

A Comparative Study: the Construction of Image System in Shan Hai Jing

Dinghui Wang

School of Foreign Languages, Zhaotong University, Zhaotong, Yunnan Province, China

Keywords: Image system, Shanhaijing, Odyssey, Iliad, The bible

Abstract: This essay aims at interpreting the construction of image system in ancient Chinese literary work Shan Hai Jing (usually translated as Classic of Mountains and Rives) though comparative analysis with the almost coeval European works Iliad and Odyssey, and the Bible. In different language and artistic techniques, Shan Hai Jing, reveals precious thoughts on man and nature relation, self-identity, life and death of the ancient Chinese. The thoughts, form distinct difference but implicit supplementary and intrinsic connection with that of the European literary works.

1. Introduction

Shan Hai Jing (also named as *Classic of Mountains and Rivers*, or *Shan Hai Ching* by scholars) is an ancient Chinese descriptive work written in ancient writing style with old Chinese before Qin Dynasty (221B.C-207B.C). There is not known author, but exactly, scholars and philosophers at that time are the writers of this monumental work. This ancient geographical book displays the vast landscape of the ancient China. There were 22 chapters in the original edition but several of that had been destroyed and lost as time goes by. The present version contains 18 complete chapters left, including poetry of mountains, rivers, animals, plants and myths of the ancient deities, heroes and emperors that contribute to the great image system of this work.

So far, scholars tend to read *Shan Hai Jing* as an ordinary book for children, and most international scholars pay more attention to the translation and the religious parts. But in the strict sense, Chinese people have no religious faith. Besides, *Shan Hai Jing* did have important influence on Japanese culture, Korean culture and the south Asian culture. Its significance to Asian culture is exactly as Homer's epics and the Bible to European culture. Therefore, interpreting this ancient Asian work will provide the worldwide readers a new and meaningful chance to read it again.

2. Literature Review

Schiffeler is regarded as one of the early scholars who started their studies on *Shan Hai Jing* with the translation in the 1970s, mainly the translation to animals and plants inside which had been deified but interpreted as common animals, mountains, seas, trees, grass[1] and so on. After having a wide understanding of Chinese culture, Mathieu began to study the implicit value of the text from the perspective of myth and ethology[2], giving the images inside the book vigor and unique existence significance. In the atmosphere of the ancient European literature, international scholars were keen on human geographical factors[3,4] and the materialization and scientific analysis of animal and plant images[5].

Likewise, Chinese scholars focused on the medicinal value of the images in *Shan Hai Jing* and tried to find relevant medicines to solve practical needs. After the reform and opening up policy, Chinese scholars began to study the text from the perspectives of narratology, metaphor, religion and politics. Scholars believe that this book provides the archetype of "political geography"[6] in Chinese literature, and the ancient Chinese belief in plants suggests the prototype of the primitive religion[7]. Besides, the images suggested the worship to animal and plant totem[8].

In short, the previous studies mainly focused on the translation, mythological narratives, religious elements and political factors. Thus, analyzing the construction of the image system in

Shan Hai Jing from a new perspective will supply necessary supplement in cross-cultural comparative study of *Shan Hai Jing* in depth.

3. Discussion

3.1 Animal Images to Compromise with Nature

In *Shan Hai Jing*, the animal images are widely deified in order to make the images that is ordinary in today's life divine, powerful and mysterious. The Heavenly Hound (or Dog), called Tian Gou in Chinese, for example is illustrated as following:

“有兽焉，曰天狗，其状如狸而白首，其音如榴榴，可以御凶”[9]

(Translated) There is a kind of animal, named Tian Gou, with fox-like body and dog-like head in white skin

and sounds like a Liu Liu(woof), resisting evil.



Fig.1 Picture of the Heavenly Hound [10]

A specific image appears in short sentences and simple words, there is vast space for readers to draw the image and add new imagination for this ancient animal. Importantly, this unique image involves in two functions, the Heavenly Hound that can resist evil, the loyal and competent aide of the God of War in Chinese culture. All of these indicates that this image is not a common image (dog), but a deity or a divine creature. Compared with the animals (or beasts) that are full of super powers in Greek myths, especially in *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, the Heavenly Hound, as well as many of the animal images in *Shan Hai Jing*, seems helpful and protective. And this is the reason that most of the animal images created early in *Shan Hai Jing* are now, still widely regarded as symbols of good luck, success and safeness and healthiness.

If the purpose of creating horrible super-powerful animal images in Greek myths is to manifest the outstanding talent and extraordinary courage of the heroes like Odysseus and Achilles, to fulfill the expectation of the hero successfully defeating his enemies after overcoming various difficult in his way of home or conquering, then the intention of creating divine animal images with human-like characters in *Shan Hai Jing* is, as supplementary, to set forth people's expectation to seek for protection, well-being and harmonies relationship with the natural powers.

3.2 Man-Animal Images to Self-Identity

Following the deification of animal images that suggest the worship for super power, the imaginative combination of man and animal images reveals the long for remarkable identity and self-identity of the ancient Chinese. Here gain, the philosophical questions--"What am I? Where I am? What do I do?" can be answered fully. The ancient female Creator Nvwa is a typical example for this outstanding construction of animal-man image system. Unlike Zeus in Greek myths or Jehovah in the Bible, Nvwa, the goddess that created the human beings through clay statue and repaired the sky with colored stone in ancient time, is regarded as the Creator in Chinese culture. The reason can be traced back to the place where the goddess locates and the way to move and live described in *Shan Hai Jing*.

有不周负子，有神十人，名曰女娃之肠，处栗广之野，横道而处。[9]

(Translated) Near the Buzhou mountain, there are ten goddess named Nvwa Zhichang (Nvwa) living in the champaign called Liguang. With man's face and snake-like body, the goddesses usually go sideways and sidle.



Fig.2 Picture of Nvwa [11]

In *Shan Hai Jing*, Nvwa is a group of ten goddesses near the Buzhou mountain, a place where the Gods locate (similar to the Olympia in Greek myths). The way the goddesses moving is very similar to that of a snake. No matter how much are the goddesses, Nvwa is the combination of human and animal. Besides, the word “chang” in Nvwa Zhichang means the tube or blood vessel of human body in Chinese. Thus, the word “chang” symbolizes intestine. Connecting the intestine and snake, it’s easy to construct the goddess’s man-animal image which reflects four aspects: the worship for reproductive organ, the seed of social system matriarchy, the development of human beings (from animal to human) and admiration for natural power. Here, the man-animal image (Nvwa) is of course the Creator, exactly the beginning of human beings.

Different from the Bible and Greek myths where the figure of the Creator or Master of the universe is a “man” though the Creator usually transforms into other images or appearances, Nvwa in *Shan Hai Jing* is in the figure of half-man and half animal. In fact, most Gods introduced in *Shan Hai Jing* are man-animal images, such as Xi Wangmu, Zhurong, Xingtian and so on. The construction of man-animal images demonstrates the progress of human beings evolution and outstands man’s obedience to and respect for power--Gods. In other words, this spiritual belief, not religious belief, indicates the fact that men are apprehensive of self limitation and manage to overcome it. What should be noted is that Nvwa is the “Mother”, while Zeus or Jehovah is the “Father”, so the western culture and the eastern culture form supplementary circle, which means in Chinese, “Yin and Yang” or “female and male”: the parents of a family. The world is a big family.

3.3 Plant Images to the Ultimate Proposition

The exaggeration and fairy imagination on common animals boosts in the construction of mysterious plant image. In *Shan Hai Jing*, all is divine, a tree, a flower, and even a specie of grass. In most cases, the plant images suggest the spiritual faith or future vision, even though, some for the necessity of healing and need of diet, all plant images are placed in the way of fulfilling eternal well-being and immortality of the ancient Chinese people. Chinese ancestors were good at expressing their strong attempt to eternity under the burden of natural law, the ominous life and death circle. Fusang, a well known tree in Chinese culture, was endowed an occult power and significance.

汤谷上有扶桑,十日所浴,九日居下枝,一日居上枝.一日方至,一日方出,皆载于鸟.[9]

(Translated) In Tanggu (a place), there is a tree named Fusang. Ten suns, loaded on ten dark three-leg bird, hang in the branches, and nine of them situate in the lower branches, only one situates in the top branch. Each sun moves upward in spiral circle with the help of the birds. The lower one replaces the former one, situating at the top.

[To express the original Chinese meaning exactly, grammatical matter “suns” will be ignored for the moment]



Fig.3 Picture of Fusang [12]

Obviously, rotating the tree ninety degrees clockwise, we will find that the top sun is in the east and lowest one is in the west. This is the natural law. In Fusang, there is not only a circle of ten moving suns, but also a circle of time, a natural circle, and even a UNIVERSE. This ultimate construction of the image stress the philosophical proposition: life and death. The upward moving pattern suggests that time is going forward, and the progress of the universe is spiraling, besides, the changeable top sun is going to be replaced by the coming one.

On one hand, Fusang is corresponding with sky. In subsequent ancient Chinese legends, nine suns had been shot down from the top sky by hero Houyi in order to save men in the earth. Thus to ensure the existence of human beings, just one sun can situate at the top, shining the ground to provide life. On the other hand, the tree itself, with its under branches and top branches, connecting life and death, contains Heaven and Hell, up and down. The tree, the suns and the birds form the trinity, in which the tree, Fusang symbolizes Father, the sun symbolizes Son and the three-leg bird then symbolizes Holy Spirit. In the Fusang tree, all is alive and moving. In this aspect, the ultimate construction of plant image emphasizes not death but life, therefore, reach an effect accordance with that of the Bible and Greek myths though in different perspective.

4. Conclusion

It is the great construction of the internal image system inside the works that made *Shan Hai Jing*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and the Bible classics in culture, literature, philosophy, religious and geography in different continents respectively. Interestingly, there is an implicit echo between the image systems in ancient Chinese descriptive poem *Shan Hai Jing* and the ancient European works *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and the Bible. This implied coincidence is, in philosophical perspective, not only an outstanding comparison but also a strong complementation in humanistic spirit and value concept system. And surprisingly, these ancient literary works become companion pieces of each other to some extent.

Shan Hai Jing reveals ancient Chinese thoughts on the living surroundings, self-identity, life and death. It is clear that ancient Chinese ancestor, also philosophers, had attempted to read the universe and the nature of the world since the dawn of mankind. *Shan Hai Jing*, though not as well-known as the contemporary works such as *Odyssey*, *Iliad* and the Bible because of language limitation, is a significant literary work to the world literature to understand the Chinese culture, an ancient civilization, and even Asian culture. Until now, there is still broad space for future studies, especially in fields such as translation, cross-cultural communication, language, medicine, geography and so on.

Acknowledgement

This paper is the achievement of the Research Project (2019J1137), subsidized by Education Department of Yunnan Province.

References

- [1] Schiffeler, J. The Legendary Creatures of the Shan hai ching. Asian Folklore Studies, no. 1, pp.

140-142, 1979.

[2] Mathieu, R. Etude sur la mythologie et l'ethnologie de la Chine Ancienne. College de France, Institut des hautes etudes Chinoises, no. 1, pp. 45-67, 1983.

[3] Fracasso, R. Libro, M. Cosmografia e mitologia nella Cina Antica, Venice: Marsilio, 1996, pp.17-19.

[4] Birrell, A. The Classic of Mountains and Seas, New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1999, pp.1-9.

[5] Strassberg, R. A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas, California: University of California Press, 2002, pp.11-21.

[6] Ye, S.X. Cultural Analysis of the images in Classic of Mountains and Seas: Wildness. Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences edition), no.4, pp. 94-101, 2000.

[7] Shen, S.J. On the plant belief of the Book of Mountains and Seas. Cultural horizon, no.1, pp. 87-89, 2010.

[8] Jing, W.X. A Preliminary Study on the Classic of Mountains and Seas and Primitive Religious beliefs, Sichuan: Sichuan Normal University, 2011, pp.22-25.

[9] Kindle electronic edition, [online] Available: Green Apple Data Center.

[10] Picture of the Heavenly Hound, [online]
Available: <https://baike.so.com/doc/5344424-5579869.html#5344424-5579869-3>

[11] Picture of the Heavenly Hound, [online]
Available: <https://baike.so.com/doc/5344424-5579869.html#5344424-5579869-3>.

[12] Picture of Fusang, [online] Available: <https://huaban.com/pins/3181911500/>.