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# Gestalt-based Research on the “Tian wen” Translation: A Theoretical Framework

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## Abstract

As the most difficult chapter of the canon *Chu ci* which is the first anthology of romantic poetry in Chinese literature, the “Tian wen” is full of mythological and historical images whose translation is the key to its successful intercultural transmission. The images in the poem constitute some image-Gs at the global, middle, and local levels according to Gestalt theory, and they are classified as macro-IGs, meso-IGs, and micro-IGs in the present study. Based this classification, a theoretical framework for the “Tian wen” translation research is established. A precise understanding and representation of these image-Gs can help target readers have a complete and thorough comprehension of the target text.

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## 1. Introduction

The *Chu ci* ( 楚辞 ), a collection of poems by Qu Yuan ( 屈原 ) and other poets living between the fourth century B.C.E. and the second century C.E., is the first anthology of romantic poetry in Chinese literature, using the first-person allegorical narrative to introduce the great poet Qu's autobiography mixed with mythology, shamanism, history, and politics (Tian, et al., 2020). As a canon, the *Chu ci* is composed of 17 chapters according to Wang Yi, the most authoritative *Chu ci* scholar of the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 C.E.), and the "Tian wen" ( 天问 ) is the most difficult chapter in the anthology (Guo, 1982). It contains many mythological and historical images. This article is aimed to establish a theoretical framework for studying the understanding and translation of the images in the "Tian wen" based on Gestalt theory, especially its image-G actualization theory.

## 2. An Interpretation of Image-G in Actualization Theory

Gestalt theory derives from psychology and has been used in many fields, such as art, architecture, and literature. Mary Snell-Hornby (1988) is the first scholar who introduces Gestalt theory into translation studies. As part of Gestalt theory, Gestalt image theory is a multi-disciplinary translation theory. Jiang Qiuxia (2002) explores the psychological mechanism of Gestalt image reconstruction in literary translation and emphasizes how readers reconstruct the whole image of the source text (ST) and achieve aesthetic equivalence between the target text (TT) and the ST. The term "image-G" was first coined by Jiang (2002) in her doctoral dissertation. According to Jiang, an image-G can be formed by a single word, a character, a sentence, a paragraph or even a text as long as they are integrated and can serve to engender pictorial meanings. Some words which denote a thing or an action may mean nothing when they are not put together. In this condition, they cannot be viewed as a "gestalt image". For example, the Chinese words " 桥 " (*xiǎoqiáo*, small bridge), " 流水 " (*liúshuǐ*, flowing water), and " 人家 " (*rénjiā*, household) refer to three specific things or images respectively, yet they cannot be seen as an image-G when they stand alone. However, when they are combined to constitute the following line " 小桥流水人家 " in the poem by Ma Zhiyuan of the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 C.E.), they begin to have an entire artistic conception because they have created a holistic atmosphere of poetic charm with a proper integration.

The main characteristic of image-G is interpreted as the essence that the whole is not simply the sum of its parts and the analysis of the parts fails to provide an understanding of the whole. Therefore, Koffka (2013: 683) holds the view that when we take a product as a gestalt, we believe that it cannot be explained by an illogical combination of a series of unconnected components. In order to figure out the difference between the traditional concept of image and image-G, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of image at first. The American imagist Ezra Pound defines image as an emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time (Pound, 1913). Although his definition seems to be appropriate in describing people's feelings, it is still much too vague and abstract. However, the Chinese aesthetician Zhu Guangqian suggests that image and feeling are two independent concepts, and thus it is not proper to mix them up. In his book *Poetry*, Zhu points out that an image is a mental picture produced by language narration, and it can evoke readers' imagination and aesthetic experience through a series of visual presentation of objects, persons, and events (Zhu, 2005: 44-47).

Different from image in a general sense which is seen as narration that can stimulate one's feelings and emotions, image-

G is explained as “the representation, both mental and verbal, of a certain scene” or “an event as a whole in a literary text” (Jiang, 2002: 6). It emphasizes on the wholeness and claims that the connotation of a unified mental representation cannot be deduced from the mere sum of all parts. The whole is equipped with attributes that require a certain function for each part involved in the whole. These attributes are deducible via an analysis of parts in isolation. A good case in point is living beings. All their parts have their own lives, but when they are integrated into a whole, a new organism is created, and it is something like image-G. Thus, the problem arises with the production of an image-G. How does one create an image-G? According to Bower and Morrow (1990), the basis of language comprehension is how a reader or a listener constructs mental models of a situation and characters and describes them in linguistic form. During the process, the image-G associates us with our prior knowledge and past experience.

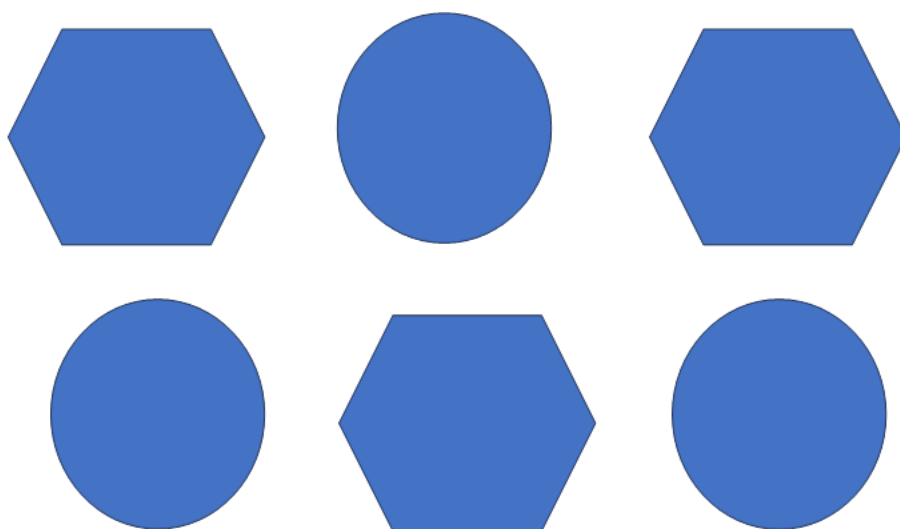
With respect to the internal structure of image-G, Jiang adopts Charles Fillmore’s scenes-frames integration which assumes that a scene refers to the situations of meaning and experience that find proper expressions in linguistic form to express themselves (Fillmore, 1977). According to Fillmore, the scene is not merely a visual one, but also any coherent part, and the frame is narrated to describe the scene in linguistic form. Based on Fillmore’s viewpoint, Jiang (2002) expounds the internal structure of image-G as the fusion of frames and scenes. The frame is to realize the scene and to arouse the reader’s psychological aesthetic schema. Bassnett (1980) indicates that translators are required to grasp the structure of literary texts, and the component parts interact with each other on the basis of this structure. To sum up, an image-G is achieved through coherent frameworks and mental scenes. It turns out to be a matter that translators have to look in the face.

### 3. Perceptual Organizational Principles of Image-G Actualization

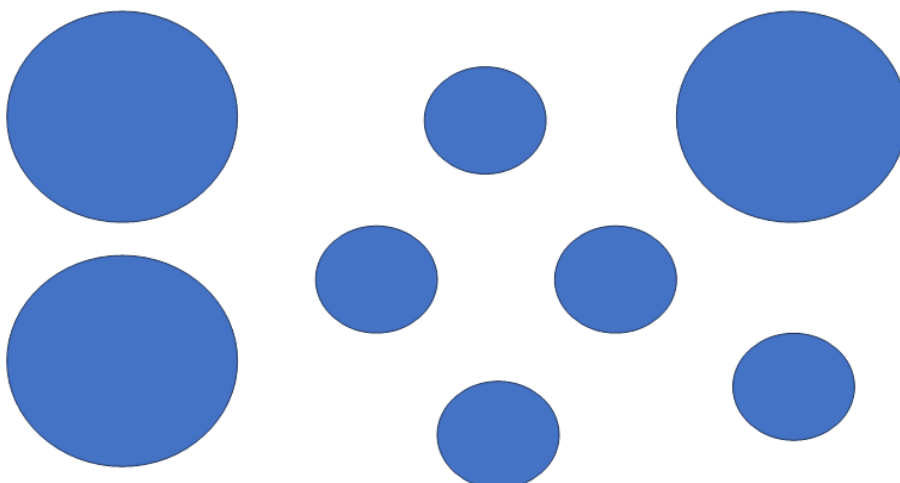
Translation studies focus dominantly on discourse analysis and text comprehension by conceiving the text as a holistic whole instead of an atomistic and fragmentary unit (Zhang, 2008). To deal with the holistic view in translation, the Gestalt principles in psychology of perception can be adopted. Image-G actualization is a new model to reproduce the meanings and the artistic conception of the ST through an integration of several elements, such as sounds, words, images, and structures. Appropriate image-G actualization contributes to the harmony between individual elements and overall artistic conception. This section briefly introduces the perceptual organizational principles of image-G actualization, and figures out the types of image-G actualization strategies in the translation of literary works.

#### 3.1. Principle of Similarity

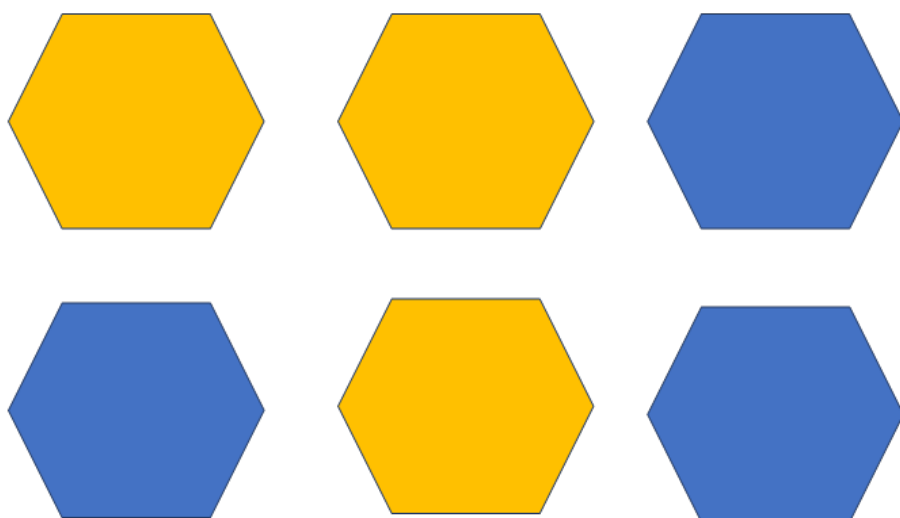
In Gestalt psychology, the Gestalt principle of similarity advocates that the elements with similar properties are inclined to be integrated into groups. Humans can perceive these similar elements as a complete picture, shape or group, even though the elements are separated from each other. It seems that the human brain can create a link between elements of a similar nature. It is concluded by Gestalt theorists as the idea that “entities in a case that share visual characteristics such as size, shape or color will be perceived as belonging together in a group” (Evans and Green, 2006: 66). For example, similarity can be achieved using basic elements (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).



**Figure 1.** Similarity based on shape



**Figure 2.** Similarity based on size



**Figure 3.** Similarity based on color

As illustrated in Figures 1, 2, and 3, similarity is influenced by the shape, size, and color of the elements. In most cases, people prefer to classify the patterns according to the similarity instead of the group in which those patterns are placed. Therefore, if we mix objects with a high degree of similarity to each other with a group of dissimilar objects, then our brain devotes time and energy to creating links between them so that it can try to understand their relationship. Sometimes, although the links are not remarkably discernable, they must certainly be presented uniformly to allow the audience to identify the linked text or pattern.

Given the similarity of the gestalt, readers are endowed with the possibility of perceiving similar elements or relationships between different sub-groups, even though the links are not obviously represented sometimes. In translating, translators need to find out the similarity or regularity among various image-Gs that are applicable to the whole. The similarity appears to be evident according to the shape, size, and color, but for the literary work, translators are expected to be a good observer to construct a whole in which all parts are closely associated with each other. Hence, translators play a vital role in deciding whether or not they should maintain the similarity or to which extent they explicitate the implicit message.

### 3.2. Principle of Closure

The principle of closure means that the defective wholes, which are implanted in forms of observance, conception, presumption memories and active deeds, and so on, are also prone to shape a subjective enclosure of integrated configuration (Kosslyn and Julesz, 1998: 256). That is to say, people obtain the “gestalt” through their senses and perceptions and they are inclined to complete a pattern based on their experience through adding the missing parts or excluding the redundant lines, while processing the visual perception (Evans and Green, 2006: 147-149). Therefore, the psychological mechanism of human creativity is realized in closure. Incompleteness and vacancy are important conditions for people’s psychological closure. We tend to complete shapes, or automatically fill in gaps among elements to perceive a complete image. That is how we see the whole first.



Figure 4. Principle of closure

As shown in Figure 4, although the visual elements are not complete, the audience can still recognize them respectively as a square, circle, and triangle at first sight. It is because readers are able to perceive a complete shape by filling in missing visual information. The lack of such a small amount of information will not cause a distortion of the original pattern. In other words, if too much information is hidden, the cognitive bias of the wholeness may arise to a certain

degree.

As far as the literature is concerned, traditional Chinese poetry lays great emphasis on the implication beyond words (Tan, 2009). By virtue of implicit, concise or delicate words, the absence and uncertainty of meaning in Chinese poetry expands the artistic conception which creates boundless room for readers' imagination. Meanwhile, semantic implicitness in ancient Chinese classics causes great trouble for readers to have a more authentic understanding of the original work. Song and Song (2010) explore the representation of the continuous closure of the gestalt from the perspective of cognitive psychology, phonetics, vocabulary, syntax, and discourse. Xin and Qin (2014) further investigate the applicability of the principle of Gestalt closure in the translation of classical poetry, guiding translators to construct the gestalt image in ancient Chinese poetry. Under this condition, translators are supposed to retain or fill in the original "blank" in the translation process and convey the true picture of the ST to target readers. In this regard, Chi (2015) as well as Cao and Yao (2017) takes the English translation of the "Shan gui" ( ) and the *Huangdi neijing* ( ) as examples to explore the methodological significance of the Gestalt closure principle in classics translation.

The principle of closure is applicable in dealing with the micro-image-G (henceforth "micro-IG") in the "Tian wen". In other words, each allusion or event in it is considered as an image-G, a part of the entirety. The whole is not simply the sum of all parts, but the parts certainly exert an influence on the whole. In sum, the translator's role is to bridge the gap between two cultures and they are required to mobilize their prior knowledge, life experience, and imagination according to the function of Gestalt closure, so as to make each micro-IG close to the nature of the event (Ahmed, 2011). Through the translator's efforts, target readers may not distort the original event.

### 3.3. Principle of Isomorphism

Gestalt isomorphism is the principle formulated by Gestalt psychologists for solving the relationship between mind and body. And the key to heterogeneous isomorphism is the fact that physical objects can express specific emotions of humans, which offers an possibility of applying Gestalt isomorphism to carry out literary appreciation.

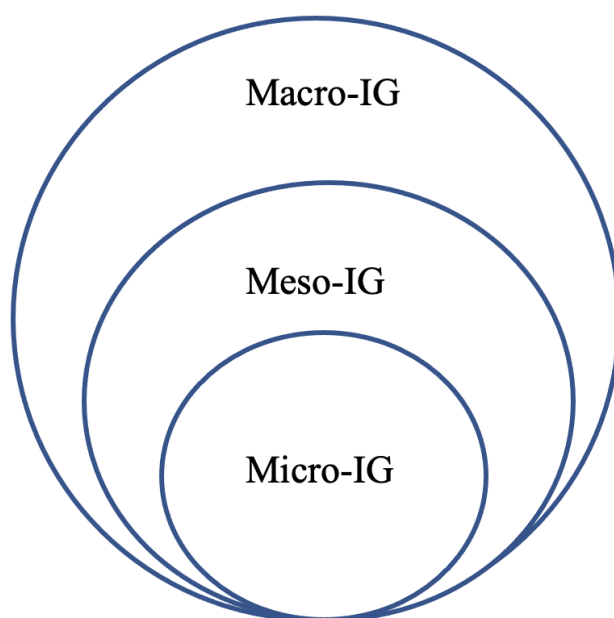
According to the concept of isomorphism, there are two different worlds: the world of experience and the world of physics. The observer's perception of the real world is the psychological field, and the perceived real world is the physical world. They do have their own identity. When the mental field and physical field are in harmony, people can get an exact psychological experience such as happiness, sorrow or anger through what they see, what they hear, and what they touch. Images are various concrete vivid and perceptible objects which are capable of expressing the idea of people who use them. Likewise, the process of translation also contains the elements of heterogeneous isomorphism because only when the inspiration of the ST and translators' complete comprehension adjust to each other to realize heterogeneous isomorphism, can a successful translation be achieved.

All in all, the principle of Gestalt isomorphism fix readers' attention on psychological factors in the translation of literary works via the combination of translation and psychology. Exploring image-G actualization in literary works can drive translators to reproduce the closest natural equivalent of the source language message so that source and target readers can enjoy the same aesthetic feelings. Also, it determines the degree of translators' adoption of replacement. When there

are images with the same characteristics in the target language, which stimulate the same or similar psychological experience of target readers, the translation strategy of replacement can be adopted in this case. While dealing with the meso-image-G (henceforth “meso-IG”) in the poem, translators are expected to take the similarity and isomorphism into account. Unlike the macro-image-G (henceforth “macro-IG”) which is relatively easy for readers to capture due to its remarkable frame, the meso-IGs establish a relationship with each other on the basis of emotions. This provides an enlightenment for translators to maintain the emotional consistency in dealing with the original image-G.

#### 4. Image-G in the “Tian wen”

This section deals with the classification of image-Gs in the “Tian wen” according to image-G actualization theory. As we have discussed above, the key to identifying the gestalt has been summarized by Kurt Koffka (2013) as the core idea that the whole is not simply the sum of all parts. Therefore, it is not appropriate to highlight the analysis of each individual part; instead, we are supposed to understand a literary work from a holistic view. The “Tian wen” is unique in style and rich in content, covering some doubts about heaven, myths, and Chinese history. Therefore, the poem itself is a global image-G, and it is composed of many sub-image-Gs. As a result, this study classifies the image-Gs in the canon into three types, namely, macro-IG, meso-IG, and micro-IG. Instead of being isolated from each other, the three types of image-Gs are in an integrated hierarchical system (see Figure 5). We can further dissect the whole poem into sub-image-Gs as follows:



**Figure 5.** Three types of image-G in the “Tian wen”

The poem as a whole is constituted by sub-image-Gs which can be further divided. All the parts in the poem do have something in common, but they are not the same thing. The biggest circle stands for the macro-IG (see Figure 5) which refers to the global structure, layout or rhythm underlying the poem. When readers plunge into the process of reading the

poem, something detailed may be noticed, and it is something more detailed about the content or emotion that the poet strives to convey between the lines. It must be pointed out that sometimes the link between the parts in the poem is not easy to capture; instead, the readers are required to employ their cognitive strategies to reproduce the image-G in another language culture. The second biggest circle stands for the meso-IG (see Figure 5). Meso-IG in the present study can be seen as a kind of image-G which is created via the link between several allusions of similar emotion or tone, namely, several micro-IGs in the poem. Finally, the smallest circle stands for the micro-IG (see Figure 5) which refers to a complete event or part of the event, usually in the form of an allusion in the poem. Each of these micro-IGs can be viewed as a whole or gestalt at the local level because the event itself involves some information elements or images. It can be seen that Qu Yuan is a man of great knowledge and adept in using various rhetorical devices in writing. This is fully reflected in the “Tian wen”. As we can see, there are numerous historical myths and allusions, some of which are mentioned only in a few words in the poem. According to Gestalt theory, if a large amount of information fails to be presented, a cognitive deviation may arise in readers’ understanding of a thing. As a result, we are supposed to provide the relevant information as much as possible in translating, in order to represent the image that is closest to the original in translation as an intercultural communication.

#### 4.1. Macro-IG in the “Tian wen”

Image-G distinguishes itself from the traditional “image” in that it is of a complete system, instead of emphasizing on a certain concrete image such as people, plant or animal. From a holistic view, the reason why the “Tian wen” is perceived as “the most splendid essay” is bound to give credit to its unique stylistic structure and rhythm (Guo, 1982).

Firstly, as a long poem with 376 verse lines, it is organized in the form of a series of questions, which is very rarely seen in the history of Chinese literature. According to the Ming-dynasty *Chu ci* commentator Huang Wenhuan’s statistics, the most frequently used interrogatives in the canon are “ ” (*hé*, why), which are used 124 times; “ ” (*yān*, where), 14 times; “ ” (*ān*, where), 13 times; “ ” (*shú*, who or which), 9 times; “ ” (*shuí*, who), 8 times; “ ” (*jǐ*, how many), 3 times (Huang, 2017: 243-244). Throughout the poem, various interrogative words are used to enrich the variability of the lines. The poem basically belongs to the four-character pattern in addition to some other patterns such as three-character, five-character, six-character, and seven-character ones. By incorporating all the verse lines of various lengths into a whole, the poet succeeds in engendering the aesthetic beauty of the poem. It seems that the lines are arranged at random, but according to Gestalt theory, there must be something shared by the component parts of the poem. Many scholars have devoted themselves to exploring the origin of the wonderful style of the poem but in vain. There are almost no stylistic similarities that can be found between the poem and any other ancient Chinese ballads, classics, and even foreign literature. Those who come into contact with the magnificent work for the first time will be impressed by its stunning rhetorical style.

Apart from the structure, rhythm is also a significant manifestation of the gestalt (Simpson, 1976: 3), and it is the carrier of thought implied in the poem. From the perspective of translation, how to deal with the phonology is also of much importance to conveying image-G. The modern Chinese linguist Wang Li’s book *On the Rhythm of the Chu ci* ( ) exactly indicates that the *Chu ci* boasts unique prosodic characteristics, which is called “Rhythm of Chu” ( ) (Wang, 1980). As for the rhyme scheme, the basic pattern of the poem is that every two or four neighboring sentences are rhymed (Yin, 2003).

The prosodic structure must be derived from Qu Yuan's careful consideration and the overall structure must be well developed in his mind before he started the writing of the poem. Its structure, rhythm, and rhyme pattern at the global level are what the macro-IG means in this study. Therefore, translators can draw their inspiration from the form and structure of the ST.

In general, Gestalt theory encourages translators to take a holistic view before the beginning of the specific translation operation. Therefore, translators have to be a good reader, and figure out the feature of the macro-IG and implicit relevance among the sub-image-Gs in the canon. Then, translators need to be a good judge, deciding whether the feature and relevance can be maintained and how they can be achieved in the target language.

#### 4.2. Meso-IG in the “Tian wen”

The Eastern Han-dynasty *Chu ci* commentator Wang Yi points out that Qu Yuan's creation of the “Tian wen” was inspired by the fresco and inscriptions on the wall of an ancestral temple (Wang, 1985). As for the division of the poem's content, *Chu ci* scholars have different views. Some of them use the dichotomy to divide the poem into the content on heaven and that on humans. However, the dividing standards and boundaries of different schools of scholars are not the same. Ma Qichang takes the verse line “ , ” (“And the Raven in the sun / With its feathers undone?”) as the boundary, dividing the poem into two parts: the first part is about nature and the second is about humans (Guo, 1982). Scholars of later generations are mostly in agreement with the division. Ma Maoyuan (1998) divides the poem into the questions about myths and those about human history from the perspective of mythology. Yin Gangxi (2003) postulates that the first stanza describes the creation of the heaven and the earth, as well as the structure of the celestial bodies. The remaining part is about the historical problems from the state of Xia, the state of Shang to the state of Zhou. Some other scholars use the trichotomy, and the representative scholar is Chi Huixin (2015) who divides the “Tian wen” into three parts, including natural phenomena, human history, and the reality of the Chu state. The three-part view was developed in Li Chenyu's Notes on the *Chu ci* ( ) which divides the poem into heaven, earth, and humans. Apart from the above divisions, there are also four-part and five-part divisions for the poem. All in all, no matter what method is used, one thing is certain that the component parts of the “Tian wen” are not put together randomly with a series of questions; instead, there is a close relationship between them.

Image-G highlights the contour of a literary work, and aims to express the author's feelings or emotions. The poem is undoubtedly considered as a whole, a gestalt image. It is the image-G at the global level, namely the macro-IG which can be further divided into several image-Gs at the middle level, namely the meso-IGs. One striking meso-IG in the poem presents a certain similarity between several micro-IGs through some emotional links. The whole poem is permeated with a spirit, namely an unrelenting pursuit and exploration of the fundamental laws of all things in the universe. The contour or the atmosphere of the poem is shaped by its language. Numerous scholars assume that the poem shows an attitude of skepticism: one is the doubt about the destiny of the universe; the other is the discussion of some ancient concepts (Wang, 1985; Zhu, 1979; Guo, 1982).

It is believed that Qu Yuan presents all the questions to convey his frustration that he had failed to achieve his ambitions

(Wang, 1985). According to Wang Yi's *Commentary to the Chu ci Chapters and Sentences* ( ), the poem was created when Qu Yuan was exiled and wandered around the mountains and lakes due to his melancholy and resentment. Liu Yongji borrows some historical facts such as the painted hall and studio recorded in the *Han shu* ( ) to confirm the authenticity of the statement (Guo, 1982). Some scholars such as Lin Geng, Chen Zizhan, Yin Guangxi, and Zhang Shuocheng approve of the idea that the canon is in the tone of desolation and it is constructed due to the author's long-term grief and indignation (Tian, et al., 2022).

It is also believed that Qu Yuan expresses his doubts about the nature and human affairs to expostulate the King of Chu (Wang, 1985). In a word, based on the relevant studies, this study divides the poem into two parts, or two meso-IGs from the perspective of Gestalt theory. The first meso-IG represents the author's doubts about heaven, and the second emphasizes on humans' efforts. Qu suppresses his indignation at the beginning of the poem; from the birth of the universe to the rise and fall of the three kingdoms, the poem returns to the reality; in the end, the author's emotion reaches its peak.

#### 4.3. Micro-IG in the "Tian wen"

The most distinguishing feature of the "Tian wen" is that Qu Yuan copiously quotes authoritative works and borrows many classical allusions (Ma, 1998). Each and every individual allusion in the poem can be regarded as an image-G at the local level, or micro-IG which can derive an independent sub-wholeness via the fragments of the description. There is generally something missing in the narration of an allusion in the canon, but roughly speaking, it does not have a substantive impact on the source language readers' overall cognition of it.

The Gestalt closure principle requires translators to mobilize their prior knowledge, life experience, and imagination in order to ensure the completeness of an image-G. In the process of image transformation and realization, the translator should give full play to their psychological mechanisms, such as aesthetic imagination and aesthetic thinking, and use various translation strategies and techniques to achieve the aesthetic reproduction of gestalt images (Tong and Gu, 2008). Poetry is a special kind of literary work with short and pithy verses. Different from other literary works like s and novels that may give a detailed account of an event, including the subject of the event as well as its course and ending, a poem usually mentions an event in a few words. This is known as a rhetorical device, and Qu Yuan is especially good at using this device, which causes difficulties in reading and translating the poem.

## 5. Application of the Gestalt Principles in Translation Research

The principle of similarity indicates that there is something governing the whole poem. As for the macro-IG in the "Tian wen", the poem is composed of a series of questions on heaven, earth, myths, and humans with a basically uniform rhythm. The degree of similarity decides whether they can be perceived as a whole by cognitive subjects. This principle is employed to see how closely the poem is organized and what aesthetic experience is produced in readers' mind. In other words, while dealing with the macro-IG, translators need to make the first choice with respect to whether the original

features should be retained. If they do keep the contour of the macro-IG, it is not easy for translators to achieve the target because the translation of ancient classics is a combination of intralingual and interlingual translation.

Secondly, we cut the macro-IG in the poem into two meso-IGs, which is a common division accepted by most *Chu ci* scholars. One meso-IG is concerned with heaven, and the other is about humans. It seems that these two meso-IGs are interrelated to each other. However, in the light of the similarity principle, we can see that the links among different sub-image-Gs may not be obvious. Sometimes, we need to find out the implied emotional connections from the perspective of isomorphism. As far as the “Tian wen” is concerned, the two meso-IGs express the author’s doubts about some known incidents or legends. They are consistent in emotional cognition, which is also what we call gestalt quality. The physical world intersects with the psychological world. Then, translators are confronted with another choice. Target readers may not manage to grasp the implicit association through the limited text message. Thus, both the similarity and isomorphism principles require translators to make implicit emotional connections explicit for readers.

Thirdly, the micro-IGs in the poem should be handled carefully. The closure principle suggests that translators have to mobilize relevant knowledge to provide a complete information for the incidents or figures in the canon. There are two ways of filling in the blank in translating. One is the in-text compensation method which means adding a limited number of descriptive phrases. The other is the extra-text compensation method which means presenting the cultural background in footnotes, endnotes or other kinds of paratexts. The main reason for adding various kinds of information via in-text and extra-text compensation methods is to avoid target readers’ deviation from or distortion of the original message. In this way, the readers are able to comprehend the original images as a whole, and thus obtain a complete understanding of the ST.

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