



# Translation of Chinese Buddhist Scriptures and Western Classical Literature

**Zihang Zhai**

Communication University of Zhejiang, Hangzhou 310018, Zhejiang, China.

**How to cite this paper:** Zihang Zhai. (2026) Translation of Chinese Buddhist Scriptures and Western Classical Literature. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 10(3), 310-315. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2026.03.011

**Received:** January 31, 2026  
**Accepted:** February 28, 2026  
**Published:** March 31, 2026

\***Corresponding author:** Zihang Zhai, Communication University of Zhejiang, Hangzhou 310018, Zhejiang, China.

## Abstract

With the development of society, diverse perspectives on translation have emerged. This paper explores the evolutionary trajectories of translation practices in Western and Chinese contexts through a comparative historical analysis, delving into the distinctive development patterns shaped by cultural, linguistic, and societal factors. It highlights key milestones, such as the prevalence of religious translations in the West and the dominant influence of Buddhist scripture translation in early Chinese translation history, and discusses how globalization has transformed translation by posing new challenges and opportunities. This work aims to foster a deeper understanding of translation's role in bridging cultural divides and shaping intellectual exchanges across civilizations. Moreover, the paper examines the evolving role of translators as cultural mediators, exploring their agency in shaping cultural narratives and promoting intercultural dialogue. Ultimately, it contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse on translation studies, enriching the understanding of how translation practices reflect and influence the dynamics of global cultural exchange.

## Keywords

Translation studies; comparison; development; history

## Introduction

Since ancient times, translation activities have been influenced and constrained by geographical environments, human factors, and political development, while simultaneously facilitating the progress of human society. This paper is divided into three core parts: the history of Chinese translation development, the history of Western translation development, and a comparative analysis of Chinese and Western translation histories.

## 1. History of Chinese Translation Development

### 1.1 Start-up Stage (Eastern Han-Western Jin Dynasty)

This stage was dominated by the translation of Buddhist scriptures, with Lokaksema as the representative translator. Together with An Shigao, he is known as one of the Two Pioneers in Translation. Lokaksema was the first monk from the Western Regions to introduce Mahayana Buddhism to China. His translation features included frequent use of transliteration to preserve the original text and a focus on retaining the original meaning rather than pursuing rhetorical polish. The translation activities of this period laid the foundation for the subsequent spread of Buddhism and Sino-foreign cultural exchanges.

### 1.2 Evolution Period (Eastern Jin-Sui Dynasty)

Kumarajiva, a world-renowned thinker, Buddhist monk, philosopher, and translator, was the representative figure of

this period. He strove for elegant and refined language in his translations, with *The Diamond Sutra* as his representative work. Key characteristics of this period: Buddhist scripture translation became gradually organized and large-scale, with the emergence of specialized translation institutions and translators; the translation style shifted from literal translation to free translation, with increased attention to the accuracy and literariness of translations.

### 1.3 Peak Stage (Early Tang-Middle Tang Dynasty)

The Tang Dynasty was the heyday of ancient Chinese culture and the golden age of Chinese translation. Translation activities extended beyond Buddhist scriptures to other literary fields, with Xuanzang—a famous monk and translator honored as Master Sanzang—as the core figure. After returning from his journey to the Western Regions, Xuanzang presided over large-scale Buddhist scripture translation projects and rendered numerous important classics into Chinese. His translations were characterized by high quality, large quantity, and a wide range of coverage, and this period saw the emergence of many outstanding translators and influential translations.

### 1.4 Declined Period (Song Dynasty-Qing Dynasty)

With the gradual decline of feudal society and the impact of foreign cultures, Chinese translation entered a period of decline, with relatively few translation activities and uneven translation quality. Key features: the translation of Buddhist scriptures declined steadily; translation activities in other fields were less vigorous than in previous periods; there was a lack of unified translation standards and norms, resulting in inconsistent translation quality.

In general, the history of Chinese translation is a rich and colorful narrative that profoundly reflects cultural exchanges and integration in different historical periods.

## 1.5 Detailed Evolution of Chinese Translation

### 1.5.1 Early Buddhist Scripture Translation and the Initial Introduction of Foreign Cultures (Eastern Han to Tang and Song Dynasties)

Against the backdrop of Buddhism's introduction to China from India, a large number of Buddhist scriptures required translation for dissemination, marking the real beginning of interlingual translation in China (Yang, 2024). Through translation, Buddhist classics, doctrines, and rituals were introduced and gradually integrated into traditional Chinese culture, promoting China's acceptance and integration of foreign cultures. In the linguistic dimension, a large number of Buddhist terms, such as Bodhisattva, Arhat, and Karma, entered the Chinese vocabulary, enriching the Chinese language and reflecting the profound influence of Buddhist culture (Yang, 2024).

### 1.5.2 Scientific and Technological Translation and the Introduction of Western Culture (Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties)

With the arrival of European missionaries, Western science and culture (e.g., calendar calculation, astronomy, mathematics, and physics) were introduced to China, and translation activities focused on scientific and technological works (Zhu & Hu, 2024). Translations such as *Elements of Geometry* brought China into contact with advanced foreign scientific achievements for the first time, enriching the treasure house of Chinese culture. The introduction of Western science and culture not only updated Chinese intellectual systems but also triggered the collision and fusion of Chinese and Western ideas, prompting Chinese intellectuals to explore the combination of Western culture and traditional Chinese culture (Zhu & Hu, 2024).

### 1.5.3 Translation of Western Learning and Profound Cultural Changes (After the Opium War)

After the Opium War, China faced an unprecedented national crisis and social transformation, leading Chinese intellectuals to introduce Western learning on a large scale and pushing translation activities to a new climax (Xiao et al., 2024). Western works on society, economy, science and technology, law, diplomacy, and political systems were introduced to China through translation, exerting a strong impact on traditional Chinese culture. Chinese intellectuals began to reflect on the shortcomings of traditional culture and absorb the essence of Western culture, which not only brought knowledge renewal and ideological emancipation but also promoted profound changes in Chinese culture, shaping a new era-specific culture (Xiao et al., 2024).

### 1.5.4 Prosperity of Contemporary Translation and Global Cultural Exchange

In contemporary society, the acceleration of globalization and technological progress has brought unprecedented

prosperity to translation, which now covers politics, economy, culture, and other fields beyond literature and science and technology (Salieva et al., 2024). Translation has realized the global exchange and dissemination of cultures of different countries and regions, enabling Chinese culture to go global while absorbing excellent cultural achievements worldwide. The prosperity of translation has also fostered a large number of translation talents with solid linguistic foundations, professional translation skills, and cross-cultural communication capabilities, providing a strong talent guarantee for global cultural exchange (Salieva et al., 2024).

To sum up, the history of Chinese translation is a reflection of cultural exchanges and integration in different periods. Through translation, China has absorbed excellent cultural achievements worldwide and promoted the continuous development and improvement of its own culture. In the future, China will continue to strengthen the construction and development of translation to make greater contributions to global cultural exchange.

## 2. History of Western Translation Development

The development of Western translation history can be divided into distinct stages that reflect the characteristics and evolution of translation activities in different historical periods, with core stages and features as follows:

### 2.1 Classical Translation Theory Period (3rd Century BC-Late 18th Century AD)

Translation activities focused on religious classics and literary works, and translation theories were mostly technical summaries of practical experience with no systematic theoretical framework (Toepfer, 2024; Wolever, 2024). Key translation events included the translation of the Old Testament by 72 Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt (3rd – 2nd Century BC), known as the Septuagint Greek Texts, and the translation of Greek literary works in ancient Rome (Wolever, 2024).

### 2.2 Modern Translation Theory Period (Late 18th Century-Early 20th Century)

Driven by the Industrial Revolution and the development of capitalism, translation activities expanded to science, technology, law, and other fields (El Morabit & El Habbouch, 2024). Translation theory began to focus on the linguistic basis of translation and translation criteria, with the debate between literal translation and free translation becoming a core topic. This period saw the emergence of many important translators and translation theorists who made significant contributions to the development of translation theory and practice (El Morabit & El Habbouch, 2024).

### 2.3 Contemporary Translation Theory Period (Early 20th Century-Present)

Contemporary translation studies show a pluralistic and interdisciplinary trend, integrating linguistics, culturology, philosophy, sociology, and other disciplines (Lianeri, 2024; Agorni, 2024). A variety of new translation theories and methods have emerged, such as functional translation theory, communicative translation theory, and deconstructive translation theory. In the context of globalization, translation activities have become more frequent and extensive, and translation technologies (e.g., machine translation, computer-aided translation) have developed rapidly (Abdulrahman Al Ismail, 2024; Westermark & Merlini, 2024).

Scholars have proposed different subdivision standards for Western translation history:

Liao Qiyi subdivides the Contemporary Translation Theory Period into the Linguistic Theory Stage (1950s-1960s) and the Multi-theory Stage (late 1970s onwards).

Pan Wenguo divides Western translation studies into the Traditional Stage (ancient times-1959), the Modern Stage (1959-1972), and the Contemporary Stage (1972-present).

Tan Zaixi divides Western translation history into six periods: the Initial Stage, the Late Roman Empire to the Middle Ages, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Modern Translation Period, and the Post-WWII Period to the Present.

Dolerup divides European translation history into six stages from the Biblical Translation Stage to the New Age Translation Stage, each reflecting the social, cultural, and translation characteristics of a specific historical period.

In summary, Western translation history has evolved from the Classical Translation Theory Period to the Modern Translation Theory Period and then to the Contemporary Translation Theory Period, with each stage featuring unique characteristics and contributions that together form a rich and colorful Western translation history.

### 3. Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Western Translation Histories

The development of Chinese and Western translation histories exhibits both differences and commonalities, which reflect the diversity and complexity of translation activities under different historical, cultural, and social contexts.

#### 3.1 Commonalities

##### 3.1.1 Close Connection with Religion

Early Western translation activities were deeply tied to religion, with the translation of the Bible playing a pivotal role in multiple historical periods (e.g., the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible in ancient Rome, the Latin translation of the Bible in the Middle Ages, and Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible) (Wolever, 2024). Similarly, early Chinese translation history was strongly influenced by religion, and the introduction of Buddhism prompted a large number of Buddhist scripture translations in the Three Kingdoms, Eastern Jin, and Sixteen Kingdoms periods (Yang, 2024).

##### 3.1.2 Core Role in Knowledge Dissemination

Translation has been a crucial vehicle for knowledge dissemination and cultural exchange in both the West and China (Salieva et al., 2024). Western translation introduced ancient Greek and Roman culture and Christian culture to Europe, while Chinese translation brought Buddhist culture and Western science and technology to China, promoting the update and enrichment of local cultural and intellectual systems (Xiao et al., 2024).

##### 3.1.3 Profound Impact on Language Development

Translation has significantly promoted the formation and development of national languages in both regions (Toepfer, 2024). Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible played a key role in the unification and development of the German language, while the translation of Buddhist scriptures in China greatly enriched the Chinese vocabulary and promoted the evolution of the Chinese language (Yang, 2024).

#### 3.2 Differences

##### 3.2.1 Historical Development Trajectories

Western translation history follows a relatively linear evolution: Classical Translation Theory → Modern Translation Theory → Contemporary Translation Theory, with each stage forming unique translation theories and practical methods (e.g., linguistic translation theory, functional translation theory) (Lianeri, 2024). In contrast, Chinese translation history features a more complex and diverse trajectory, evolving from ancient Buddhist scripture translation to late Ming and early Qing scientific and technological translation, then to post-Opium War Western learning translation, and finally to contemporary comprehensive translation. Each stage of Chinese translation was deeply influenced by the social, political, and cultural factors of the time (Zhu & Hu, 2024).

##### 3.2.2 Translation Concepts and Methods

Western translation theories have gradually formed a systematic theoretical and methodological system through long-term development, with in-depth research on literal translation, free translation, functional equivalence theory, and translation transformation theory, which have exerted a profound influence on Western translation practice (Abdulahman Al Ismail, 2024). Although Chinese translation has formed important concepts and standards (e.g., faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance), it has focused more on experiential summaries and perceptual expressions in practice. Chinese translators have continuously explored translation methods adapted to Chinese culture and language in the process of translation practice (Yang, 2024).

##### 3.2.3 Scale and Influence of Translation Activities

Western translation activities reached a considerable scale in multiple historical periods (e.g., the Renaissance and the Enlightenment), and these translation booms not only promoted the prosperity of European culture but also had a far-reaching impact on world culture (Agorni, 2024; Wolever, 2024). Although Chinese translation has experienced several golden ages, its overall scale and international influence were slightly smaller under the constraints of historical and social conditions. Nevertheless, Chinese translators have achieved remarkable results and made important contributions to China's cultural development and international cultural exchanges (Xiao et al., 2024).

## 4. Future Prospects of Translation Studies

### 4.1 Interdisciplinary Integration and Innovation

With the increasingly prominent trend of interdisciplinary integration, translation studies will draw more on the theories and methods of linguistics, culturology, sociology, psychology, and computer science (Salieva et al., 2024; Lianeri, 2024). Interdisciplinary research will help reveal the complex and profound mechanisms behind translation activities and promote the innovation and development of translation theories and methods.

### 4.2 Further Breakthroughs in Translation Technology

With the rapid development of artificial intelligence, big data, and cloud computing, translation technology will usher in new breakthroughs (Abdulrahman Al Ismail, 2024; Westermark & Merlini, 2024). Future translation software will be more intelligent and personalized, capable of accurately understanding the context, style, and cultural connotation of the original text to produce more natural and smooth translations. The popularization of translation technology will also enable more people to conduct cross-lingual communication easily, promoting the global spread and integration of cultures.

### 4.3 Dual Improvement of Translation Quality and Efficiency

How to improve translation efficiency while ensuring translation quality will become an important research topic in future translation studies (Westermark & Merlini, 2024; Salieva et al., 2024). With the continuous progress of translation technology and the accumulation of translation practice experience, more effective translation strategies and methods will be explored to achieve the dual improvement of translation quality and efficiency, meeting the growing social demand for translation and promoting the rapid development of the translation industry.

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all my teachers. Their wonderful lectures and selfless knowledge sharing have laid a solid professional foundation for me and broadened my academic horizons. At the same time, I am grateful to my classmates and friends. On the road of academic research, we encouraged and supported each other, made progress together, and spent many unforgettable moments. Once again, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all who have helped and supported me in this research. I will cherish this valuable experience, continue to strive for excellence in my future study and work, and repay everyone's care and expectations with practical actions.

## References

- Abdulrahman Al Ismail, Y. (2024). Advancements and impact of medical translation during the golden age: A comprehensive analysis. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 14(7), 2080-2085.
- Agorni, M. (2024). The role of women in translation history: Translating and collaborating in the re-shaping of Italy in the early romantic period. In M. Agorni (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 2024 International Conference on Translation History* (pp. 247-268).
- El Morabit, N., & El Habbouch, L. (2024). The call to prayer by Walter Burton Harris: A journey between faith and identity from Marrakech to Seville. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 7(5), 54-63.
- Lianeri, A. (2024). Translation in history and metahistory. *History and Theory*, 63(2), 272-287.
- Salieva, Z., Kuldoshov, U., Bakiev, F., et al. (2024). Bridging gaps in translation studies: Implementing European Union standards in Uzbekistan. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 7(6), 39-46.
- Toepfer, R. (2024). Of heroines and housewives: How Johannes Spreng's German translation of the *Metamorphoses* (1564) conveys gender-specific norms. In R. Toepfer (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 2024 International Conference on Translation History* (pp. 105-123).
- Westermark, P., & Merlini, G. (2024). Successes in translation. *Amyloid*, 31(1), 1-9.
- Wolever, E. (2024). The *translatio imperii* and the spatial construction of history in the twelfth century. *Journal of Medieval*

*History*, 50(2), 247-265.

Xiao, Y., Liu, Y., Peng, Y., et al. (2024). Variational translation of the titles of rulers in Ba and Shu: An English translation study on the bestowed realm. *Lecture Notes on Language and Literature*, 7(4).

Yang, M. (2024). A comparative study of Buddhist scripture translation and scientific and technical translation in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. *Lecture Notes on Language and Literature*, 7(6).

Zhu, J., & Hu, Y. (2024). A study on Chinese history museum text translation from the perspective of text type theory: Taking the English translation of Nanchang Relic Museum of Haihunhou State of Han Dynasty as an example. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 28(2), 45-51.