

Deconstruction and Reconstruction: An Analysis of the Power Discourse in the Translation of Chinese Classics from a Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

This paper draws on postcolonial theory to analyze the mechanisms of power discourse in the translation of Chinese classics. It argues that traditional translation harbors a deep-seated "Western-centrism," diluting or distorting the essence of traditional Chinese culture. A one-way cultural communication approach is undesirable and unworkable. Postcolonial theory, based on its dis-mantling of the discourse of "Orientalism," plays a crucial role in exposing the inequality of cultural power underlying cultural translation. On this basis, it proposes the possibility of reconstructing translation through "cultural negotiation." Empirical research demonstrates that translation guided by alienating translation, using multiple perspectives and approaches, and driven by digital translation methods is an effective way to resist cultural hegemony. This approach allows for the translation and dissemination of Chinese culture abroad on an equal footing. New theoretical and practical approaches are offered for this purpose.

Keywords

Postcolonial theory; Translation of Chinese classics; Power discourse; Cultural negotiation; Alienated translation

1. Introduction: The intersection of postcolonial theory and translation studies

Postcolonial theory originated in the 1970s with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, criticizing the West's use of cultural discourse to shape the image of the "Other" and manipulate colonial power. In translation studies, postcolonial theory points to the implicit linguistic and cultural power inherent in translation: colonial powers assimilate colonial culture through the establishment of translation standards and the selection of translated terms, a phenomenon known as "cultural discipline." As a primary vehicle for the international dissemination of Chinese culture, translations of Chinese classics have consistently suffered from the marginalization of Western colonial discourse. The cultural implications of these texts are often packaged as "ex-

oticism" or "philosophical fragments," rather than as cultural actors with a voice. From a postcolonial perspective, this article analyzes the mechanisms of discourse power in the translation of Chinese classics and reconstructs a translation method based on the concept of "cultural negotiation," hoping to provide theoretical breakthroughs and methodological guidance for the translation of Chinese classics.

2. Deconstruction: The Operation of Power Discourse in the Translation of Classical Literature

Postcolonial theory, with its sharp irony, analyzes the unjust power dynamics inherent in the globalized cultural landscape. According to postcolonial theory, the West, through the creation of "Orientalism," deliberately portrays "other" cultures as "backward," "mysterious," and "in need of salvation," thereby gaining discourse power in cultural exchange. Discursive violence is most prominent in the translation of Chinese classics. Discursive violence exerts influence through multiple aspects, such as noun usage, text layout, and critical standards, forming a comprehensive mechanism of cultural oppression.

2.1. Western-centric Discursive Hegemony

In conceptual translation, Western translators often use Christian moral concepts as a framework, translating Confucian humanities in a "colonial" manner. For example, the literal translation of "ren" (benevolence) retains only its moral and benevolent aspect, discarding the dual meaning of Confucianism: the moral practice of "self-discipline and restoration of propriety" and the political pursuit of "benevolence." Instead, it becomes a one-sided commentary on traditional Western moral philosophy. The same situation has befallen the concept of "li." It has been simplified to "ritual," forgetting that the foundation of social order lies behind it. This fragmented translation of the concept effectively places Chinese culture in a subordinate position to Western concepts.

In terms of textual structure, to accommodate Westerners' fast-paced reading style, translators have "dehistoricized" the classics. For example, the "Analects" was originally a dialogue-style work depicting the intellectual clash between Confucius and his disciples, implicitly framing the collapse of ritual and music during the Spring and Autumn Period. However, some English translations have stripped it down to a collection of single ethical aphorisms, omitting the context for passages like "Zilu Asks About Government" and "Ji Shi's Attack on Zhuanyu." The Analects has been transformed from a dynamic work of political philosophy into a static guide to moral instruction. This structural simplification of the classics has led to a diminishing of profound philosophical thought and further concealed the diverse nature of ancient Chinese political wisdom.

In terms of academic discourse, Western scholarship, under the guise of "universality," has established a dogmatic system of interpretation. For example, a group of

Western scholars have applied existentialism to interpret Zhuangzi, turning the life state of "Xiao Yao You" into a way of individual resistance to an absurd world. However, the Taoist ecological wisdom of "harmony between man and nature" and the cognitive revolution of "Qi Wu Lun" have been ignored or misunderstood. More seriously, Western academic journals must apply the postcolonial context and feminist theoretical framework to their research on Chinese classics, leaving Chinese scholars facing the awkward situation of "interpreting China with the West"—if they fail to cite the works of Foucault and Said, their research will be deemed "theoretically deficient," essentially a rejection of Chinese cultural subjectivity.

2.2. The Power Projection of Translation Strategies

Foucault's discourse theory argues that translation is not merely a neutral act of linguistic retelling. It is also an act of power reproduction. In the translation of Chinese classics, this power projection first manifests itself in the covert manipulation of naturalized translation. Lawrence Venuti denounces naturalized translation as a strategy for dominant cultures to assimilate weaker cultures by masking cultural differences through "fluent" translation. Arthur Waley's English translation of the Tao Te Ching, rendered in a 19th-century Victorian style, translates "The Tao follows the course of Nature" into "The Tao follows the course of Nature." Using typical British gentlemanly rhetoric, the Tao Te Ching's rebellious philosophy, critical of ritual, is distorted into "Eastern wisdom" that suits Western elite tastes. This shift in translation technique and language undermines the Tao Te Ching's subversive nature.

Funding mechanisms exacerbate inequality. European and American publishers and their sponsors manipulate translations based on subject matter and market considerations, rendering the translation of Chinese classics a vassal serving the West's so-called "Eastern fantasy." For example, some publishing houses demanded that the translators of the Classic of Mountains and Seas emphasize "rare and strange creatures" and downplay its identity as a geographical and ancient mythological work. They also manipulated Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio into a "Chinese Gothic tale," debunking its questioning of the imperial examination system, male dominance, and gender oppression. These stereotypes of the "mysterious East" simply confine Chinese literature to European and American cognitive frameworks. Academic exclusion mechanisms are another barrier. Western academic journals, citing "theoretical originality" as a criterion, mandate that research on Chinese classical texts must be conducted within Western theoretical models. Chinese scholars seeking to analyze the family law system in "Dream of the Red Chamber" must invoke Bourdieu's "field theory," and those analyzing the lyrical tradition of the "Book of Songs" must employ Sardou's deconstructionist approach. This forced grafting of theory onto research alienates the work from the Chinese cultural context, creating a "Western theory, Chinese examples" dichotomy. Conversely, when Chinese schol-

ars attempt to construct new theoretical systems using indigenous concepts such as "yin and yang harmony" and "heaven-man interaction" in their research, they are ironically criticized for violating "international academic norms."

The power discourse operating in the translation of Chinese cultural classics abroad, through Western-style word conversion, content deletion, and commentary monopoly, essentially forms a "cultural filter" that distorts the true image of Chinese culture and hinders the coexistence of diverse cultural ecosystems worldwide. Dismantling this power discourse requires systematic reconstruction of translation strategies, dissemination channels, and critical standards, enabling truly equal exchange and creative transformation of Chinese culture.

3. Reconstruction: Innovation in Translation Strategies Guided by Postcolonial Theory

This theory has destructive significance for deconstructing the imbalance of global cultural power. Its central perspective is to counter Western-centric cultural hegemony through innovative translation strategies and reconstruct a diverse and co-existing cultural system. Based on this, guided by postcolonial translation theory, the translation of Chinese classics into foreign languages should be comprehensively deconstructed from three perspectives: language translation, translator participation, and technical support. This approach aims to maintain cultural specificity and promote in-depth cross-cultural exchange.

3.1. Foreignizing Translation: A Linguistic Practice Against Cultural Assimilation

Postcolonial theory considers foreignizing translation an effective means of countering the hegemony of cultural colonialism. By preserving the "strangeness" of the original text, foreignizing translation can dismantle Western readers' stereotypes of heterogeneous cultures. In this context, literal translation and annotation are the most direct methods. Translating and annotating key Confucian and Taoist terms like "天," "道," and "气" (e.g., "Heaven" or "Nature") prevents these terms from being reduced to synonyms for Western religious and philosophical concepts. Furthermore, the annotations provide readers with room for interpretation, allowing them to appreciate their unique meanings through a comparison of Eastern and Western cultures. For example, "气" (qi) is considered a symbol of vitality in Traditional Chinese Medicine and the source of all things in Taoist philosophy. A literal translation of "气" with philosophical and medical interpretations avoids its being translated into Western meanings like "air" or "spirit."

The preservation and reconstruction of syntax further highlight cultural differences. When translating the "Book of Songs," the repetition of verses is retained, while appropriate adjustments are made to the English poetic form (rhyme and rhythm). This allows Western readers to appreciate the beauty of the "reciprocal" nature of

Chinese poetics and understand the emotional logic of its repetition to highlight the main theme. "Alienated form" deconstructs the linear structure of Western poetry's "theme development," reconstructing the unique characteristics of Chinese poetics within its "heterogeneity." The method of compensating for culturally loaded words is to compensate for the most misinterpreted symbols. Using cultural comparison ("Chinese dragon vs. Western dragon"), symbols like the dragon and phoenix can dispel Western preconceptions of their "ferocious" and "evil" qualities, reshaping the dragon and phoenix as symbols of power and auspiciousness. This approach not only overcomes barriers to cross-cultural communication but also emphasizes the excellent traditional Chinese cultural values through comparison.

3.2. Multi-subject Participation: Breaking the Monopoly of a Single Discourse

Postcolonialism emphasizes that translations should be produced through multi-stakeholder dialogue, rather than the product of the hegemony of a single culture. The translation of Chinese classics into foreign languages should establish an interactive, collaborative translation system between China and foreign countries. During the mutual translation process between Chinese and foreign translators, Chinese scholars provide interpretations of relevant cultural information and core content, while foreign translators make linguistic and cognitive adjustments for the readers. For example, Xu Yuanchong collaborated with foreign sinologists in translating "Three Hundred Tang Poems." This translation not only preserved the original artistic conception and rhythmic beauty of Chinese poetry, but also, through the sinologists' linguistic refinement, made the Chinese poetry accessible to Western readers. Accuracy and readability are both achieved.

Reader-participatory translation leverages digital tools to expand the scope of negotiation. Social networking sites and crowdfunding platforms can gather feedback from overseas readers and revise translation proposals in real time. The online literature platform "Webnovel" has introduced a "machine translation-human proof-reading-reader review" workflow, enabling real-time dialogue on classic works. For example, during the translation of "Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio," readers were able to express their opinions on the translated version regarding non-natural elements such as "fox spirits" and "ghosts." Translators then revised the content based on these comments, preserving the original text while also aligning it with the target language readers' common sense.

The establishment of academic organizations can institutionally break the stereotype of the West being strong and China being weak. Scholars from Asia, Africa, and Latin America can join forces to form an academic organization, the "Foreign Translation and Publishing Alliance." From a Third World perspective, they can jointly criticize the translation and review metrics used by the Spanish-language community and collaboratively establish a translation and review system that preserves the

text's quality and is recognized by both translators and readers. For example, the alliance could establish a "Special Foreign Elements Preservation Award" to encourage translators to adopt exotic approaches rather than simply pursuing "fluency."

3.3. Empowering Digital Technology: Reconstructing the Communication Ecosystem

Postcolonial theory, informed by deconstructionist thinking, suggests that digital technology can decentralize the dissemination of translated classics by transcending the power centers of discourse within the traditional publishing landscape. Multi-modal translation leverages technologies like VR and AR to recreate the cultural contexts of classic texts, transcending simple text-based translation. VR technology recreates the scenery of Bianliang depicted in the painting "Along the River During the Qingming Festival," allowing readers to immerse themselves in the virtual world and experience Song Dynasty market culture, architecture, and social life. This "spatial alienation" has a more visceral impact than simple textual communication.

Big data mining guides cultural communication based on user behavior. By studying the search process of overseas readers in the full-text database of Chinese philosophical literature (for example, whether their focus in reading Zhuangzi's "Xiaoyaoyou" is "freedom" or "ecology"), we can adjust the translation focus and annotation content to ensure accurate dissemination. For example, if we find that readers are more attracted to the ecological and environmental aspects of "Tao follows nature," we can focus on the similarities and differences between Taoist ecological philosophy and the modern green movement when translating and annotating.

Blockchain evidence storage provides technical support for Chinese scholars. By preserving the translation process, copyright data, and version data on the blockchain, we can prevent Western publishers from arbitrarily tampering with the original text and erasing the translator's signature. For example, if a translation of an ancient book is authenticated by blockchain, subsequent revisions must be approved by the original translator to preserve the book's cultural sovereignty.

The core of the innovation in translation strategy within the context of postcolonial theory lies in reconstructing the trinity of language, subject, and technology to dismantle the hegemonic control of Western-centrism. Cultural differences in alienated translations are preserved, diverse subjects collaborate to form a governance consensus, and digital technology empowers a decentralized communication model. These three dimensions work together to transform Chinese classics from "translation objects" into "dialogue subjects," providing a Chinese path for expanding global cultural diversity.

4. Case Analysis: The English Translation of "Dream of the Red Chamber"

In the globalization of culture, the translation of classics into foreign languages serves as a crucial link in cultural exchange. The choice of translation strategy affects the distribution of cultural power and the transmission or export of cultural characteristics. Taking the English translation of "Dream of the Red Chamber," a pinnacle of Chinese classical literature, as an example, analyzing the different strategies employed in Hawkes's and Yang Xianyi's translations reveals the crucial role played by postcolonial theory and the power struggles inherent in different translation strategies.

4.1. Analysis of Power Discourse in Hawkes' Translation

David Hawkes is a renowned British sinologist. His English translation of "Dream of the Red Chamber" has had a significant impact in Western society. However, his translation strategy of domestication has, to some extent, become a means of invading Western cultural power. Through a specific translation example, Hawkes translated the Chinese concept of "Taixu Huanjing," which carries profound Buddhist philosophical undertones, into the English term "Fairyland." In "Dream of the Red Chamber," "Taixu Illusionary Realm" not only represents the novel's divine and demonic realms, but also embodies a philosophical imagery that embodies the author's understanding of Buddhist concepts such as the illusory nature of life and the cycle of cause and effect. Its connotations far exceed the simple Western concept of "fairyland." This shift in translation effectively translates ancient Chinese Buddhist philosophy into familiar Western concepts, diluting the original text's exotic connotations and making it easier for Western readers to understand within their own context, blurring the cultural differences between East and West.

More importantly, Hawkes simplifies the ideas of Jia Baoyu, the "imperial examination defector." Jia Baoyu's aversion to the imperial examination system in the novel isn't simply an act of personal rebellion; it's a bold critique of the feudal society's system of selecting candidates and values centered around the examination system, and a keen awareness of the decadence of feudal rule. However, Hawkes's translation simply replaces the term "personal rebellion," obliterating the profound social critique inherent in the original text. From the perspective of postcolonial theory, this isn't an accidental translation oversight; it reflects the Western imagination of China, influenced by Cold War thinking at the time. The political ideology of the time demanded that China be portrayed as a backward, isolated nation riven by internal strife. Hawkes's translation catered to this imagination, and to some extent, it was a manifestation of Western cultural power exerting "cultural transformation" on Chinese classics. Through the choice of translation method, the image of Chinese culture was reconstructed to conform to Western discourse hegemony.

4.2. The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Yang Xianyi's Translation

Unlike Hawkes's translation, Yang Xianyi and his wife's translation resolutely employs an alienating translation method, maximizing the expression of Chinese cultural richness within an English context. Yang Xianyi's translation retains culturally loaded terms such as "Ah Q" and "Redology," which are quintessentially Chinese. "Ah Q" is the archetypal figure of Chinese inferiority in Lu Xun's writings, and his name has become a symbol. "Redology" is a highly artistic summary of the study of "Dream of the Red Chamber," imbued with profound artistic connotations and cultural traditions. Yang Xianyi and his wife used annotations to explain the cultural background and social and historical context behind the words, establishing a path for Western readers to access Chinese culture rather than forcing them to mechanically translate existing Western concepts.

In addition, Yang Xianyi and his wife proactively contacted foreign sinologists and established the "Dream of the Red Chamber Society." This shifted the monopoly of a single entity to a collaborative translation alliance involving multiple stakeholders. Regular academic conferences brought together scholars from China and abroad to discuss translation and research related to "Dream of the Red Chamber," fostering mutual learning and exchange within diverse cultural contexts. Through digital platforms, they promoted translations and research findings, bringing the once entrenched "Dream of the Red Chamber" translations to the world, where they were most open and accessible. This practice fully demonstrates that, guided by postcolonial theory and through the adoption of an alienating translation approach, a collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders can reconstruct equal cultural power, allowing Chinese cultural classics to maintain their cultural sovereignty in the process of international promotion, rather than becoming a subordinate of Western cultural hegemony. Two classic examples of the English translation of "Dream of the Red Chamber" fully demonstrate the cultural power dynamics underlying translation strategies. Hawksburn's domesticating translation reflects the degradation of classical texts by Western cultural power, while Yang Xianyi's alienating translation and multi-subject collaboration demonstrate a successful challenge to cultural hegemony and the promotion of equal cultural exchange. This inspires us to fully leverage the guiding role of postcolonial theory, uphold a culturally focused perspective, adopt new strategies, and establish new forms of multi-faceted collaboration to effectively promote Chinese culture in a global context.

5. Conclusion

Postcolonial studies have opened up a new perspective for the translation of Chinese classical texts, providing valuable critical perspectives and practical approaches. It has helped deconstruct Western-centric hegemony, restructured translation methods toward the principle of "cultural negotiation," and enabled a significant shift in the translation of Chinese classical texts from "cultural export" to "cultural dialogue." Cultural exchange between Chinese classical texts and Chinese classical

texts is no longer simply informational output, but rather a mutually equal and interactive exchange.

Looking forward, many important issues remain to be addressed in this field of research. These include the integration of digital humanities and translation studies, specifically how to leverage artificial intelligence to automate the translation of foreign texts, improving translation efficiency while preserving cultural differences. Furthermore, it is imperative to develop an evaluation system based on the Global South, shifting away from a non-Western-dominated evaluation model and ensuring fairness and diversity. Furthermore, we should also consider how to leverage the translation of Chinese classics to promote global sharing of Chinese culture and expand its appeal.

The translation of Chinese literary works is more than a simple linguistic shift; it is also a game of cultural discourse. Postcolonial theory, as a powerful theoretical tool, will enable us to continuously move towards the promising future of cultural communication, where "each appreciates its own beauty, each appreciates the beauty of others, and all beauties are shared, achieving universal peace."

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