

SEARCHING FOR SIRENES IN THE 17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES:
FANTASTIC TAXONOMIES OF ANTHROPOMORPHIC FISH
IN CHINESE AND JESUIT TEXTS

Arianna Magnani – University of Enna Kore

Abstract: *Descrizioni di pesci antropomorfici sono rintracciabili sia in testi cinesi che europei. Nel Seicento e Settecento, le grandi spedizioni marittime e l'incontro con nuovi animali marini hanno contribuito a rafforzare l'interesse scientifico e lo scambio di informazioni su queste creature misteriose, promosso in Cina tramite le traduzioni dei Gesuiti. L'articolo analizzerà l'immagine della Sirena nel contesto letterario cinese ed europeo, e il risultato generato da questo scambio culturale.*

鮫人歌
唐·李頎

鮫人潛織水底居，
側身上下隨遊魚。
輕綃文彩不可識，
夜夜澄波連月色。
有時寄宿來城市，
海島青冥無極已。
泣珠報恩君莫辭，
今年相見明年期。
始知萬族無不有，
百尺深泉架戶牖。
鳥沒空山誰復望，
一望雲濤堪白首。

A Mermaid's Song
Li Qi (690-751), Tang Dynasty

The mermaid has a house in the deep sea,
swimming in the waves with fellow fish.
Few people have seen her light and colorful silk,
woven night after night in the limpid
waves under the moonlight.
Sometimes she leaves the sea and lodges
in the cities,
but then comes back homesick for the
ocean and its blue sky.
Her tears turn into pearls as gifts of gratitude -that you cannot refuse-
as a farewell for this year and a promise
to meet in the future.
Now I realize that the world is full of different kinds of lives,
even beneath the water surface could lie
inhabited houses.
As no one can see birds flying away into
foggy mountains,
You, too, will spend a lifetime searching
for her in the deep sea.¹

Introduction

Descriptions of wondrous anthropomorphic animals are common to all cultures, but merpeople, creatures that are half-human and half-fish, are one of the myths that have most piqued curiosity all over the world, since time immemorial. Not only can sirens be traced in Greek texts such as the *Odyssey*, medieval bestiaries, and European decorations, but images of them are also found in Chinese sources, illustrated in the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*), sung in Tang era 唐朝 (618-907) poems and also cataloged in 17th and 18th-century encyclopedic texts. The siren has changed names, taxonomies, and features over time in both Europe and China, but during the 17th century it also bore witness to the cultural interaction between the West and the East: new information on sea creatures such as manatees and dugongs – the result of the more frequent global travels – was shared and circulated globally.

Analyzing the descriptions of Sirens or human fish in Chinese and European sources reveals that, starting in the late 17th century, the two merge in Chinese texts, proof of the great cultural exchange between East and West and the Jesuit missionaries' commitment to translating into Chinese.

Different Taxonomies of Human Fish in Chinese Sources

In Chinese texts there are different kind of fishes with human connotations, often associated with the term *renyu* 人鱼, which means 'human fish', equivalent to the Italian *pesce antropomorfo*: *chiru* 赤鱗, *lingyu* 陵鱼, *Diren* 氏人, *jaoren* 鮫人, *hairen yu* 海人鱼 and others.

In the Ming 明朝 (1368-1644) and early Qing 清朝 (1644-1911) periods we find descriptions of these creatures in geographical gazettes and encyclopedic texts, in the sections dedicated to foreign people

and strange animals, which are often quoted from earlier sources, such as *Shanbai jing*.² In fact, 17th-century encyclopedias like *San cai tu hui* 三才圖會 (*Collected Illustrations of the Three Realms*, published in 1609) and 18th-century compendia such as *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成 (*The Collection of the Books of Past and Present, or Imperial Encyclopedia*), faithfully transcribed information from ancient texts.

Among these descriptions of fish with human features copied from *Shanbai jing*, we find the *Diren* 氏人: “The Land of the Di People is located west of the Firm-Tree. The people have a human face and a fish’s body, and they lack feet.”³ The iconographic representation of this people is very similar to the image of Western merpeople, creatures with a human torso followed by a fishtail instead of legs. Commentators often associated *Diren* with *Huren* 互人, the Hu People, capable of travelling between heaven and earth, and descended from Lingqi 靈杞, the grandson of the Flame Emperor Yandi 炎帝, a legendary Chinese ruler in pre-dynastic times. Therefore, this half human half fish being is imbued with divine and mythological connotations.

Another creature whose description is also taken from the *Shanbai jing* is the *chiru* 赤鱗, a vermilion fish with a human face. “The Eminent River flows forth from the Green-Hills Mountain southward into Carp-Wings Lake. Many Red Ru-Fish are found in the lake. It has the basic form of a fish with a human face and makes a sound like a mandarin duck. Eating it will prevent scabies.”⁴

The high-pitched voice of the animal, and the reference to the healing properties of its meat, are characteristics that are also described in another creature often present in encyclopedias, the *renyu* 人魚, human fish. However, despite the name, the human fish was far from the modern idea that we have of merpeople and were instead creatures closer to animals than humans. In a 1612 printed edition of the encyclopedic text

Wanbao quanshu 万宝全書 (*Compilations of Ten Thousand Precious Things*),⁵ we read: “On the Longhou mountain, the Bursting River flows towards East into the Yellow River, in which there are a lot of human fish. They resemble animals with four legs and their voice sounds like that of a kid; their meat can cure any disease.”

In the *Shanbai jing*, as well as in other sources it is specified that eating human fish can cure insanity “食之无痴”; during the Ming dynasty the medical use of *renyu* is also described in pharmaceutical texts, as the *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (*Compendium of Materia Medica*), compiled by Li Shizhen 李时珍 (1518-1593).

The four-legged animal depicted in the texts corresponds to the Chinese giant salamander, *Andrias davidianus*, nowadays frequently called in Chinese *wawa yu* 娃娃鱼, the baby-fish, because the vocalizations it makes when under stress sound like a baby’s cry. Its meat is still regarded as a luxury food, and it is used in Chinese traditional medicine.

Mistaking giant salamanders for humans is more common and widespread than one might think. The most striking example is that of the Swiss scientist and naturalist Johann Jakob Scheuchzer (1672-1733). When he found fossilized remains of a vertebrate creature never seen before, he interpreted it as the remains of a man who witnessed the great flood, naming it *Homo diluvii testis*. The debate about the nature of the skeleton only ended in 1831 with the recognition that the fossil was a giant salamander from the Miocene epoch, roughly 23.5 to 5.3 million years ago. In 1837 the name coined for this extinct species was *Andrias scheuchzeri*, due to the misunderstanding generated by Scheuchzer. *Andrias*, which means statue with human features or puppet in Greek, is still today the scientific nomenclature for the genus used to indicate the largest salamanders in the world.⁶

Returning to the search for creatures

similar to the modern image of a mermaid, excluding the mythological figures of the merpeople *Diren* and excluding fish with few anthropomorphic characteristics and the so-called 'human-fish' salamanders, in Chinese texts we also find creatures more similar to humans than aquatic animals, including the *jiaoren* 鮫人. According to the *Bowuzhi* 博物志 (*A treatise on curiosities*) “南海水有鮫人，水居如魚，不廢織績，其眼能泣珠”⁷ (Beyond the South China Sea, there are *jiaoren* /Shark People that live in the water like fish, tirelessly weaving silk, their tears can become pearls). The *Jiaoren* are also named *Quan xian* 泉先 (spring people), or *Quan ke* 泉客 (guests of the spring). In various sources it is reported that they made a particular kind of silk, called *longsha* 龍紗 (dragon yarn) or *jiaoxiao* 鮫綃 (mermaid silk), which was very expensive and had water-repellent properties. The silk is described as white as snow.⁸ The precious material described here seems similar to byssus, a fabric obtained by working the filaments secreted by a marine bivalve mollusk. One of its proven properties is that the hardened fiber cannot be broken down by water, enzymes, or organic solvents.

There are several ancient poems and stories about *jiaoren*, tales of mermaids that leave the sea and fall in love with humans, then live on land selling the precious silk. Their tears of pain and grief leaving their loved ones can turn into pearls, which are gifted as a sign of love. In Qing Dynasty literature, there are several love stories about men and women-fish living in lakes or the sea.⁹ This *topos* is also used by the Historian of the Strange (*Yishishi* 異史氏) Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) in his *Liaozhai Zhiyi* 聊齋志異 (*Strange Tales from Liao Studio*), which includes the story “Bai Qiulian” 白秋練, about a mysterious and beautiful girl who came out of a lake to marry the man she fell in love with. One day, the people who lived around the lake caught the mother of the girl, a giant fish – in the text is described as a *xunhuang* 鱣 鯨 (a big sturgeon) – that was endowed with

all of the human female sexual attributes, including breasts as if it had nursed children “生近視之，巨物也，形全類人，乳陰畢具”.

Another type of anthropomorphic fish is the *Hairen yu* 海人魚 (Sea human fish), which is described in *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記 (*Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*), first published in 978, as:

海人魚，東海有之，大者長五六尺，狀如人。眉目、口鼻、手爪、頭皆為美麗女子，無不具足。皮肉白如玉，無鱗，有細毛，五色輕軟，長一二寸。髮如馬尾，長五六尺。陰形與丈夫女子無異，臨海鰥寡多取得，養之於池沼。交合之際，與人無異，亦不傷人。¹⁰

Sea human fish, in the East China Sea, 5-6 *chi* long (about 150-190 cm), similar to humans, with eyes, eyebrows, mouth, nose, hands and a head similar to a beautiful woman, but without legs. Skin white as jade, without scales, with thin, multi-colored, light, soft fur, 1-2 *can* long (about 3-6 cm). Hair similar to horsetail, 5-6 *chi* long. Their sexual attributes are the same as those of men and women; widows and widowers near the sea catch them easily and keep them in pools: sexual intercourse is the same as between humans, and they do not harm people.

The same description is also cited and reused in later texts, as *Chengzhai zaji* 誠齋雜記 (*Miscellanea of the Sincerity Studio*), a book composed probably by Lin Kun 林坤 in the Yuan 元 Dynasty (1279-1368). Here it is added that when these creatures drink wine, their skin can easily become as pink as a peach blossom, “灌少酒便如桃花”.

Sirenes and Anthropomorphic Fish in the West

As in Chinese literature, there are different kind of anthropomorphic marine creatures in Western texts as well. There are several hypotheses about the etymological

root of the Greek word *seiren* σειρήν that led to the later Latin word *siren*, and then spread throughout Europe as the Italian *sirena*, English *siren* and Portuguese *sereia*. The most fascinating interpretation analyzes the term in light of the Greek verb *surizo* συρίζω (to pipe or whistle), and the noun *seira* σειρά (rope, snare), as if to indicate a creature that can entrap and lure people with its voice.¹¹ It is no coincidence that sirens later came to symbolize vanity, lust, and music.

As Borges points out, sirens have changed in appearance over time. Alluring yet deadly creatures in the Odyssey, bird-bodied harpies in the Greek and Latin tradition, and then nymphs, nereids, mermaids, even sea monsters.¹²

The nature of these aquatic creatures changed along with the names attributed to them, representing them now as beautiful, now ugly, as symbolic of life and creation or sin and destruction.

However, many similarities can be traced between European and Chinese descriptions of sirens, including the habit of reusing ancient sources, a frequent strategy in late Ming and early Qing Chinese encyclopedias, which is also adopted by European writers throughout the 17th century, inserting quotations or historical information derived from classical and medieval sources.

Some aspects of descriptions of fish-women spotted by witnesses in the East and West are also similar, such as being able to find the creatures living alongside humans, capable of weaving and eating human food. For instance, the *Respublica Hollandiae, et urbes* (*The Commonwealth and Towns of Holland*), edited by Petrus Scriverius (1576-1660) states:

anno Christi MCCCCIII mulier quaedam marina, sive Siren discenda est, nuda & muta; quam ceperant piscatores in lacu quodam Hollandie, quo videlicet tempestibus agitatum mare ipsam expulerat, vestita & assuefacta paullatim esui panis, lactis, & aliorum id genus ciborum, etiam nere & reliquum opus domesticum

exequy didicit, crucis insuper signo honorem & reverentiam exhibens, aliosque usurpand ritus, quos à domina docebatur. Vixit autem complures annos, sed muta perpetio perstitit.¹³

In the year 1403 a marine woman, or also known as Siren, was found naked and dumb; fishermen caught her in a certain lake in Holland, into which she had been clearly cast by the stormy sea. She was dressed and gradually accustomed to eating bread, milk and other similar foods, and it is even said that she was able to knit and carry out all remaining household chores; she showed respect and reverence to the crucifix, and to other rituals, which had been taught by her mistress. She lived for many years yet remained forever incapable of speech.

In describing the category of *hairen yu*, the human fish of the sea, the Chinese sources we have already mentioned speak of creatures similar to “beautiful women” and that there are both male and female species. People living on the coasts could easily capture and raise them in pools and could also have intercourse with them.

After leaving Macao en route to India, Francesco Carletti (1573-1636), an Italian traveler who circumnavigated the world between 1594 and 1602, met merchants who traded between Sofala and Mozambique. He reported that they sold a wide variety of products, including teeth of “Pesce Donna, così chiamato per la somiglianza che ha d’umana creatura. Onde affermano che i Mori del Paese pigliandone per que’ mari se ne servano bestialmente, come se fossero vere Donne”¹⁴ (Fish Woman, so named because similar to the human female. Therefore, it is said that the Moors of that country, capturing them in those seas, abuse them bestially as if they were real women.)

Other European sources speak of spotting woman-fish (*Pece Mujer* in Spanish), between India and Africa: “I pescatori, cavando alcune fosse vicino alle sponde

de' Fiumi, le riempiono d'acqua, tanto che il Pesce ingannato vi s'ingolfi, & all' hora con loro comodità vuotandole, agevolmente lo prendono"¹⁵ (The fishermen dig some pits near the banks of the rivers and fill them with water, so that the Fish is deceived and throws itself into them; then they empty the pits easily and easily capture the Fish). The meat of the fish is described as edible, tasting like pork and having beneficial medical properties.

"Dicono, che ha solo un dente di maravigliosa virtù per istagnare il sangue, sebbene di tutt'i denti se ne fanno indifferentemente delle corone, e degli anelli"¹⁶ (They say they have one tooth that has the prodigious ability to stop bleeding, while all the other teeth are used to make crowns and rings).

This particular medical property did not escape the interest of the polymath Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680) who, in 1641, devoted an entire chapter "De Piscis anthropomorpho seu Syrene sanguinem trahente" (To the anthropomorphic fish or siren that can absorb blood):

capitur certis temporibus in mari orientali Indiæ as insulas Vissayas, quas insulas Pictorum vocant, sub Hispanorum dominio, Piscis quidam ἀνθρωπόμορφος, idest humana prorsus figura, quam ideò Peche mugger vocant, ab indigenis Duyon. Caput habet rotundum, nulla colli intercapedine trunco compactum.

Sometimes, in the eastern seas of India as in the Visayas islands—which they call Islands of the Painted People, under the dominion of the Spaniards—they catch an anthropomorphic fish, with a human figure, and therefore called *Peche mugger*, while the natives call it *Duyon*. It has a round head, without a neck to separate it from the body.

The creature has "nostris simillissimidentium non quales insunt piscium generi serratilium, sed plenorum et candidissimorum continua series" (teeth like ours and

not pointed like those of fish, with rows of full and very white teeth). Their breasts are not saggy but firm and full of very white milk. Kircher drew the description of the fish from Diego de Bobadilla (1590–1648), a Spanish Jesuit who went to the Philippines in 1615, where the sirens were captured. The Procurator claimed that these fish could stem and draw blood. The treatment involved the use of female fish bones—described as more effective than the male one—and fish meat. However, Kircher said he could not prove the exceptional medical property, although he had received from the aforementioned Father a wreath made out of the bones of this fish.

While more and more sources began to look for the scientific identity of the creature, the most widespread iconography throughout the 17th and still in the 18th century always remained that of mermaids and tritons, creatures with evident human traits except for the fishtail.

Remains of so-called sirens circulated in several European Wunderkammern and in some cases were also the subject of scientific studies. For example, the Danish anatomist Thomas Bartholin (1616-1680), in his *Historiarum anatomicarum rariorum centuria I et II* (1654) published an anatomical study of a specimen sent from Brazil, a webbed hand and a rib that he identified as belonging to a siren. Like Kircher, Bartholin also reported other sources listing the various medical properties of mermaid bones, including being a good "haemorrhoidum doloribus remedium", remedy for hemorrhoids.¹⁷

It is interesting to note that, between the 17th and the first decades of the 18th century, scholarly education still relied on classical erudition and believed in wondrous creatures while at the same time adding the new scientific approach to deeply analyze the true nature of merpeople. In the 17th century, although the medieval model of a siren and a triton emerging together from the waves was still the most widespread

iconography of sirens in the West, it was gradually modified to reflect the new data on the *pece mujer*. The merpeople icon on printed texts starts to present more animalistic connotations, such as feral faces, thick necks and monkey ears, all features based on the testimonies that came from travelers and missionaries from the East.

Cultural Exchange and Translations of Texts about Sirens:

Between the 17th and 18th centuries, the increase in long sea voyages and the encounter with marine animals such as dugongs and manatees brought a growing body of new information about the mysterious human fish described in ancient texts. Travelers and missionaries who undertook long voyages collected data and samples of these strange creatures, sharing them both in the west and in the east, in a global exchange of knowledge. Therefore, the myth of sirens can truly be seen as a witness to this exchange of knowledge and reflects the Jesuits' effort to translate into Chinese what they had previously learned. The Jesuits' scientific texts were collected at the courts of the Ming and Qing dynasties, in which they not only introduced European world geography and discoveries, but also their knowledge of sea creatures. This imported knowledge added new content about the siren's appearance.

In 1623, the Jesuit Giulio Aleni (1582-1649) wrote about two kinds of *hairen*, Sea-humans, in his *Zhifang waiji* 职方外纪 (*Records of Regions beyond the Jurisdiction of the Imperial Geographer*): one was a sea creature brought from the sea and kept at court for some time, but who refused to speak and eat. Managing to escape, it thrown itself into the sea, clapping its hands and laughing loudly. Then, the other one:

二百年前西洋喝蘭達地曾於海中獲一女人，與之食輒食，亦肯為人役使，且活多年，見十字聖架亦能起敬俯伏，

但不能言。其一身有肉皮，下垂至地，如衣袍服者然，但著體而生，不可脫卸也。

Two hundred years ago, in the Western land of Holland, a woman was captured in the sea: people gave her food and dressed her in clothes. She was able to work for people and lived many years. Seeing the holy crucifix, she showed respect and could bow, but she could not speak. Her entire body was covered with a drooping skin, as if she were dressed in a non-removable cloth rather than naked.

The story refers to the 1403 event mentioned above that was often reported in 17th-century European texts, now translated for a Chinese audience. Aleni added:

二者俱可登岸，數日不死。但不識其性情，莫測其族類，又不知其在海宅于何所。似人非人，良可怪。

Both kinds can go ashore and survive for several days. People don't know anything about their nature, don't know what species they belong to, neither where they live under the sea. They look humans but are not really humans, extremely strange.

Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688), in *Kunyu Quantu* 坤輿全圖 (*A complete map of the world*), published in 1674, illustrates sirens in the sea, which are described as follows: “大東洋海產魚，名西楞，上半身如男女形，下半身則魚尾，其骨能止血病，女魚更效” (In the Greater Eastern Ocean, there are fish called *Xileng*. The upper part of the body is like a man or a woman, but the bottom half has a tail like a fish. Their bones can be used to stop bleeding. The female's bones work better).

Here the siren is presented with a new nomenclature instead of the classical Chinese taxonomy used for anthropomorphic fish. *Xileng* 西楞 was a neologism created to render the phonetic transliteration of the Latin *siren*. The information is the same as

that gathered by other Jesuits, like Diego de Bobadillas, also found in Kircher's text. The impact of this new data about merpeople can be gleaned in the 18th-century Imperial Encyclopedia *Gujin tushu jicheng* that added the fish *Xileng* (*Xileng yu* 西楞魚) to the section on strange aquatic creatures, copying both the description and the image from Verbiest's text. The *Xileng* is not found in previous Chinese sources, nor are its medical use mentioned in the 16th-century *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (*Compendium of Materia Medica*), but Zhao Xuemin 赵学敏 (1719-1805) included it in his revised *Bencao gangmu shiyi* 本草綱目拾遺 (*Supplement to the Compendium of Materia Medica*), quoting from Verbiest's *Kunyu tu shuo* on the benefits of using the bones of this fish, adding that they could cure all diseases related to the stagnation of blood caused by internal hemorrhaging.

In the 17th century, China collected all of the information from Western travelers and missionaries, using it as a source along with local news and classical literature. An example of this interesting 'melting pot' of past, present, local and foreign knowledge is the work of the Qing naturalist Nie Huang 聂璜. In his *Haiquotu* 海錯圖 (*Book of Strange Ocean Creatures*), compiled starting from the late 17th-century, is written:

海人魚：人魚其長如人，肉黑髮黃，手足眉目口鼻皆具，陰陽亦與男女同，惟背有翅，紅色，後有短尾及胼指與人稍異耳。粵人柳某，曾為予圖，予未之信。及考《職方外紀》，則稱此魚為海人，《正字通》作魷，雲即鰕魚，其說與所圖無異，因信而錄之。此魚多產廣東大魚山、老萬山海洋。人得之亦能著衣飲食，但不能言，惟笑而已。攜至大魚山，沒入水去。郭璞有《人魚贊》。《廣東新語》雲，海中有大風雨時，人魚乃騎大魚，隨波往來，見者驚怪。火長有祝雲：‘毋逢海女，毋見人魚’。¹⁸

Hairen yu/Human fish from the sea: The

figure of a human fish is similar to a person, with dark skin and blonde hair; it has both hands and feet, eyebrows, mouth, and nose. The sexes are also the same as in men and women, but they have a red fin on their back. Liu, a Cantonese, once drew a picture of a mermaid for me, but I didn't believe it. However, according to *Zhifang waiji*, this fish is called 'Hairen' / The sea-human, and in the *Zhengzhitong* it is said that *ren* '魷/human fish' means 'xia 鰕 / big salamander'. What is written is the same as what is depicted in the picture, and it is recorded faithfully. These fish are particularly copious in the oceans in the area of the islands of Dayu and Laowan, in Guangdong. The *renyu* can wear clothes and eat, drink, but cannot speak, just laugh. They were taken to the island of Dayu but died without water. Guo Pu wrote the "Eulogy of *renyu* / Human Fish". In the *Guangdong Xinyu*, it is written that when there are strong winds and it is raining in the sea, this is because the *renyu* are riding big fish and playing while surfing on the waves. The chieftains often say for good luck: 'Wish not to meet a female from the sea / *hainü* 海女, not to see a Human fish/*renyu* 人魚'.

As pointed out by Zou Zhenhuan 邹振环, the sea-fish depicted by Nie Huang is the result of the cultural exchange of Western and Chinese knowledge:¹⁹ the characteristics of a creature that can laugh but not talk and that can be fed human food and dressed comes from Aleni, who in turn was referring to the events that occurred in the Netherlands in 1403, well known in 17th-century European texts. Nie removed the Christian elements from this story –like bowing in veneration of the crucifix– which were, on the contrary, reported in all of the Western sources. Nie copied the sailors' prayer to not meet human fish from the *Guangdong xin yu* (*New introduction to Guangdong*), since "又大風雨時，有海怪被發紅面，乘魚而往來" the sight of it is being linked to the approach of a big storm. The text was also the main inspiration for the *renyu* picture.

Describing *renyu*, it states that “毛髮焦黃而短，眼睛亦黃，面鰲黑，尾長寸許” (They have short blondish hair, yellow eyes, a dark complexion and a short tail). According to *Guangdong xin yu* “體發牝牡亦人，惟背有短鬣微紅，知其為魚” the *renyu* has a human-like figure but with a reddish fin along its back, which marks it as a fish.

We thus see that sirens were present in both Chinese and European texts. In the oldest sources, both cultures describe half-human/half-fish creatures as mythological beings endowed with almost supernatural and divine powers, such as *Diren* and nereids and tritons. Therefore, a feature common to both cultures was the definition and cataloging of all animals with some vaguely number of anthropomorphic aspects as ‘human fish’, as is clear in the case of the salamanders called *renyu* in China and *siren* or *andrias* in Europe. The female-like sea creatures that were captured in the seas of southern China, Africa and India were similarly described, using information drawn from the testimonies that circulated between the 17th and 18th centuries, often very similar or even the same, in translation: both claimed the existence of aquatic creatures similar to women, with the presence of breasts similar to those of women often emphasized.

The biggest difference obviously consists in the different cultural substrata of the two contexts, resulting in sirens with very different iconographic images and symbolic values.

In the West, the siren is often charged with religious meanings, either positive or mostly negative, such as its connection to the tempting devil or to vanity (one of the seven deadly sins). In the 17th and 18th centuries it was also the subject of naturalistic research and theological debates, such as whether these creatures were among the animals on the Noah’s Ark.²⁰ Another characteristic found in ancient Western texts is the sirens’ alluring song, making them a perfect allegory of Music.

In the East, mermaids had a bivalent nature: a positive one, such as in the romantic stories like those in the novellas of Pu Songling and symbol of poignant love in Tang poems, and a negative one, for the sea storms connected to spotting one. There is no reference to the siren’s song: the beautiful yet deadly voice of the mermaid found in Western sources seems to be missing in Chinese texts. Although, among the anthropomorphic fishes, the *renyu* are described as having a high-pitched cry like that of a child, there is no reference to beautiful and heavenly music.

In the 18th century, in the context of the debate on the Chinese Rites controversy and Jesuits accommodation policy, a case is reported of a gift sent from Europe to a Chinese emperor, a musical instrument decorated with a picture of a siren as a symbol of music; however, “il nostro imperatore restò offeso in vedere un tal mostro dipinto su un clavicembalo mandatogli in dono dal Duca di Baviera”²¹ (our emperor was offended to see such a monster painted on a harpsichord sent to him as a gift by the Duke of Bavaria). The image was based on the classic medieval model common in Europe, a naked woman with two fish tails: an image too naked and improper to be accepted. Whether this episode is true or false, surely the iconography of sirens in the two cultures was different, and even exporting it drew a different reading and reaction.

In the cultural dialogue promoted by the Jesuits in the Ming and Qing epochs, the case of sirens also reveals their effort to export their knowledge of European geographical and natural discoveries as well as insert aspects connected to religious faith. Chinese authors were not passive receivers and modified this information according to their culture and interests, in a process of cultural appropriation and domestication²² clear in the removal of Christian elements from Chinese texts: the result is a new 18th-century Chinese Siren, constructed by

gathering the most reliable ancient and new data, mixing Western and local sources.

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Notes

¹ Note to the Reader: English translations that appear without an endnote referencing translated sources are made by the author of this paper.

² For further details on the circulation of the illustrated versions of *Shanbai jing* see Riccardo Fracasso, “The illustrations of the *Shanbai Jing*. From Yu’s tripods to Qing blockprints”, *Cina* 21 (1988), pp. 93–104.

³ The English translation is taken from Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002), p.190.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁵ The edition consulted is 新板增補天下便用文林妙錦萬寶全書 *Xin ban zeng bu tian xia bian yong wen lin miao jin wan bao quan shu*, in 38 *juan*, available at the Harvard Yenching Library Rare Book Collection.

⁶ Fossil found in Öhningen, southern Germany, see J. J. Scheuchzer, H. Wolph, *Homo diluvii testis et Theoskopos* (Netherlands, typis Joh. Henrici Byrcklini, 1726).

⁷ The *Bowu zhi* by Zhang Hua 張華 (232-300); the version consulted is a reprint published in late Ming dynasty during Wanli 万历 Era (1573-1620).

⁸ 任昉《述异志》“南海出蛟绡纱，泉先潜织，一名，其价百余金。以为服，入水不濡(…)南海有龙绡宫，泉先织绡之处，绡有白如霜者。”

⁹ The *topos* of the fish woman, or of a woman who mysteriously turns into a fish, is present in several stories, as well as in some variants of Lady Meng Jiang (Meng Jiang nü 孟姜女) folktale. For more information on this topic, see Tao Siyan 陶思炎, “Renyu yu mengjiangnü —— mengjiangnü yuanxing tanlun 人鱼与孟姜女——孟姜女原型探论”, Shandong Zichuan 山东淄川, *Meng Jiang nü chuanshuo xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 孟姜女传说学术研讨会论文集, 2009, pp. 7-14. Romantic relationships between men and ‘hybrid’ female creatures are visible in the collection of folktales written by Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1645), for example *Stories to Caution the World: a Ming dynasty collection*, translated by Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang, vol. 2 (USA, University of Washington Press, 2005).

¹⁰ *Taiping Guangji, juan 464* 卷四百六十四, *Bian Shui Zuyi* 編水族一.

¹¹ See Agnese Grieco, *Atlante delle Sirene* (Milan, Saggiatore, 2017), pp. 26-28.

¹² Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, English translation by I. Carmignani (London, Penguin Books, 1974), pp.132-133.

¹³ *Respublica Hollandiae et urbes*, ed. by Petrus Scriverius. (Leiden, Maire, 1630), pp. 221-222.

¹⁴ Francesco Carletti, *Ragionamenti di Francesco Carletti Fiorentino sopra le cose da lui vedute ne’ suoi viaggi si dell’Indie Occidentali, e Orientali come d’altri paesi ...* (Florence, Stamperia di G. Manni, 1701), p.284.

¹⁵ Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, *Istorica descrizione dei tre regni Congo, Matamba et Angola...* (Bologna, per Giacomo Monti, 1687), pp.51-52.

¹⁶ Carletti, *Ragionamenti*, p.284.

¹⁷ Thomas Bartholin, *Historiarum anatomicarum rariorum centuria I et II*. (Amsterdam, Apud Johannem Henrici, 1654), pp.169-173.

¹⁸ The full text is reprinted in *Qing Gong Haicuotu* 清宫海错图 (Catalogue of marine creatures collected in the Qing palace), Gugong Publishing House, 2014.

¹⁹ Zou Zhenhuan 邹振环, “Jiaoliu yu hu jian: 《Qingong Haicuotu》 yu zhongxi haiyang dongwu de zhishi ji huayi 交流与互鉴: 《清宫海错图》与中西海洋动物的知识及画艺”, *Huadong shifan daxue xuebao* 3 (2020), pp. 96-106.

²⁰ See Athanasius Kircher, *Arca Noë* (Amsterdam, 1675). There is an English translation of the chapter on sirens in Patricia Ann Carlson, *Literature and Lore of the Sea*

(Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1986), p.270.

²¹ Citation from *Acta causa rituum seu ceremoniarum Sinensium* (Austria, Schönwetter, 1709). Although musical instruments were in fact sent from Europe via Jesuit missionaries (e.g. Matteo Ricci's gift of a clavichord to the Ming emperor Wanli in 1601), I have yet not found references to a mermaid's picture on any instrument. For musical instruments sent to China, see François Picard, “Music (17th and 18th centuries)”, in N. Standaert (ed.), *The Handbook of Oriental Studies, Christianity in China 1* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 2001), pp.851-860.

²² For more information on Chinese adaptations of Jesuits texts, see Qiong Zhang, *Making the New World Their Own: Chinese Encounters with Jesuit Science in the Age of Discovery* (Leiden, Brill, 2015).



Mother mermaid nursing her daughter while a young man plays with her tail, 14th century, miniature on parchment, Private collection