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A Comparative Study of Herbert A. Giles's and Zhao Yanchun's English Versions of *Three Character Classic* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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Abstract

Three Character Classic (San Zi Jing) is a classic primer that encompasses educational philosophy and ideas, traditional ethics and morality, and fundamental knowledge of literature and history, thereby embodying the core values of ancient China. This article compares Herbert A. Giles's *San Tzu Ching* (1900) and Zhao Yanchun's *Three Word Primer in English Rhyme* (2014), using Skopos Theory as the framework. Due to their different purposes, the two versions adopt translation strategies and methods accordingly. Giles's translation largely focuses on cultural dissemination and emphasizes readability and naturalness for readers. Zhao's translation, on the other hand, centers on cultural confidence, achieving both the form and spirit of the original. This comparative study is conducive to summarizing feasible approaches for the English translation of *Three Character Classic*, and helps promote the spread and appreciation of Chinese culture across the world.

Keywords

Three Character Classic; Skopos Theory; comparative study; Herbert A. Giles; Zhao Yanchun

1. Introduction

Three Character Classic (Wang, 1986) stands out as a cornerstone of elementary education. It condenses the essence of traditional culture and Chinese history into succinct three-character verses, making it a widely known enlightenment classic in China. Since the 19th century, many sinologists and translators have devoted themselves to translating this classic. Herbert A. Giles's *San Tzu Ching* (Giles, 1900) and Zhao Yanchun's *Three Word Primer in English Rhyme* (Zhao, 2014) are two representative versions with distinct characteristics. Giles, a British sinologist, stayed committed to helping Western readers understand Chinese culture and language. For this reason, he supplemented numerous explanations of the structure and meaning of Chinese characters to his book. Zhao Yanchun, a Chinese translator, aimed to convey the cultural essence and poetic form of the original text to the world. Also, he added explanations to the original content and appended them to his translation.

There are numerous cases in which the translation of Chinese classics has been analyzed on the basis of Skopos

Theory, and this theory has yielded significant results in guiding translation practice. The core viewpoint of the theory is that the purpose of translation plays a decisive role in the translation process (Nord, 2006), that is, "the end justifies the means". Also, it is argued that "the target text must achieve equivalence with the source text in terms of content, linguistic features, and communicative function" (Reiss, 2000). Skopos Theory is equally applicable to research on the English translation of *Three Character Classic*. In conducting such research, one should first clarify Skopos Theory itself and its three main rules, analyzing the guiding role these rules play in the translation of culturally loaded words, the conversion of Chinese and Western sentence structures, and the interpretation of special Chinese imagery, and whether they can effectively resolve the challenges faced in the translation of Chinese classics.

As the cultural strategy of "going global" continues to advance, promoting Chinese culture and telling China's stories effectively have become a core mission. Meanwhile, classical literary works serve as a bridge for cross-cultural exchange. This article examines the strategies and methods used in these two versions from the perspective of Skopos Theory to further explore suggestions on translating the *Three Character Classic*.

2. Comparative Study of Culturally Loaded Word Translation

2.1 Translation of Historical Allusions

Three Character Classic abounds with historical allusions, all of which bear profound connotations. The two translators treat these allusions differently in their translation.

When translating the name "孟子", Giles and Zhao did not directly use Chinese Pinyin, but adopted the translation "Mencius". In order to facilitate the understanding of Western readers, Giles gave a brief introduction to Mencius, a Chinese philosopher, in his book. He also added transitional phrases such as "Of old" to explain the background of the times, and used "when" to express the meaning of conditions. By comparison, Zhao omitted the translation of the word "昔", which was already known according to the context, and used end rhyme "sloth" and "cloth" to create a neat structure. Zhao, to some degree, presupposed that readers possessed basic cultural cognition of classic Chinese texts and sacrificed redundant explanations to rigorously mirror the rhythmic cadence of the original. Additionally, in terms of the translation of "孝", which carries profound meaning in Chinese, Giles rendered it as "filial piety", conveying children's duty of support and care for their parents. Zhao converted "孝" into the adjective "filial", retaining the original meaning. Compared with Giles, who uses Wade-Giles romanization, Zhao used Pinyin to translate "融". This method of Pinyin can also be seen in many parts of *Three Word Primer in English Rhyme*, especially for proper nouns, to preserve the original Chinese flavour.

2.2 Translation of Confucian Concepts

Confucian moral concepts are the core of the *Three Character Classic.* These concepts have unique Chinese cultural connotations and are difficult to find accurate equivalents in English.

The phrase "人之初 性本善" embodies the Confucian viewpoint of human nature, which is the foundational proposition of the *Three Character Classic*. Giles adopted a declarative sentence structure that strictly follows English grammatical norms. Giles used the plural form "Men" to cover the general meaning of "人", and the adverb "naturally" to accurately convey the connotation of "性本". The translation strategy is fully in line with his purpose of popularizing Chinese Confucian culture for the Western masses who lack relevant cultural backgrounds. Most of the existing studies focus on the advantages and disadvantages of its poetry translation practice, and have not yet carried out a multi-dimensional and multi-level interpretation of the artistic characteristics and infectious power of its translation (Du & Li, 2020). In contrast, Zhao adopted the poetic sentence style and retained the unique art form of the original work; its phrase translation case also provided a learning model for scholars and translators to carry out the translation of Chinese classics.

2.3 Translation of Philosophical Words

The philosophical words in *Three Character Classic* reflect ancient Chinese cosmology and life philosophy, and the translation differences are also significant.

Giles adopted domestication, interpreting word by word, using Wade-Giles romanization to introduce new concepts of "Chung" and "Yung", aiming at cultural restoration and following the Fidelity Rule. Zhao adopted a foreignization and free translation strategy. The translation of "The Golden Mean", which means an ideal, perfect

balance when dealing with things or people, conforms to the original meaning of "中庸". "The Golden Mean" preserves the philosophical blankness of Chinese thought. Concise in form yet profound in meaning, this translation delivers subtle philosophical connotations.

In addition, "self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance and bringing peace to the whole world", also known as "修齐治平", comes from The Great Learning, a Confucian classic which represents the ideal life path and political pursuit of Confucian scholars. Giles used a faithful literal translation, fully retaining the author's identity and the complete logical sequence of self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world peace, with accurate and rigorous meaning. Zhao pursued concise, rhyming poetic lines. He generalized "修齐治平" as a process from personal perfection to national progression, simplified and abridged the original connotation, weakening the original philosophical logic to pursue rhythmic beauty.

3. Comparative Study of Translation Strategies and Methods

3.1 Strategies and Methods Driven by Skopos Rule

The Skopos Rule is the highest rule of Skopos Theory, which means that translation behavior is carried out around the intended purpose, and all translation strategies serve this purpose. This anticipated purpose then governs the selection of translation strategies and methods (Reiss & Vermeer, 2014). Under the guidance of different purposes, the two translators adopted completely different translation strategies.

Taking Western readers' acceptance as the core, Giles used a domestication strategy and free translation with abundant explanatory words. He used simple and smooth English sentences and added detailed annotations when necessary. For example, when translating the phrase "此六畜", Giles decomposed "畜" into "玄", which represents the color "black" and "dark", and "田" as cultivated fields. He gave an interesting explanation: the black fields nourish animals. For each short phrase and character, Giles managed to introduce their original meaning of them. He prioritized the Skopos Rule and enabled Western readers to appreciate the charm of Chinese characters. Zhao, however, mainly used foreignization and literal translation. His sense of cultural confidence is demonstrated by the practice of 'literally translating' Chinese classics into English. (Zhu, 2016). For example, he translated "To learn widely Is seldom easy" and "To study some Informed you become" (109). This ingenious conversion bridges the language gap between ancient Chinese poetry and modern English expression, so that English readers can experience the beauty of the rustic writing style and rhyme of the original. Zhao's translation takes form restoration as the core strategy and adopts the three-word-to-three-word rhyme translation method, which is in line with China's current cultural development strategy.

3.2 Strategies and Methods Driven by Coherence Rule

The Coherence Rule refers to the requirement that the target language text must be acceptable, meaningful, and consistent with the acceptable target language environment of the text (Nord, 2001).

Giles followed the rule of coherence at the expense of form. He used natural syntactic norms. Meanwhile, he added words to make the text logical and smooth. When translating historical content in *Three Character Classic*, there are many dynasty names, imperial titles, book titles, and historical figures, etc. Giles, in most instances, adopted transliteration, specifically, Wade-Giles romanization, to translate them. He translated "周武王" into "King Wu of the Chou dynasty" (91). Also, he rendered "至黄帝" into "onto the Yellow Emperor" (83), and explained the reason why the color of yellow was chosen as the imperial color, for it represents the color of earth which nurtures us. With the help of Giles's translation, a large number of Western scholars at that time were exposed to Chinese history. Zhao's translation strategy is strictly guided by the Coherence Rule, follows the internal coherence guidelines of the text, and retains the three-character poetry style of the *Three Character Classic*. He used concise and rhyming English three-word sentences to reconstruct the internal formal coherence of the text, avoid redundant expression, and preserve the concise writing style and rhythm of the original work. A typical example is that he translated "养不教 父之过" into a short verse "What's a father? A good teacher" (45). The translation has a high aesthetic value of poetry for readers who are interested in cultural study, but the translator gives priority to ensuring the coherence of the form, which inevitably sacrifices some semantic fidelity and also creates an obvious reading threshold for foreign readers.

3.3 Strategies and Methods Driven by Fidelity Rule

The Fidelity Rule in Skopos Theory is relative, and the two translators have different degrees of fidelity and choose different strategies to achieve fidelity. The two major translation strategies of domestication and foreignization are also applied flexibly in the actual translation process, ensuring that the final translation remains faithful to the source text (Xu, 2024).

For each short phrase and character, Giles managed to provide the corresponding Wade-Giles romanization and word-for-word English definition, introducing the original meaning of characters and phrases to readers, which conforms to the Fidelity Rule. For example, He gave a word-for-word translation of "曰" as "speak", "国" as "state", "风" as "wind", and together as "We speak of the Kuo feng" (72). Meanwhile, he abandons one of the most important characteristics of the *Three Character Classic*, the three-character rhythmic form, partially losing the aesthetic value of the original text. Zhao strictly adhered to the Fidelity Rule, especially formal fidelity, and followed the rhythmic format of the original text and the simple and elegant writing style. For instance, he translated "子不学 非所宜 幼不学 老何为" into "An unschooled child Will grow wild. A young loafer, An old loser!" (46). Zhao's translation accurately conveys the core semantics and edification philosophy of the original text, retains the characteristics of traditional Chinese education and culture, is not overly Westernized, and realizes the highly faithful unity of the three dimensions of form, meaning, and culture.

4. Conclusion

This paper conducts a comparative analysis of Giles's and Zhao Yanchun's English versions of *Three Character Classic* under the framework of Skopos Theory. The research reveals that translators' distinct translation purposes fundamentally shape their choices of translation strategies, linguistic expressions, and cultural processing. From the perspective of the three rules of Skopos Theory, neither version is absolutely superior. Each translator makes reasonable compromises between coherence and fidelity to serve their respective translation goals. At the same time, the theory breaks the shackles of general translation standards and provides a new perspective for translation research, especially applied translation research (Li, 2010). This study confirms that Skopos Theory has a strong explanatory power for the translation of Chinese classics. In future cross-cultural translation practice, translators should clarify the translation goals in advance and flexibly balance the relationship between cultural inheritance, formal aesthetics, and reader acceptance. In this way, we can produce more appropriate translations and better facilitate the global communication of outstanding traditional Chinese culture.

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