in intercultural communication, but also to aid in the transference and recognition of the traditional Chinese religious culture across the world.
Keywords: *Tianfei niangma zhuan*; *Tianfei xiansheng lu*; scripture translation; metaphorical cognition; Sino-English; intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

The unending development of Chinese folk beliefs has offered a robust spiritual and cultural basis of the expansion of religions. As a native religion, Taoism started as a form of Huang-Lao Daoist communities in the early Han Dynasty. Towards the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, it started to develop into systematic theocratic structures. The reformers, including Kou Qianzhi, Lu Xiujing, and Tao Hongjing, who were active during the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, accomplished much to develop Taoism. This was also accompanied by the changes in cultural identity and this was a stepping stone of Taoism into the world of cross-cultural exchange. The Tang Dynasty experienced the development of Taoism in two interrelated ways: the rise of internal alchemy and the growth of sectarian lineages. Not only did this pluralistic development create a strong philosophical and ritual framework, but it also significantly influenced the cultural identity of East Asia, making it a crucial dimension of global studies of Chinese traditional culture.

During the Liao, Song, Jin, and Western Xia periods, religious communities like Quanzhen Dao and Taiyi Dao flourished. These sects also merged after reaching a certain scale, leading to the publication of *The Orthodox Daoist Canon* (zhengtong daozang) during the Ming Dynasty, along with its supplement, *The Wanli Daoist Canon*（wanli xudaozang). The historical trajectory of Taoism's evolution from grassroots folk traditions to orthodox institutionalization, demonstrating that "without the people's belief in spirits, miracles, the

afterlife, and the principles of rewarding good and punishing evil—or their reverence for heaven and ancestors—no religion can establish a foundation for existence and identity" (Jin, 2018), reflects a dynamic process of cultural integration and systematization.

The integration of Taoism has created a tangible and practical platform for the elevation of folk beliefs. Sharing common origins, the two engage in a dynamic and mutually influential relationship. This process, however, also involves intercultural interaction, where Taoist beliefs and folk practices adapt to, and engage with, global cultural perspectives. Their distinct systems of thought and conceptual frameworks—including theories on the relationships between humans and nature, between individuals, and between humans and society—represent both a spiritual treasure of Chinese traditional culture and a valuable cultural resource for today's global context. In this sense, translation plays a key role in bridging cultural differences and fostering intercultural communication.

Historical factors and disciplinary limitations have led to the translation of Taoist and folk belief texts being largely carried out by overseas scholars. Significant translation efforts for Taoist texts began only in the early 19th century. One of the earliest translated works was *The Treatise on Response and Retribution* (taishang ganying pian). In 1816, French scholar Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat translated it into French as *Le Livre des Récompenses et des Peines*, bringing Taoist literature to the attention of European academia. These translations marked the beginning of intercultural dialogue, where Chinese religious ideas were communicated to the Western world, albeit with challenges of cultural interpretation and adaptation. Around the same time, translations of Taoist immortals' tales sparked growing interest among Sinologists in Europe and the United States.

In 1831, the French journal *Le Journal Asiatique*, published by the Société Asiatique, featured an article titled "Légende de Jésus, Selon le Chin Sian Thoung Kian" (The Legend of Jesus According to the *Shenxian Tongjian*). The story, originally titled "Maria Gives Birth to Jesus", was translated from Xu Dao's *Shenxian Tongjian* (Comprehensive Mirror of Immortals Throughout History). Over the next five decades, the study and translation of Taoist terminology progressed significantly. Some of these translations even influenced the linguistic development of Western religious discourse. These early translation narratives were framed in ways that aligned with Western conceptual frameworks.

Although Mazu's stories were less well-known, they still attracted some attention. In 1841, American missionary Elijah Coleman Bridgman published a translation titled *Sketch of Teen Fe, or Matsoo Po, the Goddess of Chinese Seamen*, based on the *Soushen Ji* (Records of Searching for the Spirits). The translation of Mazu's story was not merely a linguistic exercise but also a process of cultural negotiation, in which Western translators interpreted and reframed Chinese religious concepts for foreign audiences. Early translations of Taoist texts were largely motivated by Western missionaries' evangelistic efforts in China. The extreme differences between the Chinese and western religious systems tended to create a barrier to communication where missionaries had to translate both Taoist and folk religious writings to expose the Chinese people with their native religious practices and beliefs to the West. These were more of an intercultural translation; whereby religious texts were not only translated but also modified to international theological and philosophical contexts. It led to cherry-picking of Daoist

cosmology, immortality, and deity, sometimes to fit the Judeo-Christian views to make it easier to comprehend.

Both the ideology and religious life of China underwent massive changes by the early 20th century. Scientific rationalism and modernization undermined the traditional religious beliefs and forced folk traditions such as Mazu worship to change according to new intellectual and cultural paradigms. At this time the work of translation of religious books, with the possible exception of canonical literature such as The Analects and Zhuangzi, was virtually stalled. The decrease in translation activities was a manifestation of more general sociopolitical changes, as Chinese religious traditions were more marginalized over time in favour of modernist and secular outlook.

Nevertheless, revival of interest in Mazu culture occurred in the late 20th century, not only in China but also abroad. The International Symposium on Mazu Studies was convened in Putian in 1990 and it was the first occasion that scholars in Taiwan, United States, Japan, and elsewhere were invited. This scholarly involvement marked a pivot in the globalization of the study of Mazu, in which the religious traditions came to be regarded as an instance of intercultural exchange, rather than as a localized folk belief. At the symposium, new terms like Mazu Studies and Mazuology were coined and now a group work was about to be initiated both in domestic and foreign scholarship to construct Mazu worship into wider time, space, sociocultural, and linguistic frames academically.

German scholar Götz Werdin translated one of the classic texts of Mazu in 1992, *Records of the Miracles of the Heavenly Empress*, establishing a standard of Western scholarship on Chinese religious texts. In contrast to the previous missionary translations, whose religious subject matter was frequently re-interpreting through the prism of Western theology, the work of Werdin was more intercultural in nature and sought to provide an exact cultural reflection of the stories and spiritual practices of Mazu.

By the beginning of the 21st century, the historical and cultural value of the Mazu faith had changed significantly. The Mazu belief and practices were listed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. Such internationalisation not only solidified the cultural heritage of Mazu worship but also placed it in an international discourse of religious heritage and cultural diplomacy.

Being a worldwide intangible cultural heritage, the belief system of Mazu is no longer a localized religious practice of the Fujian region. Rather, it has come to represent maritime spiritual culture of China and a key source to be consulted on the intercultural exchange of religion. The increased presence of Mazu culture in international debates reflects the changing nature of the role played by Chinese religious traditions in cross-cultural dialogues and its possible involvement in international debates on the topic of faith, spirituality, and identity.

As a research object among foreign scholars, as a cultural product among Chinese scholars, there are intricate linguistic and cognitive problems in the translation of Mazu texts (Yue, 2018). Translating fundamental religious ideas and expressions involve serious thoughts as well as versatile accommodation, especially in the realms of abstraction of meaning, polysemy, and cultural assimilation (Li, 2002). Intercultural translation is difficult not only due to the language difference but to some underlying cognitive and philosophical differences that

define the religious language of different cultures. Even the conceptual structures inherent in the belief systems of Mazu, such as beliefs about spiritual ascension, divine intervention, and Daoist cosmology, are not always directly analogous to Western religious tradition. This leads to conceptual gaps that need innovative translation techniques to retain meaning whilst maintaining an understanding of the information to the foreign audience.

Specifically, in cases where the untranslatability of culturally specific Chinese concepts presents itself, scholars have broadly adapted to using China English, which means using a hybrid of transliteration, a literal translation, and explanatory annotations. It is a mediating method between linguistic and cultural systems enabling the preservation of major terminologies and enabling intercultural communication. Chinese English not only allows more fidelity to the original text but also enriches the linguistic diversity of the global community by bringing new cultural ideas to the English speaking language.

Based on a cultural-cognitive and intercultural perspective of communication, this research paper analyzes the translation of *Tianfei niangma zhuan* and *Tianfei xiansheng lu*, as the the case studies. It examines the cultural and symbolic message of religious discourse and discusses the use of the Chinese English as an intercultural tool in the translation of conceptual language. The study sheds light on how translation is an intercultural negotiation, by filling lexical gaps caused by the lack of equivalent cultural concepts in the target language. This is a process of not only establishing lexical innovation, but also cross-cultural understanding because it is through this process that the Chinese traditional culture is properly and clearly presented to the world.

2. Metaphorical Cognition in the Linguistic Features of Mazu Scriptures

The Ming dynasty's vernacular novel *Tianfei niangma zhuan*, comprising two volumes, is fully titled Xinke xuanfeng huguo tianfei Lin niangniang chushen jishi zhengzhuan
(Newly Carved Authentic Biography of the Nation-Protecting, Heaven-Proclaimed Lady Lin, Empress Mazu, Born to Save the World). Written by Wu Huanchu and published in 1573, this work serves as the earliest comprehensive narrative of Mazu's divine miracles(Huang, 2018). A copy of this edition is currently housed in the Shuanghongtang Collection of the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, University of Tokyo.

As one of the earliest literary works dedicated to Mazu, this text not only reflects local religious traditions but also plays a crucial role in shaping the broader cultural identity associated with Mazu worship. The novel's narrative structure, centering on her life-saving deeds and battles against demons, highlights how religious figures in Chinese culture are constructed through both historical accounts and evolving folk traditions. In the process of translation, these religious and mythological elements present significant intercultural challenges, requiring strategies that balance historical authenticity with accessibility for global audiences.

Scholars from the late Ming to early Qing periods, inspired by this novel, sought to further explore Mazu's historical origins and cultural legacy. They compiled and authored several notable records based on historical documentation and oral folklore traditions. Among these, two works stand out:

(1) *Tianfei xiansheng lu*, contributed by Lin Yaoyu and revised by the monk Zhao Cheng.
(2) *Chifeng tianhou zhi* (Chronicle of the Heaven-Bestowed Empress), compiled by Lin Qingbiao in the 43rd year of the Qianlong reign (1778).

While these texts possess greater historical and documentary value, their literary qualities are somewhat less refined than *Tianfei niangma zhuan*. Nonetheless, the transition from a fictionalized literary representation to an officially recorded historical account illustrates how Mazu worship evolved from mythic storytelling to institutionalized research and record-keeping.

Mazu scriptures primarily comprise mythologically rich narratives detailing Mazu's ascension through cultivation, dream apparitions, and semon-subduing feats. These texts are often recorded in metaphorical language, deeply embedded in Daoist and folk belief traditions. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, the study of such language emphasizes "concepts, categorization, cognition, the mind, and reasoning rooted in embodied experiences" (Cai, 2010). This perspective provides a framework for analyzing the metaphorical expressions found in Mazu texts, particularly in relation to Daoist transcendence and spiritual transformation.

A notable example is the term dan(elixir), which is commonly associated with the lingdan (elixir of life) and xiandan (immortal pill). However, in Mazu texts, the concept of dan extends beyond external alchemical substances to represent inner alchemy practices. These metaphors offer insight into the cognitive and symbolic foundations of Daoist cultivation. Yet, they also present significant challenges in intercultural translation, as Western audiences may lack a direct conceptual equivalent for these notions.

The following passage (see Appendix, Item 1) exemplifies the metaphorical richness of these texts:

English Translation:
The Daoists, seeing no trace of her, gathered their belongings and returned to report to Elder Lin. A poem serves as evidence of this event:
Born with celestial bones, destined to ascend,
The elixir perfected, rising to the ninth heaven.
Refined like a mirror, clear and bright,
Transcending like a cicada, shedding its shell in flight.
Borrowing the fruition of a nun's path,
Completing earthly bonds at last.
A Daoist temple now stands by the river's bend,
From this moment, free of worldly dust, transcendent.[1]

The first four lines of the poem describe Lin's daughter's spiritual transformation, depicting her cultivation process and ascension to immortality. Despite her mortal origins, she is portrayed as possessing celestial essence, which is fully realized through alchemical refinement. The phrase "The elixir perfected, rising to the ninth heaven" does not refer to a

[1] Unless otherwise specified, all English translations of selected works on Mazu in this article are the author's own translations.

physical elixir but rather to an internal alchemical transformation. The text employs highly visual metaphors, such as "refined like a mirror" and "transcending like cicada", to illustrate the spiritual transcendence achieved through Daoist cultivation. However, such terminology can be challenging for foreign audiences, as the distinction between waidan (external alchemy) - the consumption of physical elixirs - and neidan (internal alchemy) - the refinement of one's jing (essence), qi (energy), and shen (spirit) - may not be immediately clear. This makes the inclusion of annotations crucial in translation, ensuring that intercultural readers can differentiate between these Daoist concepts and accurately interpret their significance.

The change of exterior to interior alchemy is a historical transformation in the Daoist philosophy, especially with the emergence of Tang Dynasty Daoism. The initial Daoist rituals were the production of chemical elixirs, and most of them were toxic, in seeking immortality. As these practices declined, Daoist began to conceptualize the human body as a spiritual crucible, refining jing, qi, and shen into an internal elixir.

Moreover, since internal alchemy primarily involves individual physiological transformation and unique psychological experiences, descriptions of attaining immortality in Daoist scriptures often rely on symbolic language rather than directly naming concrete phenomena. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the mental states and cultivation practices of internal alchemists are vividly articulated through metaphor. Practitioners record their experiences by means of analogy and symbolic association, using perceptual, intuitive, and image-rich conceptual signs to express abstract meanings. This symbolic and analogical mode of thinking—employing metaphors to grasp relationships in the world—explains why much of Daoist cultivation terminology appears as esoteric or coded language.

Another example of metaphorical cognition in Mazu texts is found in Chapter 10 of *Tianfei niangma zhuan*, titled Xuan Zhen Nü meizhou huashen(The Transformation of Xuan Zhen Nü of Meizhou). This passage (see Appendix, Item 2) employs the formation of human life as an analogy to explain the Daoist concept of "sitting in forgetfulness" (*zuowang*).

In addition to alchemical terminology, much of the metaphorical language in Mazu texts vividly depicts miraculous and mystical scenes, emphasizing Mazu's divine power and the mythological essence of Chinese religious narratives. These depictions, featuring unpredictable celestial phenomena and the marvels of nature, not only emphasize the deity's mysterious power but also imbue the texts with the distinct mythological essence of Chinese culture.

For example:

(see the original Chinese text in Appendix, Item 3)

English Translation:

> The Heavenly Empress ascended directly to the highest peak of Mei Mountain. Thick clouds draped the mountain ridges, and white vapors stretched endlessly across the sky. From the heavens came faint strains of ethereal harmonies of silk and pipe, harmonizing in perfect pentatonic tones, as if echoing the grand symphony of the Celestial Sphere. Riding the wind and gliding through the mist, she floated effortlessly across the bright blue sky, luminous in the sunlight.
>
> The crowd gasped in awe and wonder, as a radiant arc—a rainbow of divine light—shone through the clouds, piercing the highest vaults of heaven. She soared

upward, lingering in the azure vastness, drifting gently above the mortal world, flickering in and out of view like a vision. Suddenly, colored clouds converged, and she was no longer seen.

The "ethereal harmonies of silk and pipe"(si guan sheng)[1]and the "radiant arc—a rainbow of divine light" (hui yao wu hong) vividly convey the majestic splendor and divine mystery surrounding Mazu's ascension.

Another example can be found in her miraculous intervention during a grain transportation crisis (see Appendix, Item 4).

English Translation:

The officials fervently prayed to the Heavenly Empress. Before their plea was complete, dark clouds swiftly gathered and veiled the sky. Amid the mist, a red-robed figure appeared overhead, surrounded by a ceremonial canopy adorned with kingfisher feathers, standing solemnly at the bow of the ship. Suddenly, a burst of flame flared atop the mast, casting a crystalline glow that arched across the sky like a rainbow.

In this passage, the imagery—a red-robed figure appeared overhead, surrounded by a ceremonial canopy adorned with kingfisher feathers (zhuyi yong cuigai)[2]and a crystalline glow that arched across the sky like a rainbow (jingguang ruhong)—heightens the sense of the supernatural and emphasizes Mazu's divine ability to command the natural world. These metaphorical expressions add depth to the narrative, evoking a sense of transcendence and reinforcing the legendary qualities of her figure.

The specific metaphorical aspects of Mazu texts may be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, metaphors are an essential element of cognition, as humans think and abstract concepts with the help of metaphors. They are dominating forces in the formation of linguistic concepts and creating human cognition. The practice of alchemy, both internal and internal, as well as the experience of communicating with celestial beings are something out of the ordinary perception. Drawing such mystical encounters to common, concrete components of daily life, the authors of Mazu texts contribute to making their readers appreciate her divine strength and miraculous actions. The authors make comparison between seemingly unrelated ideas using metaphorical thinking and express their vision of Daoist cosmology, folk mythology, and Chinese philosophy, ethics, and religion. This symbolic way of thinking leads to a variety of metaphoric expressions in the writings.

On the other hand, early Daoist philosophy - particularly the works of Laozi and Zhuangzi - profoundly influenced the development of metaphorical expressions in later religious texts. Their use of parables, parallel phrasing, and indirect discourse subtly shaped the linguistic style of Daoist scriptures.

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[1] si guan sheng, literally "sounds of silk strings and wind pipes," traditionally refers to refined classical music but here suggests otherworldly, celestial harmonies.

[2] The phrase "zhuyi yong cuigai" refers not to a person holding an object, but to a divine figure clad in red robes and attended by a regal or ritual canopy—a sign of heavenly authority or imperial processions, often richly decorated with feathers from the kingfisher bird (cuiniao), symbolizing sanctity and power.

Zhuangzi, in Qiwulun (On the Equality of Things), states:

"To use a finger to show that a finger is not a finger is not as good as using something other than a finger to show that a finger is not a finger. Using a horse to demonstrate that a horse is not a horse is less effective than using something other than a horse to show that a horse is not a horse. Heaven and earth are one finger; the ten thousand things are one horse." （Graham, 2001, p. 45）（see the original Chinese text in Appendix, Item 5）

Through this paradoxical statement, Zhuangzi highlights the tension between names and reality, prompting a deeper inquiry into the limitations of language and meaning. He further elaborates in Tiandao (The way of heaven):

"The purpose of speech is to convey ideas. But when ideas are fixed, speech ceases to be useful. If we try to convey what cannot be conveyed, what we say will be misleading." （Graham, 2001, p. 61） (see the original Chinese text in Appendix, Item 6)

The idea reinforces his belief that language is inherently inadequate in capturing absolute meaning. He expands on this in Qiushui (The autumn floods):

"What can be put into words is the coarse part of things. What can be grasped by thought is the fine part. But there is something that words cannot express, that thought cannot grasp—and we do not attempt to define it as either fine or coarse." （Graham, 2001, p. 66）（see the original Chinese text in Appendix, Item 7）

For Zhuangzi, language functions as a tool for referencing meaning, but it can never fully encapsulate the essence of what it describes.

Thus, he proposes an analogy:

"Fish traps are for catching fish; once you've got the fish, you can forget the trap. Snares are for catching rabbits; once you've got the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words are for catching ideas; once you've got the idea, you can forget the words." (Graham, 2001, p. 102)(see the original Chinese text from Waiwu [External things] in Appendix, Item 8).

Here, language is likened to a net or trap - useful for attaining meaning but ultimately disposable once understanding is achieved. Similarly, Zhuangzi argues:

"The Way is the ultimate of things; speech and silence are inadequate to express it. It is beyond both speech and silence—it is the limit of our discussion." (Graham, 2001, p. 239)(see the original Chinese text from Zeyang in Appendix, Item 9).

It is precisely because the Dao is "beyond both speech and silence"—what Zhuangzi describes as "neither speech nor silence" (Graham, 2001, p. 239)—that its transmission can only be realized through metaphorical and indirect means. As he famously notes, "Allegories make up nineteen parts, repeated sayings seventeen parts, and goblet words emerge daily, all blending with the celestial balance" (Graham, 2001, p. 145). These forms of expression—fables, reiterated phrases, and fluid, adaptive speech—embody a philosophy that transcends fixed meaning, reflecting the limitations of language in articulating ultimate truths.

Zhuangzi's philosophy of language, in its deep suspicion of linguistic fixity and its emphasis on metaphor and analogy, resonates strongly with the core tenets of modern cognitive linguistics. This convergence illustrates a profound intercultural affinity in how both Eastern and Western traditions conceive of language as a dynamic vehicle of thought and embodied experience.

Humans share similar physiological structures and sensory faculties, allowing them to perceive and interpret the material world in comparable ways. This shared cognitive foundation facilitates the development of common conceptual structures across cultures.

Mazu scriptures include descriptions of spiritual cultivation experiences such as ingesting "yellow buds" (huangya)—a metaphor for alchemical elixirs—and advancing in practice to states described as "clear as a mirror" and "shedding like a cicada." The texts also depict scenes of divine manifestations that transcend the mortal realm, as well as vivid portrayals of supernatural intrusions in the human world, such as the White Chicken Spirit (bai ji jing) described as having a "dragon topknot and crane-feathered robe" (long ji he chang)[1] . These metaphorical expressions serve as linguistic vehicles for conveying esoteric knowledge that is meant to be understood intuitively rather than explicitly articulated. By employing analogy and symbolism, Mazu texts encode both cultivation techniques and the supernatural dimensions of divine and demonic apparitions, reinforcing their distinctive metaphorical cognitive framework.

3. Metaphorization in the Translation of Mazu Texts and the China-English Model

Cognitive linguistics asserts that semantics is a conceptual process, shaped by human experience and cognitive perception of the world. According to this framework, metaphors play a fundamental role in structuring thought, allowing people to interpret and conceptualize abstract, subjective, or elusive ideas through tangible, concrete references.

Metaphors serve as a cognitive bridge, enabling one experience to be understood through another. As cognitive linguistics emphasizes, meaning is not merely linguistic but is deeply rooted in embodied experience and conceptualization (Zhao, 2001). This perspective extends to translation, which is not simply a mechanical conversion between languages but rather an active cognitive process involving both conscious, integrative reasoning and unconscious, habitual translation patterns.

Consequently, translation can be regarded as a metaphorical activity, mirroring the fundamental function of metaphor itself. When translating the metaphor-laden language of Mazu texts, the process inevitably involves two layers of metaphorization - first, the original

[1] Excerpt from Chapter 28 of *The Biography of the Empress of Heaven*: "The Heavenly Consort Protects Childbirth in Putian" —

Lady Wang, having finished cleansing herself, gradually regained composure and asked her maid, "Just now, which midwife entered the room?"
The maid replied, "No one came in."
Lady Wang said, "How could that be? I was struck by a sudden cold wind and felt my spirit waver. I saw a woman, clothed entirely in white, enter in anger. One hand seized my throat and the other pressed upon my abdomen. I lost consciousness and thought I would surely die. A moment later, another figure appeared, with a dragon-shaped topknot and wearing a crane-feathered robe, holding a sword. She entered directly, causing the white-clad woman to flee. I felt momentary relief. The one who later assisted my delivery was this very person. I saw it with my own eyes—how could you say no one was there?"(see Appendix, Item 10).

text's metaphorical cognition, and second, the translator's interpretative transformation into the target language. This dual-layered process highlights the complexity of transferring culturally specific metaphors across linguistic and conceptual boundaries, necessitating strategic translation methods that preserve both symbolic richness and cognitive resonance for global audiences.

Accurately grasping the core conceptual terms of Chinese religion requires a multi-layered cognitive process that encompasses both linguistic comprehension and cultural interpretation. First, language cognition in classical text translation involves the abstraction of concepts and meanings. Mazu's belief contains a unique and intricate spiritual framework. For foreign scholars, the abstract nature of certain religious concepts can make them difficult to fully comprehend. Similarly, when Chinese translators introduce Chinese religious culture to a global audience, they must engage in semantic and cultural adaptation to ensure that these concepts are accurately conveyed (He & Li, 2017).

Second, language cognition in translation also involves navigating polysemy and cultural ambiguity. Mazu scriptures frequently employ metaphorical and symbolic language, where meanings are often multi-layered and open to interpretation. Variations in cultural backgrounds and cognitive frameworks can lead to divergent understandings of these texts. Thus, accurately conveying such complex semantic structures poses a significant challenge for translators, requiring strategies that balance fidelity to the original meaning with accessibility for target audiences (Tan & Ge, 2005).

The best method of ensuring the best cultural and cognitive equivalence between the source and target languages is to employ transliteration or literal translation with annotations. This approach, often referred to as China English (or Sino-English), enables the retention of distinctively Chinese cultural and conceptual aspects in translation (Wang, 1991).

As early as 1980, Chinese lexicographer Ge Chuangui identified similar challenges, particularly the absence of corresponding English terms for culturally specific concepts like "Four Books", "Five Classics", "Imperial Examination", "Eight-Legged Essay", "Xiucai", "Juren", "Jinshi", and "Hanlin yuan" (Imperial Academy). He advocated for translating these terms as Four Books, Five Classics, Imperial Competitive Examination, Eight-Legged Essay, Xiucai, Juren, Jinshi, and Hanlin Yuan, maintaining their original phonetic or structural form while providing contextual clarity.

Ge argued that these translations belong to China English, rather than Chinese English (a variant of English used in China) or Chinglish (a term often used pejoratively to describe non-standard English influenced by Chinese syntax and expressions). While native English speakers may not immediately recognize these terms, their meanings become clear with proper explanation (Ge, 1980).

Similarly, renowned translator Wang Rongpei asserts that Chinese English is not merely a localized form of English but an organic fusion of English linguistic structures and Chinese cultural elements (Wang, 1991). As an objective linguistic phenomenon, it plays a crucial role in translating classical Chinese texts, ensuring that the profound cultural heritage of the Chinese nation is effectively conveyed to global audiences.

This point is further supported by the translation practices of overseas scholars working with Chinese religious texts (Fan, 2012). When encountering culturally specific terms, they frequently adopt Chinese English to retain the authenticity of the original meaning.

A notable example is the Daoist term zuowang in *Tianhou Niangma Zhuan*. This cultivation term originates from *Zhuangzi*'s chapter The Great Master (Da Zong Shi), where Zhuangzi introduces zuowang through a classic dialogue between Yan Hui and Confucius. Yan Hui describes the practice as follows:

"To abandon the body, discard wisdom, detach from form and knowledge, and unite with the great flow—this is called zuowang." (see Appendix, Item 11).

The following are five widely accepted translations of this term:

(1) My connexion with the body and its parts is dissolved; my perceptive organs are discarded. Thus leaving my material form, and bidding farewell to my knowledge, I become one with the Great Pervader. This I call sitting and forgetting all things (Legge, 1891, p.142).

(2) I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything (Watson, 1968, p. 90).

(3) I slough off my limbs and trunk, dim my intelligence, depart from my form, leave knowledge behind, and become identical with the Transformational Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by "sit and forget" (Mair, 1994, p.55).

(4) My bones seem to droop like branches overloaded with fruit. My intelligence and cleverness become overshadowed by darkness. Any knowledge has evaporated, as well as any sense of my own shape． I feel embraced by a great openness． That's what I mean by sitting in forgetfulness (Correa, 2006, p.12).

(5) It's a dropping away of my limbs and torso, a chasing off of my sensory acuity, which disperses my physical form and ousts my understanding until I am the same as the Transforming Openness. This is what I call just sitting and forgetting (Brook, 2009, p. 60).

In 2006, American scholar Correa released a complete electronic translation of *Zhuangzi*. Although more than a century had passed since James Legge's renowned 1891 translation, a comparison of the five translations by overseas scholars reveals a remarkable consistency in their approach. Like Chinese scholars, they predominantly employed a literal translation strategy to interpret the text. Among them, Correa's translation stands out for its explicit metaphorical rendering, using a simile to translate the concept of "drooping"(duo) as "droop like branches overloaded with fruit." This choice makes the metaphor more visually and conceptually explicit for readers. In contrast, the other translators preserved the original metaphor, maintaining a high degree of consistency by rendering zuowang as "forget" or "forgetfulness".

Although a strictly literal interpretation of metaphors is often inadequate due to their intrinsically abstract nature, the process of interpreting metaphors always begins with a literal reading. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, translation involves more than just the conversion of linguistic codes—it is fundamentally a transfer of cognitive domains (Zhao, 2001).

The term zuowang, later adopted and expanded within Daoist philosophy, frequently appears in Daoist scriptures, where it refers to a meditative state of deep alignment with the Dao, in which one forgets both self and the external world. This passage presents zuowang as a process of detachment from physical existence, aligning with broader Daoist cosmological ideas about the dissolution of individual identity into the Dao (Wang, 2011). The protagonist describes transcendence as an alignment with cosmic forces, where one serves heaven as father and earth as mother. The idea of shedding worldly ties and achieving harmony with the cosmos is presented through metaphorical expressions, reinforcing the Daoist emphasis on formlessness and non-duality. Based on the translations above, the related description of this term in Chapter 10 of *Tianfei xiansheng lu* (see Appendix, Item 12) is translated as:

Since the beginning of one's life, it is the father who bestows qi (vital energy), and it is the mother who gives form. Yet, before life began, neither form nor qi belonged to offspring or parents; indeed, not even heaven and earth could claim their existence. Thus, possessing form and qi is common to both sages and ordinary people. Yet, is it only sages who, while dwelling within form and qi, can transcend beyond their domain? Now, I shall detach from form and restrain qi, transcend mundane dust, and ascend into primordial chaos (hundun). I shall honor heaven as my father and earth as my mother; my gratitude extends to the intangible, and repayment lies beyond knowing. Thus, I enter the state of zuowang (sitting in oblivion)!

From a cross-cultural perspective, such abstract Daoist concepts do not have direct parallels in Western religious traditions, making their translation especially challenging. While Western philosophy contains notions of self-transcendence, these do not necessarily align with the Daoist understanding of non-being and cosmic unity. This requires careful intercultural adaptation, ensuring that key philosophical ideas are not lost in translation while still making them accessible to non-Chinese readers. In translating the Mazu scriptures, particularly when dealing with Daoist terminology and metaphors, I often adopt the Chinese English translation method, which involves a literal translation supplemented with explanatory notes.

For instance, in *Tianfei xiansheng lu*, the character Xuan Zhen Nü receives the "Huangya" (yellow bud) elixir from the wangmu (Queen Mother of the West). The term "Huangya" originates from external alchemy(wai dan） and refers to a phenomenon in which lead and mercury, placed together in an earthen furnace, react with the earth to form bud-like structures that turn yellow in color (Wang, 2011). These "yellow buds" are regarded as the essence of lead and the foundational substance for refining elixirs. Through meticulous purification and refinement, they are ultimately transformed into the golden elixir (jin dan), a crucial concept in Daoist alchemy.

Over time, internal alchemy (nei dan) adopted this term metaphorically to describe the primordial qi (vital energy) that first emerges in the alchemical process. Just as a plant sprouts yellow buds, symbolizing vitality and growth, so too does the nascent energy within a practitioner's body. In my translation, I rendered "huangya" directly as "yellow buds"; however, as an important alchemical term, further clarification was necessary. Therefore, I included an explanatory footnote:

Yellow Buds， a term of Daoist outer alchemy． Lead and mercury are placed in an earthen tripod, generating yellow bud-like formations that exhibit a vigorous vitality of new life.

This translation approach represents a transplanted mapping of metaphorical conceptual domains. While it does not produce an exact cognitive equivalence, eliciting the same responses from target-language readers as from the original audience, it effectively preserves the metaphorical expressions of the source text within the translation. This method reflects the cognitive foundation of metaphors, ensuring that the symbolic depth of Daoist terminology remains intact.

I argue that Chinese English serves as an effective strategy for maintaining the linguistic essence of Chinese, faithfully preserving the original cultural ecology of folk belief. Moreover, it aligns with foreign readers' curiosity about foreign cultures, stimulating their interest in exploration and enhancing their understanding of cultural concepts embedded in the original text.

As a foreignizing strategy, literal translation is particularly well-suited for philosophical and epistemological interpretations, as well as for meta-textual analyses of key Daoist concepts and propositions. By applying this method to introduce Mazu culture, English-speaking readers gain direct exposure to the linguistic and cultural richness of Chinese mythology and Daoist thought. It enables them to engage with the text's vibrant, unaltered cultural elements, fostering a more authentic appreciation of its underlying philosophical and religious traditions.

Translation, as a cultural phenomenon, serves primarily to address the needs of the target culture and bridge cultural gaps. One of the core objectives of translation studies is to examine the cultural impact of translation—particularly how translation shapes and influences the target culture's understanding of foreign concepts. In this sense, translation can be regarded as a crucial mechanism for cross-cultural exchange.

Incorporating the distinctive cultural expressions of Mazu belief directly into translations represents a foreignizing strategy that embeds cultural elements within the target text. This approach fosters mutual enrichment between cultures, enabling readers to engage with diverse cultural perspectives. By encountering new and unfamiliar cultural features, readers not only expand their intercultural awareness but also internalize aspects of foreign cultural traditions as part of their own cognitive and intellectual repertoire.

Many international scholars translating Daoist and folk belief texts-particularly when dealing with core terminology-often adopt transliteration or literal translation as a preferred strategy. For Western audiences, especially those specializing in or deeply interested in Chinese religious traditions, Chinese English terms play a crucial role in preserving the authenticity of China's cultural heritage. This translation method is undeniably valuable in maintaining and sharing China's rich spiritual and intellectual traditions with a global audience.

4. Conclusion

As globalization accelerates, Mazu culture has increasingly become a focal point of cross-cultural engagement, attracting attention both within China and internationally. The growing number of Mazu temples worldwide—exceeding ten thousand—and its estimated 300 million followers reflect its expanding influence. Overseas Chinese communities and individuals interested in Chinese culture are actively participating in Mazu-related events, seeking to connect with its spiritual and maritime heritage. Furthermore, Mazu festivals are gaining

international recognition, serving as platforms for intercultural exchange and facilitating dialogue between diverse cultural groups.

The translation of Mazu texts plays a pivotal role in intercultural communication, introducing global audiences to Chinese folk beliefs and Daoist traditions. While translators must navigate linguistic challenges that shape cross-cultural transmission, they also act as mediators of meaning, bridging cognitive and cultural gaps. Translation is inherently an intercultural process, involving the reinterpretation of conceptual frameworks across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Katan, 2004). By translating Mazu texts, we extend this process, not only transferring words but also reframing worldviews, religious experiences, and symbolic meanings for international audiences.

The complexity of Mazu beliefs poses significant challenges for translation, particularly in rendering Daoist terminology such as bi gu (grain avoidance), dian hua (spiritual transformation), fang zhong (bedchamber arts), and fu er (ingesting elixirs). These specialized terms are often difficult to grasp even for Chinese readers unfamiliar with Daoist practice, making their translation even more intricate. Furthermore, the esoteric nature of Daoist alchemical writings, with their use of metaphor and deliberate ambiguity, further complicates the process. As Fu Jinyuan noted in *The Four Commentaries on the Awakening to Reality*, Daoist texts often employ symbolic, allegorical, and indirect expressions, making their meanings elusive. In this context, the folk elements of Mazu worship—rituals, celestial battles, and divine ascensions—represent a synthesis of folklore, literature, and spiritual tradition. These textual features underscore the need for culturally sensitive translation strategies that preserve the original conceptual framework.

With such complexities, Sino-English can be considered as a viable approach of translation of the soul of Mazu culture and Daoist literature to the world. Sino-English can be more approachable and yet remain authentic by keeping metaphorical expressions and cultural references intact. This strategy is in line with the strategy of foreignization proposed by Venuti (1995), which opposes domestication of cultures and instead exposes readers to linguistic and conceptual patterns of the source culture. Sino-English is a way to promote intercultural understanding because it helps preserve the cognitive and semiotic richness of the source text, allowing foreign readers to experience its original meanings without over-simplification.

The cultural act of translation is not just a matter of linguistic conversion, but it is the way cultures see each other and interpret each other (Bassnett, 2013). In many countries, such as United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, there have emerged local forms of the English language, that mirror their individual cultural-identities and yet they still work within the larger context of English as a lingua franca. Equally, the translation of both the classical and modern Chinese texts in Sino-English in China provides a similar avenue of expression of culture. The method strengthens the uniqueness of Chinese thought and helps us to communicate interculturally in the world of growing interconnection.

By adopting Sino-English as a culturally anchored yet globally comprehensible translation strategy, Mazu texts can be more effectively shared with international audiences. This method enables readers to experience the linguistic and cultural depth of Chinese religious traditions while engaging with alternative worldviews and epistemologies. Ultimately, the

translation of Mazu texts contributes to a more nuanced and dynamic model of intercultural communication, where meaning is not merely transferred but actively negotiated and recontextualized within new cultural paradigms.

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Appendix

Original Chinese Passages Cited in the Manuscript

(1) 众道士望之不见，乃各收器物，回报于林长者。有诗一首为证：
凡产骨自仙，丹成入九天。
炼修明似镜，脱化出如蝉。
聊借尼僧果，适完人世缘。
道场江头建，从此释尘烟。

(2) 从兹之后，女葆摄益纯，修炼愈至，绝于饮食，唯嚼兰香、吸晨甘而已。一日，晨起沐浴，于观音之前，拜至百拜，仍升家堂，叩首祖宗，参谒所祀诸神毕，乃请其父母出堂，再拜言曰："人自既始有生之后，受气者则父矣，成形者则母矣。于未始有生之前，则形气不惟非子有，且非父母有；不惟非父母有，即天地亦不得以有其有。故得形气者，圣凡之所共。游于形气之中而能超于形气之外者，则圣人独欤？今儿亦将决形屏气，去尘凡而上浮于混沌，事父以天，事母以地，恩见于无有其恩，报在于不知所报，乃坐忘矣！"语毕，步虚周堂三匝。

(3) 妃遂径上湄峰最高处，但见浓云横岫，白气亘天，恍闻空中丝管声韵叶宫征，直彻钧天之奏，乘风翼霭，油油然翱翔于苍旻皎日间。众咸欷骇惊叹，祇见屋虹辉耀，从云端透出重霄，遨游而上，悬碧落以徘徊，俯视人世，若隐若现。忽彩云布合，不可复见。

(4) 官吏恳祷于神妃，言未已，倏阴云掩霭，恍见空中有朱衣拥翠盖，伫立舟前，旋有火照竿头，晶光如虹。

(5) 以指喻指之非指，不若以非指喻指之非指; 以马喻马之非马，不若以非马喻马之非马也。天地一指也，万物一马也。

(6) 语之所贵，意也。意有所随，意有所随者，不可以言传也。

(7) 可以言论者，物之粗也; 可以意致者，物之精也。言之所不能论，意之所不能察致者，不期精粗焉。

(8) 筌者所以在鱼， 得鱼而忘筌; 蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄; 言者所以在意，得意而忘言。

(9) 道，物之极，言默不足以载。非言非默，议之所极。

(10)...王氏洗洁已毕，精神始定，乃问侍女曰："顷者有何处生母到此？"侍女曰："无之。"王氏曰："何谓无生母？吾彼时身被一阵冷风吹上，倏然精神瞥眊，见一女人，浑身俱白，含怒入吾床前，以一手抗吾之喉，一手按吾之腹，吾遂不省人事，自分必死矣。少顷，复有一人，龙髻鹤氅，手持一剑直入，那女遂避之，吾身暂轻，后扶吾产者，即此人也。吾所目见，何谓无之？"

(11)堕肢体，黜聪明，离形去知，同于大通，此谓坐忘。

(12)人自既始有生之后，受气者则父矣，成形者则母矣。于未始有生之前，则形气不惟非子有，且非父母有；不惟非父母有，即天地亦不得以有其有。故得形气者，圣凡之所共。游于形气之中而能超于形气之外者，则圣人独欤？今儿亦将决形屏气，去尘凡而上浮于混沌，事父以天，事母以地，恩见于无有其恩，报在于不知所报，乃坐忘矣！