



On the Transmission of Memes of Traditional Chinese Culture through the Indirect Translation of *Xi You Ji* into German via English

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Abstract. The indirect translation of classical Chinese novels played an important role in introducing and disseminating traditional Chinese culture in the West. However, it has long been neglected in scholarship due to its characterization as a form of “re-deformation”, which obscures its cultural significance. The indirect translation of classical Chinese novels such as *Xi You Ji* involves the transmission of memes of traditional Chinese culture across two cultural boundaries. In this process, memes may undergo adaptive variation in response to socio-cultural contexts and host intentions, while their core meanings remain stable. Employing the meme exploration method, this study demonstrates that the indirect translation of *Xi You Ji* across English and German realizes the genotypic transmission of memes of traditional Chinese culture. Examining indirect translation from the perspective of memetics enables a more balanced understanding of adaptive variation in surface memes and alleviates concerns about fidelity in the global dissemination of Chinese culture.

Keywords: *Xi You Ji*; indirect translation; traditional Chinese culture; memes

1 Introduction

In the early translation of classical Chinese novels, indirect translation played an important role, enabling Chinese thought and culture to circulate earlier and more widely beyond historical constraints. Nevertheless, scholars in China and abroad have long regarded it as a form of “re-deformation” and consequently systematic research on indirect translation has remained limited^[1]. As a result, its historical role in the international transmission of Chinese culture has not been fully recognized.

In 1942, Arthur Waley’s English translation of *Xi You Ji*, titled *Monkey*, was published and later translated into several European languages^{[2] [3]}. The German version, *Monkeys Pilgerfahrt: eine Chinesische Legende*, published in 1947 by Georgette Boner and Maria Nils, was based on Waley’s English translation. It was reprinted in 1980, 1983, and 1997. Before the complete German translation by the Swiss sinologist Eva Lüdi Kong appeared in 2016, *Monkeys Pilgerfahrt* had long been regarded as the “canonical translation” of *Xi You Ji* in the German-speaking world^[4] and served as the

primary channel through which German readers encountered the story of the Monkey King. Despite its influence, this indirect translation has received limited scholarly attention, and systematic studies comparing the Chinese, English, and German texts remain scarce.

Memetics, proposed by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), provides a framework for explaining the replication and transmission of cultural information. In recent years, it has also been applied to the cross-linguistic transmission of cultural elements^[5]. Memes spread through imitation and may preserve content while altering form or preserve form while altering content^[6]. During cultural transmission, surface memes in Chinese culture—such as rituals, customs, and material objects—may change, whereas their underlying value systems, as deep memes, remain relatively stable.

Drawing on memetics, this study employs the meme exploration method, that is, the identification and tracing of cultural memes across textual layers, to examine Chinese cultural memes in the English and German translations of *Xi You Ji*. The aim is to identify the deep value memes embedded in the texts and to explore how indirect translation contributes to the dissemination of traditional Chinese cultural values.

2 Exploration of Traditional Chinese Cultural Memes in the English and German Translations of *Xi You Ji*

A socio-cultural system can be divided into four layers: material form, behavioral customs, institutional systems, and psychological activities, corresponding respectively to material, behavioral, institutional, and ideological culture. Among them, values, as the core of ideological culture, guide and regulate the other three forms^[7]. Cultural translation should therefore aim to convey these values.

Mememes constitute the basic units of cultural transmission. The international dissemination of culture may thus be viewed as the replication of material memes, behavioral memes, institutional memes, and ideological memes in new cultural contexts. This study first analyzes the texts across these four layers to determine the overall tendency of meme transmission and then explores the value memes embedded within the other three types.

Through close reading and comparison of the Chinese, English, and German texts, representative cultural elements were identified. The results show that material memes include palaces, weapons, and temples; behavioral memes appear mainly as ritual gestures; institutional memes are reflected in the names and forms of address for gods, Buddhas, demons, and officials; and ideological memes are primarily moral values.

To identify overall transmission tendencies, repeated occurrences were retained. The frequency of each meme type was counted, and density was calculated using the formula: frequency of a specific type of meme / total meme frequency $\times$ 100%. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Traditional Chinese Cultural Memes in the English and German Translations of *Xi You Ji*

	English Translation		German Translation	
	Meme Frequency	Meme Density	Meme Frequency	Meme Density
Material memes	170	7.89%	170	7.93%
Behavioral memes	224	10.39%	223	10.40%
Institutional memes	1607	74.57%	1598	74.53%
Ideological memes	154	7.15%	153	7.14%
Total meme frequency	2155		2144	

The frequencies of meme types in the two translations are almost identical. Slightly fewer behavioral and institutional memes appear in the German translation, mainly because the translators simplified certain expressions—such as replacing official titles with personal pronouns—to suit German reading habits. Ideological memes appear least frequently but are often embedded implicitly within behavioral and institutional memes. Overall, nearly all traditional Chinese cultural memes present in the English translation are reproduced in the German translation.

3 Genotypic Transmission of Value Memes in the English and German Translations of *Xi You Ji*

Analysis of behavioral and institutional memes reveals three major value memes: the pursuit of social order based on zhèngmíng (rectification of names) and xúnlǐ (observance of ritual propriety), admiration for the jūnzǐ (the Confucian moral ideal of the exemplary person), and the advocacy of rewarding good and punishing evil. The translation of official titles reflects zhèngmíng, while ritual translations embody xúnlǐ. The three demon-subduing episodes included in the translations all arise from the pilgrimage team's benevolence and righteousness. Virtues such as zhōng (loyalty), xìn (trustworthiness), and xiào (filial piety) further reflect the esteem for the jūnzǐ ideal. Meanwhile, the narrative structure “transgression → punishment → pilgrimage → enlightenment” reflects the Buddhist doctrine of karmic retribution.

3.1 The Pursuit of Social Order Based on Zhèngmíng and Xúnlǐ

Social order is essential for social stability and development. Against the political turmoil of the late Spring and Autumn period, Confucius proposed a system centered on zhèngmíng and xúnlǐ, emphasizing clear social roles and behavioral norms. By defining hierarchical relations, Confucian thought seeks to establish a society in which rulers act as rulers, ministers as ministers, fathers as fathers, and sons as sons.

The Translation of Official Titles and the Idea of Zhèngmíng.

In *Xi You Ji*, the human, celestial, Buddhist, underworld, and demon realms all follow hierarchical institutional structures. Numerous official and divine titles thus embody the meme of zhèngmíng.

Waley employs various strategies in translating these titles—substitution, literal translation, free translation, back-translation, transliteration, hybrid strategies, generalization, and explicitation—with literal translation used most frequently. The German translation largely follows Waley's version.

Some translations emphasize hierarchical rank, such as Jade Emperor and King of Hell, while others highlight institutional functions, such as Inspector Spirit General and Director of the Imperial Observatory. Cultural transformation inevitably occurs in translation. For instance, Waley translates Dào Jūn (a Daoist deity title meaning “Lord of the Dao”) as “Lord,” introducing a Christian nuance. The German translators instead render “the Lord of the Sacred Treasure” as Meister (master), removing the Christian association while preserving the deity's status. Through these translations, the English and German versions jointly construct a hierarchical social order.

The Translation of Ritual Gestures and the Principle of Xúnlǐ.

Numerous ritual gestures in *Xi You Ji* embody the principle of xúnlǐ. In the original text, various verbs denote acts of respect, including bowing, kneeling, kowtowing, and prostration. Some expressions do not explicitly indicate whether kneeling is involved, making them especially prone to variation in cross-cultural transmission.

Waley translates such gestures as “bow” or “make a bow,” while more submissive actions are rendered as “kowitz” or “prostrate.” The German translation uses equivalent expressions such as sich verneigen, sich zu Boden werfen, and den Kopf auf den Boden schlagen.

Although kneeling rituals gradually disappeared from everyday life after the Tang dynasty, they remained important in sacrifices and formal ceremonies. Consequently, many acts described simply as “paying respect” in the novel likely involved kneeling. In translation, however, these gestures are often rendered as bowing, a more familiar Western practice. Although the physical movement changes, bowing still conveys respect, allowing the meme of xúnlǐ to undergo genotypic transmission in new cultural contexts.

3.2 The Admiration for the Jūnzǐ Personality

Confucian thought is a core meme of traditional Chinese culture, and the concept of the jūnzǐ is central to its ethics. Appearing 107 times in the Analects, the term represents an ideal personality characterized by virtues such as rén (benevolence), yì (righteousness), lǐ (propriety), zhì (wisdom), xìn, zhōng, xiào, and tì (fraternal love).

In *Xi You Ji*, the jūnzǐ ideal appears both implicitly in narrative episodes and explicitly in character evaluations. The demon-subduing stories of the kingdoms of Wūjī, Chēchí, and the River Tōngtiān all illustrate benevolent actions by the pilgrimage team.

Waley translates jūnzǐ as “gentleman”, following his translation of the *Analects*. He argues that alternatives such as “superior man” or “wise man” fail to capture the combination of noble status and moral excellence [8]. Although not fully equivalent, “gentleman” conveys the moral refinement associated with the jūnzǐ ideal. Since the word “gentleman” had already entered German as a loanword in the eighteenth century, the German translation adopts the same term, enabling the jūnzǐ meme to spread within a broader cultural context.

3.3 The Advocacy of Rewarding Good and Punishing Evil

In *Xi You Ji*, the moral principle of rewarding good and punishing evil is manifested through the Buddhist doctrine of karmic retribution. Centered on the idea that good deeds bring good results and evil deeds bring negative consequences, the doctrine of karma serves as a fundamental Buddhist explanation of the relationships governing the world. Within the novel, this doctrine finds its most prominent expression in the destinies of the five members of the pilgrimage group. In Chapter 100, the Buddha ultimately recounts the previous lives and present destinies of each of them. The passage is extensive and detailed. In this account, all five characters are shown to have committed faults and consequently received punishment, but through the meritorious act of obtaining the scriptures they ultimately attain spiritual fulfillment.

The English and German translations reproduce the Buddha’s account fully and accurately, without addition, omission, or alteration. The only modification concerns the layout of the passage: for the sake of readability, the translators reorganize the paragraph structure so that each section begins with the name of the respective character. This arrangement contrasts with Waley’s otherwise extensive abridgement of the original text. The parallel structure of the paragraphs highlights the similarity of their destinies, emphasizing that each character’s fate ultimately follows the cycle of karmic causation.

4 Conclusion

As a work accumulated over generations, *Xi You Ji* incorporated narrative elements from both Daoism and Buddhism during its formation and was subsequently shaped by literati who emphasized the principle that literature should convey moral teachings. As a result, the novel constitutes a memetic complex interwoven with cultural memes from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Although the English and German translations somewhat attenuate the explicit religious traces of Daoism and Buddhism, they nevertheless carry and transmit cultural memes associated with all three traditions, while at the same time placing greater emphasis on concerns related to social reality.

The pursuit of social order, the admiration for the personality of the jūnzǐ, and the advocacy of rewarding good and punishing evil reflect the value orientation expressed in the traditional ideal of self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and the pacification of the world—that is, the belief that personal moral cultivation constitutes the fundamental prerequisite for social stability. During the process of translation, the

surface memes of traditional Chinese culture inevitably undergo a certain degree of transformation due to differences in socio-cultural contexts and the expectations of target readers. Such transformations, however, create space for the survival and transmission of deeper value memes in foreign cultural environments.

Reexamining translation practices often regarded as “unfaithful,” such as abridged translation and indirect translation, from the perspective of memetics helps overcome the tendency in cultural translation studies to focus excessively on surface forms. It also allows for a more balanced evaluation of the historical significance and contemporary relevance of these translation practices in the transmission of Chinese culture. The genotypic mode of transmission emphasizes the continuity and dissemination of deep cultural memes. As intercultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world continue to intensify, the degree of variation in this transmission process is likely to decrease, while similarities at the level of cultural meaning may gradually increase.

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