

A Study of the Impact of the Dissemination of Ancient Chinese Primer Classic in the United States*

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Carrying the roots of Chinese civilization to its origins, the Chinese Primer classic has received considerable attention in the international community's cultural diffusion. The spread of the Chinese Primer class studies in the United States, aided by missionaries such as E. C. Bridgeman, Samuel Wells Williams, and William Alexander Parsons Martin, sinologists such as Witter Bynner and David Hinton, has been characterized by unidirectionality, permeability, and pluralism.

Keywords: America, missionaries, sinologists, the Chinese Primer classic

Introduction

The ancient Chinese Primer classic is the root of 5,000 years of excellent traditional Chinese culture, and the overseas dissemination of Confucian culture reflects Chinese rising cultural self-awareness and cultural confidence. The relationship between China and the United States originated from the expansion of the colonial market, with missionaries as the connecting link between the two countries. In 1830, the first American missionaries landed in Macau, such as Elijah Coleman Bridgman and David Abeel, and by the end of the 19th century, according to incomplete statistics, there were more than 1,500 American missionaries in China. Missionaries played a bridging role in Sino-American relations, effectively promoting the authentic export of China's image and thus strengthening the perception of Chinese civilization in the United States and the rest of the Western world; at the same time, missionaries also spread Western Christian culture, created a blend and penetration with Eastern civilization, and promoted the intermingling and complementarity of the world's diverse cultures. With the promotion of missionary culture, people have a deeper understanding of the life of the Chinese nation and people in the United States. The abundance of funds and the promotion of research have led more and more missionary sinologists to pay attention to value traditional Chinese Primer classic, conduct pure academic research on classical literature and thought, and intend to trace the roots of Chinese history and explore the source of Chinese enlightenment thinking. The ancient Chinese Primer classic served as a vehicle to bridge the cultural structure of the missionaries in China and the United States, effectively promoting the in-depth development of the cultural relationship between China and the United States. Through the educational concept of Confucian ethics, we can explore the thinking mode of Chinese enlightenment

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education, thus missionaries and sinologists can have more in-depth contact and understanding of the oriental civilization.

The Spread of the Ancient Chinese Primer Classic by American Missionaries

American missionaries, with the mission of spreading Christianity, intended to conquer or even replace Chinese culture with Christian culture. And in the process of indoctrination and dissemination, the missionaries actually functioned as a bridge to translate and spread Chinese culture to the West, presenting an image of China as it was actually felt and conveying a true cultural perception in the cultural exchange between China and the United States; therefore, people in the United States and even in the Western world were no longer merely hearsay. American missionaries had a rigorous approach to learning and realised that if they were to gain a foothold in China, they had to study the Confucian classics and understand the psychological characteristics of the cultural make-up of the Chinese people. By learning Chinese on their own, reading Chinese texts, they became deeply involved with classical Chinese culture, and in later years gradually began to write related readings directly in Chinese, although their aim was still to extend Western influence and control over China. The ancient Chinese Primer classic became essential reading for American missionaries to understand Chinese culture and learn Chinese characters, laying a solid cultural foundation for their later cross-cultural spread. In the course of the foreign dissemination of Chinese Primer classic, the role of the typical missionary sinologists, namely, E. C. Bridgeman, Samuel Wells Williams, and William Alexander Parsons Martin, was an important one.

E. C. Bridgeman

As the first American missionary to China, E. C. Bridgeman drove the American people to an understanding of Chinese culture. On 14 October 1829, E. C. Bridgeman boarded Oliphant's "Rome" and arrived in Canton on 25 February 1830, where he began his regular work. Finding Western understanding of China extremely one-sided and rigid, E. C. Bridgeman wanted to support the missionary activities by setting up a printing factory in order to give the Western public a deeper understanding of the foreign culture, and to report extensively on Chinese civilization and culture. In addition, the printing of a large number of religious books to transmit the spiritual culture of Christianity to the Chinese on paper would facilitate the development and implementation of the mission of edification and propagation. This request was supported by a number of businessmen of the time, and eventually *The Chinese Repository* took shape, with the main aim of introducing the Chinese state and traditional culture to Chinese and Western audiences.

In the Chinese Series, E. C. Bridgeman systematically introduced and commented on *The Three Character Classic*, *The Hundred Family Names*, *The Thousand Character Classic*, and other texts of ancient Chinese Primer classic learning. The translation of *The Three Character Classic* was the most comprehensive and specific. In July 1835, he translated and published "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" in *The Chinese Repository*, which really pushed *The Three-character Classic* to the American society. The full text is 14 pages in total, including three versions of *The Three-character Classic*, namely *Keae Yuen Santsze King*, *Santzse King choo sheih*, and *Santzse King heunkoo*, of which *Santzse King heunkoo* is the most important version for his translation.

Samuel Wells Williams

As a pioneer of early Chinese studies in the United States and the first professor of Chinese studies in the

country, Samuel Wells Williams was involved in the main printing of *The Chinese Repository* and gradually took full responsibility for the day-to-day affairs of the printing house and some of the editorial work of *The Chinese Repository*. Two of his earliest articles were published *The Chinese Repository* in February 1834: “Chinese Weights” and “Measure and Imports and Exports of Canton”. As a missionary, he pursued the integration of Eastern civilization on the basis of Western cultural ontology, constructing a “Confucius plus Jesus” model of thought.

Samuel Wells Williams’s book, *The Middle Kingdom*, which was formed on the basis of his lectures, was published in 1848 and became a classic work for the general public in the West to understand China. Its 11th chapter focuses on classical Chinese literature, providing a detailed introduction to *The Four Books and Five Classics*, *the Sutra of Filial Piety*, and other ancient Chinese Primer classic. Samuel Wells Williams has always had a respect for the achievements in ancient Chinese civilization. He uses specific textual analyses as examples, intersperses the life experiences of authors such as Confucius and Mencius, and quotes the views of other scholars such as James Reimucci, to give the American public a comprehensive and three-dimensional understanding of Eastern culture.

William Alexander Parsons Martin

William Alexander Parsons Martin was a Presbyterian missionary of the Protestant Church of Christ, and was known as a “China man”. He served as a missionary in Ningbo, China, between 1850 and 1860. After his arrival in China, he studied the Confucian classics and spent five years studying *The Four Books and Five Classics*. He was in awe of traditional Chinese culture and introduced a reverence for Chinese history and culture into his writings, writing in Chinese and propagating his sermons. An important piece of Christian propaganda written by him is *The Way of Heaven in Its Origin*, which contrasts Christian thought with Chinese religious thought. The book affirms the origin of the universe as expounded in *The Tao Te Ching*, and argues that there is a commonality between the “three things” of the Tao that gives birth to all things and the “trinity” of Christian theology. *The Tao Te Ching* is a guide to truth and virtue.

In *The Essence of Sinology: The Spiritual World of the Chinese and Its Influence*, he highlights the importance of poetry in the Chinese primer education, arguing that the Chinese attached great importance to the cultivation of poetic art as a major feature of their educational system. A separate chapter reviews Chinese poets and poetry, using examples such as *The Shi Jing* to illustrate the stages of Chinese lyric poetry, and refers to the enlightenment book *The Thousand Family Poems* as an aid to the argument for the enlightenment origins of traditional Chinese poetry education. In addition, he points out the differences between the mythical Confucius and the historical Confucius, and argues that although *The Rites* and *The Book of Filial Piety* are mostly good, they are somewhat divorced from the essential ideas of the sage Confucius and are overly exaggerated and deified. In his opinion, the books of Confucius and Mencius can be regarded as *The Bible* of China, while *The University* is the most important of *The Four Books* for Chinese people. *The Four Books and Five Scriptures* effectively fulfilled the function of ethical edification. As a Chinese generalist, he read a large number of Chinese texts so that he was able to build a solid foundation in Chinese and to act effectively as a bridge between Eastern and Western civilisations. In addition, this work has enabled European and American audiences to gain a better understanding of the image of Confucius and the culture of Chinese monasticism, which has served as an excellent cross-cultural communication tool.

Translation and Introduction of Chinese Ancient Books by American Modern Sinologists

Chinese culture, represented by literary and philosophical classics, has become a window for American readers to understand China through translation. In the English-speaking world, many translators have deep cultural ties with China and are committed to the translation and dissemination of Chinese culture. The 19th century was the time when the academic model of Western Sinology was formed, which was characterized by a tendency to be scientific and professional. The translation and interpretation of the classics of the enlightenment study in the contemporary West showed more open and diversified characteristics, and more demonstrated its practical significance and application value.

Witter Bynner

Witter Bynner devoted himself to the study of oriental poetry, especially ancient Chinese poetry, and created many poems with oriental charm. The poetry collection *Lovely Stranger* published in 1919 is a work influenced by the oriental spirit. In 1920, he worked with Chinese students from the University of California to translate the famous passages in *The Book of Songs*, which was praised as “one of the best American poems of this century”. During his teaching at the University of California, Bynner met Jiang Kanghu, a scholar from China. Bynner and Jiang Kanghu worked together to translate the well-known *Three Hundred Tang Poems* in China, which lasted 11 years. In 1929, *Qun Yu Shan Tou* was officially published, with a total of 311 Tang poems translated and introduced. It is considered as one of the most influential books in the United States in the translation of Chinese poetry into English. This book is the first English translation of *Three Hundred Tang Poems* in the English-speaking world. It is an enlightening book for foreign readers to understand ancient Chinese poetry. It has been selected by many universities as a textbook for learning Chinese poetry and culture. Under the guidance of the thought of “loose style” poetry translation, Bynner translated the emotion, style, and musicality of Tang poetry in a unique way. Bynner’s poems reflect his rich experience in the translation of Tang poetry and show the “Chinese poetry style” of Tang poetry images, which is a famous “imitation of Chinese poetry”. “Yushan Poems” and imitated Chinese poetry won Bynner a high reputation in English poetry and promoted the development of modern American poetry.

In 1944, Bynner translated *The Tao Te Ching*, which was a popular version in the United States and further promoted the acceptance and dissemination of traditional Chinese culture in the United States. Bynner referred to the English versions of different translators and versions, added his own understanding of “the way”, and translated *The Way of Life* recording to Laotzu in clear, concise, and poetic language. Influenced by the translation of *Three Hundred Tang Poems*, Bynner uses poetic form, rhythm, and language to explain the serious and profound Taoist philosophy. The poetic translation method makes the translation smoother and more in line with the language and cultural characteristics of the American era. Many readers are first exposed to the “way” from the far east through this translation.

David Hinton

David Hinton highly respected Chinese poetry culture, translated and introduced a lot of ancient poetry charm in the vision of American culture. During his college years, Hinton became interested in ancient Chinese literature. At that time, he read many Chinese classics, and began to try to create poetry with his love for Chinese classical literature. In 2008, Hinton translated and published *The Selected Works of Ancient Chinese Poetry*, which includes many classical poems. During this period, he was infected by the works of Du Fu, a poet of the Tang Dynasty, and regarded Du Fu as the greatest lyric poet in history. In the anthology, Hinton combed the

historical context of the Chinese poetry tradition. In the 3,000 years from 1500 BC to now, the Chinese poetry tradition has become the largest and longest lasting literary tradition in the world literature forest. In combination with the thinking mode of Taoist cosmology, Hinton discusses the characteristics of ancient Chinese and its influence on poetry, a special literary genre. He has a deep understanding of the grammatical structure of ancient Chinese, which shows that he has a solid foundation in Chinese, and this stems from his obsession and love for Chinese literature. In 2013, Hinton co-edited it as *The Four Classic Books of China* and published it, thereby becoming the first Western translator to translate four of the most representative Chinese philosophical works in English alone.

Hinton's translated poems are based on modern English, which is not only easy for contemporary readers to understand, but also can convey the artistic conception and beauty of ancient poems. Hinton conveyed the literary structure and philosophical connotation of the original work to the readers in the translated version, and also integrated the Chinese classical philosophy in his prose and poetry creation, with a strong sense of speculation. Hinton has made corresponding philosophical interpretations of the poet's thoughts and ecological images, and even interpreted the connotation of the relationship between "Qi" and "Tao" and the universe in ancient China, thus enabling readers to appreciate the unique images of landscape poetry and painting in China, gradually forming the Chinese philosophical thinking and ecological concepts, and broadening the translation vision of ancient Chinese philosophy.

Conclusion

The cultural genes are engraved in the long lineage of the Chinese people as the texts of the ancient Chinese Primer classic have been handed down from generation to generation. As the process of cross-cultural communication continues to accelerate, the dissemination of the ancient Chinese Primer classic in the United States is characterised by the following features: unidirectionality, permeability, and plurality.

1. Unidirectionality: The original purpose of the American study of the Chinese Primer classic was the intention of the American missionaries to shape the religious beliefs of the Chinese people through the cultural integration of the classic. The cultural exchange between China and the United States was basically one-way; the strong Western culture represented by the United States was introduced to China in large numbers, while the weak Chinese culture had little impact on American society.

2. Permeability: From the time when the China series began to present a true image of China and Chinese culture to Westerners, to the time when more and more missionaries entered China and became involved in the modernisation of China, the traditional Chinese Primer classic texts have been essential classic sources for understanding Chinese culture. George Washington, the first President of the United States, John Adams, the second President, and Thomas Jefferson, the third President, all held Chinese culture in high esteem and sought to use it to intervene in political construction. Some researchers found a poem *Shi Jing—Wei Feng—Qi Ao* (《诗经·卫风·淇奥》) on Jefferson's poetry excerpts, suggesting that in moral edification, there is a commonality between Chinese and American works, and that Chinese cultural images can be used to express their political ideas.

3. Pluralism: E. C. Bridgeman introduced the Western world to the true image of China with *The Chinese Repository*, and Samuel Wells Williams introduced the Western world to systematic Chinese culture with his *General Theory of China*. Pointing for missionary purposes has become a complete historical memory, and the ranks of sinological studies have grown.

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