

# A Comparative Study of the Translation Activities in the Western Renaissance Period and the Scientific and Technological Translation in the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties

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**Abstract:** In the history of the development of Europe, the Renaissance is a key stage of development of the awakening of humanism spirit. During it, national languages were widely promoted, and in the hope of promoting social change, the key proponents of the Renaissance carried out a large number of literary translation activities, forming a climax in the history of western translation. In China, the translation history has been recorded since the Zhou Dynasty, and the translation activities have been developing continuously since then. This paper compares the translation activities of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties with the Renaissance period. By means of comparative research, the author discovers the differences in translation background, purpose, essence and content of the two translation upsurge of the Western Renaissance and the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, which will not only help to sort out and study the history of translation and the history of translation studies, but also help to promote the emergence of new translation thoughts and theories.

**Keywords:** Translation activities; Western Renaissance period; Scientific and technological translation; The Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties

## 1. Comparison of translation background

With the development of productive forces, the germination of capitalism appeared and the capitalist economy prospered. In this situation, a new bourgeoisie arose. At the same time, chronic corruption within the Holy See has milked the people and caused discontent among the people. The emerging bourgeoisie was dissatisfied with the church's control over the spiritual world and hoped to break the bondage of the church's theology. The Renaissance came into being. It is one of the most important ideological movements in western society. It advocates humanism and regards it as the core of ideology. Under the guidance of humanism, the Renaissance movement opposed the divinity and advocated human nature, and opposed theocracy with the help of human rights, attacked the feudal hierarchy, and resisted the arbitrary rule of religion. Under the Renaissance humanism ideological trend, with more thought leaders, who led the public continuously the pursuit of "truth, kindness and beauty", and through a series of practical activities to the humanistic spirit, translation activity is the prevalent practice one of the Renaissance, and achieved remarkable results.

At the same time China was in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. With the opening of new sea routes, European colonialists found their way to China and India, and they began to go to China. The influence of the Travels of Marco Polo, described by Polo, made Western colonists attempt to plunder China overseas. Meanwhile, in order to win over Protestants and expand the influence of Jesus Church, Jesus Church began to preach to the east. In 1580, Luo Mingjian, an Italian, accompanied Portuguese merchants to Guangzhou for trade, bribing the governor of Guangdong and Guangxi to build a church in Zhaoqing (Ma 182)<sup>1</sup>. This was the beginning of the Jesuits' eastward mission. After that, Matteo Ricci, John Tang, Jacob Lo and Nan Huai ren went to China to preach. In the course of their missionary work, they all noticed one problem ---the Chinese people were not interested in Jesuits. As a result, missionaries turned their attention to the Chinese scholar-bureaucrat class, so the translation activity of combining Jesuits with Chinese scholar-bureaucrat was born.

## 2. The concept of sponsor and the comparison of the translation content

The concept of patron was put forward by Andre Lefevere, one of the leading figures in the cultural school of translation studies, that is, "the power (individual or organization) that can promote or hinder the reading, creation and rewriting of literature" (Lefevere 15)<sup>2</sup>. The sponsors of Renaissance translation activities were the emerging bourgeoisie and its humanism, while the sponsors of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties were the European churches and the Chinese emperors.

Since the Renaissance itself advocated humanism and revived ancient Greek and Roman culture, relevant translation activities also focused on it. In this period, Leonardo Bruni, an Italian, pioneered western humanistic translation. He translated a lot of Greek philosophical works, among which his translations of Plato, Aristotle and other philosophical pioneers became classics, which had a wide and far-reaching influence. In addition to Leonardo Bruni, there was another famous translator in the Renaissance. He was

Desiderius Erasmus, known as the “master of humanism”. He translated many ancient Greek literature works, which set off a huge wave of humanism translation at that time. The most classic literary translation is the translation of the literary works of the ancient Greek rhetorician Banima and the playwright Euripides. In addition, he has translated commentaries on the Latin New Testament of the Bible. In the process of translation, he also integrated humanistic thoughts into it, broke through the restriction of the authority of the church, regarded the ideas conveyed by the Bible itself as more important, and tried to restore the original spirit of the Bible. Literary works have become an important carrier of passing judgment consciousness, rational spirit and resisting tradition. (Shen 977)<sup>3</sup>

In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the European churches supported a number of Jesuits in order to spread their religion to the East. Naturally, what they required was the interpretation of the Bible and the Christian classics. At that time, scholar-officials were the earliest target missionaries after the missionaries entered China. However, they did not show strong interest in Christianity, but paid attention to the advanced science and technology in the West, so what they hoped to translate were some books about science and technology. Among them, the western mathematics represented by the “Principle of geometry”, military technology such as Hongyi cannons, mechanical technology such as clocks and watches, and science and technology such as astronomy and geodetic, all had a great influence on China. (Liu 152-158)<sup>4</sup> And the rulers of the Ming and Qing dynasties, they can directly determine the missionaries in China, so the missionaries in the literary intelligentsia, have the opportunity to contact the royal family, through to the emperor to show some scientific and technological inventions, to get the support of the ruling class. As a result, their original intention is spread religion, but because of the emperor of China translation content requirements, its translation content also converted to technology and literature. Matteo Ricci studied the Chinese language and Confucian classics in order to establish himself as a “Western Confucian”, to make friends with famous people and to become a scholar and then achieve his origin goal. In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, western missionaries, while spreading western religion and technology to China, also translated Chinese classics and literary works into foreign languages. For example, according to Julius Eliot’s *The Trail of Mr. Dasili*, Matteo Ricci “tried to translate the Four Books of China into Western languages and sent them back to his country, where the Chinese people were delighted to read them” (Ma 207)<sup>5</sup>

### 3. The essence of translation

The translation in this period is not only the product of the Renaissance culture but also the medium to promote the development of the Renaissance. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, although the translation activities brought us advanced science, it was fundamentally science with religious color. (Liu 47-49)<sup>6</sup>

### 4. Conclusion

According to the comparison, it can be found that the purpose and content of translation are closely related to the social background at that time. The Renaissance needed to borrow classical literary works from ancient Greece and Rome to spread humanism and oppose theocracy and feudal hierarchy. It is mainly reflected in the interpretation of the Bible and the translation of secular literary works. Through literary translation, the content of the works can interact positively with the social and cultural contexts of various regions, thus forming a relatively positive cultural effect. (Luo 171-173)<sup>7</sup> The same is true of Ming Dynasty translators. At that time, China was technically closed and backward. Advanced intellectuals realized the importance of science and technology and assumed the responsibility of disseminating scientific knowledge. But beyond the stated purpose of translation, we can dig deeper and find that it is essentially cultural communication. Renaissance is the exchange and collision of ancient Greek and Roman culture, papal culture and capitalist culture. The translation of missionaries in Ming Dynasty is the communication between western culture and Oriental traditional Confucianism. Translators not only translate a work into different languages, but also act as a bridge, an ambassador for cultural exchange.

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