Acceptance of Translated Traditional Chinese Medicine Classics Overseas: A Survey of Five English Versions of *Nan Jing*

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Abstract. *Nan Jing* is one of the four foundation texts of traditional Chinese medicine. The present study investigates the acceptance of the five English versions of *Nan Jing* overseas in terms of three parameters: number of worldwide libraries holding the copy, book reviews and citation amount in international journals, and customer reviews plus sales ranks on Amazon.com. The results show that Unschuld’s version is the best accepted among overseas readers and in the reading market, and that Flaws’s version comes the second, while the versions of Chinese translators are not widely accepted. It is inferred that the academic reputation and market influence of the translator and the publisher are essential for the acceptance of the translated text of traditional Chinese medicine classics.

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese medicine (henceforth TCM), an important branch of traditional medicine with a history of more than three thousand years, is an essential part of traditional Chinese culture. TCM boasts a complete and integrated system of medical theories, clinical practice and therapeutic methods, which is highly respected in Sinosphere and gains increasing attention and practices across the world. The classics of TCM, which contain both intricate concepts and clinical details and introduce a highly practical system of holistic healing, remain on the top of reading list for TCM researchers and practitioners. Hence, the translation of TCM classics, which serves those who cannot read the ancient Chinese themselves, is of great importance in propelling the international dissemination of TCM.

*Nan Jing* (“Classics of Difficult Issues”), originally known as *Huangdi Bashiyi Nanjing*, is one of the four classics of TCM. Even though the book was unreliably attributed to Bian Que (c. 401-310 BCE), no agreement has been achieved on the real author of the book and the exact years when it was written. This book consists of 81 questions and answer explanations, which comprehensively cover pulse diagnosis, meridian study, organism, illness, acupuncture points and needle points [1]. The innovative pulse diagnosis as well as the acupuncture and needling theory remain influential until today. Inheriting the theories from *Huangdi Neijing* (“The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon”), *Nan Jing* develops its own path and is “regarded as a significant and innovative work that marks the apex...of the development phase of the conceptual system” [1]. Compared to the English translation of *Huangdi Neijing*, the study of English translation of *Nan Jing* has not been granted enough attention. To this date, there are five English versions of *Nan Jing* available and the previous researches about them focus on the translation history and translation of TCM terms [2,3]. The present study attempts to investigate the current situation of acceptance of the English versions of *Nan Jing* and discuss about the insights for the future spread of TCM classics overseas and propelling the international dissemination of TCM.

2. Research Objects and Methodology of the Present Study

Henry C. Lu practiced TCM in Canada since 1972 and published *A Complete Translation of the Yellow Emperor’s Classics of Internal Medicine and the Difficult Classic* in 1978 in Vancouver (henceforth Lu’s version), which was the first English translation of *Nan Jing* [4]. Paul U. Unschuld, a renown German professor of Chinese studies and TCM history, translated *Nan Jing* in 1986 (henceforth Unschuld’s version) [1], which was his first translation of TCM classics. The 749-page
book includes both the Chinese texts and translation of the texts, and it also selects commentaries of Chinese and Japanese authors from twenty authors of the third through the twentieth century [1]. Bob Flaws, a well-known TCM practitioner in the USA, published his English version of Nan Jing in 1999 (henceforth Flaws’s version) [5]. Li Zhaoguo, an English professor in China, included the translation of Nan Jing in appendix of his translation of Huangdi Neijing, Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine: Spiritual Pivot III, in 2008 (henceforth Li’s version) [6]. The latest English version of Nan Jing was translated in 2015 by Dong Hua, a TCM practitioner in Israel and the US (henceforth Dong’s version) [7].

The present study investigates the situation of acceptance of the English versions of Nan Jing in terms of the following three parameters: (1) the number of libraries holding each of the English versions of Nan Jing; (2) the book reviews and citation amounts of the English versions of Nan Jing in international journals; (3) the customer reviews and Amazon Best Sellers Ranks of the English versions of Nan Jing on Amazon.com. To a great extent, the investigation of the three parameters can present a clear picture of the acceptance of the English versions of Nan Jing.

3. Acceptance of the English Versions of Nan Jing

3.1. Number of libraries holding the English versions of Nan Jing

| Translator         | Book Name                                             | Year of Publication | City of Publication: Publisher                          | Number of Libraries Holding the Copy |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Paul U. Unschuld   | Nan-Jing: The Classic of Difficult Issues              | 1986/2003           | Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press | 1422 (1199 with eCopy)               |
|                    |                                                       |                     | Taipei: Southern Materials Center                       | 2                                    |
|                    |                                                       |                     | Oakland, California: University of California Press     | 736 (699 with eCopy)                 |
|                    |                                                       |                     | Total: 2160                                             |                                      |
| Bob Flaws          | The Classic of Difficulties: A Translation of the Nan Jing | 1999/2003/2004/2006 | Boulder, CO: Blue Poppy Press                          | 1514 (1499 with eCopy)               |
| Hua Dong           | Nan Jing: The Classic of difficult issues, A Translation and Notes | 2015                | [United States]: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform | 1                                    |
| Henry C. Lu        | A Complete Translation of the Yellow Emperor’s Classics of Internal Medicine and the Difficult Classic | 1978/1990/1994/1994 | Vancouver, B.C.: Academy of Oriental Heritage | 8                                    |
|                    |                                                       |                     | Vancouver, B.C.: International College of Traditional Chinese Medicine of Vancouver | 10                                   |
|                    |                                                       |                     | Total: 18                                               |                                      |
| Li Zhaoguo         | Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine: Spiritual Pivot III | 2008                | Xi’an: World book Press                                 | 17                                   |

The number of worldwide libraries holding a book can be regarded as one of the best yardsticks for measuring the cultural influence of the book. In terms of the translated text, libraries tend to collect the version which is more popular and more recognized. The larger number of libraries holding the copy, especially the eCopy, makes it easier for readers to get access to the text. OCLC’s
WorldCat is the largest online public access catalog (OPAC) in the world, through which the holding records of a book can be rapidly searched [8]. The data on WorldCat are updated in real time. The data in the present study were collected from OCLC database on November 10, 2019. The numbers of libraries holding the English versions of Nan Jing (including different editions) worldwide are displayed in Table 1. Table 1 shows that Unschuld’s version ranks the top with the total number of 2160 libraries holding the copy, among which 1898 libraries hold the eCopy. Flaws’s version ranks the second with the total number of 1514, among which 1499 libraries hold the eCopy. The numbers of libraries holding Lu’s version and Li’s version are 18 and 17 respectively, which is much smaller than those of Unschuld’s version and Flaws’s version. Only 1 library is found to hold Dong’s version.

3.2. Book reviews and citation amount of the English versions of Nan Jing

Peer review is essential for the overseas promotion of a translated text. For the overseas acceptance of TCM translated texts, the review from the overseas experts on Chinese studies or history is of great importance. The present study searched the book reviews of the English versions of Nan Jing written by peer experts abroad in the international journal databases of JSTOR, ProQuest and EBSCOHost on November 10, 2019. Two book reviews of Unschuld’s version were found and no book review of the other versions was found. The detailed information of the two book reviews are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Book Reviews of Unschuld’s Version.

| Year of Publication | Journal Name                  | Publisher            | Reviewer     | About the Reviewer                             |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|--------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 1987               | Bulletin of History of Medicine | Johns Hopkins University Press | Donald Harper | Professor of Chinese Studies in University of Chicago, America |
| 1988               | The Journal of Asian Studies  | Cambridge University Press | Shigehisa Kuriyama | Professor of Cultural History in Harvard University, America |

Table 2 shows that Unschuld’s version obtained the attention of the peer experts soon after the publication in 1986. Harper thought Unschuld’s translation was “a major contribution to the study of Chinese medicine” and “a boon to historical study” and pointed out that “Unschuld deserves praise for the quality of his translation” [9]. However, to better understand the translation, the reader may need to refer to the explanation of basic concepts and key terms of TCM written in another book of Unschuld [9]. Kuriyama, a Japanese scholar in America, claimed that Unschuld’s version was puzzling for the student with no background in TCM [10]. However, he believed that Unschuld’s translation evoked “a vast and intriguing realm to be explored further” and “direct students interested in the nature and development of traditional medicine in China” [10].

Citation amount in journals can manifest the degree of interest of scholars in a book. Scopus is the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature [11]. The author searched Scopus database on November 10, 2019 to collect the citation amount of the English versions of Nan Jing. The results show 3 citations of Unschuld’s version and 0 citation of the other versions.

3.3. Customer reviews and best sellers rank on Amazon website

The sales of a book can reflect its popularity in the market. The review of the readership abroad is one of the most important reference points for evaluating the acceptance of a translated text. Amazon.com is the biggest online bookstore in the world, which ranks the top five of the most popular customer review sites in U.S. in 2018 [12]. The author searched www.Amazon.com on November 10, 2019 and collected the Best Sellers Ranks of the English versions of Nan Jing as well as the customer reviews. The results are presented in Table 3 [13-18].
Table 3. Amazon Data.

| Translator     | Year of Publication | The Amazon Best Sellers Rank | No. of Customer Reviews |
|----------------|---------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Paul. U. Unschuld | 1986               | #1,727,685                   | 9                       |
| Paul. U. Unschuld | 2016               | #414,647                     | 0                       |
| Bob Flaws       | 1999               | #1,379,473                   | 6                       |
| Hua Dong        | 2015               | #2,183,657                   | 8                       |
| Henry C. Lu     | 2004               | #12,963,269                  | 1                       |
| Li Zhaoguo      | 2008               | #3,568,682                   | 2                       |

From Table 3, it is demonstrated that Unschuld’s version is the most popular in terms of the rank and the number of customer reviews. The customer reviews can reflect the readers’ feedback directly and manifest the translation strategy of the translator as well. In the reviews on Unschuld’s version, the words like “profound”, “remarkable” and “greatest” clearly show the positive evaluation of the readers. Unschuld included selected commentaries in his translation and hoped that “the reader will become familiar both with the contents and general history of the reception of the text” [1]. This practice is well-received in the customers and one customer writes “The original text is present in the book and Paul added the main commentary at the text written by the most famous studious of TCM of all ages. If you love TCM and you want to understand all subtle questions of this fine art, this is a book you must have” [13]. Flaws thought Unschuld’s translation was hard to read and he “tried to retain the succinctness of the original text as far as possible” [5]. Flaws’s version receives a two-extreme evaluation from the customers. One customer thought “This book is a simple translation and a quick, easy read to give the reader a basic understanding” [15]. However, more customers regarded it to be “an inadequate translation” and “omits much of the information that is useful and relevant to traditional Chinese medicine practitioners” [15]. One review pointed out that Dong’s version was full of “English mistakes” but other customers thought Dong’s version was helpful for understanding some of the key concepts and information of TCM [16]. The reviews of Lu’s version and Li’s version are about Huangdi Neijing while Nan Jing is not directly mentioned [17,18].

3.4. Discussion and implications

From the survey of the three parameters above, it is clearly shown that Unschuld’s version is the best accepted one both in the academic field and at the reading market overseas. Flaws’s version is comparatively better than the rest of the other versions. It should be noted that Lu’s version and Li’s version of Nan Jing are combined with the translation of Huangdi Neijing, leading to the difficulty in confirming the independent status of acceptance. However, even with the combination of Huangdi Neijing, the data of these two versions still cannot rival the data of Unschuld’s version and Flaws’s version. It is found that there is a noticeable gap between the versions translated by the three Chinese translators and those translated by foreign translators in terms of the influence and acceptance. The difference can be mainly attributed to the following two factors.

The reputation of the translator is an important factor for the acceptance of a translated text. Unschuld is considered to be one of the leading authorities on TCM in the West, and is well recognized in the academic field. Unschuld’s version is the third book by him to appear in a series entitled “Medicine in China”; the two earlier volumes are also published by the University of California Press. Veith, the translator of the first complete English translation of Huangdi Neijing Su Wen, wrote a book review of the two volumes and comments that Unschuld, “trained in both sinology and pharmacology, is so exceptionally well qualified” to write the two books [19]. Donald Harper is a well-known scholar of Chinese studies, with expertise on early Chinese civilization, focusing on philosophy, religion and history of science [20]. He published his book review of Unschuld’s version in Bulletin of the History of Medicine, a leading journal in the field of medical history worldwide [9,21]. Since Unschuld’s version includes the commentary from Japan, it attracted the attention of the Japanese scholar Shigehisa Kuriyama, who focused on the comparative medical history, and he wrote another book review in The Journal of Asian Studies, an authoritative
international journal in the field of Asian studies [10,22,23]. Even though the book reviews pointed out some of the weak points of the translation, they both endorsed the academic achievement of Unschuld’s version [9,10]. The recognition and recommendation of peer experts play an important role in promoting the acceptance of Unschuld’s version. The common readers are also very familiar with Unschuld and his reputation is one important proof for readers to choose his version. One customer commented that Unschuld was “a giant of the study of TCM” and another commented that “It is pointless to mention the vast knowledge and contribution that Pro. Unsculd (sic!) bring to the field, saying that it is always (sic!) has been great to read his books” [13]. The citation amount shows that Unschuld’s version attracts more attention from the researchers as well. The influence of Unschuld in the academic field and at the market partly explains the fact that Unschuld’s version has the largest number of libraries holding the copy and ranks the highest on Amazon Best Sellers Rank among the five versions. It is worthy mentioning that Chinese scholars, Ma Jixing and Ma Kanwen, offered great help for Unschuld’s work [1]. Bob Flaws is an internationally known TCM practitioner and an author, translator and/or editor of over 100 books on TCM [24]. Flaws’s version has the second largest number of libraries holding the copy and ranks the second highest on Amazon Best Sellers Rank. However, no book review of Flaws’s version has been found. It can be told that Bob Flaws does not enjoy the same academic status as Unschuld. The negative comments of the customers may be due to his translation strategy as analyzed in Section 3.3. The rest three translators do not enjoy the same international reputation of Unschuld and Flaws and their versions are not well accepted.

Another important factor is the publisher of the translated text. Unschuld’s version is published by University of California Press, one of the most forward-thinking scholarly publishers in the US. The press also published Veith’s translation of Huangdi Neijing in 1966 [25]. The book published by the scholarly publishers is easy to gain the academic attention. Blue Poppy Press was founded by Bob Flaws and Honora Wolfe in 1982 and now is the world’s largest English language publisher specializing in acupuncture and Chinese medicine [26]. The good reputation and the strong influence of the two publishers in international market also contribute to the good acceptance of the versions. The rest three publishers are not advantageous to promote the acceptance of their versions.

4. Conclusion

It is difficult for Chinese readers to read the classics of TCM, and the obstacle for English readers is even more enormous. The translation of TCM classics attempts to bridge the gap between the classics and the English readers. However, the acceptance of translation of TCM classics differs considerably from one version to the other. This survey of the English versions of Nan Jing shows that two important factors influence greatly the acceptance and transmission in the target market: the reputation of the translator in academic field and at the common reader market and the reputation and influence of the publisher. China is currently propelling the international spread of TCM, and, to better promote the acceptance of TCM classics as well as the TCM culture, these two factors should be taken into serious consideration. It is recommended that the future translation projects should seek cooperation with influential publishers abroad, as well as prioritizing collaboration between internationally-recognized translators and Chinese scholars.

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