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Translation between China and Europe in the Long Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

This paper is a brief review of the translation works between China and Europe in the long eighteenth century. The translations of Western texts into Chinese in the period can be roughly divided into three categories: religious texts, scientific works and popular literary writings. The latter two categories usually served missionary purposes and to some degree were regarded as an extension and by-product of missionary endeavours. Additionally, the translation of Chinese novels into English in the period provides a lens through which we can explore the nature of European–Chinese transcultural exchange in the globalised era. In the long eighteenth century when the missionaries began to translate Chinese literary works into English, reading tastes in England were already broadened, reaching out to the European continent, to the Turkish and Arabian East and to America, if not fully "globalized". The translation and change of the text in this process can tell us how the Chinese fiction is (mis)understood, translated, revised and received in England and Europe, and the transcultural exchanges that it signifies between China and England or Europe in the long eighteenth century.

Keywords

Translation, Chinese literary works, Europe, Hau Kiou Choaan, The Orphan of China

In the long eighteenth-century when Europe's overseas expansion underpinned the commercial and cultural exchanges between the West and the East, China represented great opportunities for solid and profitable commercial relationships on the one hand, and ongoing Christian missionary work on the other. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, many businessmen and missionaries left Europe for China with the support of their governments or sponsored by the churches (Zhang 1-8). Alongside the development of international trade and missionary work in China, there appeared many books or narratives translated between Europe and China, most of which were completed by Europe missionaries and some by European businessmen living in China or in regions nearby with special permission for

foreigner's residency (Wylie i-vi; Song 7-15). As Peter J. Kitson argues, the primary demand was for translations of religious and classic texts, namely the Bible and the Confucian classics; however, literary fiction (often combining modern secular and traditional religious values) was also part of the translation and exchange of texts that occurred in this period (31, 39).

I want to suggest that the translation of novels between Chinese and English in the long eighteenth century provides a lens through which we can explore the nature of European–Chinese transcultural exchange in the globalised era. But it is important to acknowledge from the outset that at the beginning, this exchange was mostly one-sided. According to Lihua Song, at least 350 foreign novels, allegories or biographies were translated, compiled or written by Western missionaries in Chinese and published in China in the period between 1600 and the 1930s (340-75) (Note 1). Most of the translated and compiled works were originally produced in English. By contrast, the Chinese displayed a striking indifference to English efforts at engagement. This attitude was demonstrated by Emperor Qianlong's response to the Macartney Embassy in 1793, when the latter sought to establish broader trade between Britain and China and to secure permission for British missionaries to preach in China. Presented with a letter from King George III and many valuable gifts, Qianlong offered this blunt reply:

> Swaying the wide world, I have but one aim in view, namely, to maintain a perfect governance and to fulfil the duties of the State: strange and costly objects do not interest me. If I have commanded that the tribute offerings sent by you, O King, are to be accepted, this was solely in consideration for the spirit which prompted you to dispatch them from afar. Our dynasty's majestic virtue has penetrated unto every country under Heaven, and Kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures. (*Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking* 324-25)

This correspondence reveals China and Britain's contrasting attitudes towards cultural and commercial exchange. On the one hand, Britain's overtures to Qianlong reveal its global ambition, as we have noted above; while, on the other, China's refusal to engage reveals its own kind of conservative foreign policy, whereby trade and engagement with Europe was treated as a distant issue. While Europe aggressively expanded overseas and embraced the wealth and the social changes brought by global trade and colonial exploitation, the Chinese government enforced the foreign policy of "cut off country from outside world" to ensure the stability of the country (Note 2).

John King Fairbank has attributed China's vigilance towards the Western countries to the following factors: first, China is an ethnocentric country with a long-established idea of regarding people from foreign countries as "barbarians" (22). Chinese scholars in the eighteenth century thought that Western knowledge lagged behind the Chinese, and that Western writing was thus unworthy of being translated. This partly explains why only very few Chinese scholars participated in translating books from the West.

Second, the rulers in the Qing dynasty—Manchu, a minority ethnic group that originated from the north-eastern part of China—sometimes put the defence of their dynasty before that of the country. As some governors of the Ming dynasty were in exile and trying to restore the former regime, the Qing government banned contact between Chinese people living on the coast and overseas in order to keep its sovereignty stable (Fairbank 22). Third, China had traditionally been a Confucian society based on agriculture and bureaucracy, which means it had great difficulty in adapting to the commercial, industrial and nationalist revolution happening in, and brought about by, the West (Fairbank 22). Besides these factors, the superior national productivity of China in the long eighteenth century made China overconfident about its self-sufficiency and its ability to cut off commercial connections with the West. According to Robert Markley, "China emerges as the economic engine for the early modern world—the most populous, wealthiest, and among the most technologically sophisticated nations before 1800" (2). Believing that the stability of national sovereignty was most important, that China did not need imports from Europe, and that China was strong enough to block external influences, the Qing government saw no need for cultural or commercial exchange with the outside world. The same thinking would underpin the uneven exchange of books and knowledge between China and Britain. Although some Chinese intellectuals entered into an open-minded exchange with British as well as European missionaries, for the most part it was Europeans who initiated and undertook the translation of texts and knowledge between Europe and China.

Translations of Western texts into Chinese in the period can be roughly divided into three categories: religious texts, scientific works and popular literary writings. The latter two categories usually served missionary purposes and to some degree were regarded as an extension and by-product of missionary endeavours. When European missionaries arrived in China, they brought many books on various scientific subjects, such as mathematics, technology and astronomy. As I have mentioned above, China in the long eighteenth century was still an agricultural country that paid little attention to industrial technology. Because Western science was much more advanced than that in China at that time, missionaries utilised their knowledge in science to win the trust and admiration of the Chinese intellectuals (Brenner 3-21). For example, when the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci was in China in the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth century, he cooperated with Guangqi Xu and Zaozhi Li, officials from the Qing government, to translate many important European mathematic and scientific texts from Latin into Chinese. These included the first six volumes of *Euclid's Elements* (published in China in 1607), *Epitome Arithmeticae Practicae* (published in China c. 1614), *Principle of Measure* (published in China c. 1607) and *Astrolabium* (published in China c. 1607) (Zeng and Sun 60) (Note 3).

As we might expect, the main focus of missionary translation efforts was not scientific works but religious narratives, including the Bible and religious allegories such as John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Robert Morrison, a British Christian missionary who arrived at Canton in China in 1807, is usually regarded as one of the first translators of the Bible into Chinese (Alcott 53-58). In 1813,

Morrison completed the translation of the New Testament, and in 1819, finished the translation of the Old Testament with the help of another British missionary, William Milner—who was also sent by London Missionary Society—and published it in Malacca in 1823 (Alcott 100-01). Simultaneously, Joshua Marshman also worked on a Chinese translation of the Bible and published his version in India in 1822 (Zhao 8). Other milestones include William Chalmers Burns's translation of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) written by John Bunyan. The translation was published in 1851; according to Dadui Yao, this was the first time that a full-length Western novel had been completely translated into Chinese (156). It is also worth mentioning that Milner composed a Christian conversion novel in Chinese, titled *Dialogues between the Two Friends Zhang and Yuan* (1819) (Note 4). It consists of dialogues between Zhang, a sincere Christian believer, who answers the questions raised by Yuan, a potential convert.

Unlike Morrison and Marshman who had translated the Bible into classic Chinese, and Ricci who maintained a close relationship with the elite class, Milner and Burns chose to translate their texts into a mixture of vernacular and semi-classic Chinese, which made their works more accessible to a general readership. At that time, writing in vernacular or semi-classic Chinese was not reputable within established Chinese literary circles, because classic Chinese was a sign of elite social status and good education. Narratives in vernacular or semi-classic Chinese were excluded from highbrow literature. Only much later, in the context of the Chinese literary revolution of the twentieth century, did writing in vernacular become widely acceptable or praiseworthy. Alphonse Joseph Garnier suggests that the early Western translators who chose to use vernacular Chinese did so in the knowledge that one day China would experience the same literary revolution as the West, whereby the vernacular language forms used by the general population became common written language (96). Therefore, even though European translators were mocked in Chinese literary circles for using Chinese vernacular to translate the Bible, Garnier claims that they could possibly be viewed as early pioneers of an important literary movement—the New Cultural Movement in China (96). In Patrick Hanan's *Chinese Fiction of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (2004), he discusses how the novels written or translated by Christian missionaries with the help of their Chinese assistants influenced Chinese literature to develop new forms and methods (58-79, 85-104). And Zuoren Zhou, a pioneering twentieth-century literary critic in the New Cultural Movement, further suggests that the early vernacular translations of the Bible introduced punctuation to Chinese writing (3).

However, while it is true that missionary translations could inspire Chinese vernacular writings, and that Chinese writing borrowed important elements of punctuation from the West, it should also be noticed that even before the translation of the Bible into Chinese in the early nineteenth century, there were already many indigenous novels written in Chinese vernacular and with basic punctuation in Chinese. Both *The Story of the Stone* (c. 1754, trans. 1816) and *Hau Kiou Choaan* (c. 1616-1630, trans. 1761) were written in vernacular and semi-classic Chinese before the circulation of vernacular translations of Western works in China. And while it is true that classic Chinese does not have sophisticated punctuation

such as the question mark or the quotation mark, it does use a dot to signify a break in, as well as an end of, a sentence, which means serving the functions of the comma, the colon, the full stop and so on in English. I would argue that while Christian translations in Chinese were indeed innovative and influential, their role in the development of Chinese vernacular literature is not as significant as Wang, Zhou and Garnier have suggested. The dissemination of these religious works was limited, after all, and Chinese literature had already experienced similar developments internally and unprompted by the arrival of translated works.

Fictional narratives, including stage plays and novels, constitute the third important category of translation between Chinese and English. In the long eighteenth century when the missionaries began to translate Chinese literary works into English, reading tastes in England were already broadened, reaching out to the European continent, to the Turkish and Arabian East and to America, if not fully "globalised". Courtship novels from continental Europe—such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie; or, The New Heloise* (1761) and Bernardin de St. Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*, or *Paul and Virginia* (1788)—were translated and published in England; and the translation of foreign novels into English nurtured a global reading taste that paved a way for the reception of Chinese literary narratives in England. Most notably these include, on the one hand, traditional Chinese dramas, such as *The Orphan of China* (c. 1264-1294, trans. 1735), a historical tragedy centred on a male hero, and, on the other, newer modes of prose fiction narrative such as *Hau Kiou Choaan*, which emerged from the Chinese "talent-beauty" genre, a form of Chinese domestic romance.

The Orphan of China was a historical play written by Junxiang Ji during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) and set in the Spring and Autumn Period (770 to 476 BC) of Chinese history (Note 5). It tells the story of Wu Zhao, an orphaned child and the only survivor of Angu Tu's attack upon his family. Zhao is saved by Ying Cheng, an upright retainer of his aristocratic family, with the help of several kind officials, but many people sacrifice their lives in this process, including Cheng's newborn son. Upon reaching maturity, Zhao avenges his family. The play was first translated by Joseph de Prémare, a French missionary preaching in China, under the title of *L'Orphelin de la Maison de Tchao* (*Orphan of the Zhao Family*) and published in France by P. Jean-Baptiste Du Halde in his edited French book *Description de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise* (*Description of the Empire of China and Chinese-Tartary*) (1735), a book introducing the history and geography of China and Asian countries to European readers. Du Halde was a priest himself and his book collected the writings of many European missionaries living in China. The English translation of his book, published in 1738, was quoted many times by Thomas Percy in his annotations on Chinese manners in *Hau Kiou Choaan*. The story of the Chinese orphan, however, had a life of its own in England and Europe: Voltaire adapted it into a new stage play, *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (*The Orphan of China*), which was performed in Paris in 1755 (Kitson 217). In England, William Hatchett wrote the first English adaptation of the play under the title of *The Chinese Orphan: An Historical Tragedy* in 1741. Later in 1759, the Irish writer Arthur Murphy rewrote the story and it was

performed in London to great acclaim (Kitson 216). As Elizabeth Harper suggests, *The Orphan of China*'s theme of tragic revenge appealed to eighteenth-century English audiences well versed in Shakespeare and the broader tradition of historical theatre and revenge tragedy (Note 6). In its various European translations and performances, the play also served to reinforce received Western ideas about the loyalty, sacrifice and martial spirit of traditional China.

The seventeenth-century talent-beauty novel *Iu Kiao Li, or the Two Fair Cousins* is another important peer to *Hau Kiou Choaan* in the Chinese context. Like *The Orphan of China*, it circulated broadly in Europe, first in Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat's French translation published in 1826 and then in anonymous English translation, *Iu Kiao Li: or the Two Fair Cousins, A Chinese Novel* (1827). As a story of triangulated courtship resolved when the hero marries his initial love interest as well as her cousin, it presented European readers with a happy marriage between three people, which was enabled by Chinese practices of polygamy. *Hau Kiou Choaan* was translated by an English employee in the East India Company as an aid to language acquisition. And passages of *The Story of the Stone* were similarly translated by an English missionary, Robert Morrison, who was training to preach in China (Percy ix; Morrison 194-200). We know in general terms that English missionaries and businessmen played the most active role in Chinese–English literary translation in this period and that the motivation for their translations was to know more about China or, conversely, to convert Chinese people or to further enable profits via trade with China. But besides these practical purposes, it is also worth considering that the selection of talent-beauty novels for translation may also have been made with literary purposes in mind. Another typical example of the talent-beauty work in this period is *Hau Kiou Choaan*, which was edited and published by Thomas Percy in England in 1761 (Percy ix). English readers' curiosity about China could be an important factor that motivated Percy to do so. Indeed, it is possible that the contemporary consumer taste for chinoiserie in England stimulated a broad curiosity about Chinese customs and manners (Note 7). Chinoiserie—an aesthetic taste formed by the Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth century for arts, goods and designs of Chinese styles—is, it should be noted, a more significant phenomenon in England in the period than elsewhere because of "England's close association with the expansion of commercial activity, its dissemination across class boundaries, and the attendant debates on luxury, consumption, politeness, and the taste that it produced", as David Porter has argued (*The Chinese Taste* 10, 17). In this context, it is significant that the circulation of *Hau Kiou Choaan* in Europe also started in England. Although the initial print run of *Hau Kiou Choaan* in 1761 in England was modest—just one thousand copies, which still left enough unsold copies for its reissue in 1774—its influence was nonetheless substantial. By 1766, a French translation was published under the title of *Hau Kiou Choaan, Histoire chinoise* and circulated across the European continent as the English translation had before it (Min 166; Milner-Barry 215).

As Percy himself said in a personal letter to George Macartney, he believed that "its principal merit is its genuineness" as a Chinese text (Nichols 342). In the title page of each volume of *Hau Kiou Choaan*, Percy also quoted from Du Halde's *A Description of the Empire of China and of Chinese Tartary* (1738): "There is no better means of instruction on China than letting China speak for herself" (Du Halde 258; Vol. 2) (Note 8). It is clear that, for Percy, a key reason to edit *Hau Kiou Choaan* for publication in England was that he believed it would satisfy the English people's curiosity about China. To better serve this end, Percy added many annotations to the original translation to explain the unfamiliar Chinese geography, goods, animals, customs and so on to English readers. These annotations were welcomed and applauded by English readers, as well as by fellow scholars and antiquarians. In 1762, in a personal letter to Percy, Jas Grainger, as Percy's close friend and literary correspondent, remarked of Percy's edition of *Hau Kiou Choaan*: "You have been at great pains collecting your notes to the Chinese History. They throw much light upon it; and, to deal frankly with you, I think they constitute the most valuable part of your book" (Nichols 280-81). T. C. Fan agrees that "[t]he most remarkable thing about Percy's editing of the Chinese is his annotation. His numerous notes are worth studying, not because they are new or striking, but because they are a part—and an important, almost integral, part—of the work" (123). These responses suggest that Percy's annotations to the text of the manuscript accounted for much of the success of *Hau Kiou Choaan* in England.

However, even though Percy's edited translation of *Hau Kiou Choaan* received high praise in England for its convincing portrait of China, there was still a notable gap between Percy's imagined China and the real one. Percy's edition of *Hau Kiou Choaan* might lead to some misunderstandings among the English readers about China as well as Chinese literature. First of all, though Percy himself assured readers in the text's preface that *Hau Kiou Choaan* provided "a faithful picture of Chinese manners", his footnotes are not always correct (xv). Because Percy himself was not a Chinese-language scholar and never visited China, his annotations were based entirely on secondhand citations from books about China published in Europe. He made a list for his own reference of key texts including Du Halde's *A Description of the Empire of China and of Chinese-Tartary*, Alvaro Semedo's *The History of that Great and Renowned Monarchy of China* (1655) and Gabriel Magaillans' *A New History of China: Containing a Description of the Most Considerable Particulars of that Vast Empire* (1688), but the information he draws from them is sometimes unreliable.

For example, Percy provides the following footnote about a subplot in *Hau Kiou Choaan* in which a great Mandarin forces a handsome woman to be his "second wife" or concubine:

> The Chinese laws allow but one, who can properly be called a wife. Yet they may have several second wives or concubines, whose situation is not at all disreputable: but they are greatly dependent on the first, who alone is mistress of the house. The children are deemed to belong to the true wife, and inherit equally with her own. P. Du Halde, Vol. 1. p. 304. (*Hau Kiou Choaan* 25; Vol. 1, ch. 1)

Du Halde's understanding that "the children born of a concubine […] have equally a Right to inherit" is inaccurate (304). In fact, while the children of second wives (concubines) did belong to the true wife, they could only inherit a very limited amount of family money. In matters of status, reputation or inheritance, they could not be equal to the children born to the true wife. Indeed, inequality between the children of the true wife and the second wives is even a trigger for the domestic conflicts and tensions in many Chinese novels, such as the tension between Baoyu and his younger brother Huan and the embarrassing situation that Baoyu's sister Tanchun faces in the family, precisely because both the latter two characters are born of a concubine.

Nonetheless, after *Hau Kiou Choaan* was introduced into England and Europe, many Western writers and scholars compared it to contemporary European courtship novels. Most famously, it likely inspired the following remark from Goethe, as recorded by his assistant Johann Eckermann in *Conversations with Goethe* (1850):

> Within the last few days […] I have read […] a Chinese novel, which occupies me still, and seems to me very remarkable […] the Chinamen think, act, and feel almost exactly like us; as we soon find that we are perfectly like them, excepting that all they do is more clear, more pure, and decorous, than with us. With them all is orderly, citizen-like, without great passion or poetic flight; and there is a strong resemblance to my "Hermann and Dorothea", as well as to the English novels of Richardson. (348-350)

Goethe's interest in Chinese courtship novels was formative to the development of his notion of *Weltliteratur* (world literature), which totalises all literatures across linguistic, territorial and national boundaries in order to push beyond European nationalism (O'Bell 64-80; Cha 7). In her essay "'While we thus Value what is Foreign': Percy's *Hau Kiou Choaan* as a Precursor to 'World Literature'" (2020), Ning Ma points out that by juxtaposing the Chinese tradition with the diversity within European traditions, Goethe treats Eastern and Western literatures as commensurable local instances without a specific hierarchy (111). Goethe's cosmopolitanism has a structural similarity with the early modern polycentric worldview (Ma 111). While the title of the Chinese novel Goethe refers to here is not specifically mentioned, many scholars, including Ning Ma and Bian Dongliu, believe that it is *Hau Kiou Choaan* (Ma 108-14; Bian 38) (Note 9). Perhaps what is most striking, however, is Goethe's sense of "a strong resemblance" or sympathy between European and Chinese characters who, as he puts it, "think, act, and feel almost exactly like us" (349). Goethe's sense of the continuity between Chinese fiction and those of contemporary authors such as Richardson and himself suggests that to his mind *Hau Kiou Choaan* conformed to European literary tastes and expressed universal modes of thought and feeling (50). The translation and change of the text in this process can tell us how the Chinese fiction is (mis)understood, translated, revised and received in England, and the transcultural exchanges that it signifies between China and England in the eighteenth century.

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Notes

Note 1. See the appendix "Concise Compilation on the List of Novels in Chinese from Western Missionaries" in Lihua Song's *Missionary's Chinese Novels* (2010). 详见宋莉华所著《传教士汉文小说研究》(2010), 附录"西方来华传教士汉文小说书目简编".

Note 2. This policy forbade trade and contact between the Chinese people living in coastal areas and foreign countries. Canton had once been the only port in China that allowed import and export under government rules. According to Percy's preface, it was in Canton that James Wilkinson, the translator of *Hau Kiou Choaan*, had resided.

Note 3. 徐光启, 李藻之. The book titles in Chinese:《几何原本》前六卷、《同文算指》《测量法义》《浑盖通宪图说》.

Note 4. The Chinese title for *Dialogues between the Two Friends Zhang and Yuan*: *张远两友相论*.

Note 5. The Chinese title of *The Orphan of China*: *趙氏孤兒*. Its other English titles include: *The Orphan of Zhao*, *The Orphan of Chao* or *Zhaoshi Guer*.

Note 6. For comparative analysis on *The Tragedy of Hamlet* and *The Orphan of China*, see Elizabeth Harper's *East-West Theories of Tragedy: Shakespeare's Hamlet and Ji Junxiang's Zhaoshi Guer (The Orphan of Zhao)* (2019) and Liang Junqing's *On Tragic Heroes: A Comparative Study of Hamlet and The Orphan of Chao* (2015).

Note 7. The European general public had a great enthusiasm for China, which is to a certain degree cultivated by the circulation of memoirs or travel notes written by missionaries who had been to China, such as Matteo Ricci's *The Christian Expedition among the Chinese* (1615), which is often compared with *The Travels of Marco Polo* (1299).

Note 8. Halde's original text in French: "Il n'y a pas de meilleur moyen de s'instruire de la Chine, que par la Chine même" (*Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise* 258, Vol. 2).

Note 9. Scholars disagree which Chinese novel Goethe refers to. For example, Daniel Purdy insists that Goethe is referring here to *Iu Kiao Li*. After analysing the evidence that Bian and Purdy cite, as well as Goethe's complete conversation, I would say that current evidence is not sufficient to reach a firm conclusion about which "remarkable" Chinese novel Goethe discusses here. However, it is clear that Goethe reads more than one Chinese novel, obviously including *Hau Kiou Choaan*, with which he is very impressed, because a plot that he mentions later in this conversation is identical to that of *Hau Kiou Choaan*. Goethe's remarks on the plot are as follows: "then there is another of two lovers who showed such great purity during a long acquaintance, that when they were on one occasion obliged to

pass the night in the same chamber, they occupied the time with conversion, and did not approach one another" (349-50). These events are drawn from the plot of *Hau Kiou Choaan*.