

# The Translation of Chinese Culture: Past, Present and Future

Feng Qi, Zhang Huan, and Sun Hui

**Abstract**—This paper aims to review the history and status quo of the Translation of Chinese Culture (TCC), and predict the directions of future development. The paper reviews the history of the translation on Chinese culture by reviewing the Chinese and western translators' C-E translation which is mainly on classical books. It also overviews the status quo of CCT by analyzing its development, achievements, and national policies since the reform and opening up policy (ROP). The paper explores five potential directions for TCC: classical books, world-class and regional intangible cultural heritage, communist party culture and education. The fact-based exploration of TCC (Translation of Chinese Culture) is helpful for depicting the real outlook of CCT, and guiding the development of the translation program in China.

**Index Terms**—Chinese classics, Chinese culture, intangible cultural heritage, translation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Yu Guoming [1] pointed out that a country's power can be classified into two types: one is hard power, the other soft power. Hard power refers to a country's GDP and facilities, while soft power consists of culture, social system and media. From the late Ming Dynasty to the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, the mainstream purpose of the translation in China was to import the academic knowledge from Europe and U.S.A. To catch up with developed countries, China widely imported the western technologies in math, philosophy, astronomy, physics, chemistry, medicine, biology, geography, politics, sociology, economics, law, applied science and technology, history, literature and art through translation.

Since the establishment of People's Republic of China, especially under the guidance of the reform and opening up policy, China has surged to be the second largest economy. Through language and translation, Sino-west cultural exchange has been the engine for the cultural progress of both sides. It has been an undebatable fact that Chinese and western scholars share the equal position in idea exchange and more western scholars suggest that a cultural translator or scholar without the knowledge of Chinese culture and language is incomplete [2]. In the age of information globalization, the rise of mass media and transmission has made culture an important role in globalization, which is assisted by translation [2]. This age is filled with economic

globalization, global multi-polarization and integration, the transmission of Chinese culture through translation has been an important way to enhance China's soft power, and facilitate the international understanding of China's history and future.

## II. THE PAST: PRIOR TO OPENING UP

TCC originated from the Chinese Classics Translation (CCT). In the early stage, its translators mainly consisted of western sinologists and Christian priests, whose purpose was to transmit Christian values to China. Chinese translators were confined mainly to philosophers and men of letters, such as Gu Hongming, Lin Yutang, and Yang Hsien-yi.

### A. Western Translators

In the early stage, CCT was characterized by Chinese classics and western preachers and sinologists. The first TCC translator is Matteo Ricci from Italy, who translated *the Four Books*; Nicolas Trigault from France, translated *the Field Angle Monument of Qin Dynasty*; British translator Robert Morrison was the first to translate *Three Character Classic*; Ignatius de Costa from Portugal translated *The Great Learning* and *The Analects*; Philippe Couplet from Belgium translated *Interpretation of Western Four Books*; Marie de Premare from France translated *Book of History*, *Book of Songs*, *The Orphan of Zhao*. In the 13th century, Marco Polo recorded his journey in China, which is defined introductory cultural translation [3].

During Ming and Qing Dynasties, catholic missionaries thronged to China, but they translated only for communication, and most of the translations were only abridged versions of Chinese classics. In 1590, Juan Cobo, a Spanish missionary, translated *Precious Mirror of the Clear Heart*, which is the first Chinese literature to be translated in a European language. Since then, the translation mainstream in China from the Han to Tang and Song Dynasties was Chinese classics, while that of the Ming and Qing Dynasties was science and technology. The English versions of many ancient Chinese classics were also printed and published in Hong Kong and Taiwan during that time.

In 18<sup>th</sup> century, William Jones translated part of *The Book of Songs*; John Francis Davist translated *Autumn in the Han Palace*; Herbert Allen Giles, representative of the first generation of sinologists, translated *The Treasure of Chinese Literature*; Arthur Waley, representative of the second generation of sinologists translated the Chinese poems and songs such as *The Book of Songs*, *Chu Ci*, *Tang Poetry*, and *Three Character Classic*. David Hawks, representative of the third generation of sinologists, is famous for the translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

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Since the Opium War (1840), 200 types of Chinese classics and literature have come out due to the work of over 100 western publishing houses. Oxford and Cambridge presses have respectively published 40 and 20 types of Chinese classics. Over 400 years, Britain has published over 300 types of Chinese classics and 30 relevant PhD dissertations.

The CCT in U.S.A began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and over 1000 types of books and PhD dissertations has been published. The most outstanding work is *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* and *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* written by Stephen Owen. Except Britain and U.S.A, the English version of Chinese classics were also published in Singapore, Philippines, Ireland, Canada, Saint Lucia, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, etc. Some non-English countries also translated Chinese classics, such as Netherlands, Sweden, India, France and Japan.

### B. Chinese Translators

The cultural translation in China mainly translates foreign cultures into Chinese, which mainly refers to the Buddhist scripture and western literature. From 1920s to 1940s, only a few Chinese classics were translated in English, such as *Mozi*, *Selected Translations of Ancient Essays*, *Wisdom of Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, translated by Lin Yutang; *Strange Tales of a Lonely Studio* translated by He Jingzhan; *Travel of Lao Can* translated by Yang Hsien-yi; *Lee Sao* translated by Lin Wenqing; *The Inconstancy of Madam Chuang* translated by Zhu Xiang. From the late Qing Dynasty to early modern times, Gu Hongming translated *The Analects* and *The Doctrine of Mean*. Su Manshu translated over 110 Chinese poems which includes 61 poems of *The Book of Songs* and 51 poems written by poets Lee Bai and Du Fu from the Tang Dynasty.

Since the founding of People's Republic of China (PRC), TCC has been booming in China. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (couple translators) together translated many Chinese classics, namely *Dream of Red Mansions*, *Chu Ci*, *The Book of History*, *Selected Legends of the Tang Dynasty*, *The Scholars*, *Love in Long Life Hall*, *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio*, *Travel of Lao Chan*, *Ancient Chinese Fables*. Meanwhile, Chinese government has been granting financial and policy support to the translation of Chinese culture.

Foreign language publishing house and New World Publishing House have published the translation of *Lee Sao*, *The Selected Book of Songs*, *Ancient Chinese Fables*, *Poems of Du Fu*, *Poems of Bai Juyi*, *The Scholars*, *Water Margin*, *Strange Tales of Make-Do Studio*, etc. Sidney Shapiro, a Chinese Jewish translator, finished the translation of *Water Margin* during the Cultural Revolution in China.

## III. THE PRESENT OF TCC

### A. Development of TCC

Since the reform and opening up policy in 1978, the translation of Chinese classics has reached a diversified and dynamic peak stage, and become more classified and systematic. The data of CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) shows that the publication of relevant papers has been rising since 1999 and its annual publication reached 162 in 2019, and remains the similar level these years,

which is illustrated in Fig. 1.

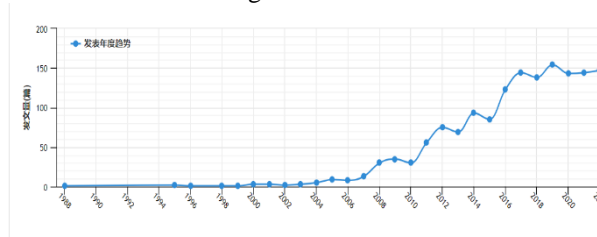


Fig. 1. Trend of Publication on Translation of Chinese Classics (from CNKI).

The academic debate and translation of Chinese culture are closely related to Chinese publishers, presses and government. For example, the National Press and Publication Administration directed the translation of *Library of Chinese Classics*; Hunan People's Publishing House published *Chinese-English Bilingual Series of Chinese Classics*, Shandong Friendship Publishing House published *The Book of Rites (selected)*; Foreign Languages Press published *Series of Translated Chinese Poems* and *Echoes from Classics*; Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and Chinese Literature Publishing House together published *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* and *English-Chinese: Gems of Chinese literature Classical*; Jiangsu Education Publishing House translated *Readings of Chinese Culture Series*, etc.

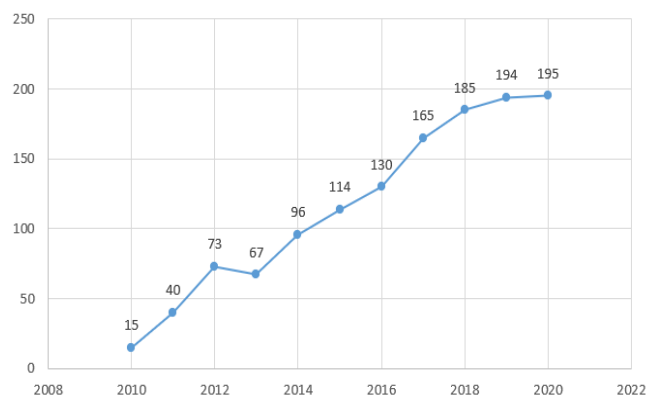


Fig. 2. Number of projects funded by Chinese academic translation project of national social science fund of China from 2010 to 2020.

Except for the translation of Chinese Confucian classics, history, classics of the Qin Dynasty, and poetry, today's TCC covers a wider range of subject. The number of projects funded by Chinese Academic Translation Project of National Social Science Fund of China projects has been increasing from 2010-2020 (see Fig. 2), it funded 236 projects in 2021, including philosophy, history, system, education, art, Red Culture, reform and opening up policy, poverty alleviation policy, currency, China's rise, the reorganization of the world order, etc. Since then, TCC directly engages in national development and becomes a main force of it and China's international status.

### B. C-E Translation and National Policy

It has been a hotspot to combine TCC with China's diplomacy and international discourse power. Higher education has been the main base for the study and practice of TCC in China. In Shanghai, professor Hu Kaibao from SISU (Shanghai International Studies University) has been studying this field. When working in the foreign language

department of Shanghai Jiaotong University, his research project application- the discourse construction, translation and transmission of the diplomacy of Chinese characteristics- was successfully funded by the National Social Science Fund of China in 2017. His research aims to construct a transmissive diplomatic discourse, accurately translate the diplomatic discourse of Chinese characteristics, explain the idea and principle of China's diplomacy, gain international support to China's diplomatic strategies and improve China's soft power.

Professor Wu Yun, the dean of School of Foreign Languages Tongji University, studied the constructions of national image from the aspect of construction, translation, transmission and acceptance. She illustrated the role of TCC for interpreting a country's image by the political and cultural strategies of "hide your strength and bide your time", "a new model for relations between major countries", the Belt and Road Initiative, South China Sea issue, and East China Sea issue. These studies are necessary for the understanding of Chinese culture, tradition, ideology, wisdom and China's role and responsibility in constructing human destiny community.

A variety of Chinese academic organizations for TCC have been offering platform for TCC development: Translators' Association of China, Shanghai Translation Society for Sci & Tech, Sinology Bilingual Research Association, Committee of Translation and International Promotion of Traditional Chinese Culture (COTIP), Association for Comparative Studies of English and Chinese, China Association for the Promotion of Traditional Chinese Medicine, China Society for English Poetry Translation. Han Suyin Youth Award for Translation in 2018, and Han Suyin International Translation Competition (after 2018) have been hosted for 30 years by the cooperation among Translators Association of China and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Chinese Translators Journal and College of advanced translation of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. Moreover, CC Cup translation contest for multiple foreign languages is hosted by Sinology Bilingual Association since 2019 is prepared to apply Guinness World Record for the number of contestant and competition scale.

#### IV. THE PROSPECT: FIVE DIRECTIONS

Part 4 will predict and divide the future of TCC into five directions according to China's recent cultural policies, tourism resource, labor market and educational policies. The five directions include the popularization of Chinese classics, world-class and regional intangible cultural heritages, red culture tourism, and education of cultural translation.

##### A. *Popularization of Chinese Classics*

Currently, the translation of Chinese classics has accumulated many qualified translated classics, which have laid a foundation for their oversea popularization. The qualified translated Chinese classics can be advertised from multi-dimension, such as translation expert IP, the organization of cultural translation, journal, teaching material, and media.

Zhao Yanchun, a renowned translation expert of TCC, has completed 34 translated classic books, among which *One Thousand Words* (one thousand Chinese characters are

translated into one thousand equivalent English words). So far, most of the Chinese classics have multiple versions of translation, so the translation expert IP can safeguard the quality and standard of TCC.

In terms of uniting the social and academic sources of TCC, China has many relevant organizations, associations, journals, such as East West International Education Foundation, Sinology Bilingual Research Association, China Language Education Research Association, International Association for East-West Studies East-West Studies.

Finally, if China has enough qualified classic translations the direction of TCC development can be switched to the use of translated Chinese classics, such as the appraisal of translated classics, teaching material for TCC education, media products (like video or record), and ideologization of English course. However, the number of the English talents in China has decreased drastically in recent years, and many talents have flown into other majors and industries for employment tendency, which has made the TCC in China face the shortage in talents and human resource.

##### B. *World-Class Intangible Cultural Heritage*

For CCT has accumulated many versions of translated books and its need for translation is saturated nowadays, another direction for TCC will be the translation for the introduction, international exchange and application of the world-class Chinese cultural heritage.

TCC is not only a cultural bridge, but also a shield for cultural protection, such as the translation for the application of intangible cultural heritage. The development of Chinese culture has experienced a process of cultural development, consolidation, competition, and protection. The Translation and transmission of Chinese culture (TTCC) plays an important role in the consolidation, competition and protection of Chinese culture.

Because of the homogenization of different cultures in the world, different counties might have competition and conflict in the application for world-class intangible cultural heritage. The advantage and competence of different cultures mostly depends on cultural translation, transmission and exchange. However, Chinese culture has been facing many challenges on international platform. In 2005, Korea succeeded in the application for the intangible cultural heritage-Gangneung Danoje Festival, which challenges and is similar to China's Dragon Boat Festival. It indicates that the development pace of China's culture is far behind the speed of economic progress and the importance of TCC.

If the priority of TCC is turned to the application materials of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), it would lay a solid foundation for the application's success. It would also create an international reputation and environment before the application of China's ICH, and let the world learn the holographic projection of Chinese culture.

##### C. *Regional Intangible Cultural Heritage*

The municipal ICH has the function of filtering the influential ICH from counties. Translating municipal ICH can guarantee the content quality and significance of translation activity. Its translation style should focus more on local feature, rather than the national one. After filtering the ICH from counties, municipal ICH can symbolize the essence of the local culture in China and fit the standard for cultural transmission. For a capital city and province, ICH symbolizes their IP and its transmission can demonstrate local features

and accelerate municipal ICH's entrance into the National ICH List.

The translation of municipal ICH can assist the development of tourism and entertainment industry. In Shanghai, there are 55 national ICHs, which include the music, dance, drama, sculpture, textile, architecture, Chinese medicine, and porcelain of local feature. These ICHs can provide film industry, cultural tourism, art, city advertising with material and content basis. In Shanghai city, the county Chongming also has many ICHs, which can reflect its feature of ecological and cultural island, namely gardening, cuisine, wine-making, boat design and textile, so their translation should also reflect this local feature to reflect a city's difference.

The contradiction between local feature and international interpretation. The fourth article of Interim Measures for the Application and Evaluation of Representative Works of National Intangible Cultural Heritage stipulates that, the purpose of setting ICH list is to fulfill the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO, enhance international understanding of China's ICH, promote international cultural cooperation and exchange, and contribute to the sustainable vitality and diversity of global culture. However, the interpretational difficulty of China's local ICHs for international society depends on the domestication of translation, but the demonstration of local feature depends on its foreignization. If a local ICH prioritize international transmission and translation's domestication, TCC would tend to import western culture, rather than export China's. Therefore, the translation of local ICH should balance among local feature, legibility for international society and transmission efficiency.

Translation of local ICH and international aid. The threshold of local ICH List includes enhancing social cohesion, representing high level of traditional skill, being heritable for next generation, reflecting local feature, etc. The translation of local ICH is a good material for local English education, because it can not only let more people inherit local culture through language education, but also improve people's ability to transmit it through foreign language. In this way, local culture can better play its role in uniting society and maximizing its social influence. On the other hand, the translation of local ICH can help it better prepared for the international aid from UNESCO when it's in danger.

#### *D. Red Culture*

Another direction for TCC is the translation for Chinese Red Culture (CRC). The CRC in this research refers to the revolutionary culture formed by Communist Party of China (CPC) during the liberation and the formation of communism in China, and directed by the scientific theory of Marxism-Leninism [4]. The typical intangible CRC includes the red revolutionary spirits of Jing Gang Mountains, Yan An, Long March. The value of CRC is embodied in historic evidence, cultural heritage, political education and economic development [5].

The translation for CRC has economic value. The tourism resource of CRC widely covers many Chinese cities, such as Jing Gang Mountains, Yan An, Shanghai, and this tourism resource of Chinese feature attracts many foreign tourists every year. For example, there are about 20000 foreign militarists and researchers who visit Jing Gang Mountains to study its red history [6]. Therefore, the translation of CRC can help develop the international tourism market for

revolutionary cities and create more jobs for foreign language majors. Secondly, CRC translation can benefit the export of CRC products, such as the film, book, song, costume with the theme of Chinese revolution. The translation for the lyrics, books, and costume introduction all need the talents specialized in language and revolutionary culture. TCC can promote both Red Culture tourism and employment of foreign language majors.

The translation of CRC can present the holograph of China's history and image, and share its successful political experience with the world. Most of the current translation for CRC is lack of cultural awareness and well-managed translation company, which caused the damaged image of China [7]. Some translation without cultural awareness might cause foreign misunderstanding on CRC, and make China's image too militarized and politicalized. Therefore, the CRC tourism has a large demand of the translators specialized in language, culture and international communication, but the translation major for culture in college hasn't been created so far in China. On the other hand, the translation of CRC can share China's successful experience in governing, such as economic development and COVID-19 prevention. The translation on CRC achievement can avoid foreign misunderstanding on CRC and learn the advantage and experience of CRC and China's system.

#### *E. Education of Cultural Translation*

Since reform and opening up policy (1978), the translation education In China has made achievement in major and discipline building, talent cultivation, education quality and education research [8]. However, the translation major in China also has some problems, such as the teaching force lack of social practice, blur planning of talent cultivation, mismatch between education and social demand. What's more, many colleges don't have a clear line between translation and English majors, and many translation majors use the coursebook of business English major, which doesn't fit the demand of translation major.

China has a huge demand of professional cultural translators. In China, the organizations in need of this human resource include museum, exhibition, cultural organization, cultural and creative enterprise, tourism agency, translation company, educational department, foreign affairs departments, foreign-related institutions, translation research institutes, Confucius Institutes, etc. However, China is not short of language graduates, but short of the ones who are specialized in Chinese culture, language, and international communication. The translation of some Chinese classics, ICHs, Red Culture scenic spots only considered language, but not culture, which would be an obstacle for cultural transmission. It partly reflects the reason for the difficult employment of translation majors in China, which is due to the mismatch between translation education and social demand.

The direction of the education for cultural translation major. Firstly, cultural translation major should utilize the current social environment, and occupy the highest point in the field of ICH translation. For the college whose translation major is not combined with certain field, cultural translation will be a chance to demonstrate a major's feature. Most of the characterized translation majors are combined with science translation, but cultural translation major is rarely seen. Secondly, cultural translation major should aim to cultivate practical and compound translation talents by offering them

the chance for social practice to prepare for their employment. Thirdly, the teaching force of cultural translation should prioritize DPT (double-position teacher), who are required to have both educational and technical titles and be good at teaching theory and practical skills. Fourthly, the teaching mode of cultural translation major should prioritize task-based model, and teach through social practices, such as ICH application and the cooperation with translation and cultural companies.

The ideologization of the cultural translation course for non-language majors. Its ideologization has political and policy supports. The fourteenth article of Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO stipulates that each contracting country should let intangible cultural heritage be admitted, respected and developed by society through public and youth education. In 2014, Shanghai Municipal Committee and municipal government firstly mentioned the idea of curriculum politics, which aims to develop the ideological educational resource in various courses, so as to form the synergistic effect between other courses and political course [9]. In 2020, Ministry of Education issued the Guiding Outline of Curriculum Politics Construction in Higher Education, which aims to develop course ideologization in China's higher education [10]. Therefore, the translation education of Chinese culture has a supportive social and political environment.

## V. CONCLUSION

After reviewing the literature and works of TCC, the paper has found following results: 1). the TCC before 1978 concentrated on Chinese poetry and classics, and the research for TCC was zero during that period; 2). most of the western translators of TCC were preachers and sinologists before 1978; 3). since 1978, the concentration of TCC has been more diversified and covers the range of Chinese philosophy, history, education, art and China's political system, Red Culture and successful policies in economy and politics; 4). The development of TCC is more financially and politically supported by Chinese government now, and most of the funded translators are college faculties; 5). the policy of curriculum ideology and Red Culture tourism in China have a huge demand for TCC.

According to the findings of the literature review for TCC, this paper reaches the following conclusions: 1). the past and present of TCC development can be distinguished by the time of opening up policy in 1978 according to the topical diversification of TCC and the research popularity of it; 2). TCC can further develop in the field of the education of cultural translation according to Chinese government's current policies, such as curriculum ideology and National Social Science Fund for TCC; 3). TCC can develop in the field of intangible cultural heritage due to the political support from UNESCO and Chinese government for cultural heritage; 4). Red Culture tourism, supported by Chinese government,

has a huge demand for qualified cultural translator; 5). China has so far accumulated many qualified translations of Chinese classics, so the tendency of TCC will be the use and popularization of them in the field of cultural education, tourism and heritage protection.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Feng Qi designed the framework of this research; Zhang Huan wrote the paper; Sun Hui analyzed the data and designed the figures; all authors had approved the final version.

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The completion of this literature review for TCC is mostly contributed by author Feng Qi, who presented his ideas according to 30 years of experience as a translation researcher, wide reading of translation and familiarity with China's policies. Author Sun Hui gathered the data and the information of official policies relevant to TCC, which are important for the conclusion. Author Zhang Huan revised and transformed other two authors' ideas and framework into words.

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