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The Cooperative Translation Activities of China and the West and Their Influence in the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties

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Abstract: In the eyes of many scholars, there have been three pivotal periods in the history of Chinese translation, which are: the translation of Buddhist scriptures from the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Tang and Song Dynasties, the translation of scientific and technological books from the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, and the translation of Western works from the Opium War (1840-1842) to the May Fourth Period (1915-1921). As the second climax in the history of Chinese translation, the Sci-tech translation activities in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties held a pivotal position in the history of Chinese translation, greatly promoting the dissemination of scientific and technological knowledge in China and enabling Chinese people to gain a deeper understanding of Western culture for the first time. This article summarizes and analyzes the influence of the Sci-tech translation activities in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties.

Keywords: translation history; the late Ming and early Qing dynasties; the second translation climax; influence

1. Introduction

The second translation climax in the history of Chinese translation occurred in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. The translation activities during this period were mainly driven by Western Jesus missionaries who came to China to preach.

In the early 16th century, the European capitalism was developing gradually and the primitive capital was accumulating sharply, which made the backward feudal rule face the challenge of new forces. Christianity, the spiritual pillar of Europe, had been questioned by people, too. The Holy See's oppressive actions, including its exploitation of Germany, fueled dissatisfaction with Christianity. This had further sparked people's dissatisfaction with Christianity. Therefore, the Protestant Reformation of great historical significance occurred in the Western world. The movement's leaders were famous figures such as Martin Luther and Jean Calvin.

The Protestant Reformation seriously threatened the status of the Roman Catholicism. Some people supported the Protestant Reformation, while others opposed it. "With the outbreak of 'Anti Protestant Reformation', the Western Jesuits chose to travel eastward and began to preach to China" [1].

Although the Jesuits adhered to the purpose of "preaching in China", they unexpectedly set off the second translation climax in Chinese translation history – the Sci-tech translation. No matter how one looks at it, the development of this translation activity was kind of dramatic. The Jesuits intended to preach, but in the end, they made it centered on Sci-tech translation. In summary, this accident had a significant historical status and was of great historical significance for China and the entire world.

2. The Second Climax in Chinese Translation History – Sci-tech Translation

In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, a large number of Western Jesuits came to China and engaged themselves in translation activities. Cooperated with the Chinese literati and officialdom class, they translated a large number of Western books. Translation bears the brunt of cross-cultural communication. The same applies to missionary activities. This is very similar to the spread of Buddhism in China: successful cases of Buddhism spreading in China are closely related to Buddhist scripture translation activities. Since the Jesuits came to China for missionary purposes, why did they choose to engage themselves mainly in Sci-tech translation? The real reason was closely related to the national conditions of China at that time.

2.1 From Preaching to Spreading Scientific and Technological Knowledge

2.1.1 Preaching Obstacles in China

The Protestant Reformation was among the important factors that triggered the Western missionary mission to the East. The development of Western capitalism, the progress of the Great Navigation Movement, and significant achievements of the West in natural sciences were all important conditions for the dissemination of knowledge in China by the West. Bai Jingyu and Xi Jing analyzed that "The gap in scientific and technological development between China and the West during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties was a prerequisite and social foundation for the translation and dissemination of European science and technology in China. The prosperous development of European scientific and technological society and overseas colonial expansion became a historical opportunity for missionaries to

come to China to preach and to carry out scientific and technological literature translation.” [2]

However, in China, the three religions of “Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism” had already firmly rooted in people’s mind at that time, and people's thoughts were stable. When they faced with foreign religions, most people remained skeptical. “In 1580, Michele Ruggieri, an Italian, accompanied Portuguese merchants to Guangzhou for trade and bribed the governors of Guangdong and Guangxi, then they were allowed to build a church in Zhaoqing.” [3] It can be seen how difficult it was for Jesuits to preach in China at that time. The emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties were very cautious towards Western missionaries as their missionary activities not only involve spreading their religion, but also could deeply affect people’s thinking and even cause impact to politics. Therefore, the emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties issued multiple policies to prohibit the spread of Catholicism. “In terms of attitude towards missionary activities, Emperor Wanli of the Ming Dynasty issued a ban on Catholicism in 1616, Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty banned Catholicism for three times (1665, 1692, 1719), and Emperor Yongzheng and Emperor Qianlong imposed stricter restrictions on the dissemination of Catholicism.” [4]

Due to various factors mentioned above, Jesuits encountered obstacles in their missionary work in China. They came to China with all their enthusiasm and couldn't wait for this populous country to believe in Jesus, but unexpectedly encountered troubles. They were unwilling to give up like this. Given China's unique environment and policies, they have come up with strategies tailored to China’s local conditions.

2.1.2 New Ways to Preach in China

Although missionaries came to China one after another in the late Ming Dynasty, the person who truly kicked off the climax of the Sci-tech translation was Matteo Ricci. Xia Tingting said that Ricci’s cooperation with Xu Guangqi on the translation of *Euclid’s Elements* in 1606 marked the beginning of China’s Sci-tech translation [5]. The progress of this translation activity also triggered the first “Western Learning Spreading to the East” in Chinese history. Therefore, Matteo Ricci was a pioneer in leading the Western Learning Spreading to the East.

Matteo Ricci was a figure that must be mentioned to study the second climax of Chinese translation history. He was as important as Hsuan Tsang in the first translation climax, the Buddhist scriptures translation. Fang Hao referred to Matteo Ricci as the “first person in the Ming Dynasty to make Chinese and Western cultures communicate with each other.”

After summarizing the failed experiences of many missionaries trying to preach in China, Matteo Ricci found another way out, that is, to integrate into Chinese culture before seeking missionary opportunities. He “wisely realized that only by following Chinese laws and customs can he establish himself in China” [3]. Matteo Ricci's strategies, such as 'scientific preaching' and 'combining Catholicism with Confucianism', aimed to integrate into Chinese culture before seeking missionary opportunities. In 1594, he put on Confucian clothing and called himself ‘Western Confucianist’ [6]. He pioneered the “Matteo Ricci rules” and

“academic missionary” strategies. Since direct preaching was not feasible, missionaries embarked on a path of “curved preaching.”

In this way, Matteo Ricci gained the favor of the Chinese ruling class at that time, which lay the foundation for his future missionary and translation activities. When other missionaries saw that this method was effective, they joined Matteo Ricci one after another. They spent great efforts on learning Chinese. They delved into Confucian classics, held the Bible in one hand and *The Four Books* in the other, and vigorously promoted the “harmony” and “complementarity” between Confucianism and Catholicism [7]. This was the "cultural adaptation" strategy they adopted.

Adapting to Chinese culture and doing as the Romans do were just one aspect of their strategy. The second aspect was that they aimed the literati and officialdom class as the goal to preach Catholicism. The literati and officialdom classes were highly respected classes in feudal China, and most of them received good education. Western missionaries were well aware that they could spread Catholicism in a more effective way if they affected the literati and officialdom classes first. Many literati and officialdom were influenced by Western missionaries and converted to Catholicism. “Xu Guangqi, Li Zhizao, and Yang Tingyun, known as the ‘Three Pillars’ in the history of Chinese Catholicism, all joined the Catholic Church under the influence of Matteo Ricci’s dissemination of Western civilization and science.” [8]

Thirdly, Jesuits were aware that direct preaching was difficult to be effective in the context of China at that time, so they changed their translation objectives and engaged in a large number of scientific translations under the guise of natural science, hoping to preach through this activity.

Hu Weiwei analyzed the phenomenon using Bourdieu’s Field Theory: When they found that Chinese literati and officialdom were more interested in Western technologies, missionaries collaborated with Chinese literati and officialdom to translate some scientific and technological works, thus entering the translation field; At the same time, they also entered the scientific field and established their authority in this field, and they made friends with a large number of senior officials and relied on these social and symbolic capital to enter the political field [9]. Finally, they were able to enter the religious field of China. Matteo Ricci once said, “Among the sciences that Chinese people value are astronomy, optics, mechanics. They are most interested with mathematics... It seems that in this country, Christianity decorated with astronomy is easy to approach high-ranking officials.”

In short, the missionary activities of Western Jesuits ultimately evolved into a Sci-tech translation activity.

2.2 The Sci-tech Translation Activity and Its Achievements

2.2.1 The Sci-tech Translators from China and the West

A large number of Western Jesuits have flocked to China to engage themselves in translation activities after Matteo Ricci started the trend. Many Western academic works were translated into Chinese during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties.

Famous Western Jesuit translators mainly included Matteo Ricci, Johann Adam Schall von Bell, and Ferdinand Verbiest, etc. Correspondingly, famous Chinese translators at that time included Xu Guangqi, Li Zhizao, Yang Tingyun, etc. With their joint efforts, many translated works have sprung up like mushrooms after rain.

By sorting out *A History of Translation in China (Complete Volume of Ancient China)* by Ma Zuyi, Ma Zhentao found that there were 137 Sci-tech translations by missionaries in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties (1584-1790) [10].

It is worth noting that many western scholars and Chinese literati and officialdom worked together to translate, and they shared many translation achievements.

2.2.2 The Sci-tech Translators and Their Achievements

Matteo Ricci wrote and edited 22 books. He worked with Xu Guangqi and translated *Euclid's Elements*. The Chinese translation of *Euclid's Elements* was included in the large-scale mathematical encyclopedia of the Qing Dynasty, *The Essence of Mathematics and Physics* (1723), and later it was included in the imperial encyclopedia *The Complete Library of the Four Treasures* (1782). Matteo Ricci also collaborated with Li Zhizao and translated many scientific works such as *Tongwen Suanzhi* and *Yuanrong Jiaoyi*.

After missionary Johann Adam Schall von Bell arrived in China, he compiled and translated *Chongzhen Calendar System* with Xu Guangqi. He participated in the translation of scientific works such as *Huntian Tushuo*, *Ancient and Modern Jiaoshi Kao*, *Western Survey Calendar* and so on.

Xu Guangqi was a prolific Chinese translator. In addition to cooperating with Matteo Ricci and John Tang, he has been involved in the translation of *The Hydromethods of the Great West* with the Italian missionary Sabbatino de Ursis and *De Anima* with Francois Sambilai. In addition to the representative translators who have cooperated with Xu Guanqi mentioned above, other translators also played an important role in this translation activities. For example, missionary Francisco Furtado and Chinese scholar Li Zhizao jointly translated *Universal Interpretation*; Polish missionary Nikolaus Smogulecki and Chinese scholar Xue Fengzuo worked together to translate *Tianbu Zhenyuan*; Johannes Schreck and Wang Zheng cooperated and translated *Strange Machinery in the Far West*.

Ferdinand Verbiest was also a famous translator worth mentioning. He had over 20 scientific translations, such as *Test Summary*, *Calendar Debate*, *Kangxi Yongnian Lifa*, *Kangxi Fifteenth Year*, and so on.

The aforementioned translators from the late Ming and early Qing dynasties have a good reputation and are well-known. But there are also many other less well-known translators who participated in this translation activity. It was their joint efforts that set off the second climax in the history of Chinese translation.

3. Influence

The Sci-tech translation activity of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties not only had a significant impact both on China and on the world.

3.1 Impact on China

In the translation activities of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, China was affected significantly, and the scope of influence was relatively wide.

3.1.1 Enriching China's Knowledge of Natural Sciences

Firstly, the translation activities had greatly enriched China's knowledge of natural sciences, including mathematics, astronomy, and geography, and so on. The translation of *Euclid's Elements* has had a profound impact on the development of Chinese mathematics. "Many terms in the book, such as 点 (point), 线 (line), 直线 (straight line), 曲线 (curve), 平行线 (parallel line), 角 (angle), 直角 (right angle), 锐角 (acute angle), 钝角 (obtuse angle), 三角形 (triangle), 四边形 (quadrilateral) and so on, were first created by Xu Guangqi and have been used to this day" [3]. In geography, Western missionaries brought a world map to China, which was more complete and has expanded the world in the eyes of the Chinese people. All of these have promoted the progress of China's science and technology.

3.1.2 Enriching China's Understanding of the Western World

Secondly, Western Learning Spreading to the East allowed China to have a deeper understanding of the Western world and boosted the development of Chinese social culture. Prior to this, there were exchanges between China and the West but they were in a limited scale and didn't have direct or large-scale cultural exchanges. For example, Zhang Qian, an official and diplomat of the Han Dynasty, was appointed to travel to the western regions by the emperor; during the Yuan Dynasty, Marco Polo visited China. The Sci-tech translation activity in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties involved a great number of Western Jesuits who came to China to carry out translation activities, introducing the great knowledge of the West and the rich Western culture to China. Jesuits "subjectively spread their religion in an active manner, but objectively made the Chinese and Western civilizations communicate with each other. The two civilizations hadn't had substantive interactions before" [11]. This made Chinese people realize that there were other civilizations in the world that are not inferior to that of theirs.

3.1.3 Impact on the Field of Translation in China

Thirdly, the translation activities in this period had a profound impact on the field of translation in China. The Sci-tech translation activities in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties were hailed as the second climax in the history of Chinese translation, indicating its high status and great influence. In the Sci-tech translation activities, it is common for Jesuits and Chinese literati and officialdom to collaborate with each other, with the former dictating and the latter translating, then polishing the translation together and creating rich translated works. The translation activities were featured with the following characteristics: a combination of Chinese and Western cultures and a collaborative translation; smooth and fluent translation with a focus on conveying ideas; diverse styles and excellent works [1]. At that time, foreign translators were very meticulous in their translation. When it comes to terminology related to certain concepts, they negotiated repeatedly and added new terms. In

the later stage, they mainly put the emphasis on conveying ideas. Different Chinese translators have put forward their own unique translation propositions. For example, Xu Guangqi elaborated on the translation philosophy of “translating – communicating – surpassing”; Li Zhizao proposed the idea of “creative translation”; Wei Xiangqian proposed the “correct” translation standard [12]. These translation thoughts are of great significance for the development of translation theory. Until today, many of their translation thoughts and ways still affect the translation behavior of many translators.

3.2 Impact on the World

The translation activities during this period not only had a profound impact on China, but also influenced the world greatly.

The missionaries who came to China during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties not only introduced Western religious, scientific and technological works to China, but also introduced a large number of Chinese classics to the West, forming a two-way relationship among translation activities and between cultural exchanges [13].

The translation not only triggered the “Western Learning Spreading to the East”, but also gave birth to the “Eastern Learning Spreading to the West.” Missionaries not only translated plenty of Western books and introduced Western culture to China, but also translated quite a few Chinese books and spread them to the West, allowing the Western world to know the Chinese culture.

“The earliest existing Western language version of Chinese classics is the Latin version of *The Great Learning* translated by Michele Ruggieri (In 1593, a translation of the excerpt was published in Rome), and Matteo Ricci almost translated *The Four Books (the Great Learning; The Doctrine of the Mean; the Analects of Confucius; Mencius)* in Latin and sent them back to Italy” [4].

A French missionary Antoine Gaubil, who has been studying sinology for decades, even translated and compiled 86 Chinese works and introduced them to the West.

Many missionaries translated Chinese books into Western languages and introduced them to Western countries, allowing western people to experience China’s profound and long history and culture. The upper-class and intellectuals in the West developed a deep longing for China. The activities of missionaries were the origin of sinology in the West, their translation activities promoted the Enlightenment and made “Chinese style” popular in the West [4].

4. Conclusion

In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the translation activities that combined Western Jesuits and Chinese literati and officialdom generated many translated works, among which the scientific translations are the domination. These translation activities are a rich and colorful stroke in Chinese history, setting off the second climax of the magnificent Chinese translation history. There is no doubt that they have a profound impact on China and the world. The sci-tech translation activities have triggered the “Western Learning Spreading to

the East”, creating the first truly profound cultural exchange and communication between the East and the West.

However, this sci-tech translation had some limitations. Firstly, it had a strong sense of purpose as it was started by Western Jesuits for missionary mission. It seemed that they have translated many books on natural sciences, but most of these books were Western classical natural sciences. The missionaries deliberately avoided many of the latest developments made by the West at that time. Secondly, in the society of China, the imperial power was gradually reaching its peak and the society was in a state of closure. Thus, the “seclusion” policy was implemented. In this situation, the Chinese people’s thinking was greatly restricted, and they were fixed in their own way and lived their own lives without knowing what was happening outside of China. The impact of sci-tech translation was mainly on the upper class, such as literati and officialdom, but it didn’t trigger social changes.

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