

On Studies of Burton D. Watson's Translation of Traditional Chinese Classics in China and the West

Guoqiang Yang

Cultural Research & Communication Center, Zaozhuang University, Zaozhuang, China
ygq1023@126.com

Keywords: Burton D. Watson; Translation; Traditional Chinese Classics; China; The West

Abstract. American sinologist and translator Burton D. Watson (1925–2017), well-known for his great translations of Chinese classics, has drawn the attention of and been studied by scholars around the world from a variety of perspectives, of which it is of great significance, both in theory and practice, to make a thorough critical analysis, pointing out the problems and imperfection and correspondingly putting forward remedies so as to shed new light on the studies centered on Burton D. Watson and his translation of traditional Chinese classics.

Introduction

In the past nearly 400 years of history of Chinese literature being translated into foreign languages, Western sinologists, such as Matteo Ricci, James Legge and Richard Wilhelm of the earlier periods, and Roger T. Ames, Cyril Birch, Barry Burden Blakley, Burton D. Watson, Bonnie Medougall and Howard Goldblatt of modern times, have played a key role making great contributions to the dissemination of Chinese culture and literature and the advancement of Western civilization as well. Their achievements have drawn the attention of and been studied by scholars around the world from a variety of perspectives, of which it is of great significance, both in theory and practice, to make thorough analysis. Based on a thorough summery of studies of Burton D. Watson both in China and the West, this paper is intended to make critical analysis pointing out the problems and imperfection and correspondingly putting forward remedies so as to shed new light on the studies centered on Burton D. Watson and his translation of traditional Chinese classics as well.

Burton D. Watson and his translations of Chinese literature

Burton D. Watson (1925–2017), a prestigious American sinologist and translator, is best known for his numerous translations of Chinese literature into English in his over sixty years' professional translation career, including Chinese historical classics including *Records of the Grand Historian of China: Translated from the Shih chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien*(1961), and *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the Former Han by Pan Ku*(1974), philosophy works like *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*(1964) and *The Analects of Confucius*(2007), and Chinese poetry like *Chinese Rhyme-Prose: Poems in the Fu Form from the Han and Six Dynasty Periods*(1971), *Cold Mountain: 100 Poems by the T'ang Poet Han-shan*(1962,1970), *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry: from Early Times to the Thirteenth Century*(1984), etc.

Watson's translations have not only won popularity with the Western readers but also received popular recognition among the vast majority of sinologists in the West. Furthermore, some of his translations have become the teaching materials in American universities and colleges and still quite many others have been included in *UNESCO Collection of Representative works, Chinese Series*, which has made great contributions to the dissemination of Chinese culture and literature in the English-speaking world. Thanks to his long and prolific translations, Watson has received many awards, including the Gold Medal Award of the Translation Center at Columbia University in 1979, the PEN Translation Prize in 1995 for *Selected Poems of Su Tung-p'o*, and the PEN/Ralph Manheim Medal in 2015 which, the most important medal, enables Watson to become the first winner who devoted all his lifetime to the translation of Chinese literature in the history of this medal.

In the past few decades, Burton D. Watson has remained the target of research around the world. A thorough summary of studies in China and the West and correspondingly a critical analysis are to be made as follows, pointing out the imperfection so as to promote the studies centered on Burton D. Watson.

Studies of Watson's Translation of Traditional Chinese Classics in the West

Studies of Burton D. Watson's translation of Chinese literature began from the 1950s in the West. Watson's translation of *the Shih Chi*, that is, *Records of the Grand Historian of China: Translated from the Shih chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, ranks top in his influential translations. That's why academic achievements centered on it have been made in profusion. Edwin George Pulleyblank of Cambridge University (1959) thinks that the beauty and elegance embodied in Watson's translation of *the Shih Chi* contribute a lot to its great popularity among the Western readers, but on the other hand he also points out its defect which lies in the inadequacy of semantic research and reference materials due to Watson's overdependence on the studies of *the Shih Chi* made by the Japanese sinologists and neglect of the latest studies made by Chinese and Western sinologists [1]. Yang Liensheng of Harvard University (1961) thinks highly of Watson's translation of *the Shih Chi* for its readability and reliability but he also points out that many mistakes come arise in Watson's translation, and doesn't agree totally with his decreasing footnotes as much as possible[2]. Ho Ping-Ti of Chicago University (1963) holds that Watson has done a good job in his mastery of the classical Chinese literature style in the Han Dynasty which contributes to his accuracy and readability of his translation of *the Shih Chi*[3]. Hans Frankel of Yale University (1986) among the scholars alive today no one can surpass Watson in translating so many Chinese classics of philosophy, history and poetry into English with the employment of elegant language[4]. That's why Paul W. Kroll of Colorado University, editor-in-chief of *T'ang Studies*, hails Watson as today's August Pfitzmaier(1808-1887). Grant Hardy of North Carolina University (1996) argues that, from the perspective of literature, Watson's translation of *the Shih Chi* is unprecedented in its vividness of language which is very suitable for leisure reading bringing about comfortableness [5]. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (1996) points out in his paper *A Century(1895-1995)of Shih chi Studies in the West* that it is under the influence of Watson's translation of *the Shih Chi* that the new generation of scholars started their studies of *the Shih Chi*[6].

Besides, there are also scholars thinking highly of Watson's other translations. For example, both Ronald C. Egan, professor of UC, Santa Barbara, and Stephen W. Durrant, professor of University of Oregon, praise highly Watson's translation of *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Famous American poet Gary Snyder, also an important member of the American Beat Generation, gives high marks to Watson's translation of Chinese poetry, including *Cold Mountain: 100 Poems by the T'ang poet Han-Shan*(1962), *Su Tung-p'o: Selections from a Sung Dynasty Poet*(1965), *Po Chu-i: Selected Poems*(2000), and the like[7].

Studies of Watson's Translation of Traditional Chinese Classics in China

In China, the late professor Wang Rongpei(1995a) first mentioned Watson's translation, that is, *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*(1984), but without any comment or analysis. It is Jiang Hongxin and Yin Feizhou (1998) who made the initial studies of Watson's translation. The two scholars make a critical analysis of the target text with specific examples, holding that Watson's *Han Fei Tzu: Basic Writings*, although accounting for one-third of the source text in quantity and also including some misinterpretations, is of high-level translation [8]. From 2006 more and more achievements began to spring up of studies of Watson's translations, increasing progressively year by year on the whole. Li Xiuying(2006a,b; 2007a,b; 2008a,b; 2016) makes in his series of papers systematic studies of Watson's translations and sinology study and his role played in the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture with focus on his translation of *the Shih Chi*[9], which helps to have a good mastery of his translation thoughts and styles. Wei Jiahai(2007) makes a thorough analysis of Watson's translations of Chinese prose and poetry discussing his translation

characteristics and methods, and thereby giving an objective evaluation of his translations and his position in the history of the foreign translation of Chinese literature[10]. Wang Hong(2013) makes a comparative study of the two English versions of *Mozi* i.e. *The Ethical and Political Works of Motse* translated by Mei Yibao and *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu* translated by Watson, discussing retranslation of *Mozi* from the perspective of the purpose of translation, readers' requests and the text type, which helps the "going out" of Chinese classical literature[11]. Deng Na(2013) explores how the ecological aesthetic thoughts in *Zhuangzi* are reproduced in Watson's English Version of *Zhuangzi*, i.e. *the Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* from the perspective of Eco-translatology, to be specific, from three dimensions: language dimension, culture dimension and communication dimension of Eco-translatology theory[12]. Yang Jing (2014) makes a discussion of Watson's translation achievements in its comprehensive examination of the translating activities in the 20th century of the United States of America from the perspective of cultural communication between China and the West[13], which offers enlightenment for the Chinese culture going global and cultural diversification around the world. Liu Jingguo(2015) discusses in detail the prominent features of Watson's English version of *The Analects* in terms of diction, syntax, figures of speech and culture-specific items, arguing that Burton Watson, with respect for the Chinese culture and the employment of masterly translation skills, succeeded in conveying the artistic flavor and cultural elements embodied in the original text in plain and pithy English[14]. Feng Zhengbin and Lin Jiabin(2015)makes a detailed analysis of Watson's translation strategy which takes acceptability into full consideration, making his translations academic and readable, and thereby significantly enhancing the status of Chinese poetry in the realm of world literature, and sums up tactical inspiration Watson's translation provides for the current Chinese Culture Going Global Strategy[15]. Lin Jiabin(2017) makes systematic studies of Watson's translations and successful translation experience, which may enlighten the rational thinking of "Chinese literature going global" strategy, as well as deepen the understanding of the nature of cultural translation[16]. Ma Yuefei(2017) makes a systematic and comprehensive study of the aesthetic subject in Burton Watson's translation of *Zhuangzi (Inner Chapters)* with convincing examples in order to discover appropriate ways to achieve the aesthetic representation in the translation of Chinese classics[17]. Wu Tao(2018) points out that Watson's translations provide an excellent model of the export of Chinese culture in his recreation in the English world of Chinese classics ranging from poetry, history to philosophy and Buddhism, from which a set of useful suggestions are inducted for the translation of Chinese culture[18]. Yang Guoqiang(2018) holds that Watson's effective translation of quite many Chinese classics in his over 60 years of translation career has made great contribution to the dissemination of Chinese literature and culture, which provides us lots of enlightenment for the promotion of the effective translation of Chinese literature as well as its overseas dissemination and reception[19].

Critical Analysis of the Studies of Watson's Translation of Chinese Classics

From what has been analyzed above, it can be safely concluded that the academic circles both in China and the West have paid close attention to Burton D. Watson and his translation of traditional Chinese classics with detailed studies made from different perspectives. Generally speaking, studies in the West basically pay attention to micro-level, such as narrative structure, semantic investigation, intertextuality and so forth, whereas the studies in China show a dynamic development, shifting from micro-level to macro-level with more focus on social reality than on the text itself, aiming to work out solutions to the problems in the dissemination of Chinese culture, which is more culture-conscious.

However, there also remain problems and imperfection in the studies of Burton D. Watson and his translation of traditional Chinese classics, which is summed up as follows.

First, the studies need deepening. Currently, a large quantity of studies only scratch the surface with more focus on language style, translation skills and the like on the basis of comparative analysis of texts or purely from an empirical or impressionistic point, which, to a large extent, is

confined to the critical model of binary oppositions centering on the static texts,

Second, dynamic studies need enhancing. A vast majority of the studies are confined to the static studies within the text, which is characteristic of the lack of the dynamic studies requiring integral observation of the internal and external translation with more focus on dissemination and effect. In view of this, Translator Behavior Criticism, put forward by Chinese scholar Zhou Lingshun, the latest achievement of translation studies in China, is expected to play a leading role in the field of translation criticism around the world.

Third, the studies need expanding. Just as analyzed above, Burton D. Watson, in his over sixty years' professional translation career, is best known for his numerous translations of Chinese classics into English including Chinese classics of history, philosophy, poetry and Buddhism, among which his translations of traditional Chinese classics of history and philosophy have drawn more attention than those of Chinese poetry and Buddhist sutras in the academic circles around the world. Watson's achievements cannot be evaluated comprehensively and objectively unless more studies are conducted of his translations of Chinese poetry and Buddhist sutras. In addition, Watson's translations of traditional Chinese classics are well-known for accuracy, elegance, readability and reliability, contributing a lot to the dissemination and reception of Chinese culture and literature in the West, which offers for the "going out" of other nations' culture and literature, especially those in the third-world, and eventually for the promotion of the cultural diversity around the world, great enlightenment which needs to be studied in the future.

Conclusion

Burton D. Watson plays a significant role in the translation and introduction of traditional Chinese classics to the world. His painstaking efforts and outstanding achievements have made great contributions to the dissemination of Chinese culture and the advancement of Western civilization, which should be evaluated in an objective and comprehensive way, which means systematic studies including his studies of sinology, translation strategies, selection of materials to be translated, translator mode, sponsorship and so forth, should be conducted centering not only on his translations of Chinese classics of history and philosophy, but also on those of Chinese poetry and Buddhist sutras.

Acknowledgements

SFLEP Research Project (2018SD0006B)

Research Project of Zaozhaung University (2017ZX10)

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