



Comparative Analysis of English Translation Versions of Three Character Classics in the 21st Century

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Abstract

English versions of Three Character Classic have been enjoying new developments in the 21st century. Previous studies have investigated the differences between versions from linguistic and cultural perspectives. Yet analysis from the perspective of the target reader is under-researched. This paper compared the target reader and translation purpose manifested in the translators' forewords and the layout of the content of translation among different translation versions to probe into their possible effects on the target reader. Research showed the two centers—Singapore and China—emerged as the centers for publication. Translators came from various national backgrounds. The English versions of the work, with their evolution, fulfilled the educational functions for the target readers that they had for the original readers. The layout format of the contents does exert an influence on the possible target readers. Hence, translators of later versions shall take the characters of the readers into account. Both suggestions for future research and practice in this regard are offered.

Keywords

English translation of Three Character Classic, multi-translation version comparison, foreword, layout of content

1. Introduction

With Confucianism as its guideline, Three Character Classic, originally composed by Wang Yinglin in the 13th century and later edited by Zhang Taiyan in the 19th century, is a spiritually uplifting children's book full of Chinese traditional virtues. Previous studies have investigated the differences between versions from linguistic and cultural perspectives. Current research studies lack convincing results as they are limited in terms of methods and coverage of translation versions. The comparison of different versions remains a superfluous introduction rather than based on in-depth textual analysis. Hence the results are not well-grounded. The present study compared the target reader and translation purpose manifested in the translators' forewords and the layout of the content of translation among different translation versions in the text to probe into their possible effects on the target readers.

2. Literature Review of the English Translation Versions of Three Character Classic

The history of English Translation of the book dates back to Robert Morrison, a British Missionary, who first translated and published his work in China Spring and Autumn, ushering in the era of translation of Three Character Classics by Western diplomats/missionary priests. Three Character Classics embodies all aspects of daily life as well as the code of conduct of the ancient Chinese with careful diction, short length, and easiness of understanding,

therefore creating a platform for learning about Chinese Characters and Cultures (Liu Shusen, 2017, p. 3). The last two centuries witnessed the role of English as a lingua franca globally. Various English translation versions of the book have been published. Giles, under the influence of Bridgman, translated his version of the book in 1910, which is still a well-received version in the English world. Translation and introduction of the work have never ceased pace for the past century. The Translation version by Panh in 1989 in particular, which was published in Singapore in 1990, has been recommended and listed by the UN as a Children's must-read for nurturing moral integrity, thus furthering the publicity overseas.

Meanwhile, interest in Traditional Chinese Culture has been reignited with miscellaneous related research carried out. By the end of 2022, it was found that more than 30 English translation versions of Three Character Classics had been published. Zhao Yanchun (2014, p. 5), in an attempt to explore new methods for translating traditional classics of China, analyzed the shortcomings in the translation works of Western translators and experimented with paired rhymes. Zhao Yanchun and Lu Lirong (2016) expounded on the principles guiding the Translation of Traditional Chinese Cultural works from language form, thoughts, and cultural connotations. However, the current studies, employing case analysis, focus on summarizing the obstacles facing the translation while aiming to discover the best approach and strategies for use.

Nevertheless, Zheng Zhongqiu (2015) conducted a review of the work during the last two centuries, employing descriptive translation studies to examine the history, purpose, changes in paratext, and translation styles. However, as the only research paper of its kind, the summary and introduction of the translation are not specific enough and lack in-depth analysis. Furthermore, the characters of the online translation version in the digital era are neglected.

To sum up, current research studies lack convincing results as they are limited in terms of methods and coverage of translation versions. The comparison of different versions remains a superfluous introduction rather than based on in-depth textual analysis. Hence the results are not well-grounded. Based on the review, the present study compared the target reader and translation purpose manifested in the translators' forewords and the layout of the content of translation among different translation versions in the text to probe into their possible effects on the target readers.

3. Comparative Analysis of English Translation Versions of Three Character Classics in the 21st Century

3.1 Introduction

The present study compared the target readers and translation purposes manifested in the translators' forewords and the layout of the content of translation among different translation versions to probe into their possible effects on the target readers.

3.2 Places of Publication and Translators' Purposes

The English Translation Versions feature China's Mainland and Singapore as the two hubs in terms of places of publication. Further analysis of the forewords of the English translation versions revealed various translators' purposes. Zhao's version (2014) is to *"explore the methods for the translation of Chinese culture by experimenting with the translation of traditional Chinese classics and to establish Chinese image and promote Chinese voice in the international community by introducing the Chinese culture."* Wang Ronghua (2019) expressed that *"readers will be acquainted with the basics of Chinese society, Confucianism teachings, and thoughts of thinkers of ancient China, as well as how to motivate children to receive an education."* In addition, Wang initially discovered that an ancient thousand-character rhymed tetrasyllabic Chinese teaching exercise, in which no character appeared twice, could be transposed into English. The book, written in rhymed couplets, is well-suited for application in the teaching of oral English. In addition, the book also has the aim of promoting the merits of traditional Chinese culture. In the Preface by Professor Wang Rongpei, he wrote, *"He has made another contribution in bringing the two germs of Chinese literature to the West (Wang & Li, 2008)."* Therefore, it is evident that the three versions, although all bearing the intention of showcasing the merits of traditional Chinese culture, differ in the choices of target readers and the focus of publicity. Wang's version accentuated its value for Chinese foreign education. Zhao's version attempted to forge new methods for the translation of traditional Chinese classics by conducting comparisons of translation versions in terms of the essence, strategies, and cultural representation of translation. However, Zhao has been ambiguous about the target audience.

Singapore, on the other hand, published several versions, for instance, 2009, 2014, and 2017 versions. In Victor

Peterson's version, the preface stated that "*the purpose of the publication was to make it easier for parents and children to understand Sanzijing.*" The other two versions, although without mentioning the target readers, exemplified the translators' design for translation purposes and the display modes of the texts. Lee's version explicitly stated that *he hoped more readers would be able to master the approach to learning.* After mastery, students will be able to acquire skills individually.

An unexpected outcome has been discovered, i.e., in the preface of Jeff Pepper's version published in the UK in 2020, the translator employed various methods, for instance, incorporating an introduction to the tone system in Chinese and explaining the polysenses of Chinese words to reduce the difficulty for readers to understand Chinese characters. Such targeted measures have been taken to ensure learners' maximum understanding of Chinese characters and cultures.

The publication location of the online version could be revealed through its websites. The current prevalent online versions were launched in the US and Germany. Versions including Chinasage, Wiki, and the Chinese Text Project were launched in the US. Their web layout focuses on the promotion of knowledge of Chinese characters, history, philosophy, and classics, all with open access and non-profit traits.

3.3 Layout Format of Contents

3.3.1 Layout Format of Contents of the Versions in China

Wang's translation is quite simple, with four lines of Chinese in the middle, and three characters in each line, on top of which are pinyin (the Chinese sound system for articulation). The English translation appeared in the same form with an "abab" rhyme system. The diction of words is common and easy to pronounce. The original meanings in Chinese are well reflected in a simple collection of three or four words. To facilitate readers' understanding, black-and-white illustrations are presented after each section of the translation. Footnotes are also available to supplement the background and offer a more detailed account of the story. In comparison, Zhao's translation follows an even simpler pattern with only the original texts, translations, and notes, which appeared in Chinese as supplemental material for deepening understanding. The difference lies in the versions' choices of languages for footnotes. Wang used English, while Zhao used Chinese. Chinese students are better able to introduce Chinese culture in English more fluently and precisely to the international audience with the aid of a rhymed poem, a form well understood and accepted in the English-speaking world. In contrast, if the target readers in Zhao's version are non-Chinese, annotations in Chinese would create barriers to understanding.

3.3.2 Layout Format of Contents of the Version Outside China

In contrast, versions published outside China paid particular attention to catering to the readers' needs. Peterson's version not only used full-color pictures for illustrations but also invited professional cartoonists to produce cartoon characters. Both English and pinyin are used for the convenience of better understanding. Apart from these, the translator contrived a story based on the original text, creating a fictional scenario to introduce a family as the protagonists. The characters lead readers to experience the story as a way of immersing themselves in Chinese culture. Such contextualization with cartoons is better suited to the cognition of the children and can motivate their interest in reading the book, hence deepening their understanding with an enhanced reading experience.

The text consists of three parts: original and translated texts and pinyin on top; cartoons in the middle; and proverbs summarizing the main idea at the end. The contents of various forms are presented in a clear and family-friendly order. Rather than explaining character by character, the translation interprets the lines and stories as a whole. Hence, for children, the effects of moral teaching rank before the function of teaching Chinese characters. Yet, the character teaching function is manifested in the translations of both Xu and Li, who unanimously explained the meaning and pronunciation of each character, thus magnifying the text's function as a text for teaching Chinese characters.

Both Xu and Li's translations conserve the text's character instruction function as they added English explanations to individual characters. Li furthered such an attempt by including the main idea of each section, thus promoting readers' understanding of the text with the help of text interpretation from the translator's perspective. What is worth mentioning is Pepper's version, in which media technology is integrated with paper with the help of a QR code. The multi-modal representation in translation is thus realized. Although initial attempts have been made by Peterson in 2009, when readers can connect to the audio materials, integration between audio technology and paper has not been actualized. Reading the pages while accessing the audio cannot be realized simultaneously. The introduction of QR codes thus bridged the gap.

Pepper's version, published in 2020, consists of four parts, with the first part presenting the original texts, pinyin, and translation; the second, in the lower-left corner, a table listing pinyin and explanation for each character; the third, the explanation of the translated texts; and the fourth, down the page, the introduction to the main characters behind the text. For instance, *Conscious* appears in the first section of the translated work. The lower-right corner prints a QR code. The page before the translated work on the left presents illustrations depicting the story.

Another highlight is that after each section of translation, an individual page is left for practicing writing Chinese characters. Each character is put in a box, with space left blank for learners to imitate the strokes of the characters. Learners will get a hands-on experience with the Chinese writing system.

The 2020 version displays the vitality of the translated work with the integration of an explanation of Chinese characters, an introduction to Chinese culture, and multi-mode technology with a QR code. The work, therefore, breaks the limits set by the traditional paper medium of a printed book.

3.3.3 Layout Format of Contents of the Online Version

From the contents and display modes of the texts, the online versions, based on Giles's translation in 1910, are either entirely borrowed or adapted. In terms of layout, the online version follows a pattern that places the original Chinese text first, followed by pinyin and the translation of the individual characters, and ends with an explanation or background information on the Chinese text. Such a model manifested the strength of providing well-organized and authoritative material for research. The web pages of *Chinasage*, in particular, not only accentuated the key academic vocabulary for research but also provided references so that further information could be tracked by readers with strong interest. However, such an information display mode will put beginners at a disadvantage as too much information is presented without focus or highlights. Beginners will be inundated with such a flow of information that they will be unable to identify and locate what they need. A bad experience with browsing the web will lower the readers' interest in further investigation. The concept that the online translation version will enjoy greater publicity and attract more readers with a better reading experience is therefore challenged.

4. Results

This paper compared the translation versions of *The Three Character Classic* from the perspectives of the translators' forewords, the contents, and the layout of the translated work. The findings are presented as follows:

4.1 General Trend

China's mainland and Singapore emerged as the hubs for translated work, with sparsely translated versions appearing from other English-speaking countries. Regardless of the origin of the country, language researchers at higher education research institutes are the main force behind the publicity of traditional Chinese culture. A case of exception is Jeff Pepper, who established his own publishing house aimed at the worldwide promotion of Chinese culture.

4.2 Target Reader Manifested in The Translators' Preface

The English-translated version of the book fulfilled the function of teaching the characters and moral education to a larger audience. However, the translation purposes of each version vary. Wang Baotong, Li Li, and Wang Ronghua creatively used English translation versions to improve English learners' competence in China. For junior high or higher students, employing English poems as a form of language enhancement is a good choice. After that, they will be better able to communicate in English about the Chinese traditional culture in the international arena, which will be a fruitful attempt.

4.3 Relationship between the Layout Format of the Contents and the Target Reader

The inclusion of pinyin, English explanations for each Chinese character, illustrations by famous cartoonists, and introductory stories enhanced the readability and expanded the readership. Firstly, a clear consciousness of the audience is required before translation. For instance, in the preface of Peterson's version, it is stated that the book aims to make it easier for parents and children to understand *Sanzijing*, so the translation magnifies the story-like, understandable, and experiential traits, as children are naturally attracted to more contextualized stories with cute characters and full-colored pictures. Secondly, for beginners who enjoy the traditional Chinese culture, the story-like trait and hands-on experience are the most important features. For instance, Pepper's version in 2020 highlighted this with the

introduction of character writing sheets in the book. Thirdly, for scholars of traditional Chinese culture, the translation version shall feature systematic and authoritative treatment of the literature, which is well reflected in the online version with rich contents and links that highlight key topics and words for research.

5. Conclusion

The English translation versions of Three Character Classic have been abundant in the last two centuries; however, comparison analysis in this topic has been under-searched, with few studies carried out from the perspective of the target reader and the translation purpose manifested in the translators' forewords and the layout of the content of translation among different translation versions. The research results showed that China and Singapore emerged as the hubs of translation. Translators belong to different cultural backgrounds with different nationalities. In addition, the translations serve different purposes. Versions published in China were designed primarily for improving college-level students' English competence. Overseas translation versions emphasized the global transmission of Chinese culture. The online version is better suited for academic study. Lastly, the layout format of the contents does exert an influence on the possible target readers. Further attempts shall be devoted to discovering the rich Chinese cultural traits in the text to contribute to the promotion of traditional Chinese culture.

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