



## Cultural Soft Power in the Translation of Chinese Classics

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### Abstract

Chinese classics, as the most important representative of Chinese culture, take on the responsibility of demoting the cultural soft power of China. In translating Chinese classics to the west, therefore, the unique culture of China must be maintained. In order to achieve this goal, the translator must reconsider Chinese culture and classics, and then work out a long-term translating strategy. The translator ought to seek cooperation between Chinese and foreign experts, between translators and presses. What's more, the subject construction of classic translation and the cultivation of cultural translators must be promoted in order to improve the translation quality. As a cross-cultural activity, the translation of Chinese classics is bound to enhance China's cultural soft power.

**Key words:** Cultural soft power; Chinese classics; Translation; Translators

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### INTRODUCTION

#### A. Soft power

“Soft power” is a notion originating from political

field. The term was named by Joseph S. Nye who was the former president of Kennedy School of Government in Harvard University. In order to illustrate the term “soft power”, in 1990, he published two essays (“Soft Power” in *Foreign Policy* & “The Changing Nature of World Power” in *Political Science Quarterly*); in 1999 two essays (“The Challenge of Soft Power” in *Time Magazine* & “The Redefinition of National Interest” in *Foreign Affairs*); in 1990 a book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* by Basic Books Press; in 2004 a book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* by Public Affairs Press.

In these essays and works, Joseph Nye makes explicit the definition of soft power, and he contrasts soft power to hard power. Hard power refers to hard commanding power as from military and economic influence (Zhang, 2005, pp.20-36). Different from hard power, soft power is used to win over people by way of spiritual implement, moral values, ways of life and social system (Ney, 2004). Soft power mainly includes cultural attraction, ideological attraction and the ability to regulate international rules and to decide political issues (Zhang, 2005). A Chinese scholar Wang Huning notes that it's a new concept to regard culture as soft power. He also points out that culture is not only the background of a country's policies but a kind of power, which can change another country's behaviors (Li, 2010, pp.114-117.) Zhang Hong defines cultural soft power in four aspects: First, cultural soft power belongs to national power in economy, military and technology; second, the key factor of cultural soft power is cultural values, including people's key values, ability in science and technology, cultural tradition and national personality, etc.; third, a country's spirit is usually embodied in its purpose, its behaviors and its foreign policies, which form that country's soft power; fourth, cultural soft power refers to a country's internal creativity and its external influence (Zhang, 2009, pp.148-150). All in all, a country's power includes hard power and soft power, the latter is based on

culture. It defeats another nation through attraction rather than military force or influence. In this new era, with the human confronted with new challenges, cultural soft power plays leading important roles in the competition between different countries. The cultural field has become the main battle field of politics and ideology (Hong, 2009, pp.50-55).

### **B. Soft power and translation of Chinese classics**

China is a country with a long history of more than 5,000 years, which has contributed a lot to the development of its neighboring countries and as well as to the human civilization. Thus there exists a great gap between Chinese cultural influence on the world culture and Chinese culture itself. While translating activities in China can be dated from ancient times, there obviously are a lot more translated foreign works than Chinese ones translated into other languages. It has become a big issue how to go through the cultural differences between different countries and enhance the external communication of the Chinese culture. The translation of Chinese classics, an important part of cultural soft power, is therefore highlighted in the translation and academic circles. The aim of enhancing cultural soft power is to enlarge the scale of Chinese cultural communication in the world. Chinese classics serve as the most important representative of Chinese wisdom and take on the responsibility of promoting China's cultural soft power.

## **1. THE CULTURAL SOFT POWER DERIVED FROM TRANSLATING CHINESE CLASSICS**

### **1.1 The Significance of Translating Chinese Classics**

Classics consist of two parts: one is involved in the influential works and documents in history; the other is about the old statute books and institutions (Wang, 2009). Chinese classics refer to the authoritative works written in China's history. Those classics include the profound Chinese culture of all aspects, like politics, economy, technology, religion, diplomatism, military strategy, etc., all of which are regarded as the priceless spiritual wealth of the Chinese and the world. Therefore, the translation of Chinese classics is of prominent importance.

Translation serves as a medium to spread thoughts and cultures. It is also the means to introduce Chinese classics to the world. With China becoming more and more powerful, China's influence is getting stronger and stronger. As a result, more and more foreign countries are extremely eager to learn about China and Chinese culture. Chinese, however, is not the universal language of the world. Thus the translator must take the responsibility of spreading Chinese culture in foreign languages. This reason can not only make Chinese culture known to the

whole globe, to enhance the influence power of China. It can also be employed as the studying material for foreign language learners.

### **1.2 The Impact Made by Translation on Cultural Soft Power**

Translation is the indispensable medium for spreading cultures. The cultural soft power of a country will therefore be strengthened through translation.

Firstly, translation will advance cultural soft power. The world culture is made up of various cultures of all nations. The culture of a single country is not developing domestically only. It needs nourishment from other cultures for its further development (Yu, 2006). Translation is the sole way to achieve this.

Secondly, translation represents cultural soft power. The glamour of culture lies in its originality. This kind of culture bears creativity to benefit both the domestic and foreign people, and it will be welcomed by the world. So this kind of culture will rank the first to be translated into foreign countries. As the essential means of spreading cultures, the creative translation represents the characteristic culture of the source language. Therefore, translation is the cultural soft power of the source culture.

## **2. THE TRANSLATOR'S ROLE IN TRANSLATING CHINESE CLASSICS AS FOR CULTURAL SOFT POWER**

Translators play an important part in promoting cultural soft power. While translating Chinese classics into English, translators are introducing to the west the best of traditional Chinese culture. Objectively, there is cultural difference between different cultures. It is therefore necessary to comprehend the western readers' cultural preference as well as to display the unique beauty of traditional Chinese culture. Only in this way, can the translation of Chinese classics enhance the introduction and communication of China's cultural soft power.

Take the translation of Chinese classic *A Dream of Red Mansions* as an example (Zhang, 2012, p.196). This novel, a depiction of the social customs in the evening of Chinese feudal society, is widely spread in foreign cultures. Research shows the translation history of *A Dream of Red Mansions* has been over 100 years with hundreds of versions, among which there are some partial translated versions and some selected translated versions. Those wholly-translated versions are translated into more than 20 different languages, such as English, French, Japanese, Korean, and German and so on. Hundreds of millions of them have been published with billions of readers all over the world. Of all these translated versions, the English versions enjoy the longest history. Although there are merely two wholly translated English versions, they embody the different cultural backgrounds of the

translators, who are one of the key factors to decide a translated version. Whether a version is good or bad depends on their identities, translation aims and their target readers, which thus influence the effect of its cultural communication. Translator's different identities and different education level may result in their different understandings of the original version. Furthermore, their different language styles in translation make their versions characteristic.

The American translator, Hawkes, was both a rigorous translator and a sinologist of rich accomplishment. In order to translate *A Dream of Red Mansions* with commitment, he even resigned from his post in the Oxford University as a lecture professor. He regarded the translation of this novel as his life career. From the year 1973, Penguin Group of the UK began to publish Hawkes' version, the name of which is *The Story of the Stone*. This version is divided into five chapters: the first three of them were translated by Hawkes himself and the other two by John Minford, his son-in-law, under his instructions. The moment it was published by Penguin Group, it earned universal praise and popularity and was to be republished for many times. Hawkes' translation is true to the original and maintains the original style. And also his precise language and elegant words make his version high in artistic level. Besides, in the process of translation, the translators did strict textual research into the words and versions of the original, which enabled them to have irrefutable evidence and thus make fewer mistakes. *The Story of the Stone* by Hawkes can be regarded as the best translation of so many translated versions. The cultural influence and cultural soft power of Chinese classics are greatly exemplified by their translation.

The Chinese translator, Yang Xianyi, is a well-known translator, a specialist in foreign literature, a scholar in culture and history, and a poet. In 1936, he went to Oxford University to study ancient Greek and Roman literature in Merton College. He acquired honored Bachelor's and Master's degrees of Greek Latin and English literature. His translation career began after he came back to China. Yang Xianyi translated over 100 books in all his life and contributed a lot to China's external communication. At the end of the 1960s, very few Chinese works were translated into foreign languages. To make up for the blank in Chinese translation history, Foreign Languages Press assigned Yang Xianyi to translate *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Yang and his wife Gladys Yang finished the translation together from 1964 to 1978. For the special Chinese political culture at that time, the Yangs tried their utmost to introduce Chinese traditional culture to the west. They translated the novel literally without avoiding some unique Chinese cultural words and frequently added notes for the special cultural points of China. In this way, the cultural contents of *A Dream of Red Mansions* are displayed truly in the Yangs' version, which enables English readers to get an insight into more

traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, the Yangs' version successfully spreads Chinese culture to the western readers, and the cultural soft power of China is promoted through the Yangs' translation.

The different translating experiences of Hawkes and Yang Xianyi suggest that they not only mastered the two languages—English and Chinese, and knew well the Chinese society and culture at that time, but they were also experts at the study of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, and thus they shared a deep understanding of the cultural contents and the artistic value of this novel. From what has been stated above, such a conclusion can be arrived at: translators as a cultural medium must know well the cultural backgrounds of both the source language and the target language. Only when they master the language and the culture at the same time can they transmit foreign cultures precisely and finish the mission of "cultural fax". That is to say, in translating Chinese classics, translators should be learned both in the two languages and cultures concerned, as well as in politics, economy, history, geography, customs and ways of thinking.

At present, compared with the dominating western culture, Chinese culture lies in a lower rank. In translating Chinese classics, translators should have strong cultural consciousness and regard spreading Chinese culture as their holy responsibility. Thus Chinese culture may avoid being assimilated and drowned in translation. In brief, translators' cultural consciousness helps to advance cultural soft power.

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### 3. SOME CULTURAL SOFT POWER PROBLEMS IN THE TRANSLATION OF CHINESE CLASSICS

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External translation is an important part of Chinese translation cause and it plays an indispensable role in the dissemination and spread of Chinese culture as well as promoting Chinese-foreign communication. Especially in recent years, China has been putting great emphasis on translation of classics and even regards it as something about an international image of China (Zhang, 2013, pp.187-188). In the process of enhancing cultural soft power through translating Chinese classics, there are some problems the translator should pay special attention to.

#### 3.1 Reconsider Chinese Culture and Chinese Classics and Work Out a Long-Term Translating Strategy

The enhancement of cultural soft power is not merely seeking common ground or a simple language transformation of Chinese culture. The translator should be confident enough to fully display China's splendid history and culture. At the same time, translators should try to take in the good qualities of world cultures. Chinese culture intended to spread should be distinctively

characteristic so as to display Chinese people's diligence, courage, wisdom, uprightness and to shape a perfect national image.

Traditionally, Chinese classics refer to the works written by Confucius and Mencius, plus those well-known scholars during pre-Qin days. The translation of Chinese classics is always limited to the poems in Tang Dynasty and Song Dynasty, as well as some famous prose. It is obviously not enough. Translators should break through the old understanding of Chinese classics and interconnect different subjects in China. In addition to what have been stated above, specifically speaking, Chinese classics should also include works on astronomy, geography, technological manufacture, art of handwriting and drawing, literary theories, garden architectures, customs and so on.

"Chinese Craze" has been going on abroad for quite many years. By the end of 2010, there have been nearly 700 Confucius colleges all over the world. However, the increase of people learning Chinese doesn't mean that there are correspondently more people learning Chinese culture and thus becoming experts at translating literary works. Take the UK as an example, only a few people such as Julia Lovell are actually committed to translating Chinese literature. Therefore, foreign demand for Chinese culture and China's active sending out will co-exist for a long time. By translating Chinese classics, China's cultural soft power will gradually influence the whole world.

### 3.2 Organize the Translation of Chinese Classics and Seek Cooperation

It is a well-known fact that the translation of Chinese classics has been done successively by foreigners, overseas Chinese and translators from domestic China. In different stages, there are some shifts in their translation emphasis and choices in their translation modes, which are undoubtedly delightful. But there is still something that must be paid attention to. The translation of Chinese classics still lacks in systematicness and aims, which make external translation a bit orderlies. In order to effectively plan and enforce this work, great emphasis has been laid on its organization and national programs of translation and research have been started. In this way, translators can coordinate the translation of Chinese classics and thus achieve more, so as to further strengthen the cultural soft power of China.

Cooperation—especially cooperation between Chinese and foreign experts, between translators and presses—is essential to China's external translation. Since the readers of external translation are mostly foreigners, this cooperation could be more than one way. First, translators could seek cooperation with some leading presses which would publish their translation works as many as possible. Second, China could attract more foreign learners to join in the translation of Chinese classics. Finally, China

should recommend the most representative works of Chinese literature to the foreign translators since they might be a bit blind in their choice.

### 3.3 Enhance the Subject Construction of Classic Translation and the Cultivation of Translation Experts

The translation of Chinese classics includes two aspects: one is about the definition of classics, the translation choice, the translation process and the publication; the other is about translation criticism and theory research. The latter is previously ignored to some degree. At present, translation criticism and theory construction are being stressed. But everything is just at the outset. A lot of work hasn't been carried out and the lack of specialists is the glass neck that restrains the going out of Chinese culture. Further and effective work is wished to be started as soon as possible, thus to promote the translation of Chinese classics and to spread China's cultural soft power.

## CONCLUSION

Culture, a nation's spirit and soul, is the most essential of its soft power. Different cultures accumulated in different countries in the long history consist of different human civilizations. However, only when national culture is spread to or in other nations and imposes positive influence on people's thinking and behaviors can it become real soft power. Translation is the bridge of cross-cultural communication. Undoubtedly, translation plays an indispensable part in the formation of cultural soft power between different languages and different countries. What translation means to cultural soft power is that translation can promote, demonstrate and display cultural soft power. We must work hard in two ways if we intend to promote cultural soft power: one is to enrich Chinese culture with foreign advanced culture; the other is to enrich the world culture with Chinese culture. Both ways cannot do without translation. China is a great nation and the translation of Chinese classics is a great systematic program, which requires careful planning and enforcement as well as a lot of cooperation. As a cross-cultural activity, the translation of Chinese classics is closely related to economic growth, social steadiness and cultural development. The Chinese government should constantly support and guide translators to make more achievements in translating Chinese classics, should further the cooperation with experts from circles of translation, academy and publication, so as to spread Chinese culture to the world and promote the cultural soft power of China.

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