Discussion on the Translation of Chinese Classics*

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Since the 16th Party Congress, the central government has put forward in several situations that Chinese culture must spread to other countries, and as the essence of Chinese culture, Chinese classics become the major carriers for the completion of the task. Translation is an important tool for the communication of culture, and some scholars have published some theoretical articles discussing the topic, which has promoted the development of it. This article summarizes the theoretical articles on translation of classical works (especially about English translation) in recent years and discusses who must take the burden of translation and how to translate them. Finally, the article puts forward the principles of translation on Chinese classics.

Keywords: Chinese culture, Chinese classics, domestication, foreignization

Since the 18th century, British sinologists began to translate Chinese cultural classics directly into English, which has a history of nearly 200 years. In recent years, with the improvement of China’s international status and economic strength, China’s desire to export culture has become more and more urgent. The issue of English translation of Chinese classics has become a hot topic in academic circles. Many scholars have been writing articles on the translation of Chinese classics, but they have not reached a consensus. Both in practice and in theory, the English translation of Chinese classics still needs further research and discussion, which is the requirement of the times and the need of Chinese culture spreading to the world.

1. Who Should Translate Chinese Classics

Who should translate Chinese classics? What kind of person can translate well? This problem is an urgent problem to be solved, because if this problem is not solved properly, it will greatly affect the publication and acceptance of the translation of Chinese classics. In the 1960s, A.C. Graham, a famous British Sinologist, once said that Chinese people could not translate classical works themselves, because he believed that translation was a process from foreign language to mother tongue, not from mother tongue to foreign language (Pan, 2004, p. 40). This statement is undoubtedly a blow to the Chinese translators, which greatly dampens the enthusiasm of Chinese translators in the translation of classics. This can also explain why there are few translators of ancient books in China for so many years, and the translation works are sparse. Taking the English translation of Chu ci, only four Chinese scholars have translated this work over the years, including Yang Xianyi, Sun Dayu, Xu

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Yuanchong and Zhuo Zhenying. Besides, most of the translated works in China have not gone abroad except those translated by Yang Xianyi and his British wife, Gladys. Is it true that what Graham said is a curse that Chinese translators will never get rid of?

Of course, Graham’s words have his own reasons. Throughout the history of translation for thousands of years, it is true that the cultural translation of the exporting country is generally done by the translators of the receiving country. The translation of Buddhist scriptures in India, the translation of ancient Greek and Roman mythology, and the Bible in the Tang Dynasty of China were all carried out through the translators of the receiving countries. It may be based on the investigation of the history of translation in the past thousands of years that Graham came to this conclusion. The translator of the receiving country has its inherent advantage in translating, that is, the translator has a good understanding of the culture of the receiving country, has a certain grasp of the receiving country’s readers, and can consider the choice of words and sentence types and the use of idioms from the perspective of readers’ expectations, which is more conducive to the dissemination and acceptance of the translated works. In other words, due to the translator’s mastery of their own mother tongue, the translated works are more readable and more suitable for readers. Take Lin Shu, a famous Chinese translator in the late Qing Dynasty, for example. He did not know foreign languages at all. He only translated through other people’s statements, and then translated many popular works. The reason is that his advantage in language use makes readers have a sense of identity at first glance. But it’s just the general situation, not always. There is no absolute thing in the world, so is translation. Graham’s mistake is to be too absolute, not to give himself leeway, nor to give others hope. As a matter of fact, whether a translator can be engaged in the translation of a certain language has little to do with the identity of the translator. What really becomes a problem is the translator’s own quality and his proficiency in both languages and cultures. If you don’t have a good command and understanding of the source language culture and the target language culture, no matter which country you come from, you cannot translate a high-quality translation. Taking English sinologists as an example, not all translators can produce exquisite translations. What’s worse, some well-known Sinologists’ translations can even be called poor. Take the English translation of \textit{Chu ci} as an example, Hawkes, Watson and Waters’ translations are very exquisite, while those of Giles and Waley are slightly inferior, and the phenomenon of misreading is relatively serious. As for Field’s translation of \textit{Tian wen}, it can be described as poor. The translation is so insipid, which makes people feel like chewing wax. It does not reflect the beauty of the original text, nor does it convey the aesthetic feeling to English readers. On the contrary, several Chinese translators, in addition to Professor Zhuo Zhenying’s mistranslations (in fact, the literary talent is good), Yang Xianyi’s, Xu Yuanchong’s and Sun Dayu’s translations are not inferior to those of ordinary British translators. Hawkes even refers to Yang Xianyi’s translation method. This shows that it doesn’t matter where the translator comes from, but only his proficiency of the two languages and cultures.

Not only Chinese translators can be engaged in the English translation of Chinese classics, but also should be encouraged to actively participate in the English translation of Chinese classics, which is the need for the positive dissemination of Chinese culture. At present, sinologists in English-speaking countries are in short supply. After the death of the older generation of sinologists, it is difficult to find a new person who can inherit their shoes. Therefore, the dissemination of Chinese classics is difficult. The occurrence of this situation is related to the difficulty of understanding Chinese classics, especially \textit{Chu ci}. Not only English-speaking readers are
afraid of it, but also ordinary Chinese readers are hard to get through. What’s more, the foreigners pay more attention to the practicality of knowledge, and they don’t want to spend time studying these literary works with little practical significance. This situation makes it necessary for Chinese translators to get involved in the English translation of Chinese classics. In addition, at present, the importance of English in China’s education has increased to an unprecedented height. Many places start to learn English from Grade 3 of primary school. English is a compulsory course in middle schools and universities. This kind of environment enables Chinese people to learn standard and authentic English, especially for English majors, their English level is not much different from that of people in English-speaking countries. Especially in today’s world, cultural exchanges are unprecedented frequent, coupled with the development of mass media and the Internet, it is not very difficult for ordinary scholars to understand the culture of another country. As an international language, English has been mastered by ordinary scholars. Especially, the convenience of studying abroad and emigrating makes Chinese scholars have the same thinking habits as British. I think if Graham lived in the present context, rather than in the 1960s, when China was hostile to the west, he would not have said that. He would have thought that translators from the native countries can translate well, and that translators from source-language countries can also do well in translation. However, to achieve this goal, only theoretical preaching is not persuasive, we need to prove its feasibility through practice. At present, there are few domestic translations going abroad, and few of them have influence in China.

The organization and quality of domestic translation and publication are mixed, and the difficulties in promotion and operation make the publication and distribution of Chinese classics in foreign languages mostly limited to domestic, and it is difficult to enter the field of vision and teaching of world literature. (Wang, 2009. p. 6)

Therefore, domestic translators should focus on foreign countries, and the purpose of translation is nothing more than to spread culture. If the translated works are only circulated in China and the readers are also a few people proficient in foreign languages, then this kind of translation is of little significance. Domestic translators should publish high-level English translations and publish them in the English-speaking world. Only when the domestic translated works are well accepted in the English world can we justly say that translation is not only something that translators in native countries can do.

In short, it does not matter which country the translator comes from. The key is whether the translator has a good command of Chinese and English, and whether he has a profound understanding of Chinese culture and English culture. If you are clear about the language and culture, both Chinese and English translators, even German translators, can be engaged in the translation of Chinese classics and can translate exquisite translations, which can make English readers taste the beauty and subtlety of Chinese literature.

2. How to Translate Chinese Classics

How to translate Chinese classics? As for the English translation of Chinese classics, many scholars have written articles to discuss it. The following will be combined with these views, just to put forward my personal views, hoping to provide enlightenment for the English translation of Chinese classics.

There are two aspects in the domestic discussion on the translation of classical works, the one is the choice of translation methods, the other is the issue of cultural translation. When translating, which translation method should be chosen to better convey Chinese culture, and how to convey some unique Chinese cultural phenomena
to English readers in the world, if these two problems are solved, the English translation of Chinese classics will be solved. As a matter of fact, there is no consensus in the field of translation. As a highly personalized practice, it seems difficult to judge which kind of translation is better. Sometimes it can only be said that each has its own merits. Moreover, the world is rich and colorful, rather than uniform. So is translation. It is the existence of various translation methods that makes this field has the research significance.

In the translation of classics, there is a dispute between domestication and foreignization. When translating classics, is it better to use domestication or foreignization? Some people think that the use of foreignization is good, and that the translation produced by the strategy of foreignization is helpful to show the characteristics of national culture, expand readers’ horizons and accelerate cultural exchange (Huo, 2005, p. 54). However, most people believe that the English translation of Chinese classics should not be trapped in a specific translation mode, but should be flexibly selected according to the situation. For example, Li Dongbo believes that “only by using the two translation methods of foreignization and domestication, and retaining more characteristics of Chinese culture, can the world have an accurate and comprehensive understanding of Chinese traditional culture” (Wang, 2007, p. 118). Domestication and foreignization, as different translation methods, have their own advantages, and there is no difference between the advantages and disadvantages. Translators can choose according to their own purposes, and if they choose properly, they can have a good effect. Lin Shu, a famous Chinese translator, typically adopts domestication in his translation, which is very popular in China. The purpose of his translation is to make his translation sell well. Therefore, he adopts the translation method that meets the expectations of Chinese readers. Of course, if the translator wants to remain the exotic flavor and let the domestic readers know the foreign culture, the foreignization method is better.

Another hot topic in the translation of classics is about cultural translation. Chinese cultural classics are extensive and profound, with thousands of years of cultural accumulation. There are many myths and historical stories in the classical works. All kinds of thoughts are involved. How to translate these cultural elements with local color so that English readers can understand their connotation and arouse their interest in reading is undoubtedly a problem that translators must face. How to deal with these cultural factors in translating Chinese classics? Many scholars have written papers to express their opinions. Some scholars attach great importance to the cultural fidelity in the process of translation, holding that “translators of classics translation should fully understand the original text, and be responsible for the source-language culture, and strive to reproduce the style and cultural connotation of the original text while conveying the written meaning and language form of the original text” (Ban, 2008, p. 162). The cultural fidelity here refers to the unique cultural elements in these works, which must be faithfully conveyed. Some scholars believe that the use of various translation techniques for words with distinctive cultural flavor can achieve good results. “There are seven methods to deal with cultural words in the translation of cultural classics, namely: transference, transliteration, substitution, interpretative translation, meaning translation, free translation with phonetic notation, and annotation of Chinese characters in the original text” (Li, 2001, p. 16). These translation methods can be said to cover almost all the methods used in the translation of cultural words, most of which are commonly-used methods, such as transliteration, interpretative translation, free translation with phonetic notation. These methods have been proved to be feasible in practice and have played a good role in spreading culture.
In addition to the above two aspects, many scholars have discussed the translation of classics from some specific aspects. For example, some scholars think that in the process of translating Chinese classics, translators must consider and adjust the logical structure of the original text according to their needs. This adjustment is mainly based on the differences of thoughts between the East and the West, and the wrong word order of the original version (Zhuo, 2011, p. 47). Some scholars specially discuss the role of interpretation in the translation of classics and records. They think that interpretation can convey language information and reproduce aesthetic experience, which is conducive to cultural exchange between China and foreign countries (Lu, 2004, p. 45). Some scholars discuss the translation strategies of classics from the perspective of a foreign translation theory. For example, some scholars specially compare the semantic translation and communicative translation of famous translation theorist Newmark, and think that the translation of cultural classics is suitable to adopt the semantic translation (Li, 2008, p. 92). Some scholars believe that the English translation of Chinese classics must reproduce the style of the original work and try to be close to the original text in content and form, which requires the translator to select works similar to his own creation style for translation, and integrate his own style into the style of the original work, so as to achieve the reproduction of style (Guo, 2004, p. 108). Other scholars have focused on the importance and methods of textual research in the translation of Chinese classics. They believe that only textual research can provide a reliable basis for English translation. The methods of textual research include gloss, textual criticism, empathy, cultural and historical perspective, textual internal and external testifying, intertextual perspective and author’s textual mutual verification (Zhuo, 2005, p. 66). These viewpoints have their own reasons. At the same time, they also reflect the complexity of the English translation of Chinese classics and have higher requirements for translators than ordinary texts.

In our opinion, Yan Fu’s three character formula “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” is a good guiding ideology in the translation of Chinese classics. Faithfulness to the original text is the most basic requirement of all translations, so is the translation of classics, and there are higher requirements for translators. Because the translation of classics is faced with double faithfulness, the ancient Chinese should be translated into vernacular first, and then into English. In the understanding of ancient Chinese prose, translators need to have a deep knowledge of Chinese culture and do some textual research before determining the meaning of sentences. Therefore, textual research is particularly important in the translation of Chinese classics. As the second requirement of translation, expressiveness is more considered from the perspective of the receiver. Here, expressiveness means that the translated text must conform to the rules of English grammar and syntax, so that the works can be accepted by English readers and integrated into English context. “Elegance” is a controversial requirement of later generations. Some scholars believe that elegance in the original text leads to elegance in the translation, while elegance in the original text makes the translation unnecessary. This statement is natural and reasonable. However, from the perspective of Yan Fu’s life, this requirement of “elegance” is extremely correct. Because he lived in an era of advocating ancient prose and creating with ancient prose, and the ancient prose is literary, and its highly generalized and refined language itself is the embodiment of literary talent. As far as Chinese classics are concerned, they are all the cream of China’s ancient works. Their diction and sentence making are more than ordinary works, and they are particular about rhythm, rhetoric and so on. Therefore, the translation must be elegant to convey the sense of beauty of Chinese classics. “Faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” can be regarded as a general requirement for the translation of Chinese classics. In the specific
translation, the colorful translation methods mentioned above can be adopted. However, no matter how the methods are changed, we must follow Yan Fu’s three character formula, which is determined by the internal quality of the classics.

3. Difficulties and Countermeasures in the Translation of Chinese Classics

The purpose of translating Chinese classics is to make the world better understand China, especially the splendid Chinese culture, enhance the national pride of the Chinese nation, and promote the humanistic spirit of the Chinese nation. Classics are the crystallization of the wisdom of the Chinese nation, with infinite charm and permanent value. However, due to the fact that China was poor, backward and beaten up in modern times, the greatness of Chinese culture was obscured by the fact that English sinologists often had preconceptions when they translated Chinese culture, and their prejudice against the late Qing Dynasty penetrated into their understanding of Chinese culture. For example, James Legge had a contemptuous tone when he commented on Qu Yuan’s *Li sao*. The prejudices of these influential sinologists distort the real connotation of Chinese culture and belittle the image of Chinese culture in the eyes of foreign readers. Their humanistic concern is not recognized by foreign readers, resulting in their alienation and resistance to Chinese culture, thus affecting China’s international image, and even bringing adverse effects on China’s politics and economy. Therefore, it is an indispensable cultural strategy for China to go to the world in the new era to re-examine the translation and introduction of classics.

However, there are many difficulties in the translation of Chinese classics, which are mainly reflected in the following aspects:

First, there is a scarcity of talents who are proficient in Chinese classics. In recent decades, China’s education has placed too much emphasis on applied science, while the humanities are increasingly marginalized, resulting in the shortage of top-notch talents in humanities. Social utilitarianism, education utilitarianism, employment and economic development as priorities make few talents willing to engage in the study of Chinese classics. The inheritance of Chinese classics has become a problem, let alone translation and communication.

Second, bilingual talents are rare. The improper setup of colleges and departments in Chinese universities leads to a serious shortage of bilingual talents. At present, the division of labor among departments in Chinese universities is very elaborate, and the boundaries between the departments are clear, and there is little communication between them. Ancient Chinese and foreign languages belong to the school of liberal arts and the school of foreign languages, which makes it difficult to select excellent translators who are proficient in bilingual.

Third, the unbefitting translation strategies. Too much relying on sinologists, and most sinologists only translate out of interests rather than for the purpose of communication. Therefore, their influence is very limited. However, most of the translated works of domestic translators are only published in China, which has no purpose of spreading culture.

The author believes that in order to get rid of the current dilemma of the translation of Chinese classics, we can start from the following aspects:

First of all, speed up the cultivation of bilingual talents in China. Some universities can recruit a bilingual class according to the situation of teachers, and make corresponding curriculum and training plan.
Secondly, domestic translators should work in foreign contexts. From the perspective of some Chinese literary translations circulating abroad, *Sunflower Splendor* compiled by Liu Wuji, an overseas Chinese living in the United States, has a great influence in the United States, which shows that Chinese who are proficient in the essence of Chinese culture have greater advantages in translating Chinese classics. Therefore, it is possible to send domestic translators to teach in foreign universities. By integrating into the teaching and research environment abroad, they will be able to publish higher quality translations.

Thirdly, strengthen international cooperation and exchanges. Due to the small number of talents who can teach in foreign universities, a large number of translators still can only do translation work in China. Only by strengthening the communication and cooperation with foreign university scholars can they achieve good effect. The translated works of domestic translators can be submitted to well-known foreign scholars for revision, so as to make the translation more in line with the language norms of the target-language country. In addition, the names of foreign scholars should also be written in the translated works published abroad, which will be beneficial to the dissemination of the translated works.

In a word, the translation and dissemination of Chinese classics is an important and arduous task. Only through long-term exploration and practice can we make the translation of Chinese classics effective. In this way, Chinese classics can be better spread and accepted abroad, and the influence of Chinese culture will be expanded, and the brilliant light of Chinese culture can shine on the world.

Conclusion

In a word, the translation and dissemination of Chinese classics is a long-term national strategy which aims to boost China’s international influence and cultural soft power. We must realize its importance and difficulty. Only through constant exploration and practice can we make the translation of Chinese classics effective and fruitful. We can’t only depend on English sinologists but must take on the burden of translation ourselves, for there are still so many Chinese classics which haven’t been touched upon till now, and English sinologists have the least intention of rendering them for one reason or another. When we translate Chinese classics, it is advisable for us to cooperate with foreign scholars who are familiar with Chinese culture, and make careful revisions before our translating work comes out. We can adopt different translating strategies with the purpose of spreading our culture effectively. I am very sure if we adhere to the career persistently, Chinese classics will be spread and accepted well abroad, and more and more people around the world will come to realize the value and glamour of Chinese classics.

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