

# Fenghuang and Phoenix: Translation of Culture

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**Abstract**—Fenghuang and phoenix from ancient myths are both culture-loaded words that have unique features and comprehensive historical developing routes. This paper focuses on their translations to find out the reflected cultural issues and power influences under the ideas of cultural identity and language power. Classic literatures like *The Analects* and *The Tempest* in bilingual versions are compared in terms of the translation for both animals, as well as by searching the different social backgrounds and timelines of those literatures. The mixed usage of phoenix and fenghuang in both Chinese (East) and English (West) culture makes confusions but also enriches both languages and cultures.

**Index Terms**—Fenghuang, phoenix, translation, language, cultural identity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Translation as a social practice involves different cultural identities [1]. There are many mythical animals in Chinese culture being translated into some “equivalent” animals in Western culture, such as 龙 [long], 凤凰 [fenghuang], and 麒麟 [qilin] that are commonly seen being replaced by “dragon”, “phoenix” and “unicorn” [2], [3], which are regarded as culture-specific items existing only in Chinese cultural phenomenon [4]. It has posed translational problems due to the different values in different language cultures [5]. More researches and discussions are focused on 龙 and its translation, “long” and “dragon” [6], [7]. Even suggested alternative translation is given, as “loong” [8], [9]. Fenghuang, on the other hand, generally translated as “phoenix”, is far more easily accepted with fewer opposing voices. However, with its complex features and specialties including gender connotation that fenghuang can be either male, female or bigendered [10], using “phoenix” to represent fenghuang is still limited.

In Chinese ancient documents, such as *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* and *Erh Ya*, fenghuang is described to have the head of a cock, the beak of a swallow, the neck of a snake, the back of a tortoise, and the tail of a fish [11]-[13]. The divine creature composited with several variant animals is of six-chi tall and having five colors for its plumages including black, red, green, white, and yellow [14]-[16]. Fenghuang has its natural divinity of winds and social divinity representing power and value [17] that five virtues can be seen in fenghuang as uprightness, humanity, virtue, honesty, and sincerity [16]. Fenghuang has faced historical change of gender as from yang to yin (generally understood as from male to female) in Chinese connotation. At

Confucius’ time, fenghuang was mainly used to describe virtuous man, such as shi and king, and it was in Han dynasty that fenghuang’s gender was gradually distinguished [18], as the male feng with the female huang respectively, in symbolizing everlasting love that representing the yin-yang balance. After Ming-Qing period, fenghuang was major symbolization for female that such transformation is unavoidably related to the monarchical power of Chinese empresses in indicating themselves by using fenghuang-elements [16].

As for phoenix in the West, it has the totally different origins and characteristics. Phoenix dies in its nest, and then is reborn from its own burned ashes, with a duration of about 500 years [19]. Phoenix is said to be originated from Egyptian solar myths of the sacred bird, benu, through association with the self-renewing solar deity, Osiris [20]. Ancient Greek poet, Hesiod, made the first mentioning in the West of phoenix, under the Greek name “phoinix”, while later on, Greek historian, Herodotus gave the first description of behavior as a sacred bird of Heliopolis, the famous Egyptian city, being eagle-like and with bright red and gold plumages [21], [22]. In 1633, one of the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament, *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, was published by Patrick Young (1584-1652) that marked a critical moment for phoenix with its first appearance in the document to be used by Christian, as a pagan bird [23].

Though benu and phoenix have close relations, fenghuang and phoenix, in the East and West culture, are actually totally different things in considering their appearances, origins and historical descriptions. Nigg [16] states that the currently widely linking association of Western phoenix and Chinese fenghuang can be dated back to the translations of nineteenth-century scholars, though the translation that connects identically worshiped but individual birds from separated parts of the globe is not universally admitted by scholars that the “phoenix” is identified as the “miscalling” of fenghuang [24]. Besides, the greatest difference between fenghuang and phoenix as distinct in two cultures is that one never dies, but the other is periodically reborn from the burned ashes. Further, the gender of the fenghuang is importantly mentioned in Chinese culture, even with the association of yin and yang, but the phoenix is not concerned with such differentiation [25]. Even though with a huge difference between fenghuang and phoenix, the Chinese mythical bird is still more frequently translated as phoenix for both Chinese and Western translators. Even, the forthcoming Disney movie, “Mulan”, has also used phoenix to represent fenghuang [26]. This paper focuses on the translation of fenghuang, and to see how the translation reflects the cultural issues and what the relation of power influences on the translation.

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## II. THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGY

Translation is a social-oriented activity that alters the challenging of power relations [27]. As power is important in translation studies after cultural turn [28], [29], translation is unavoidably involving the interaction of different cultures and powers that ethical and political choices are under consideration for translators and researchers [30]. Hence, translation is of cultural, social and political determination [31], [32]. Chinese culture in the understanding of Western discourses center-oriented people is “fictional”, which includes Chinese culture in the Western power centered discourse [33] that Chinese identity is filtered to accustom the Western norms. The phenomenon of linguistic code vacancy is unavoidable in translation [34]. The text contains cultural characteristics, and translation is the exchange of texts but also the communication of different cultures [35]. Apart from transference of words from languages, culture-related aspects should also be concerned [36]. Culture, as a multifaceted concept [37], is significant in forming the thoughts, behaviors and perceptions [38] that culture-specific items are important in carrying traditions, ideologies, values and common consensus [39] for members in the same cultural circle.

Translation is not only the transferring of language code, but also the cultural substitution of ideological transformation [40] that unequalled language and power relations are involved in intercultural communication [41]. Cultural awareness and ethnic diversity have become staple terms of academy [42]. Culturally-oriented translation studies are currently under popular studying [43]. Culture provides identity, purpose, and direction [44]. Language and culture are remarkably interfaced [45]. Through reaffirmation, cultural identity, as a critical portrayal of distinguishing groups [46] sharing identical values respectively, should be redefined in its own image [47] via language reorganization. Culture shapes the way that language being used [46]. Positive language attitude generates a positive cultural identity [45], which contributes to the development and advancement of the language [48]. Inappropriate reading, interpretation and translation might exist for foreign cultural existence of mixing connotation [49].

This paper searches relative Chinese and English translations about fenghuang and phoenix to find the factors behind that why translators chose which way of translation. Especially, classic literatures in both languages and their translations are compared. Different social background and timeline for the translation are also searched for analysis. Further, the relation between translation and cultural identity is studied via the analysis of fenghuang’s translation. Issues on translation and power are also considered by checking the current academic analysis on the interaction between fenghuang and phoenix.

## III. TRANSLATING FENGHUANG FROM CHINESE

According to Nigg [16], James Legge (1815-1897), the pioneering and preminent translator of the sacred Chinese books, in his translation of *The Annals of the Bamboo Books*

[50], was one of the earliest to introduce the image of fenghuang to the Western world with European language, as the text writes, “phoenixes, male and female, arrived”. Then, the choice of the name of the Western phoenix became an influential beginning in translating the texts telling the Chinese bird. However, “Fang” also becomes the male element of the fenghuang in Legge’s translation [16]. Literatures in different dynasties that mentioning fenghuang are randomly selected to compare the bird’s translations. The translation of *The Analects* by Legge, Arthur Waley (1888-1966) and Ku Hung-Ming (1857-1928) are first selected. Different choices for translating fenghuang can be seen.

子曰：“凤鸟不至，河不出图，吾已矣夫！” [51]

Legge: The Master said, “The Fang bird does not come; the river sends forth no map — it is all over with me!” [52]

Waley: The Master said, “The phoenix does not come; the river gives forth no chart. It is all over with me!” [53]

凤兮！凤兮！何德之衰？往者不可谏，来者犹可追。  
已而，已而！今之从政者殆而！ [51]

Legge: O FANG! O FANG! How is your virtue degenerated! As to the past, reproof is useless; but the future may still be provided against. Give up your vain pursuit. Give up your vain pursuit. Peril awaits those who now engage in affairs of government. [52]

Ku: O Phoenix bird! O Phoenix bird,  
Where is the glory of your prime?  
The past, —’t is useless now to change,  
Care for the future yet is time.  
Renounce! Give up your chase in vain;  
For those who serve in Court and State  
Dire peril follows in their train. [54]

Since the Chinese only mentioned feng that Legge intends to make distinct genders available in the translation, as “Fang” is used. However, fenghuang in these sayings has no clear clue on the gender, even it is used to describe those noble officials and scholars who are mainly men, as feng can be abbreviation of fenghuang, which is common way in classic Chinese writings. Waley and Ku might find the fact behind, so that they are not intentionally differ feng and huang, but they both use “phoenix” to simply replace fenghuang. Linguistic variation and cultural heterogeneity influences the translation activities [49]. Chinese language variation might be difficult to fully accustomed with, so that misunderstandings occur. Further, these people’s translations might be affected by the cultural hegemony. Waley, as a Westerner, used the conventional idea to replace fenghuang as phoenix for easier reading and association to the readers. Ku’s translation actually also reflects his background that his English was not his mother tone, so he might use some existed, popularly accepted words to translate, rather than creating new terms that are not familiar to the readers. It also can be regarded as the reflection of Chinese translators’ intention in that time in translational activities. Legge’s version exists some misunderstanding of Chinese culture, as stated by Ku, he, then, intended to make a Chinese people’s translation [54]. In this case, Ku, who wanted to uphold Chinese philosophy to foreigners as a non-native English

speaker, on the other hand, used more understandable expressions, as phoenix, which already exists in target culture, to make the translation. The Chinese word, fenghuang, is further searched in *The Book of Songs (The Book of Poetry)* to compare the translation of Legge and Wang Rongpei (1942-2017).

凤凰鸣矣、于彼高冈。  
梧桐生矣、于彼朝阳。  
莘莘萋萋、離離喈喈。 [55]

Legge: The male and female phoenix give out their notes,  
On that lofty ridge.  
The dryandras grow,  
On those Eastern slopes.  
They grow luxuriantly;  
And harmoniously the notes resound. [56]  
Wang: The phoenix sings a joyful air  
On the lofty mount o'er there.  
The plane trees rise into the air,  
On the southern slope o'er there.  
How luxuriant are the trees!  
What pleasant songs in the breeze! [57]

Legge pays attention to the variation at diction level who makes different adjustments to actually the same creature. When feng and huang appear together, Legge used "male and female phoenix" to translate, while "Fang" is used for feng. Legge's intention is to differentiate feng and huang, in order to emphasize the gender difference that he might also have discovered, but his adaptation makes some misleading effects to purposely separate the same kind of creature into two totally different mythical systems, and even confuses the image of fenghuang to English readers.

In 1840s, a cigarette brand called 龙凤香烟 was translated into Loong Voong Cigarettes [7]. Originally, fenghuang can be seen more frequently to have its own group of characters to be referred, such as "fang" and "voong" [49]. Even with some translators using "phoenix", variation still exists. But in relatively more recent translations, "phoenix" can be seen as more popularly accepted and applied by translators in translating "fenghuang". In *Chinese-English Dictionary of Modern Usage* edited by Lin Yutang (1895-1976), fenghuang-related words are all translated by using the word "phoenix" [58]. The currently famous translator in the Chinese mainland, Xu Yuanchong (1921~ ), who has translated plenty of Chinese classic poems, also uses "phoenix" in the translation, such as Li Bai's "On Phoenix Terrace At Jinling".

凤凰台上凤凰游，凤去台空江自流。  
吴宫花草埋幽径，晋代衣冠成古丘。 [59]

On Phoenix Terrace once phoenixes came to sing;  
The birds are gone, but still roll on the river's waves.  
The ruined palace's buried 'neath the weeds in spring;  
The ancient sages in caps and gowns all lie in graves. [59]

"Phoenix" is also commonly accepted by Chinese translators. Without notation or further explanation, they could just mix the two creatures into one. Further, in the two translations of *红楼梦*, *The Story of the Stones* by David Hawkes (1923-2009) and John Minford (1946~ ), and A

*Dream of Red Mansions* by Yang Hsien-yi (1915-2009) and Gladys Yang (1919-1999), fenghuang is also being translated into phoenix in both translation, as can be seen in the cited sentences.

水溶见他言语清楚，谈吐有致，一面又向贾政道：令郎真乃龙驹凤雏。 [60]

Yangs: The prince turned to observe to Jia Zheng "your son is truly a dragon's colt or young phoenix." [61]  
Hawkes: The prince observed to Jia Zheng that the young phoenix was worthy of his sire. [62]

At that period, phoenix is far more accustomed by translators to be used in translating fenghuang. However, compared with translators in translating Chinese literature, more current scholars, especially Chinese scholars, prefer "fenghuang" as the bird's English translation rather than "phoenix" [25]-[64]. Behind the current change of word preference, Chinese cultural identity and discourse power are more considered by translators that will be further discussed later.

#### IV. TRANSLATING PHOENIX INTO CHINESE

In translating phoenix into Chinese, there are mainly three ways, as 菲尼克斯 [feinikesi] (translating the sound), 不死鸟 [businiaio] (translating the image by creating a new word) and 凤凰 [fenghuang] (borrowing the existent word in Chinese myth). 菲尼克斯 is mostly used in translating Greek myths. In 1913, Qian Zhixiu had mentioned the "Greek bird", phoenix, as 菲尼克斯, with some general description about the bird that published in *The Eastern Miscellany*.

固犹能如菲尼克斯Phoenix之从飞灰而复活。（按菲尼克斯为希腊之神鸟、生存五百年后、自烧灭为灰、自其灰中复活、又为五百年之生存、循环往复、亘古不死、）如普鲁士权力之增长。 [65]

[So, it is like phoenix can be reborn from ashes. (Phoenix is the divine bird of Greece that after five hundred years' life, burns itself to ashes, and resurrects from the ashes to live for the next five hundred years' life in cycles and in eternity,) just like the growth of Prussian power.]

In that period, Chinese translators can still clearly differentiate phoenix and fenghuang. For more recently, in writing academic papers on talking about the translation of fenghuang, Chinese scholars also tend to use the sound to translate phoenix [64]. It is said that it was Guo Moruo (1892-1978) who first linked phoenix with fenghuang in the Chinese context [66] in his poem 凤凰涅槃 [Nirvana of Phoenix], which was first published in 1920 [67]. Guo first used the sound of phoenix, as 菲尼克司, and gave the original characteristics of the self-burning bird, then made it to be linked to the Chinese fenghuang.

天方国古有神鸟名“菲尼克司” (Phoenix)，满五百岁后，集香木自焚，复从死灰中更生，鲜美异常，不再死。按此鸟殆即中国所谓凤凰：雄为凤，雌为凰。 [67]

[In ancient Arabia, there was a divine bird named "phoenix". At its five hundred years' age, it would collect

incense woods to burn itself, and to be reborn from the dead ashes that it would be extraordinarily beautiful, and would not die again. This bird is actually the so-called feng-huang in China: the male feng and female huang.]

Guo's poem, or the "translation" of phoenix, is borrowing the concept of "rebirth" of phoenix to encourage and urge Chinese people to fight for their freedoms and rights, after the May Fourth Movement [13]. It is currently recorded the earliest mixing of the concepts of phoenix and fenghuang in Chinese contexts. Fenghuang is then having more connotations that are originated from the Western phoenix and Buddhist philosophy in modern Chinese language. Then, afterwards, more examples can be seen in the translations of phoenix as fenghuang, such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in Act III, Scene iii, translated by Liang Shiqiu (1903-1987) and Zhu Shenghao (1912-1944). Both translators have translated phoenix into fenghuang. As for Liang's translation, he had not used qilin to translate unicorn, but interestingly used fenghuang to translate phoenix. Liang's translation might have been influenced from the convention of Chinese translators or even normal Chinese readers, as phoenix and fenghuang are more popularly accepted to be linked together. Zhu's translation is mainly for theater play that word limits and acceptance of audience might be considered. As the word leaves the page and turns into vocal and gesture expressions, more specific intentions on translation should be considered [68]. Hence, except conventional translation, word length could also be one of the possible factors to make Zhu translating phoenix into fenghuang, so that the play can be more economical and of easier understanding and accepting for audiences.

Now I will believe that there are unicorns; that in Arabia there is one tree, the phoenix' throne, one phoenix at this hour reigning there. [69]

Liang: 我现在可以相信世上真有独角兽; 在阿拉伯真有一棵树, 凤凰的宝座; 真有一只凤凰现在在那里称尊。 [70]

Zhu: 一幅活动的傀儡戏? 现在我才相信世上有独角的麒麟, 阿拉伯有凤凰所栖的树, 上面有一只凤凰至今还在南面称王呢。 [71]

As for 不死鸟, it also has its own translational logics and routes. Since fenghuang is more applied in translation, phoenix as 不死鸟 is not that popular, but still, it has its own language circle in Chinese context, especially with recent years' academic researches on differentiating phoenix and fenghuang. Then, other than fenghuang, and sound transliteration, the "secular bird" becomes more and more acknowledged in translation process. Zhuang Ke, in his novel, directly uses bilingual title, to identify phoenix as 不死鸟 [72]. Hong Kangqi has also written 不死鸟的传说 [The Legend of Phoenix] [73]. For more recent translations, Liu Qing [74] has translated Roderick Stewart and Sharon Stewart's book *Phoenix: The Life of Norman Bethune* [75] by using 不死鸟 to translate phoenix. With the development of discourse power of China as well as the Chinese language, more scholars are aware of emphasizing Chinese cultural identity. Translators in mainland China could be more eager to differ fenghuang, as an inclination to uphold cultural

uniqueness and Chinese identity. So, fenghuang and phoenix are more intentionally differed by some scholars and translators who prefer the supplement translation 不死鸟 for referring to phoenix [63]-[66].

## V. NIRVANA OF PHOENIX: ENRICHMENT OF FENGHUANG CONNOTATION

According to Toury [31] and Chi [32], translation being historically determined can make huge difference to the language, culture and even the society. Though Guo Moruo's poem confuses phoenix and fenghuang [76], his creation through the translation in literature has huge influence in modern Chinese language. Guo's creation combines Buddhist nirvana, Chinese traditional fenghuang and Western phoenix. It was also one of the typical phenomena of China in the first half of the twentieth century [77] that various cultures, religions and ideologies were combined together by Chinese people to find or create a "Chinese way" of independence from empirical colonization. Such kind of globalization of culture that importing features from privileged cultures to unprivileged cultures in the beginning of the last century has made a variety of social, cultural and political influence [78] that produces the interconnectedness of the three cultures. Guo's usage of phoenix focuses on the specialty of rebirth through which Guo's intention is to convey the ideology of breaking against the feudalism and even reaching communism [13]-[66]. Political factors can be seen from these birds' translations.

Guo's recreation creates a hybrid new fenghuang culture in Chinese language by the incorporation of the translated concepts of phoenix's resurrection [36]. The May Fourth literary language, in this case, Guo's "nirvana of phoenix", has ensured the deep foundation for the future development of Chinese literature [79]. The enlargement and innovation of the existed vocabulary and meaning [13] have also made huge promotion to the development of languages. By searching the word entry 凤凰涅槃 in one of the biggest database in China, CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) for word frequency in last twenty years, more than two thousand results including newspapers, journals and conferences can be found. Further, by checking the existing translations for Guo's poem, there are majoring of two kinds, namely "The Resurrection of Feng-Huang" [80] and "The Nirvana of the Feng and Huang" [81], [82]. It can be found out that apart from phoenix in the Chinese sphere, even in the English world, the connotation of fenghuang has also been enriched with the extensive association to the phoenix.

## VI. CULTURE AND POWER: RECONSIDERING THE POSITION OF FENGHUANG

By means of approaching values and beliefs, culture could be explored and enhanced by its people [37]. With the growth of Chinese nationalism, and with the enhancement of national self-confidence and cultural awareness by translators and scholars [83], more voices are calling for translating 凤凰 into "fenghuang". As the translation being created should have its own specific moment of acceptance

[43], its transmission to a new set of readers might cause new differentiations and adjustments. The “existence” of the fenghuang and phoenix in Chinese and Western cultures has become the de facto basic for understanding each other’s culture [84], so that the connotation of fenghuang from an alien culture is automatically transformed into the self-understood existence of the resurrected phoenix. However, the phoenix in the West is also the representation and symbol of the Jesus Crist for the rebirth connotation of the bird, while fenghuang should not include this kind of religious meaning [63]. The religious association could raise misunderstanding to Chinese fenghuang with inappropriate interpretation.

Besides, ho-o in japan, firebird in Russia, benu in Egypt, and yel in America all have their unique names in English language that are confused with phoenix [16]-[63]. Fenghuang, however, is not the case. Since no comprehensively equal notations during the cross-cultural communication process can be detected, using an existed phrase to rebuild the unique cultural features and values in the target cultural context is difficult [85]. Chinese culture is now being emphasized to be respected, and fenghuang is a strong culture-loaded word to indicate Chinese traditional culture. Translation can be an empowering activity that resistant practices are deliberately opted [42] at a specific historical time. In current age of globalization, Chinese culture should also keep its unique identity, of which the idea is applied to support the partition of fenghuang and phoenix.

Translation is argued to be instrumental to the ideological intentions [86]. The translation of fenghuang as phoenix has raised more concerns on the postcolonial issues that target readers in confronting translated text come across a sense of familiarity which is easier for reading and understanding, but the language uniqueness and cultural features in the source culture which is the unprivileged culture are also missed [87]. It is even criticized to be cultural hegemony in omitting the special features of fenghuang during the translation [88] that it has caused negative influence on Chinese cultural identity and self-awareness [66]. Fenghuang has its shared meanings in Chinese cultural community by means of the natural language [89] that through weakening the heterogeneity of fenghuang in “foreign culture” as using phoenix for alternative [85], Chinese culture to some degrees is underestimated in the translation. Fenghuang is more emphasized on its own translation by using “fenghuang” to replace “phoenix” [25], [63], [64]. This kind of resistance of translation is a challenge to the Western culture [90], [91] that Chinese scholars expect more focusing on Chinese individuality in its own culture under the globalizing era.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Translation is unavoidably being influenced by the cultural identity in different historical eras and affected by the rise and fall of discourse power in the target cultures. The intertwining combination of fenghuang and phoenix is under great influence by Legge’s translation and Guo Moruo’s poem in English and Chinese languages respectively. But more affections can be seen to Chinese translators, as Guo’s poem leads to huger influence in the Chinese culture. Though

the translation has made some confusion to the language, there still exists positive influences. Guo’s creation of combination of Buddhist, Chinese and Western mythical connotations for both fenghuang and phoenix greatly enriched the Chinese language after the May Fourth Movement that this translation provides more possibilities of Chinese culture as an inclusive culture. Translating fenghuang into phoenix disambiguates the specialty and uniqueness of the feature of fenghuang, but it also broadens phoenix’s connotation just as it was borrowing ideas from Egyptian benu millenniums ago.

While the translation of fenghuang in English and translation of phoenix in Chinese are found to have various alternatives after searching and comparing of different examples, the majority of those translations link fenghuang and phoenix together in both cultures. However, in current days, with the growth of China, the language, culture and soft power of China are more considered by some Chinese and foreign scholars in arguing for building up the Chinese cultural identity. The development of nationalism in China also leads to the increasing volume of voices in the retranslation of fenghuang and other culture-specific items, in the circle of Chinese translators. It is even criticized by some scholars and officials to translate fenghuang into phoenix as the cultural hegemony. Fenghuang is one of the possibilities to enhance the Chinese existence in influencing the Western languages and cultures, and also to indicate the uniqueness and individuality of the traditional culture of China. Besides, fenghuang’s feature of gender is more complex even in the Chinese context that its translation might encounter more issues, which should be further studied in the future.

## APPENDIX

### Translating fenghuang into English

1840s	voong	/
1861	fang	Legge
1865	phoenix	Legge
1898	phoenix	Ku
1938	phoenix	Waley
1972	phoenix	Lin
1974	phoenix	Hawkes
1978	phoenix	Yangs
1987	phoenix	Xu
2008	phoenix	Wang
2009	fenghuang	Zhang & Gong
2010	fenghuang	Huang
2011	fenghuang	Qian
2020	phoenix	Mulan

### Translating phoenix into Chinese

1913	菲尼克斯	Qian
1920	凤凰	Guo
1937	凤凰	Liang
1947	凤凰	Zhu
1988	不死鸟	Hong
2001	不死鸟	Zhuang
2013	不死鸟	Liu

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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