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A Case Study of the Overseas Dissemination Predicament of Wang Rongpei/Ren Xiuhua's *Book of Change*

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This paper investigates the limited overseas reception of Wang Rongpei and Ren Xiuhua's *Book of Change* (2007), the first English translation of *Yijing* completed by mainland Chinese scholars. Adopting a case study approach, this paper draws on library holdings, publication records, and platform reviews to examine the factors underlying this outcome. Four factors are identified including a domestic readership orientation, the absence of overseas co-publishing and distribution arrangements, the omission of the *Yizhuan* and of annotations, and the translation's absence from mainstream overseas sales channels. The findings indicate that translation production and dissemination are distinct processes, and that reader positioning, distribution partnerships, and paratextual support require systematic consideration at the design stage of classics translation projects intended for overseas audiences.

Keywords: Wang Rongpei, *Book of Change*, overseas dissemination, translation of Chinese classics

Introduction

The *Book of Change*, co-translated by Wang Rongpei and Ren Xiuhua and published in 1993 by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, was the first English translation of *Yijing* completed by mainland Chinese scholars after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Wang Rongpei was one of the most prominent translators of Chinese classics in contemporary China. His translations cover the *Laozi, Zhuangzi, Book of Songs, The Peony Pavilion,* and other canonical works, among which six have been included in the Library of Chinese Classics, a major national publishing project for introducing Chinese cultural classics to the world.

The translation has been widely recognized in Chinese academia. Some scholars have used it as a corpus for research on English translations of *Yijing*, analyzing it from perspectives such as eco-translatology, habitus theory, and translation norm theory. However, Zhang and Liao (2015) note that domestic research on English translations of Yijing remains limited in scale and scope, and Zhang (2023) further observes that while the range of topics has expanded, the field still suffers from a narrow methodological base. More importantly, a stark contrast exists between domestic recognition and overseas reception. Data from Geng Jiyong and Yu Shibo (2024) show that the global library holdings of this translation amount to only 14 copies, with no reader ratings or reviews on Amazon or Goodreads. By comparison, the Wilhelm/Baynes translation has 853 library holdings and a substantial number of reader reviews. This discrepancy between domestic standing and overseas reception merits closer study.

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This question concerns not only the Wang/Ren translation itself but also the broader predicament of Chinese classics translation "going global." In recent years, substantial resources have been invested in promoting Chinese culture overseas through translation projects. Yet this case suggests that the production of translated texts does not automatically lead to their dissemination. As Xie Tianzhen (2014) observed, "if one only cares about 'output' and not about effect, at most one has completed a translation, not a 'translation-mediated dissemination.'" Taking Wang/Ren's *Book of Change* as a case study, this paper examines the causes of its overseas dissemination predicament from four dimensions: publication orientation, distribution channels, translation strategy, and reader accessibility.

Publication Orientation

Target Readership Positioning

To evaluate the dissemination effects of a translated text, one must first establish its intended readership. Judging from the available materials, the target readers of the Wang/Ren translation are not ordinary overseas readers. Publication information shows that this translation was positioned as one of the "Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press Chinese Culture Bilingual Series," intended as "a popular reading series for the general readership, especially foreign friends, to understand Chinese culture." This wording merits close reading. "Foreign friends" is not equivalent to "overseas readers." The former usually refers to foreigners who are studying, working, or have already developed an interest in Chinese culture in China; the latter encompasses ordinary readers in the English-speaking world who know little or nothing about Chinese culture. This distinction matters a great deal. A translation for "foreign friends" in China can assume its readers have already had some contact with Chinese culture. A translation aimed at "overseas readers," by contrast, cannot make such an assumption.

Ren and Ma (2024) provide further evidence of how reader orientation shapes reception. Their analysis of online reviews shows that readers approach *Yijing* with functionally different expectations. Some seek divination guidance, others philosophical wisdom, and still others psychological insight. A translation designed for one function may not serve the others well. The Wang/Ren translation, positioned for domestic readers with prior cultural exposure, does not explicitly address any of these overseas reader groups.

Format and Design Implications

This positioning difference directly influences the design orientation of the translation. The Wang/Ren translation adopts a Chinese-English bilingual format, with the Chinese original on the left page and the English translation on the right. This arrangement serves the scenario of "comparative reading". Readers need to attend to both languages simultaneously. For overseas readers unfamiliar with Chinese, the bilingual format not only fails to aid understanding but increases visual burden.

By contrast, mainstream overseas English translations of *Yijing* (such as the Wilhelm/Baynes translation and Minford's translation) adopt an English monolingual format supplemented by annotations and introductions, rather than a bilingual format. The bilingual format is useful for Chinese readers learning English or for foreign readers already studying Chinese, but it does not serve the needs of ordinary overseas readers who simply want to understand the text.

Paratextual Materials

Furthermore, the translation's paratextual materials also reflect this domestic orientation. The preface and introduction were written for Chinese readers rather than overseas readers. The translation lacks the kind of

reader-friendly guidance such as introductions to the historical background of *Yijing*, explanations of its divination function, or discussions of its philosophical significance that overseas readers would need to approach the text. In this sense, the Wang/Ren translation assumes a reader who already possesses substantial cultural knowledge, which is precisely what the ordinary overseas reader lacks.

Distribution Channels

Publisher and Publishing History

The publisher of the Wang/Ren translation is Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, a domestic publisher primarily engaged in foreign language textbooks and academic works. From its first edition in 1993 to its reprint in 2007, the translation was published solely by this press and was never co-published with overseas publishers.

By contrast, the Wilhelm/Baynes translation was repeatedly reprinted by Princeton University Press, Pantheon Books, Routledge, and other mainstream Western publishing institutions, covering both academic and popular publishing channels. It was first published in 1950 by Pantheon Books in New York, then by Routledge & Kegan Paul in London in 1951, and subsequently by Princeton University Press in 1967. The Princeton edition alone has been reprinted numerous times and remains in print today.

Library Holdings

The difference in distribution channels is directly reflected in library holdings. Geng and Yu (2024) report that the global holdings of the Wang/Ren translation amount to only 14 copies. Considering that WorldCat includes library holdings records from more than 170 countries worldwide, 14 holdings means the translation was purchased by only a very small number of libraries, most likely concentrated in university libraries with strong Asian studies or sinology collections. The likelihood of ordinary overseas readers encountering this translation in public or university libraries is extremely low.

Commercial Availability

Research by Xie Zhiming (2024) further reveals a noteworthy phenomenon. Among the Top 10 English translations of *Yijing* retrieved on Amazon, the Wang/Ren translation does not appear. This means that even if overseas readers wish to purchase an English translation of *Yijing*, this translation is not within the effective coverage of mainstream sales channels. It is essentially unavailable to overseas readers through normal commercial channels.

The lack of availability is not merely a matter of marketing. It reflects a more fundamental issue. The translation was never designed with overseas distribution in mind. The publisher operates primarily within the domestic market, the translation was intended for domestic readers, and its distribution network was confined to domestic channels. Under these conditions, even if overseas readers were interested in the translation, they would have no practical means of obtaining it.

Translation Strategy

Beyond publication orientation and distribution channels, the strategic choices of the translation itself also affected its overseas readability.

Omission of the *Yizhuan*

A notable feature of the Wang/Ren translation is that it omits the *Yizhuan* (*Commentaries*). The translation notes explicitly state: “As for the *Yizhuan* explaining the *Yijing,* it was written by Confucius and his disciples,

directing the *Yijing* toward a philosophical path. This book does not include this part." This choice means the translation presents only the hexagram and line statements of the sixty-four hexagrams, without the philosophical interpretations of the *Yizhuan*.

For readers with some knowledge of Yi studies, this choice may be acceptable. But for ordinary overseas readers, the hexagram and line statements of *Yijing* are extremely concise and obscure; divorced from the explanations of the *Yizhuan*, they are extremely difficult to understand. Overseas readers' interest in *Yijing* often derives from its philosophical wisdom or psychological significance, and the *Yizhuan* is precisely the main carrier of these connotations. Both the Wilhelm/Baynes translation and Minford's translation include or extensively cite the Yizhuan precisely because they recognize that without it, *Yijing* is merely an incomprehensible divination manual for overseas readers.

The Wilhelm/Baynes translation, for example, includes the *Yizhuan* commentary alongside the hexagram and line statements, enabling readers to understand the philosophical depth of the text. Minford's translation, similarly, provides extensive commentary drawn from the *Yizhuan* and later Chinese commentators. These translations recognize that the *Yizhuan* is not an optional supplement but an essential interpretive framework without which the *Yijing* text remains opaque.

Lack of Annotations

Another noteworthy dimension is the lack of annotations. The Wang/Ren translation has no annotation system. When translating the *Laozi*, Wang Rongpei explicitly stated that one of his principles was "Chinese-English bilingual, with Chinese pinyin marked under Chinese characters, facilitating foreign readers who understand Chinese to compare and study." This positioning continued into the translation of *Yijing*, likewise presupposing that readers possess some Chinese reading ability or basic understanding of Chinese culture. For overseas readers lacking these prerequisites, the translation offers no cognitive support.

The combination of these factors—omission of the *Yizhuan*, lack of annotations, and bilingual format means that the translation, while perhaps suitable for its intended domestic audience, is poorly suited for overseas readers. The translation strategy, in other words, is not a matter of translation quality but of reader orientation. The translation was not designed to be comprehensible to overseas readers, and it is therefore not surprising that it has not been widely read by them.

Reader Accessibility

Absence of Reviews

Reader reviews are a direct indicator of whether a translation has truly entered the reading horizon of target readers. On the two major overseas book platforms, Amazon and Goodreads, the Wang/Ren translation has no valid reader ratings or reviews. Geng Jiyong and Yu Shibo (2024) explicitly record this: "The Wang/Ren translation and the Fu translation have no ratings or reviews."

Interpreting the Silence

This "silence" requires cautious interpretation. The absence of reviews may mean the translation was not discovered by readers, or that readers discovered it but felt no inclination to review it, or that the platforms themselves did not include the translation. Considering that the Wang/Ren translation may have no effective sales link on Amazon, the more reasonable explanation is that the translation never entered the horizon of mainstream overseas book sales and reading communities. By contrast, Xie Zhiming's (2024) research collected a total of

2,707 valid reviews from Amazon and Goodreads for the Top 10 translations, among which the Wang/Ren translation does not appear at all.

Significance of the Silence

The absence of reader reviews is significant because it indicates that the translation has not entered the reading horizon of ordinary overseas readers. It is not merely that readers have evaluated the translation negatively; rather, they have not encountered it at all. The translation remains invisible in the overseas reading market.

This invisibility results from the combined effect of the publication orientation, distribution channels, and translation strategy examined above. Each factor alone might not have prevented dissemination, but together they created a situation in which the translation was effectively unavailable and incomprehensible to overseas readers. The absence of reviews is therefore not an anomaly but a predictable outcome.

Conclusion

The Wang/Ren *Book of Change* illustrates a gap that frequently separates the production of a translation from its dissemination. The translation itself is academically sound, and Wang Rongpei's standing as a translator is not in question. What the case exposes is a design problem that the translation was never configured on the assumption that overseas readers might discover it, obtain it, or make sense of it. The bilingual layout, the omitted *Yizhuan*, the absence of annotations, and reliance on a single domestic publisher collectively kept it out of overseas view.

For Chinese classics translation projects, the lesson is that completing a translation is not the same as reaching readers. Decisions about readership, publishing partnerships, distribution, and supporting materials belong to the design stage, not as afterthoughts. In this case, the obstacle was not the quality of the translation but the absence of a dissemination strategy.

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