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From Myth to Meaning: A Thick Translation Perspective on the *Xuánniǎo* Motif in Guizhou Batik

Jixin Huang[1,2]* and Haslina Haroon[1]
[1]Translation and Interpreting Studies Section, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
[2]School of Foreign Languages, Zunyi Medical University, 563000 Zunyi, Guizhou, China

*Corresponding author: huangjixin@student.usm.my

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ABSTRACT

A persistent challenge in the translation of intangible cultural heritage involves conveying symbolic meanings and deep cultural connotations without eroding their inherent mythical or ritual significance. This study examines the Xuánniǎo (Xuan bird) motif in Guizhou batik—a symbol central to mythical origins and ethnic identity—to propose a nuanced translation framework for culturally dense iconography. Drawing upon Geertz's (1973) framework of thick description and Appiah's (1993) concept of thick translation, it aims to investigate the diachronic representation of Xuánniǎo across mythical, symbolic, and ritual dimensions, examine the evolution of its English translations in various periods and publication types, and propose a thick translation model designed for the preservation and transfer of complex cultural symbols. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, the study analyses a corpus of 70 English translations of Xuánniǎo spanning from 1871 to 2025. The findings demonstrate how the Xuánniǎo transitioned from a mythical agent of ancestral birth to a central cultural symbol, ultimately finding its modern artistic expression as a primary motif in the ethnic ritual crafts of Guizhou. The findings also point to a shift in the translation of Xuánniǎo, moving from conventional literal and free translation strategies toward a transliteration-led approach. This evolution reflects a growing scholarly emphasis on cultural fidelity and conceptual accuracy. Building on these trends, this paper introduces the 3R Model (Retain, Reveal, and Recontextualise). This framework seeks to harmonise semantic precision with cultural integrity, positioning translation as a vital intellectual and cultural instrument for the global dissemination of intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Xuánniǎo motif, Guizhou batik, thick description, thick translation, intangible cultural heritage*

INTRODUCTION

House (2019, 10) defines translation as "intercultural communication designed to achieve intercultural understanding." This is especially true for Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), where translation bridges ethnic traditions and international audiences by overcoming linguistic barriers (Wang 2024).

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Guizhou batik is represented by four entries on China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage List (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network 2006, 2008, 2011, 2021), reflecting its prevalence among Miao and Buyi communities in Southwest China. Thriving in the region's diverse ecological landscape, this wax-resist dyeing craft produces iconic blue-and-white patterns. Beyond ornamentation, these designs serve as visual records of ethnic beliefs, cosmology, and social narratives (Lyu and Yahaya 2021).

Among the numerous batik motifs, the *Xuánniǎo* motif is of cultural symbolic significance. The *Xuánniǎo* motif derives from an ancient myth documented in the *Book of Poetry*, in which "Heaven commissioned the swallow, To descend and give birth to [the father of our] Shang" (Chinese Text Project n.d.). Within this cosmological narrative, the *Xuánniǎo* signifies divine mandate, ancestral origin, and the cyclical continuity of life. Through cultural exchange and local adaptation, the *Xuánniǎo* has been reimagined in Miao batik as a symbol of fertility and protection, and today, it represents ethnic identity and cosmological belief (Mu and Wang 2021). *Xuánniǎo* is often translated simply as "black bird," "dark bird," or "swallow," and while this facilitates reader understanding, such reductionism sacrifices the symbol's cultural nuances.

To address this semiotic flattening, this study systematically explores the cross-cultural translation and cultural reproduction of the *Xuánniǎo* motif in Guizhou batik from the perspective of Geertz's (1973) thick description and Appiah's (1993) thick translation. To be specific, this study aims to: (1) investigate the diachronic representation of *Xuánniǎo* across mythical, symbolic, and ritual dimensions; (2) examine the diachronic evolution of its English translations in various periods and publication types; (3) propose a thick translation model designed for the preservation and transfer of complex cultural symbols.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Literature Review reviews literature on thick description, thick translation, and the cultural symbolism of Guizhou batik motifs. Methodology details the data sources and methodology. Finally, Analysis and Discussion discusses the findings, focusing on the feasibility and cultural significance of applying a thick translation perspective to ICH.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Thick Description

The concept of thick description was first proposed by Ryle (1949, 118), who distinguished between "thin" and "thick" descriptions to reveal deeper cultural meanings behind behaviour. Building on this, Geertz (1973) developed it as a core methodology in cultural anthropology, emphasising that cultural analysis involves the interpretation of meaning rather than mere description of facts. In his analysis of Balinese cockfighting, Geertz (1973) demonstrated that cultural analysis involves interpreting symbolic meaning rather than merely describing facts.

Scholars later adapted thick description across various disciplines, resulting in two primary research trajectories. The first path emphasises contextual interpretation, arguing that actions and meanings are deeply embedded in specific social and cultural environments (Bell and Kissling 2019; Balogh 2020). The second path focuses on symbolic expression, where scholars in philosophy and the arts employ thick description to uncover implicit cultural values and ethical meanings embedded in symbolic forms (Foster 2023).

Within Translation Studies, scholars have applied thick description to uncover cultural meaning embedded in language. Li (2015) emphasises its role in revealing social and symbolic dimensions of expressions, while Guan et al. (2022) position it as a theoretical foundation for thick translation, enabling the reconstruction of culturally embedded meaning beyond word-for-word equivalence. However, existing research remains largely theoretical, with limited application to specific cultural contexts. As Yan and Tian (2020) observe, studies tend to focus predominantly on literary texts, and a systematic methodology for practical translation analysis is still lacking.

Thick Translation

The concept of thick translation, proposed by Appiah (1993), originates from thick description in cultural anthropology. Drawing on Geertz's (1973, 5) view of culture as a "network of meaning," Appiah (1993) conceptualises translation as a process of cultural reconstruction rather than mere linguistic transfer. Appiah (1993) further emphasises the role of paratextual strategies, such as annotations, prefaces, and appendices, in enabling readers to access the original cultural context. In this sense, thick translation reflects a dual fidelity to linguistic form and socio-cultural meaning, positioning translation as a form of cultural practice.

Building on Appiah's (1993) notion, Hermans (2003) further develops thick translation as an approach to cross-cultural interpretation that foregrounds contextual complexity and resists reductive representations of meaning. Subsequent research has since diverged into exploring translator subjectivity and methodological refinement. For example, based on a comparison between two English translations of *Laozi*, Huang et al. (2019) propose a "text-close" model of translation, emphasising the crucial role of paratext in cultural context. Similarly, Yin (2013) emphasises the translated intermediary role in building a "third space" between theory and practice, while Jiao and Tian (2023), with the English translation *Chu Ci*, for example, illustrate how paratexts enhance cultural depth. Furthermore, Nakamura (2024) reveals the possibility of protecting cultural symbols in an audiovisual context from a multimedia perspective. Collectively, these studies indicate that thick translation is gradually evolving into a cross-disciplinary mechanism for cultural transmission.

Although thick translation has been widely discussed in literary and philosophical research, as seen in the work of Zhu and Yin (2023), its application to ICH remains underdeveloped. Specifically, there is a lack of research addressing the cultural practices, social memories, and expressions of identity inherent in ICH. This gap highlights the need for a more structured methodological approach to thick translation in this field. Such an approach is essential to achieving a balance between representing cultural depth and ensuring effective cross-cultural understanding.

Intangible Cultural Heritage

Within Translation Studies, ICH is vital for maintaining cultural identity (Zheng and Liu 2022). UNESCO defines ICH as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage" (UNESCO 2022). Consequently, translating ICH requires accounting for its deep roots in social practice and collective memory.

In recent years, research on ICH translation has concentrated on three interconnected levels. At the technical level, scholars have explored the potential of digital technologies—particularly artificial intelligence—to optimise the accessibility of ICH texts and enhance the efficiency of their global dissemination (He and Duan 2023). At the cultural level, researchers such as Liu

(2021) investigate the negotiation between localisation and globalisation, emphasising the translator's need to balance target-language readability with the preservation of cultural uniqueness. Finally, at the practical level, studies demonstrate the social implications of ICH in artwork distribution and heritage communication, highlighting its vital role in fostering cross-cultural dialogue and social networking (Song 2023).

Current research, however, remains fragmented, often prioritising translation products over the processes used to create them. A systematic framework for reconstructing cultural context and deep-seated meaning is still lacking. Specifically, scholars have yet to explore how linguistic conversion can effectively preserve the cultural symbols and social memories inherent in ICH.

Guizhou Batik

Guizhou batik stands as an important representative of China's ICH, synthesising the Miao and Buyi artistic creativity, ethnic identity, and spiritual heritage. Utilising beeswax and natural indigo, practitioners create complex, layered designs through a wax-resist dyeing process (He and Yang 2009). Beyond its decorative appeal, the craft embodies ritual symbolism and collective memory, sustained by Guizhou's mountainous topography and natural resources.

In recent years, scholarly research on Guizhou batik has diversified significantly, with studies focusing on its techniques (He 2021; Zhao 2020), styles (Liu et al. 2021; Long and Lee 2021), cultural transmission (Dewhurst and Lloyd 2019; Li 2021), and economic value (Cheng and Wang 2021). As a cornerstone of China's ICH, the preservation of Guizhou batik must extend beyond material conservation to encompass the linguistic and semiotic translation of its symbolic imagery. Accurate cultural translation is paramount for authentic global representation; yet, scholarly attention to this communicative dimension remains scarce.

Existing studies (Huang 2021; Huang et al. 2021) have focused primarily on general textual analysis or communicative strategies, with little attention paid to the translation of batik motifs as distinct semiotic units. Although the symbolic dimensions of batik—specifically the *Xuánniǎo* motif and its mythical imagery—have been explored in folklore (Wang 2025) and art (Chen and Gao 2025), they have yet to be systematically analysed through the lens of cross-cultural translation. This study, thus, addresses this gap, exploring how the *Xuánniǎo* motif is interpreted and disseminated across linguistic boundaries.

In view of the above, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What mythical, symbolic, and ritual meanings are embedded within the *Xuánniǎo* motif in the context of Guizhou batik?
2. How have the English translations of *Xuánniǎo* evolved across different periods and publication genres?
3. What "thick translation" framework can most effectively balance linguistic accuracy with cultural integrity when translating ICH symbols like *Xuánniǎo*?

METHODOLOGY

Source of Data

The primary data for this study consist of 70 verifiable English translations of *Xuánniǎo*, collected from a diverse range of academic and public repositories. The corpus is categorised into five distinct publication genres:

1. Journal Articles: peer-reviewed articles spanning the fields of literature, mythology, linguistics, and religious studies;
2. Conference Proceedings: papers presented at international forums on cultural studies and translation;
3. Theses and Dissertations: graduate-level research reflecting recent academic interest in the cultural symbolism and translation of *Xuánniǎo*;
4. Monographs and Edited Volumes: chapters and books selected from the disciplines of Sinology, comparative literature, and cultural history;
5. Digital Platforms: Online resources, such as Wikipedia, utilised as supplementary data and for cross-verification of terminology.

Within this corpus, particular emphasis is placed on texts and studies centred on Guizhou batik. In this specific medium, the *Xuánniǎo* motif transcends mere ornamentation, serving as a signifier of ancestral worship, ethnic identity, and spiritual protection within national craftsmanship. To analyse the evolution of the translations of *Xuánniǎo*, this study utilises a longitudinal corpus spanning over 150 years. This timeline provides a comprehensive historical trajectory, ranging from the earliest English renditions of *The Book of Songs* in 1871 to the most recent academic contributions in 2025. Each entry in the corpus was systematically indexed by its context, publication genre, year, and source. This structured approach ensures the representativeness and verifiability of the data set. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the *Xuánniǎo* translations across the various publication categories.

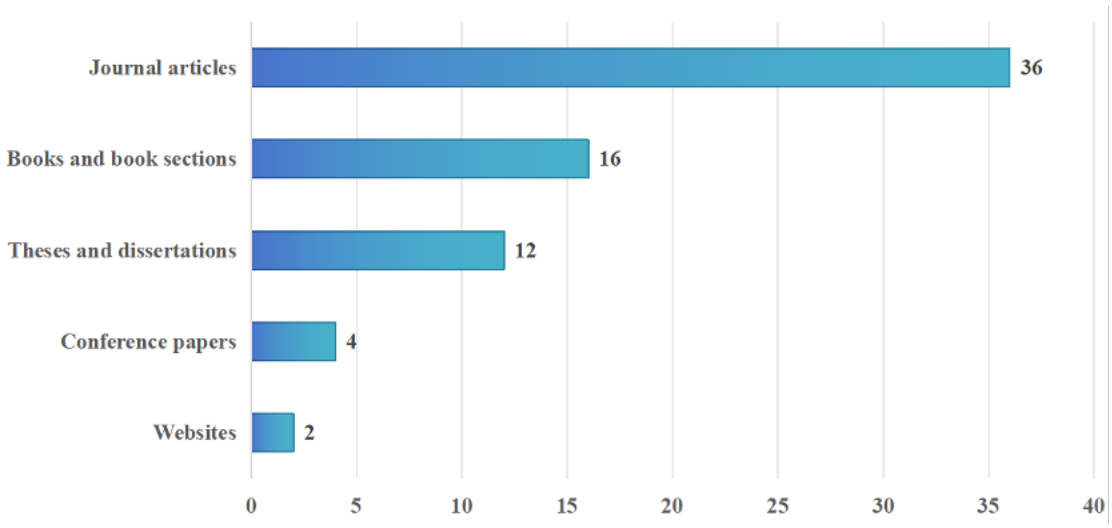


Figure 1 Distribution of *Xuánniǎo* translation corpus by publication type (1871–2025).

Data Collection

The data collection process followed a systematic three-stage protocol: identification, screening, and categorisation.

1. Identification Stage: A comprehensive search was conducted across major academic databases, such as CNKI, Brill, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. The search utilised a combination of transliterated and translated keywords, like "Xuan Niao," "dark bird," "black bird," "phoenix," and "swallow."

2. Screening Stage: Potential entries underwent a rigorous validation process. Publications were authenticated, and any duplicated or irrelevant entries—those outside the cultural and linguistic scope of this research—were excluded to ensure a high-quality dataset.

3. Categorisation Stage: The final 70 valid translation samples were systematically organised by publication genre and historical period. This allows for a diachronic comparative analysis, tracing the evolution of translation strategies over time.

This process ensures corpus reliability across periods and genres, facilitating a robust framework for subsequent qualitative analysis and descriptive statistics. Furthermore, the temporal scope of the corpus is set from 1871 to 16 October 2025. While further translations of *Xuánniǎo* may emerge in the future, this corpus represents the most comprehensive and verifiable collection of samples available at the time of data collection.

Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a holistic view of the translation process. The research is structured into three progressive stages, each aligned with a specific research objective.

Phase I: Cultural Interpretation (Thick Description)

This stage utilises the concept of thick description to decode the *Xuánniǎo* motif through its mythical origins, symbolic prototypes, and ritual functions. By synthesising data from classical historiography and ethnographic records, this phase traces the semantic evolution of *Xuánniǎo*, from its genesis in ancient mythology to its modern artistic re-creation in Guizhou batik.

Phase II: Translational Representation (Diachronic Analysis)

Utilising the 70-sample corpus, this section examines the re-conceptualisation of *Xuánniǎo* across historical periods and genres. It evaluates the shift in translational paradigms—from early missionary literalism to modern cultural studies—analysing the interplay between literal translation, free translation, and transliteration. This illustrates the dynamic linguistic trajectory of the motif as it crosses cultural boundaries.

Phase III: Framework Construction (The 3R Model)

Synthesising the preceding analyses, this section proposes a "Three-Dimensional Thick Translation Framework" (3R Model: Retain, Reveal, and Recontextualise), the features of which are explained in the following:

1. Retain: preserve the original linguistic signifier to maintain cultural identity;
2. Reveal: provide paratextual explanations to uncover the essential symbolic significance for the target audience;
3. Recontextualise: re-embed the symbol within its original ritualistic and craftsmanship-based context, achieving a dynamic balance between semantic precision and cultural integrity.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural Connotations of the *Xuánniǎo* Image: A Thick Description

The *Xuánniǎo* (which literally means "black bird" or "dark bird") originates from ancient Chinese mythology and ritual traditions, symbolising the spiritual bond between cosmology, gender concepts, and collective memory. Drawing on Geertz's (1973) thick description, this study looks at the *Xuánniǎo* as a cultural symbol that carries mythological origin, symbolic meanings, and ceremonial functions rather than just a simple bird. By referring to ancient books such as *The Book of Songs* and *Records of the Grand Historian*, this section will now discuss its semantic evolution from a mythical and legendary prototype to a symbol of ethnic culture.

Mythological Origin: The Bird of Destiny and Ancestral Birth

The earliest record of *Xuánniǎo* appears in *The Book of Songs* (*Shijing·Shang Song·Xuanniao*), a poem composed during the early Western Zhou period (11th to 8th centuries BC), *as* "天命玄鸟，降而生商" (Cheng and Jiang 1999, 1030), meaning "Heaven decreed the dark bird to descend and give birth to Shang," which is a poetic narrative showing "the sacred lineage of the Shang people" (Men 2023, 27). This is also echoed by Huang (2023), who believes that it constitutes the mythological code of the origin of the Shang people.

Subsequently, *Records of the Grand Historian: Annals of Yin* (approximately the 1st century BC) also recorded the story of "简狄见玄鸟堕其卵，取而吞之，因孕生契" (meaning "Jiandi saw a *Xuánniǎo* drop its egg, took it and swallowed it, and gave birth to Xie, the name of the ancestor of the Shang people") (Sima 1988, 4). This narrative established the mythological foundation for the *Xuánniǎo* as the ancestral totem of the Shang people.

Over time, the myth was documented extensively throughout the Chinese historiographical tradition, gaining widespread cultural acceptance. Within the academic community, the precise identity of the *Xuánniǎo* remains a subject of significant debate; scholars have variously identified it as a swallow, phoenix, or crow, with these competing interpretations reflecting a multifaceted cosmological and totemic system (Men 2023). Such symbolic ambiguity underscores the inherent complexity of the motif, suggesting that its significance lies less in its classification and more in its role.

Indeed, in early Chinese cosmology, the *Xuánniǎo* functioned as more than a mere symbol of fertility; it represented the mandate of heaven to descend into the world, becoming a bridge connecting heaven and earth through the sacred act of birth. As Geertz (1973, 5) posits, this myth forms a "web of meanings" that intertwines with life, reproduction, and cosmic renewal. Furthermore, scholarship in mythology and cultural history (Shi 2007; Zhang 2015) considers the *Xuánniǎo* as a symbol of mythical motherhood, linking human, nature, heaven, and earth.

Symbolic Transformation: From Divine Symbol to Ethnic Pattern

Throughout its extensive historical development, the *Xuánniǎo* of the Shang Dynasty transitioned from a messenger of the cosmic order into a central motif within popular visual arts. This process of cultural transmutation is supported by ethnographic research, which suggests that the myth has evolved into an ethnic totem, a vital signifier of birth and protection (Zhang 2025).

This transition from ancient myth to living heritage is reflected in Guizhou batik. He and Yang (2009) observe that batik produced in Rongjiang and Sandu in the Guizhou Province consistently utilises avian designs, which are frequently intertwined with floral and botanical elements to symbolise the renewal of life and the natural world.

Although worship of the phoenix eventually replaced *Xuánniǎo* in mainstream Chinese tradition, the motif of the *Xuánniǎo* has been preserved within the cultural memory of ethnic minority communities (He and Yang 2009). In Miao batik specifically, the *Xuánniǎo* serves as a symbolic guardian of fertility; its characteristically symmetrical wings function as a visual metaphor for universal harmony and the life cycle.

Tu (2021) further notes that the *Xuánniǎo* image shifted from a totem associated with Shang royal authority to an ancestral bird symbol within Miao culture, illustrating how cultural meanings are reinterpreted through processes of regional adaptation. If the phoenix symbolises the transcendence of imperial authority, the Miao *Xuánniǎo* represents the protection and collective memory of the community. Furthermore, the actual batik-making process—drawing, waxing, dyeing, and dewaxing—is not merely a technique but also a ritual. It physically shows how the community's life and culture are constantly being reborn and renewed.

Recent design scholarship indicates that the *Xuánniǎo* totem is undergoing a process of semiotic regeneration within contemporary cultural and creative industries. By incorporating geometric abstraction into the contrast of cool and warm tones, modern designers have effectively recontextualised the traditional motif, instilling it with renewed symbolic vitality (Ding and Zheng 2021). This clearly demonstrates the modern renewal of an ancient symbol. The way the *Xuánniǎo* has changed—from a myth into a symbol of ethnic pride and a distinctive marker of ethnic identity—shows the process of cultural continuity. Ancient symbols can indeed be revived when they are aligned with modern creativity.

Ritual Embodiment: Living Heritage in Guizhou Batik

Within ancient Chinese cosmology, the *Xuánniǎo* is defined by two primary identities: as the mythological ancestor of divine descent and as a messenger of the seasons bringing the harmonious unity of yin and yang. According to Fang and Shao (2022, 114), the *Xuánniǎo* appears "at the vernal equinox to demonstrate the balance between the cold and the heat," thereby indicating the cyclical order governing heaven and earth. Over time, the link between bird migration and solar cycles developed into a ritualistic worldview, in which the *Xuánniǎo* was a medium for reproduction and divine renewal. In this respect, the *Xuánniǎo* drawing or praying is a symbolic practise through which the cosmic order is restated.

Additionally, within the visual grammar of batik, the *Xuánniǎo* is typically rendered in a circular or swirling composition, reflecting the "rotational and cyclical cosmology" inherent in the character *Xuán* (玄), which denotes depth, mystery, and circularity (Fang and Shao 2022, 114–115). The indigo-dyed lines, often flowing in curvilinear and wave-like patterns, create a sense of continuous movement and visual rhythm, symbolising renewal and rebirth (Yuan and Ni 2023).

Structurally, the motif adopts a centre–periphery composition, with the *Xuánniǎo* as the focal point, surrounded by floral and vegetal elements signifying growth and regeneration. The symmetrical wings convey balance and harmony, echoing the cosmological unity between heaven, earth, and life. Through these visual features, abstract cultural concepts are materialised in artistic form, transforming the motif into a semiotic system in which meaning is embedded in narrative, symbolism, line, composition, and visual flow. Accordingly, the *Xuánniǎo* motif is not merely decorative but constitutes a form of "thick description," embodying cultural continuity in Guizhou batik.

In summary, by employing thick description, this study situates the *Xuánniǎo* within a continuum spanning myth, symbol, and ritualised craft. Tracing its trajectory from ancient cosmological origins to its modern artistic re-creation in Guizhou batik reveals a motif that is functionally dynamic rather than static. By uncovering the motif's multidimensional heritage, this study is able to evaluate how different translations navigate the semiotic density and cultural complexities inherent in the *Xuánniǎo*.

Representation in Translation: Diachronic Translations of *Xuánniǎo*

In line with the second objective of the study, this section evaluates the translational representations of *Xuánniǎo* across different periods and publication types, with the aim of analysing the evolution of translation strategies amid the process of cultural adaptation. This study assembled 70 verifiable English translations spanning the period from 1871 to 2025. This dataset encompasses five primary categories: monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, conference proceedings, and digital platforms. As illustrated in Figure 2, the chronological distribution of the corpus reveals a significant concentration of contemporary scholarship, contrasting with the relatively sparse translational output of earlier periods.

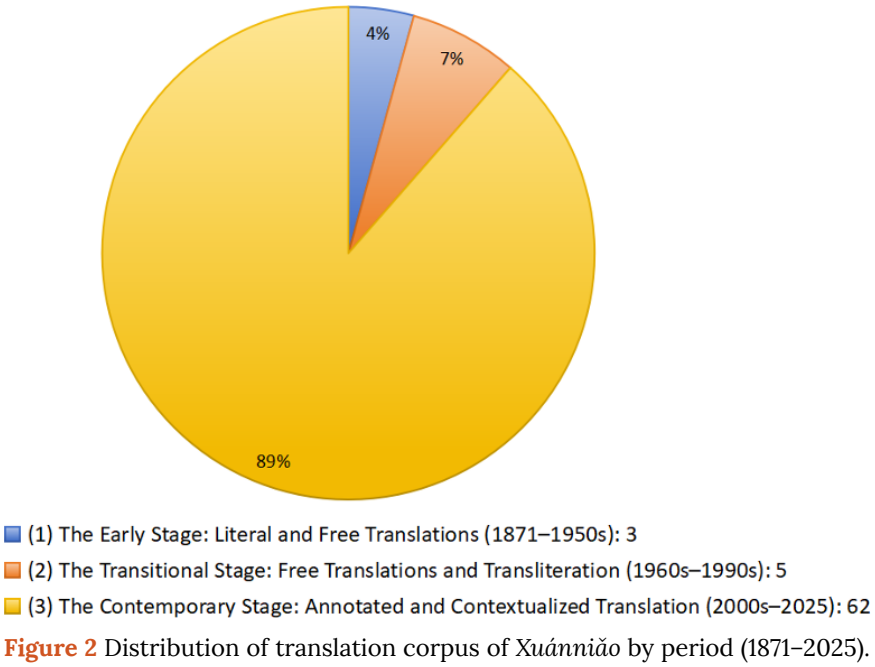


Figure 2 Distribution of translation corpus of *Xuánniǎo* by period (1871–2025).

The Early Stage: Literal and Free Translations (1871–1950s)

The earliest English translation of *Xuánniǎo* originated from philological contexts which prioritised linguistic accuracy and religious tone. During this time, the motif's broader cosmic significance was largely neglected. Legge (1871, 636), in the fourth volume of *The Chinese Classics*, rendered the line "天命玄鸟，降而生商" as "Heaven commissioned the swallow, to descend and give birth to the father of our Shang." Through the domestication of the *Xuánniǎo* as a "swallow," Legge interpreted the myth of "feeling the heavens and getting pregnant" as a natural event, bringing the concept of "commission" into the semantic framework of Christianity's mission of God. Besides, influenced by the rhetorical rhythm of the King James Bible, Legge's translation has a clear biblical rhythm and parallel structure, reshaping the myths of the Shang people into religious narratives with moral admonitions.

In contrast, Waley (1937, 303) adopted a more secularised approach in translation of *The Book of Songs*, rendering the passage as "Heaven bade the dark bird/To come down and bear the Shang." By translating *Xuán* literally as "dark," Waley restored the dark and mysterious imagery originally represented by the word "*Xuán*," reflecting a shift from the religious fable to an aesthetic literal translation. However, even though "dark bird" is more semantically accurate, it still deviates from the ritual of the original context in the poem, simplifying mythological imagery into a poetic description rather than reflecting its deep meaning as a symbol of the sacred universe.

Subsequently, Karlgren (1950, 263) rendered the passage as "Heaven ordered the black bird to descend and bear Shang." While the choice of "black bird" aligns more closely with the denotative meaning of the word "*Xuán*" (玄), this approach diverges from Waley's emphasis on creating a poetic atmosphere by emphasising accuracy in language and form of text. This simplifies the myth into linguistic evidence rather than belief in the living universe. This approach reflects the empirical language orientation of Sinology research in the mid-20th century, which emphasises the verifiability of literature and the rational distance of academia, but to some extent weakens the vitality of cultural symbols.

During this period, the semantic profile of the *Xuánniǎo* underwent a distinct process of flattening. Whether through cultural domestication (as seen in "swallow") or literalism ("dark bird" or "black bird"), these translational approaches effectively naturalised a metaphysical entity, reducing this mysterious image to a naturalised or linguistic symbol and weakening its original cosmic and sacrificial functions.

The Transitional Stage: Free Translations and Transliteration (1960s–1990s)

After the 1960s, the English translation of *Xuánniǎo* entered a transitional stage, with translators showing more sensitivity to its mythological underpinnings. During this period, the practice of translation gradually shifted from the framework of early missionary linguistics to comparative mythology, anthropology, and early semiotic approaches in Sinology research. Translators no longer regard *Xuánniǎo* as a simple linguistic referent; instead, it was considered an important cultural symbol in the interpretation of the ancient universe and the reproduction of myths.

Schmitt (1966) pioneered the use of transliteration by rendering the motif as "*xuan-niao*," reflecting linguistic awareness in terms of the untranslatability of the term. He called for the preservation of the mythical name in order to preserve cultural identity in ethnology, a move that may be considered as a precursor to the modern "thick translation" framework. Later, Allan (1981) adopted a hybrid translational strategy, rendering *Xuánniǎo* as "black bird (*xuan niao*)," reflecting the emphasis on semantic accessibility (through literal translation) and cultural

specificity (through transliteration). The inclusion of the transliteration in parentheses serves as a meta-linguistic marker, alerting the reader that the *Xuánniǎo* is not a mere descriptive label but a specialised cultural signifier with mythological significance.

Since the 1990s, the English translations of *Xuánniǎo* have exhibited a clear shift from its treatment as just a bird toward its treatment as a sacred symbol. For example, Xu (1994) utilised the term "Swallow," but differentiated his approach from Legge's earlier domestication by capitalising the initial letter. This orthographic choice serves to personify the motif, elevating it from a mere specimen to a sacred subject, thereby achieving a balance between linguistic accessibility and cultural reverence. Subsequently, Jensen (1995) and Riegel (1997) advocated for the use of transliteration (*xuanniao* or *xuan niao*), highlighting *Xuánniǎo*'s independent mythological identity and reflecting the growing academic awareness of *Xuánniǎo* as a symbol of local culture.

In general, the use of varied strategies during this period—ranging from capitalised domestication (Swallow) to hybrid forms (black bird [*xuan niao*]) and pure transliteration (*xuan niao*)—signifies a shift from lexical equivalence toward symbolic interpretation, and reflects the effort to negotiate communicative accessibility and cultural authenticity. This key transition reversed the earlier mythic flattening and laid the foundation for the rise of the concepts of contextualised translation and thick translation in the 21st century.

The Contemporary Stage: Annotated and Contextualised Translation (2000s–2025)

Between 2000 and 2025, the translation of *Xuánniǎo* underwent a definitive shift toward transliteration complemented by paratextual annotation and contextualised framing, marking a departure from the earlier literal and free translation in favour of mixed interpretation. In the corpus of this study, 62 out of 70 samples (88.6%) are concentrated within this timeframe, indicating that contemporary research has become a primary site for the negotiation and stabilisation of the *Xuánniǎo as a distinct cultural signifier*.

To better understand the drivers of this trend, the publication ecology of these 62 contemporary cases was examined (Figure 3).

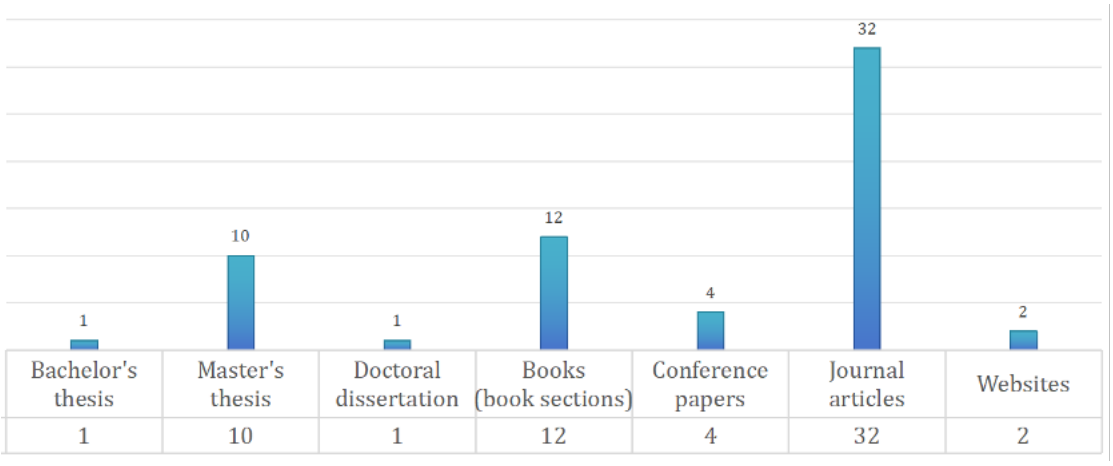


Figure 3 Distribution of contemporary *Xuánniǎo* translations by publication type (2000–2025).

As illustrated in Figure 3, peer-reviewed journals constitute the main medium of dissemination (n = 32, 51.6%), suggesting that the *Xuánniǎo* has entered mainstream academic discourse and indicating standardisation in terms of orthography, glossing, and contextual framing. Monographs and book chapters (n = 12, 19.4%) further reflect the motif's interdisciplinary integration and terminology solidification. Notably, the presence of 12 theses—predominantly at the Master's level—highlights the topic as a fertile entry point for emerging scholars, particularly for literature reviews and case-based inquiries. However, there is limited representation of doctoral dissertations (n = 1) and bachelor's thesis (n = 1), suggesting that a specialised, large-scale research community has yet to consolidate around this specific motif at these levels. Conference proceedings (n = 4, 6.5%) serve as platforms for exploratory frameworks, whereas digital entries (n = 2, 3.2%) act as channels for disseminating "transliteration and brief gloss" to a broader, non-specialist audience.

Next, the translation strategy profile of the 2000–2025 contemporary subset (n = 62) is assessed (details in Figure 4, merged in Figure 5).

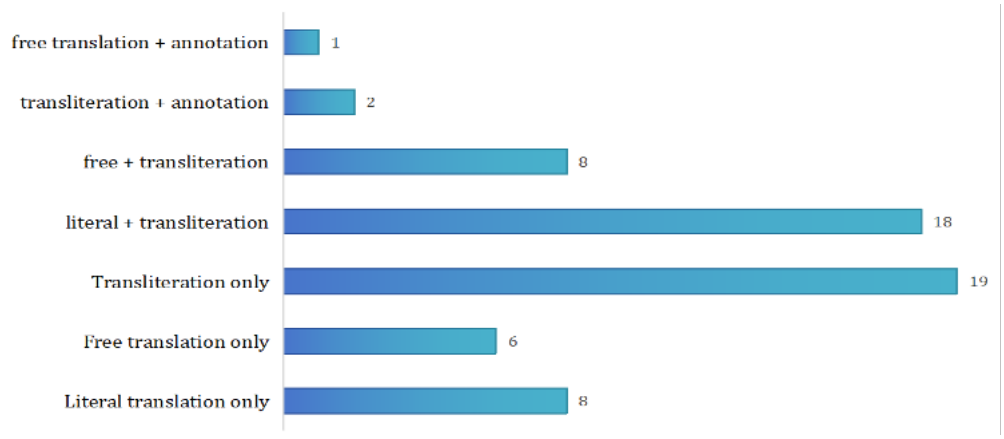


Figure 4 Distribution of translation strategies for *Xuánniǎo* in the contemporary subset (2000–2025).

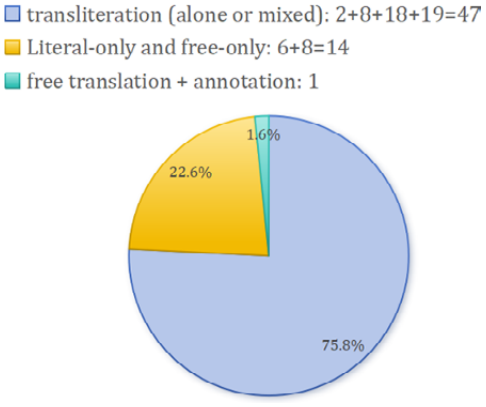


Figure 5 Share of transliteration vs. non-transliteration strategies in the contemporary subset (2000–2025).

An analysis of the translation strategies reveals the dominance of transliteration (alone or mixed), accounting for 75.8% of the corpus. This preference points to the desire to preserve the local symbol while utilising brief annotations or literal translation to ensure semantic accessibility. Purely literal and free translations comprise 22.6% of the samples. These instances are primarily driven by a desire for communicative fluency. The use of free translation with annotation remains marginal at 1.6%, suggesting its use as an alternative for specific communication scenarios. Thus, the contemporary corpus presents a dominant paradigm of transliteration first, supported by light annotations and selective literal translation, which stabilises the *Xuánniǎo* as a culturally distinctive signifier across different disciplines and audiences.

In summary, diachronically, the translations of *Xuánniǎo* have shifted from purely literal or free solutions toward a system that prioritises transliteration. Contextually, within mythological and archaeological discourse, there is a tendency to preserve the original name (*Xuánniǎo*). In the context of ICH or batik, transliteration and brief annotations are often used to bridge the gap between ethnic origins and ritualistic significance. Finally, to address audience expectations, general texts aimed at the wider public often use literal or free translations to enhance readability.

A "Thick" Framework for Translating *Xuánniǎo* in ICH (3R Model)

In line with the third objective, this paper proposes a thick translation framework specifically tailored for the translation of the *Xuánniǎo* in the context of ICH. The proposed 3R Model, comprising the stages of Retain, Reveal, and Recontextualise, aims to strike a balance between semantic precision and cultural integrity while optimising the textual load for both scholarly and public discourse. This triadic approach is made up of three collaborative phases: first, retaining the indigenous signifier to preserve cultural identity; second, revealing the core conceptual essence through a concise, one-line gloss upon initial mention; and third, recontextualising the motif by anchoring it to a specific mythological, ritualistic, or technical dimension. To ensure empirical validity, the framework is established based on a diachronic corpus of 70 translation samples (1871–2025). As distinct from Figures 4 and 5, which focus on the contemporary subset (2000–2025), the following analysis draws on the full corpus; numerical differences therefore arise from temporal scope rather than inconsistency.

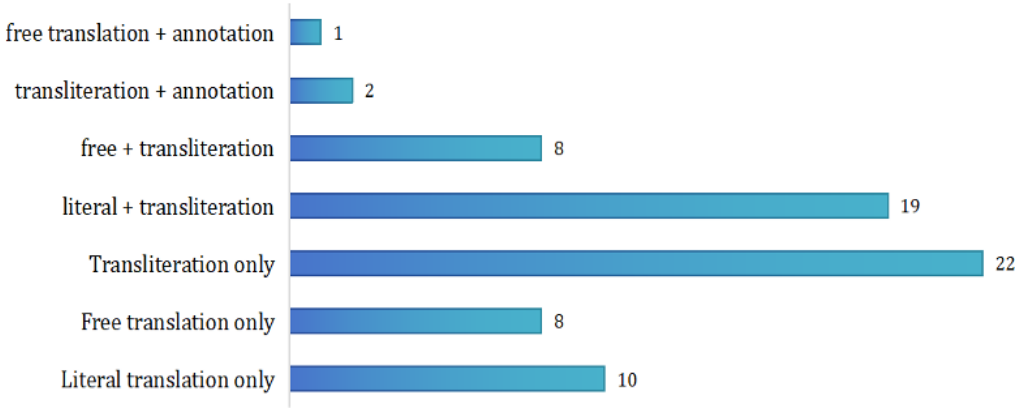


Figure 6 Distribution of translation strategies for *Xuánniǎo* in the full corpus (1871–2025).

Retain

To operationalise the "Retain" phase, this study proposes a toned, capitalised, and closed-form transliteration: *Xuánniǎo*. Tone markers preserve the sound character mapping (*xuán/niǎo* → 玄/鸟). Capitalisation of the first letter of *Xuánniǎo* reclassifies the term as a proper mythological noun rather than a common species. The closed-form (solid) spelling—*Xuánniǎo* as opposed to *Xuán niǎo*—denotes a unified cultural concept. This structural unity facilitates digital discoverability and aligns with the observed diachronic trend toward transliteration (72.9% in the 1871–2025 corpus).

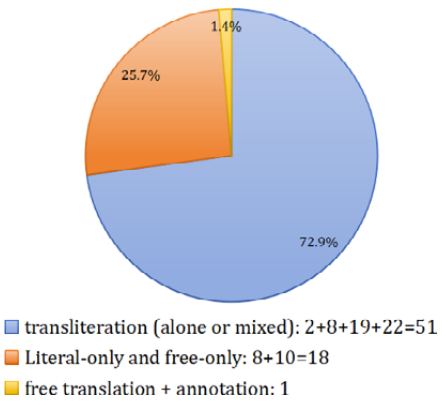


Figure 7 Share of transliteration vs. non-transliteration strategies in the full corpus (1871–2025).

Reveal

For the "Reveal" phase, this study proposes accompanying the first mention of *Xuánniǎo* with a one-line minimal gloss. Depending on context, this gloss should capture the motif's essence: a myth-oriented version (e.g., "heavenly mandate and divine conception of the Shang lineage") or an ICH-focused version (e.g., "avian motif signifying protection and ethnic continuity"). By delegating extensive cultural or bibliographic detail to the paratext (footnotes or glossaries), the primary prose remains accessible while offering a "thick" investigative path for the reader.

Recontextualise

The "Recontextualise" phase uses specific "contextual points" to ground the *Xuánniǎo*. A mythological point links the symbol to sacred texts like *The Book of Songs*; a ritual point emphasises its role in fertility and ancestral rites; and a craft point situates it within Guizhou batik material culture. In the latter, the motif on ritual objects like baby carriers serves as a visual expression of protection and lineage continuity.

In digital contexts, this phase also supports discoverability and accessibility. Standardised transliteration (e.g., *Xuánniǎo*) facilitates keyword search and indexing, while multimodal elements such as images and metadata extend contextual meaning. In this way, the motif is re-embedded within digitally mediated environments, enabling more effective cross-cultural communication.

By integrating these three components, this study offers a model for the multimodal representation of the *Xuánniǎo* within the context of Guizhou batik (Figure 8). This synthesis ensures that the translation is neither linguistically reductive nor culturally obscured.

Xuánniǎo (a primordial avian totem of the Guizhou ethnic groups): An ancestral totem worshipped by the Shang people, symbolising divine mandate and fertility in ancient Chinese mythology. This motif persists as a revered signifier in Miao culture, embodying a profound metaphysical connection to nature and ancestral lineage. Within the material culture of Guizhou batik, the Xuánniǎo is visualised as a dynamic, swirling pattern of flowing lines, organised around a central focal point that creates a balanced compositional weight, as illustrated in Figure 9.

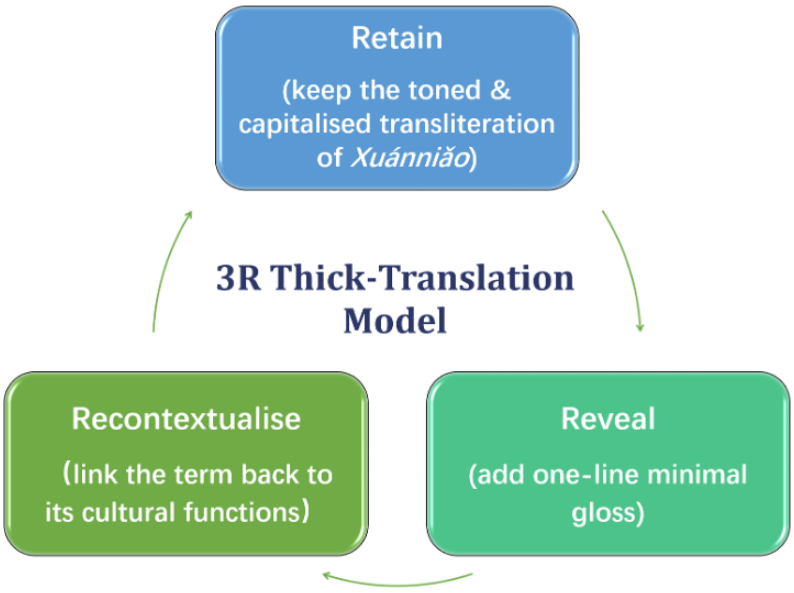


Figure 8 3R thick-translation model.



Figure 9 *Xuánniǎo* motif in Guizhou batik.

Source: Photographed by Zou Yun (used with permission).

The proposed framework is rigorously evidence-aligned with the diachronic corpus. Within the 70 analysed samples, transliteration accounts for 72.9% of modern strategies, while purely literal or free translations comprise 25.7%, mostly driven by the readability of specific genres or narrow etymological interpretations. By synthesising transliteration with a minimalist gloss and contextual hints, the 3R Model effectively reduces the cognitive load on the reader while preserving the motif's semiotic density. This approach facilitates the transformation of the *Xuánniǎo* from an easily misconstrued faunal label into a recognisable cultural signifier. Ultimately, the 3R Model offers a means of translating the *Xuánniǎo* and other ICH symbols, ensuring a synergy between semantic fidelity and cultural sovereignty in global communication.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided a multi-dimensional examination of the *Xuánniǎo* as a complex cultural signifier across mythology, ritual, and craftsmanship. By applying thick description, the research decoded the motif's mythical origins (divine mandate), symbolic value (fertility), and ritual embodiment in Guizhou batik. This analysis demonstrated that the *Xuánniǎo* is not a static relic but a "living heritage" that continues to sustain and recreate ancient Chinese cosmology in contemporary ethnic crafts.

The diachronic corpus analysis of 70 English translations (1871–2025) revealed significant interpretive tendencies within the field. The data indicate a translational ecology increasingly dominated by transliteration, where the *Xuánniǎo* is preserved as a heritage symbol, although the degree of annotation and contextualisation varies across publication contexts.

To address the challenges of translating such culturally dense iconography, this study proposes the 3R Framework (Retain, Reveal, and Recontextualise). By balancing semantic accuracy and cultural integrity, the framework provides a transparent model for future research into the global dissemination and cross-disciplinary application of ICH.

From a broader research perspective, the limited representation of doctoral dissertations in the contemporary corpus may indicate that research on the *Xuánniǎo* motif remains relatively specialised, or that sustained interdisciplinary engagement with ICH translation has yet to be fully developed at advanced academic levels. This observation highlights the need for more in-depth and cross-disciplinary research in this area.

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AI USE DISCLOSURE

Generative AI tools were used solely for language refinement and academic expression. All content and interpretations remain the responsibility of the authors.

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