

A Study on English Translation of Chinese Classics in Higher Education

Miaomiao Sun

Chongqing Metropolitan College of Science and Technology, Chongqing 402167, China

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of profound changes in the global cultural landscape, promoting outstanding Chinese traditional culture internationally is a core strategy for enhancing the country's cultural soft power. Translating classical literature into English serves as an important means of conveying the spiritual essence and wisdom of Chinese civilization. This not only holds cultural value but also carries far-reaching strategic significance, making it a focal point of interdisciplinary research. This paper highlights potential tensions in the development of this field: despite benefiting from strategic guidance at the highest level, there remain limitations in foundational capacity-building. Even with political support, the project faces numerous challenges, including the 'cultural deficit' in translated works, a lack of talent able to navigate multicultural contexts, and a mismatch between university translation teaching methods and societal needs. Through a systematic review of local and international research pathways, methodological developments, and the field's consensus, this study identifies persistent gaps and proposes strategic directions for the future. These directions include establishing a solid framework of translation ethics, enhancing audience-based experimental research methods, utilizing digital technologies, and expanding the vocabulary of translated texts. The ultimate success of the field lies in a strategic shift from a product-centered to an audience-centered model of cultural exchange, enabling Chinese culture to evolve from merely 'going global' to achieving 'effective integration' in global cultural discourse.

Keywords

Chinese classics; Cross-cultural communication; Cultural transmission; Ideological and political education; Translation pedagogy

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1. Introduction

Amid the significant transformation of the global cultural landscape, effective international communication of China's traditional culture has emerged as a central strategy for enhancing the country's national cultural soft power. English translations of Chinese classical texts serve as vital conduits for transmitting the core values and intellectual heritage of Chinese civilization, thereby holding considerable strategic importance in cultural diplomacy. This essay contends that the translation and global promotion of Chinese classical texts not only serve as key instruments of cultural dissemination but also constitute a pivotal area for advancing China's international influence. Furthermore, this topic has evolved into a dynamic interdisciplinary field of research, integrating perspectives from translation studies, cross-cultural communication, and cultural policy, thus underscoring the complexity and significance of this endeavor ^[1].

Notably, the development of this field exhibits an important dual characteristic. On one hand, it benefits from strategic guidance and political support at the national level; on the other hand, it remains constrained by basic research and has relatively weak capacity for talent cultivation. These contradictions together shape its current development model. Despite continued policy support and related resource investment, translating classical literature still faces many challenges in educational practice. From a practical perspective, both in quantity and quality, current English translations are difficult to convey the richness of ancient Chinese culture, resulting in a significant cultural gap. At the same time, translations that enter international channels still have considerable room for improvement in terms of international recognition, acceptance, and practical impact ^[2].

In addition, in the field of translation talent cultivation, the issue of insufficient professional personnel reserves has become increasingly prominent and is a major factor restricting its development. We must recognize that translating classical literature into English, as a complex intercultural practice, imposes high demands on practitioners. They must not only possess excellent translation skills but also have a deep understanding of traditional Chinese culture and outstanding intercultural communication abilities. However, the current education system aimed at cultivating such multifaceted talents

remains imperfect, and the development of corresponding mechanisms is still in its exploratory stage.

Within the current context of college public English instruction, the integration of classical text translation remains minimal in most university foreign language curricula. This disparity reflects a significant misalignment between existing curricular frameworks and the evolving demands of industry and broader societal practice, thereby constraining the effectiveness of talent development in this field. In response, this essay systematically examines both macro-level contextual factors and micro-level practical challenges encountered in the translation of Chinese classical texts in higher education settings. Specifically, the analysis will first outline the gap between current curricular offerings and professional requirements, then assess the broader socio-cultural and institutional influences shaping translation practices, and finally propose targeted strategies to address these issues. By providing this structural roadmap, the essay aims to establish a foundational understanding of current challenges while elucidating pathways to advance the field and foster its sustainable development ^[3].

2. Literature review

2.1. Domestic research evolution

Local studies on translating Chinese classical books into English show distinct stage-based development characteristics and can be divided into three main periods ^[4]. In the first period (the 1980s and 1990s), academic research mainly focused on systematically summarizing translation techniques, emphasizing the handling of culturally specific vocabulary and the unique grammatical structures found in poetry and classical texts. The research outcomes of this period primarily focused on comparative analyses of translations of major classical works, such as the *Analects* and the *Daodejing*, employing empirical inference and case study methods.

With the arrival of the new millennium, the 'cultural turn' in translation studies has prompted local researchers to go beyond the traditional boundaries of research focused solely on language transfer, expanding their academic horizons to encompass broader cultural transmission ^[5]. Academic research in this stage has two notable characteristics:

- (1) The critical adoption of Western translation theories (such as ‘deep translation’ and the ‘foreignization/domestication’ strategies), adjusted to fit the local context;
- (2) An expansion of research topics, gradually shifting from early philosophical classics to poetry, drama, novels, as well as scientific and medical texts.

Researchers began to focus on deeper themes such as translator competence, the construction of cultural identity, and the relationship between translation and ideology. Research methods also evolved from simple text comparisons to comprehensive approaches that combine the analysis of translations from different periods with studies of socio-cultural contexts. At the theoretical level, researchers have systematically re-examined the once highly esteemed theory of ‘deep translation.’ This theoretical reflection extends beyond translation strategies to explore its philosophical foundations and the limits of its application. Relevant studies indicate that overreliance on minor components of the text may weaken the translation’s core, while excessive interpretative authority on the part of the translator may lead to the formation of a monopolistic cultural discourse^[6]. For example, through detailed analysis of classical translations such as “The Warm Whip Dragon,” although footnotes, prefaces, and other supplementary appendices aid in cultural understanding, they may also become means for translators to insert personal academic views or specific value-laden stances.

Early studies were usually composed of sharing individual educational experiences. In recent years, however, a theoretically oriented educational system with professional characteristics has gradually emerged. This system focuses on the concept of “three-dimensional integration” in education. At the level of knowledge construction, it emphasizes the simultaneous development of language skills and humanistic culture; at the methodological level, it stresses the organic combination of theoretical teaching and practical training. At the level of educational objectives, it is committed to the joint improvement of academic literacy and communication abilities. Many universities adopt a progressive teaching model, including “intensive reading of classical texts, translation workshops, and simulations of multicultural exchange scenarios,” and, through real translation projects,

effectively enhance students’ practical application skills.

Research on the English translation of classical Chinese texts demonstrates different developmental paths in international sinology. Early Western studies from the 19th century to the mid-20th century were characterized by features typical of the colonial era. During this period, most missionaries and sinologists took a Eurocentric stance in their academic research and tended to employ deep domestication strategies in translation to meet the aesthetic and intellectual expectations of target-language readers. Although this translation practice helped introduce Chinese classical texts to the West in its early stages, it also, to some extent, reinforced Western stereotypes of Chinese culture.

2.2. International research trajectories

Since the end of the 20th century, with the rise of postcolonial theory and cultural studies, the concept of translation in Western Sinology has undergone significant changes. The new generation of Chinese scholars place greater emphasis on preserving the cultural characteristics of the source text in translation, often employing in-text annotations and cultural footnotes to balance translation readability with cultural preservation. It is particularly noteworthy that Western scholars were among the first to apply reception theory in this field, focusing on the impact of translation and its reception within the target cultural context. This reader-oriented research perspective provides important methodological references for translation practice, including the translation of classical studies into English. In research, a comparative cultural perspective has become a prominent feature of Western studies. Researchers typically analyze Chinese classical texts within the broader framework of world literature and, by comparing them with other civilizations (such as the Chinese and Indian classical civilizations), reveal the unique value of Chinese culture and its global significance. This cross-civilizational research approach not only broadens the scholarly perspective for translating classical texts into English but also creates new theoretical space for China’s participation in global dialogue.

2.3. Convergence and innovation in research paradigms

In recent years, local and international academic traditions

have shown significant convergence in the translation of classical literature into English. Methodologically, this integration is reflected in Chinese scholars' efforts to maintain the advantages of traditional linguistic analysis while actively adopting the multidisciplinary approaches prevalent in Western research. At the same time, Chinese scholars educated in the West are more actively engaged in local academic dialogues and prioritize accurately conveying the original cultural meanings in their translation practices. The collaborative focus of scholars from different backgrounds has facilitated the emergence of multidisciplinary research, and the methods employed in digital humanities exemplify this harmony. Researchers now widely use natural language processing technology and big data analysis to conduct quantitative and historical investigations of translation practices, thereby revealing the development of translation traditions and providing empirical evidence for current methods ^[7].

In addition, academic attention to translation ethics has been increasing, and Chinese research on the scope of translator effectiveness resonates with international discussions on the political influence of cultural representation. Overall, these developments reflect the deep methodological complexity and the growing ethical awareness in the field. In summary, the ongoing systematic exchange, the application of digital tools, and the shared commitment to ethical reflection all indicate that research on the English translation of classical literature is progressing toward greater theoretical maturity and interdisciplinary integration, laying a foundation for more precise and efficient future studies.

3. Research methods and consensus

3.1. A pluralistic methodological system

In long-term research practice, the field of translating classical English texts gradually took shape, forming a comprehensive, systematic framework for research methods. This system is grounded in qualitative research and integrates multiple research methods to support the in-depth development of the discipline. Textual criticism and comparative analysis are two fundamental research approaches in which the researcher must study the original text and its translation, word by word, with particular attention to key cultural concepts, distinctive

rhetorical devices, and the translation's structural characteristics ^[8]. Through meticulous textual analysis, the researcher can understand the translation strategies employed by translators and the underlying cultural stances they reflect. In recent years, this approach has evolved from merely comparing translations to a three-dimensional analytical model that includes 'the original text-the translated text-the supplementary text,' and the scope of research has expanded to include supplementary textual materials such as prefaces, footnotes, and commentary.

Longitudinal studies offer an important historical perspective to the academic field. By examining different translations of the same text over different time periods, researchers can trace the evolution of translation standards, cultural attitudes, and academic trends. For example, the ten key translations of the book "Daodejing" over more than a hundred years in the West clearly demonstrate the trajectory of changes in the Western understanding of Chinese culture. This longitudinal research method helps recognize the dynamic characteristics of translation activity and avoid simplistic judgments of translation phenomena. Case studies are considered an effective means to deepen theoretical understanding. Researchers typically select translations or translation phenomena with representative characteristics for in-depth analysis, such as studying classical Confucian translations by Rijak, or translations and research in Chinese literary criticism by Liuben Swan, among others. These case studies enhance understanding of specific translation practices and provide rich empirical material for theoretical reflection.

The applications of interdisciplinary research methodologies are becoming increasingly widespread. Scholars draw theoretical resources from fields such as hermeneutics, reception theory, discourse analysis, and cultural studies, continuously enriching the tools for analyzing the understanding of translation phenomena. In particular, with the development of digital humanities techniques, corpus-based methodologies have been introduced into research on translating classics into English, through big data analysis to uncover the underlying patterns of translation practices. After extensive scientific research, several important consensus points have emerged in the field of translating classics

into English. Understanding of the nature of translation has become largely unified, with academics generally believing that translating classics into English is not merely a simple linguistic transfer, but a complex cultural practice and a discourse-constructing process. This understanding broadens the research perspective from the technical level of “how to translate” to the cultural level of the motivations behind “why it is translated in this way”.

3.2. Established consensus within the field

Regarding translation standards, the academic community has reached a more comprehensive understanding. Researchers generally believe that translating excellent classical texts requires a balance between cultural accuracy, reader acceptability, and aesthetic value. This balance should be based on a profound understanding of the translation’s objectives and an accurate grasp of the readers’ needs. There is also a clear consensus regarding the skills required of translators. Qualified translators of classical texts need to possess three abilities: proficiency in both languages, deep cultural knowledge, and a thorough awareness of cultural communication. Cultural knowledge includes not only an in-depth understanding of the source language’s culture but also familiarity with the target language’s cultural background. Comprehensive ability is regarded as a significant advantage in cultivating translators of classical texts. As for teaching and research, the principle of combining theory with practice has been widely accepted. Researchers emphasize that teaching translation of classical texts should go beyond traditional lecture methods by creating authentic or simulated translation scenarios that allow students to deepen their theoretical understanding through practice. New teaching methods, such as project-based learning and workshops, have gained wide recognition and are increasingly being applied.

In terms of publishing strategy, the academic community emphasizes the principle of precise publishing based on target levels and categories. Researchers may recognize that different reader groups have diverse needs when translating classical literature; therefore, translation strategies and publishing methods suitable for both professional researchers and general readers should be employed. This awareness of the audience indicates that

research on translating classical literature into English has entered a mature and developmental stage. The emergence of these concepts not only reflects the theoretical achievements of research on translating classical literature into English but also highlights future trends. As research deepens, this methodological framework will continue to be refined, thereby promoting the development of the field of classical literature translation.

4. Discussion

Based on a preliminary analysis of current trends and methodological developments, it is necessary to highlight the main limitations in this field and identify potential avenues for future research. Although significant progress has been made in translating Chinese classical texts into English, persistent structural and conceptual gaps still require systematic attention. In this section, the focus will explicitly shift to discussing these research gaps by evaluating unresolved theoretical, methodological, and practical challenges. In this way, strategic directions are proposed to improve existing models, thereby fostering an academic environment that encourages deeper, more comprehensive studies of the translation of Chinese classical texts^[9].

Although significant progress has been made in the study of translating Chinese classical texts into English, this research model urgently requires a structural transformation. Currently, academic perspectives and research methods largely follow traditional paths, focusing on the ‘translator’ and paying excessive attention to source-text analysis and the exploration of translation strategies. To advance this field from mere linguistic conversion to deep cultural transmission, it is imperative to expand the scope of research to cover the entire publishing process and to focus on four main strategic directions:

- (1) On the level of translation ethics and methodology, current studies still need to deepen the discussion on the subjectivity of the translator, especially the need to find ways to stimulate the translator’s creativity while establishing effective control mechanisms. The future should focus on developing a methodological framework for translation

ethics, establishing applicable standards, and determining the translator's balance point between cultural fidelity, academic standards, and artistic creativity. By developing specialized databases, terminological guides, and other tools, a reference can be provided for conveying cultural concepts, allowing the translator's subjectivity to play a constructive role within a framework of controls;

- (2) Considering the current weak assessment of publication impact, there is a need to drive the shift of research patterns towards an experimental approach, actively incorporating research methods from media and sociology. Through audience surveys, in-depth interviews, and group data analysis, the dissemination paths of translated works and their impact on the target cultural environment are systematically studied, aiming to establish a data-driven evaluation system that provides a scientific reference for translation practice;
- (3) In the face of transformations in the digital age, the use of modern technology should be promoted in all stages of translating classical books. It is possible to explore the benefits of translation rules revealed by big data analyses, develop interactive human-machine translation models, and utilize virtual and augmented reality technologies to create new ways to present classical books. At the same time, the

potential of social media platforms to enhance bilateral interaction and build deeper reading communities abroad should be studied;

- (4) In terms of research areas, it is essential to address the current limitations that predominantly emphasize Confucian and Daoist classics by systematically expanding the scholarly scope to encompass a broader corpus. This expansion should include rationalist philosophical works from the Song and Ming dynasties, ancient scientific and technological treatises, cultural texts produced by ethnic minority groups, and other diverse genres. Such inclusivity is necessary to represent the multifaceted nature and cultural complexity of Chinese civilization.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the advancement of English translation studies of Chinese classics depends on transitioning from a translation-centered approach to one centered on audience reception and engagement. By refining theoretical frameworks, advancing research methodologies, and broadening the corpus of texts under consideration, the field can develop a more robust and integrative academic paradigm. In summary, these efforts are crucial for fostering a richer international understanding of Chinese culture and facilitating its broader acceptance within the global cultural discourse.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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