

Study on Translation, Dissemination and Influence of *Three Character Classic* by *Chinese Repository*

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Abstract

There have been many studies on the English translation of *Three Character Classic*, but not enough attention has been paid to the translation of Elijah Coleman Bridgman published in 1835 by *Chinese Repository*. Most of the present studies briefly mentioned its translation, but few systematic and in-depth investigations have been made into it. Therefore, the historical significance of its translation has been undervalued. This study aims to objectively describe and analyze the historical motivation, process, communication, and impact of the translation of the *Three Character Classic* by *Chinese Repository*. It is found that Bridgman took advantage of a large number of paratexts to make sweeping accusations against Confucian educational thought and philosophy, forcing the essence of Chinese primary education to be exposed to the western world, aiming to reveal that China desperately needed the salvation of the Christian Gospel to enlighten its children as well as to lay the foundation for its missionary work. However, it is undeniable that its translation action objectively spread the culture of Chinese primary education and the basic concepts of Confucianism to the West, and built a bridge for westerners to understand China's traditional culture.

Key words: *Chinese Repository*; Bridgman; Translation of the *Three Character Classic*; Dissemination; Influence

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INTRODUCTION

The English translation of the *Three Character Classic* (《三字经》), one of the most influential texts of ancient China on the subject of learning, began in 1812 by Robert Morrison. He is a British missionary. It was later retranslated by Elijah Coleman Bridgman, Ernest John Eitel, Herbert Allen Giles, and many other westerners. At present, the academic circle has paid more attention to Morrison's and Giles' translations, and there are also studies comparing several translations involving the one on *Chinese Repository* in 1835, which was translated by Bridgman. However, most of the studies are limited by a large number of subjects and fail to go deeper in the study of the translation, resulting in the historical value of the translation not being fully revealed. This serves as the starting point of this study, which aims to examine the historical motivation, process, dissemination, and influence of the translation of the *Three Character Classic* by the *Repository*.

1. THE TRANSLATION OF THE *THREE CHARACTER CLASSIC* BY *CHINESE REPOSITORY*

Chinese Repository, also known as the *Macau Monthly*, was founded in Guangzhou in May 1832 by the first American protestant missionary to China. It was the earliest English-language periodical published in China in modern times, aiming to report to the west on all aspects of China and its changes. The newspaper was published in more than 20 countries and regions, and its readers were mainly government officials, merchants, sailors and westerners in China from Europe, America and Southeast Asia, etc. It ceased publication in August 1851. During its 20 years of circulation, it published 20 volumes with 232 issues (one issue per month, one volume per year), each with about 600 pages, mainly covering six sections: book

reviews, travelogues and diaries, essays, religious news, literary notices, and real-time reports. It is considered to be the world's first Sinology magazine, which greatly facilitated westerners' understanding of China.

The importance of Bridgman's translation is evident from the fact that it was the top article published in the third issue of the fourth volume of *Chinese Repository* in July of 1835. The article is entitled "Santsze King, or Trimetrical Classic; its form, size, author, object, and style; a translation with notes; the work ill adapted to the purpose of primary education" (Bridgman, 1835, p.105) and consists of an introduction, the translation, notes, and a post-translation summary.

1.1 Pre-translation Introduction

The introduction to the translation of the *Three Character Classic* on *Chinese Repository* begins on page 105 and ends on page 118, with information on the paratext making up about two-thirds of the text. First, Bridgman introduced the basic information about the popular editions of the *Three Character Classic* and their authors. Later, he pointed out the difference between the Chinese and western reading styles: "Like the Hebrew books, the Chinese books are written from right to left, while they are read in a top-to-bottom order" (ibid.). He argued that it is not convenient for the translation to follow the layout of the original text, but rather that "it is easier and more natural to follow the common European horizontal style" (ibid, p.106). To make it more understandable, he arranged the first to fifth columns of the original text horizontally, with the phonetic tones marked.

Secondly, he introduced the number of words and lines of the *Three Character Classic* and the similarities and differences among the three versions. The *Three Character Classic* consists of 178 lines, with two sentences per line, totaling 1,068 characters. He noted that some words in the original text were used repeatedly, such as 'jin (man)' appearing 12 times, 'che (of)' 9 times, etc. The actual number of words without the reduplication was 510. While these statistics may not seem significant today, they can certainly help the target reader quickly have a general understanding of the *Three Character Classic*. He also mentioned that some of the commentaries were obscure, and some were even as confusing as the original text. Therefore, he believed that adding notes was not a one-off. Thereafter, he informed the readers that the popular "San Zi Jin Xun Gu (《三字经训诂》)" was the source text for his English translation.

He then introduced the language, genre, content, and function of the *Three Character Classic*. He noted that the *Three Character Classic* "was easy to understand in language, important in the ideas stated in the book, easy to understand in its literary genre, and clear in its reasoning. The book discussed the dialectical relationship between the three forces of heaven, earth, and man, and was a passport for readers to understand classical and historical

literature. It was indeed a ford that young children can quickly grasp and move to advanced courses of study". Bridgman acknowledged that his knowledge might be flawed, and coupled with a hasty understanding of the original text, he was aware that his translation may be subject to scholarly criticism.

Finally, he explained the educational purpose of the *Three Character Classic*. He noted, "The *Three Character Classic* is a common early childhood textbook in all Chinese provinces at the time, designed to familiarize students with the Chinese language and to deepen their impressions of knowledge through the rhythm of the texts." (ibid, p.107) The translator used the paratext to provide a detailed introduction to the western readers, which "constructs a rich linguistic and cultural context for the translation and elucidating the cultural background involved in the translated language" (Sun, 2020, p.29), helping readers to gain a macroscopic understanding of the translation and laying the foundation for further comprehension.

1.2 Post-translation Manipulation

Each article is followed by a commentary in the source text, instead of translating all the commentaries, Bridgman chose to translate 56 ones, outlining the general meaning of the commentary and explaining traditional Chinese culture from his perspective. The post-translation commentary, as a form of paratext, also provides rich space for the translator to manipulate the translation. For example, in the commentary on the phrase "教之道，贵以专", Bridgman translated it as "unwearied attention to everything that can in any way affect the body or the mind of the child" (Bridgman, 1835, p.112), and that "concentrating on anything can affect the physical and mental health of children" (ibid.). Obviously, the translator overstretches the meaning of the original text, which is not conducive to a correct view of traditional China's education by western readers.

He concluded with a comment on the *Three Character Classic*. First, he affirmed the overall clarity of style and purity of language in the *Three Character Classic*; second, he offered a scathing critique of the content and educational significance and function of the *Three Character Classic*. He argued that "he is surprised and regretful that the *Three Character Classic* is used as an enlightenment text in China. Comprehension of the *Three Character Classic* required a great deal of knowledge and proficiency in the Chinese language so that some of the teachings in the *Three Character Classic* were far beyond the cognitive ability of the enlightened child" (Bridgman, 1835, p.118). Furthermore, he criticized the lack of instruction in moral sentiments and religious principles in the *Three Character Classic*, and it was sad that the whole text did not even contain words to guide the children's minds beyond the limits of time and subjectivity. The Christian God, the Creator, the Judge of all things, and

the eternal nature of man was not mentioned, which led directly to the students having to grope their way to the realm of eternal life on their own in the dark (ibid.). Therefore, the translator believes that the teachings advocated in the *Three Character Classic* are definitely not a good way to educate children. This comment is meant to point out that “the traditional *Three Character Classic* lacks a Christian theological content or religious concern” (Yao, 2017, p.16), and therefore the dissemination of Christianity in China is particularly necessary.

1.3 Translation of the *Three Character Classic*

Before translation, the main arguments in the *Three Character Classic* are summarized by Bridgman, and the contents are basically the same as the original text. The English translation is composed of 178 lines. Since the source text is not divided into different paragraphs, he used Arabic numerals at the beginning of every fifth and tenth line. The translator mainly adopted the direct translation with notes, and the translation is basically faithful to the source text. The translation enjoys a certain degree of readability, probably because the target audience of the English translation of Confucian texts by protestant missionaries to China is not aimed at scholars or social elites, but mainly “people inside and outside the church who were passionate about the cause of spreading the gospel to China” (Deng, 2015, p.134). The pursuit of a popular and universal translation rather than a literary and academic one becomes one of the guiding ideas of the English translation of Bridgman. The cultural allusions and traditional Chinese Confucianism in the *Three Character Classic* are presented to English readers in an easy-to-understand language, which not only deepens readers’ basic knowledge of Chinese history, but also promotes the positive spread of Confucian culture, education, and family ethics in the western world. For example, in his translation of “黄香温席”, considering the cognitive and cultural deficiencies of Huang Xiang to most western readers, he used annotations to make up for the missing cultural background information. On the one hand, he introduced the story of Huang Xiang warming his parents’ bed since he was young, promoting the Confucian idea of children’s filial piety to their parents; on the other hand, he also introduced China’s bedding culture. He pointed out that China’s bedding includes: “bed curtains” (蚊帐), “a mat made of thin strips of bamboo” (竹席), “pillow also made of bamboo; though sometimes covered with cloth” (枕头), “a coverlet, which is usually very thick” (衾绸), “bedstead” (床榻).

Admittedly, there are problems with some of the translations, such as poor word choice, lack of meaning, and inconsistent forms. In his preface, he pointed out that “the translation retains the double-line layout but never attempts to preserve the rhythm of the original” (Bridgman, 1835, p.107), and it is clear that this break with the form of the original makes the translation more

in line with western reading habits but at the expense of the textual and poetic features of the original. In addition, mistranslations are also prominent and can be divided into three main categories. First, linguistic misinterpretation due to the limitation of foreign language proficiency; second, cultural misinterpretation due to the differences between Chinese and western cultures; third, misinterpretation due to the subjective motivations of the translator. The first two categories belong to unconscious misinterpretation, while the third category belongs to conscious misinterpretation. The following is an example of each.

Example (1) Source text: 匏土革，木石金。

English Translation: The gourd, earth, skin, wood, stone, and metal.

This sentence is about the first six of the eight musical instruments of ancient times. The third musical instrument is made of leather, which is used as a drum. The translator misunderstood the word “leather” as “skin”.

Example (2) Source text: 泌七岁，能赋棋。

Source text: And Pe at the age of seven, understood the game of chess.

The translator translated the phrase “能赋棋” as “understood the game of chess”, which does not reproduce the original meaning of “赋”. 赋 is a literary genre in ancient China, which is very particular about literary style and rhyme and has the characteristics of prose. From this example, it is inferred that Bridgeman’s knowledge of Chinese literature is inadequate.

Example (3) Source text: 群弟子，记善言。

Translation: In which his disciples have recorded the sage’s (Confucius) words.

Confucius’ disciples recorded his words and teachings as insightful and philosophical, not words in the ordinary sense of the word. The translator downplayed Confucius’ subtle words as ordinary words, but in fact he deliberately diluted Confucianism to serve the spread of the Christian gospel.

This is not conducive to “the translator’s true and comprehensive understanding and grasp of the spiritual essence of the source culture, and constitutes an obstacle to cross-cultural communication” (Wei, 2001, p.101); and to a certain extent, it exerts a negative impact on the reception and dissemination of the *Three Character Classic* and traditional Chinese Confucianism in the western world at that time. It also exerts a negative impact on the reception and dissemination of the *Three Character Classic* and traditional Chinese Confucianism in the Western world at that time.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSLATION MOTIVATION

Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere point out that translation never takes place in a vacuum; it always

takes place in a continuous process, and the context in which the translation takes place inevitably affects the way it is translated (Bassnett, 1998, p.93). To make the translation perform its cultural functions in the target language context, the translator must consider the socio-cultural context of the specific historical period in which the translation is made, and the historical motivations for the translation of the *Three Character Classic* by *Chinese Repository* are examined below in terms of the selection of the material and the motivations of the translator.

2.1 Selection of Materials for Translation

The English translations of protestant missionaries to China in the 19th century were driven in part by their Chinese studies or by helping others to learn Chinese. As early as 1834, Bridgeman listed the *Three Character Classic* as one of his translation goals. The first entry on page one of the *Glimpses of Canton: The Diary of Elijah C. Bridgman, 1834-1838* (written on March 17, 1834) is about the *Three Character Classic*. He recorded that “the *Three Character Classic* was translated in three ways: to gain knowledge of the language, to help others learn the language, and to collect material for the Repository” (Bridgman, 1998, p.1). In addition to translating the *Three Character Classic*, he also translated the classics of 《百家姓》 (*The Hundred Family Names*), 《千字文》 (*The Thousand Character Classic*), 《千韵幼学诗题》 (*The Thousand Rhymes on Poems for Young Learners*) and 《二十四孝》 (*The Twenty-Four Filial Virtues*). The great attention paid to Children’s first reads in *Chinese Repository* must have had deep-seated socio-cultural motivations. According to Kong (1999, p.9), the tendency of the subject culture overwhelmingly influences the decision to select materials for translation, those who initiate the translation (either the translator, the publisher, or the editor) often introduce a foreign work to establish an authoritative status for it, while stating how this work is most important in the culture of the source language, which is the most common technique. But this way of operating with authority is actually only successful if two conditions are met: first, there is an inherent need for such works in the native culture; and second, the native culture believes that the standards of the original language culture can serve as a model. To Bridgman, the *Three Character Classic* is nothing more than a shallow reading material embodying Confucianism, which he translated with religious tinted glasses against a cultural context of the western being strong and China being weak, aiming to “search for flaws in Confucian thoughts and culture as a way to highlight its negative influence in China and emphasize the superiority of Christianity” (Sun, 2020, p.27). The ultimate goal is to reveal the urgent need for Christian salvation in China. Such cultural factors influenced the translation of the *Three Character Classic* and, more profoundly, the translation of a large number of such works.

2.2 Motivations of the Translator

Bridgeman arrived in Guangzhou in February 1830 and began a missionary career in China that lasted more than thirty years. He came to China at a time when Western capitalism was expanding around the world and gaining momentum at an extremely rapid pace. The spread of Christianity was one of the means of ideological and cultural aggression by the powers against the weaker nations, and this formed the historical background for the arrival of Robert Morrison in China. Robert Morrison, the first English protestant missionary sent to China from the west, arrived in Canton in 1807. In 1822, when his assistant died and missionary work became difficult, he requested that missionaries be sent to China to assist him. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, therefore, sent him to China to spread Christianity, which constituted the direct reason for his arrival in China. Before departing, the American Board of Commissioners gave him these instructions: “In all your work, remember that the primary goal is to spread the gospel among the Chinese people. Make full reports to us of the character, customs, and manners of this people, and especially how their religion has influenced these, as your work and circumstances will permit” (Bridgman, 1864, p.24-26). Because of the deep-rooted Confucianism that dominated China at the time, the Chinese government issued a severe prohibition against the great wave of protestant missionary forces, which formed the political background for Bridgman’s arrival in China. He came to China to carry out his work amid the above-mentioned complex factors, and it was difficult for him to preach in such a severe political environment, therefore it became urgent for him to find a breakthrough.

The inaugural issue of *Chinese Repository* stated in the middle: “we are interested in the religious character of the Chinese, and will take a strong interest in it” (Bridgman, 1832, p.4). Most of the classical children’s first reads, such as the *Three Character Classic*, are “general and superficial expressions of Confucian ideas” (Zhou et al., 2020, p.123), and the translation of these texts can be considered “an extension of the work of translating the Confucian classics” (ibid.). However, introducing the Confucian classics to the west is not the fundamental purpose of *Chinese Repository*, and the use of paratext to “attack the discourses of Chinese sages and Chinese culture is a common strategy used by protestant missionary translators to translate Confucianism and attack it” (Deng, 2015, p.131). Bridgeman is no exception. The *Three Character Classic*, with its long, simple, and clear words, is full of complete Confucian educational ideas and systematic ethical and moral concepts, aiming to encourage children with exemplary figures as models. Confucianism has ruled China for more than two thousand years, and Bridgeman considered it the greatest obstacle to the spread of the Christian gospel. The translation of

the *Three Character Classic*, which had a solid status as a textbook for preschool children, is intended to take the opportunity to criticize the traditional Confucian ideological and moral system and the ideological and cultural roots of China, reflecting the “backwardness” and “ignorance” of China’s education.

In his inaugural article *Chinese Repository*, Bridgeman noted that many of the previous Catholic missionaries to China had made valuable presentations of China, but that the situation changed so much that a foolish, backward China needed to be salivated and presented to the west, and *Chinese Repository* aimed to spread Christian doctrine to every Chinese and to cultivate the true character of the great people of Heaven. Thus, “trying their best to explain the dark and backward side of China to gain missionary legitimacy became a powerful motivation for their translation of Chinese literature” (Deng, 2015, p.64).

3. TRANSLATION DISSEMINATION AND INFLUENCE

Chinese Repository only discloses the volume of circulation in 1836, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Circulation volume of *Chinese Repository* in 1836

Country/ Region	Volume (pieces)	Country/ Region	Volume (pieces)	Country/ Region	Volume (pieces)
China	200	Sandwich Islands	13	Hamburg	6
United States	154	Mumbai	11	Cape Town	4
United Kingdom	40	Bangladesh, Nepal, Assam	7	Thailand	4
Batavia	21	Malacca	6	Burma	3
Singapore	18	Penang Island	6	Ceylon	2
Manila	15	Sydney	6		

Table 1 shows that although the circulation is small, but it is widespread in the world, with China and the United States being the main places of circulation. Volumes 1 and 2 had a print run of 400 copies each, doubling to 800 in Volume 3 and increasing to 1,000 in volume 4, which contained the translation of the *Three Character Classic*. The 1837 Annual Report of the American Ministry noted that volumes 4 and 5 had an important impact and that all the volumes published to date would be of a permanent reference value. Although this number seems very small now, at the time the famous magazine *North American Review* had a print run of only about 3,000 copies. It is undeniable that *Chinese Repository* played an objective role in promoting the spread of modern Chinese Enlightenment educational ideas in the world. According to Li (2016, p.102), *Chinese Repository* has translated a total of about 70 Chinese classics to the English-speaking world, mainly

on language and literature, but also on religion, history, geography, science, geography, travelogues, etc. Through the influence and status of the series in the west, these translated articles have spread rapidly, providing the target language readers with a comprehensive understanding of China. It is noteworthy that a significant portion of the classics in *Chinese Repository* “is the first translation in the English-speaking world” (ibid., p.104). Although the translation of the *Three Character Classic* began with Morrison, the retranslation of Bridgeman and the first translation in *Chinese Repository* also brought the text and its rich cultural message to the attention of western readers.

As an important venue for the publication of English translations of Confucian texts such as the *Three Character Classic*, the role played by the journal in the process of “Eastern culture spreading to the West” cannot be ignored. Tury (2012, p.23) argues that translation is a fact of the target culture; sometimes it is a fact with a special status, and sometimes it constitutes its own identifiable (sub)system, but in any case, it is an established fact of the target culture. Translation has a shaping function on culture, and as a result, the translation has become the fact of the receiving cultural system, participating in its operation and playing a constructive or subversive role in it. The translation of the *Three Character Classic* was influenced by many westerners in the 1830s, and its translation was later quoted or referred to in the source language.

In 1841, the S.W. Williams Press of Macao published a book entitled *A Chinese Chrestomathy in the Canton Dialect*, in which the translation of the *Three Character Classic* was included in the third chapter of the study section on pages 9 to 16. The original translation has been preserved in its general spirit.

In 1845, Samuel Wells Williams went to Paris to visit the sinologist Stanislas Julien and the publisher Benjamin Duprat, who expressed his interest in Bridgeman and his printing business and his desire to obtain a copy of Bridgeman’s work and *Chinese Repository*. Williams then wrote to Bridgman, who was in Macau at the time, requesting that he send the relevant books to Julien. Miyazawa (2012, p.456) notes that the textual materials sent to Julien included a translation of the *Three Character Classic* from the journal. Based on the translation of the *Three Character Classic* in the journal, Julien published his own English translation of the *Three Character Classic* in 1864.

In 1848, Williams (1913, pp.526-529) cited Bridgeman’s translation, with some slight changes in the translation of some phrases, but in general, he was still using the translation of the *Three Character Classic* in the first volume of his *The Middle Kingdom: A Survey of the Geography, Government, Literature, Social Life, Arts, and History of the Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants*.

In 1861, Benjamin Jenkins retranslated the *Three Character Classic* with the subtitle “Romanized according to the Reading Sound at Shanghai”. He added pinyin to the Shanghai dialect after each word of the source text, providing two translations, a word-for-word direct translation and a translation from *Chinese Repository*, in its original form. He explained that the direct translation was intended to explain the meaning of each Chinese character, while Dr. Bridgman’s Italian translation was used to provide assistance to those who wished to access the spirit of the original text but were unfamiliar with the Chinese language.

In 1902, *The East of Asia Magazine*, founded by a British and American missionary in Shanghai, published Bridgeman’s translation of the *Three Character Classic* on pages 155 to 162. In 1906, Nanyang Government Book Bureau in Shanghai published Cao Qian’s book 《华英合编三字经图书》. His translation is still based on Bridgeman’s, but the translator made additional translations in the history of the Song Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty.

It is not difficult to find that the translation of the *Three Character Classic* in *Chinese Repository* provided an important reference for the translators mentioned above, and Bridgeman’s translation was inherited to a certain extent. However, highly critical paratextual information and intentional cultural misinterpretations were inevitably disseminated, which undoubtedly created a negative image of China in the world at the time. According to Miller (1974, p.66), “there can be no doubt that the reputation of Confucianism was severely damaged in the nineteenth century, and that protestant missionaries played a key role in this process”.

4. CONCLUSION

Through the above analysis, it is found that the translation of the *Three Character Classic* by Bridgman through *Chinese Repository* objectively spread Chinese primary culture and the basic concepts of Confucianism to the west, and built a bridge for the west to understand Chinese traditional culture. His translation has a high academic value and provides an important reference for future generations, and his contribution to the dissemination of Chinese culture should be acknowledged. However, due to his status as a missionary and the special historical background of his arrival in China, he manipulated the paratext to criticize some Confucian educational ideas and concepts, creating a negative image of China, and to a certain extent, causing adverse effects on the spread of Chinese culture in the west. To gain in-depth understanding of this historical event of translation more objectively, the background of the time and the cultural orientation of the translation subject can not be ignored. In addition, researchers should go beyond linguistic

analysis and explore the political, cultural, and historical motivations behind it.

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