

On English Sinologist Minford's Translation and Translation Ideas

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Abstract

John Minford is a contemporary British sinologist and translator of world renown. He has a natural affinity with Chinese, and after feeling the charm of Chinese literary works, he believes that this excellent literature should be known to all mankind. Taking the translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a beginning, Minford started his journey of translating Chinese literary works. He blended the understanding and interpretation of the translations by Chinese and Western scholars, paid attention to the relationship between self and other, and explored the richness of culture, accelerating the spread of Chinese culture in the English-speaking world and promoting the integration of Chinese literature and Chinese culture into the Western world. To understand this translator more comprehensively, this paper introduces Minford's translation career, his view of translation, and analyzes the translation style and characteristics of his successful translations of classics such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, *The Art of War*, and *Tao Te Ching*.

Keywords

Sinologist, Translator, John Minford, Translation career.

1. Introduction

After studying at Winchester Public School in England as a teenager, Minford studied Western philosophy at Oxford University and then switched to Chinese. He is good at Latin, Greek, and French...and is regarded as a rare sinologist in the academic world. He was called a "cultural ferryman" and his research in Sinology is based on his own deep knowledge of Chinese culture and his translations to Chinese literature works have given him an unassailable position in the field of cultural exchange between China and foreign countries. When talking about Chinese literature and world literature, some scholars believe that "the more national the thing is, the more likely it is to become global, but without the intermediary of translation, a work that is excellent on the national soil may be in a state of 'death' in a foreign country. Only a good translation gives the work a continuous life and life in the afterlife" (Wang Ning 2014: 26). So there are many who esteem the efforts and contributions of translators like Minford in their translation work, and his self-positioning is that "I am primarily engaged in literary translation using literature as a tool, but not for the sake of pure scholarship, but to create enjoyable-to-read versions of literary works, versions that make it accessible to English readers." So for decades, Minford has devoted himself to studying, researching, translating and disseminating Chinese culture, loving Chinese Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, valuing the humanistic and artistic values of Chinese literature, and looking at Chinese culture with respect rather than looking down from above. For Minford, Chinese literature belongs not only to China but also to the world and humanity as a whole. "It is a great blessing in my life to be able to study Chinese and translate Chinese literature; there are very few excellent translations of Chinese literature in the world, and there are still many Chinese literary classics to be translated." He wanted to share the good things with people all over the world, so he tried to spread them. Through the English translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, for example, people in the English-speaking

world can understand to some extent how the Chinese think and understand a way of life different from theirs.

2. Overview of Minford's Sinological Research and Translation Career

Young Minford entered Winchester Public School in England, where he studied Greek, Latin and classical literature. At that time, students were required to do a great deal of Greek and Latin translation, and he developed a passion for translation. In 1964, Minford enrolled at Oxford University, where he accumulated cultural and linguistic skills. It was there that he met his Chinese teacher, David Hawkes, who led him down the path of Chinese cultural translation. While studying at Oxford, Minford had a short exchange to Hong Kong, during which he lived with a Chinese family. While helping to tutor the host family's children in their homework, the children's mother told him that if he wanted to truly understand China and the Chinese people, he should read *Dream of the Red Chamber* and she wrote down the Chinese characters “红楼梦” on a piece of paper. Minford believes in the Chinese culture of destiny, just as he chose the Chinese Department while having majored in so many foreign languages, simply because he chose Chinese major by accident. After studying Chinese for four years and finishing reading *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Minford proposed a joint translation of the Chinese book to Hawkes, who had already signed a translation contract with a publisher. To meet the publisher's requirements, after several efforts to bring his translation style closer to Hawkes', so that the readers could not tell it was a collaborated translation, and once published, it became the most widely accepted and influential translation.

In 1977, Minford went to the Australian National University for his doctoral studies under the supervision of the sinologist, writer and literary critic Pierre Ryckmans and the Chinese-American sinologist Liu Ts'un-yan, who is known as “Encyclopedia of Chinese Culture”. At this time, Minford became more interested in Chinese literature. The following year, while teaching at the Tianjin Foreign Language Institute, Minford translated Miao Yue's *Lun Tz'u*, which was published in the book *Song without Music: Chinese Tz'u Poetry*, edited by Song Qi. In 1980, Minford, who was teaching at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, formally met Song Qi, who had already heard about each other. The people who influenced Minford's cultural stance and philosophy of translation most were Liu Ts'un-yan and Song Qi. Making friends with Song Qi made Minford realized that translation was not the only way to introduce “The Best China” to the world. He was dissatisfied that many Westerners were only interested in the Chinese economy and market, so he wanted to try his best to make Chinese literature and culture known to the world in more ways than one. He even has set up a website (<https://www.johnminford.com/>) specifically to spread Chinese culture. In 1982, Minford's translation of the fourth volume of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *The Return of the Pearl to Tears* was published by Penguin Press. During the four years living in Hong Kong, Minford and Song Qi edited *Chinese New Tz'u Poetry*, the first collection of new poetry, prose, novels, and translations of plays from both sides of the Strait and from Hong Kong to show readers in the English-speaking world the achievements of new Chinese literature and its diversity. In 1986, Minford left Hong Kong to teach at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. That same year, he and Geremie Barmé compiled *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience*. His translation of *The Dreamer Wakes*, the fifth volume of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, was also finally completed and published. During his years in New Zealand, Minford collaborated with Wong Siu-kit on a collection of Hawkes' essays on Chinese literature, *Classical, Modern and Humane: Essays in Chinese Literature*, and with Pang Bingjun and Séan Golden on an anthology of translations of *Modern Chinese Poems*. In 1994, Minford returned to Hong Kong to teach at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and started the translation of *The Deer and the Cauldron*. In 2000, with

the passion of Chinese Tzu from his early years, Minford was invited to translate Song Xunlun's works into English, and he became friends with Song's son, Song Xukang. In 2002, his translation of *The Art of War* was highly recognized by readers as soon as it was released by the Viking Publishing Company, a subsidiary of Penguin Publishing. In 2006, teaching at the Australian National University, Minford spent 15 years translating and publishing *Strange Tales* from a Chinese Studio. And then he spent 12 years translating *The I Ching: Book of Change*. In 2018, his translation of the *Tao Te Ching/Lao-Tzu: The Essential Translation of the Ancient Chinese Book of the Tao* was published by Penguin Press and received high praise in sinological and cultural circles. That year, Minford's journey in Chinese literature translation has come to an end, and he indicated that he will not pursue his translation practice for the time being, but will focus more on promoting Chinese culture.

Minford's translations in the field of Chinese literature focus on ancient Chinese works, modern and contemporary Chinese literature, and various anthologies. He named his translation anthology *The Best China*, expressing his belief that the best Chinese literature and culture is the one that is seen by the world. *The Best China* is also the motto of his lifelong translation career, indicating his cultural stance and guiding his translation practice for many years. Among various literary genres, Minford believes that Chinese ancient works represent *The Best China*, so he has devoted much time and effort to translating *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Strange Tales* from a Chinese Studio, *The Art of War*, and *Tao Te Ching*. In the field of contemporary literature, Minford translated Louis Cha's martial arts work *The Deer and the Cauldron*. In the translator's preface, he said that he chose to translate such a difficult work because he hoped that the translation would enable English readers to understand Louis Cha's martial arts world and Chinese martial arts culture, and that Western readers would enjoy the flowing reading experience and the unique aesthetic experience brought by this novel as much as Chinese readers. In addition, during his stay in Hong Kong, he collaborated with his colleagues to translate the work of Hong Kong author Sissie, *A Woman Like Me*. In other anthologies, Minford translated romance novels such as *Sinful Sea* and *Sad and Ridiculous Causes*. His selected translation of *One Hundred Modern Chinese Poems* has also been widely welcomed by readers at home and abroad. In a word, Minford's translation activities focus on the communication between Chinese and English cultures, first of all, in his efforts to integrate the understanding and interpretation of his selected texts by Chinese and Western scholars, and in his emphasis on the significance of classical literature for modern people and modern civilization.

3. Minford's "Natural" Translation Views

"For overseas readers to truly understand Chinese culture, they will be interested in approaching the source of Chinese culture to read the Chinese classical books, and language is the first barrier they need to cross when reading these books" (Xu Duo and Xu Jun 2015: 14). Minford advocates that "translating is writing". He admires Qian Zhongshu's transformation theory and Yan Fu's expressiveness theory, but in his view, being faithful to the original meaning does not mean launching a translation that is difficult to read. As a translator with rich translation practice, Minford does not translate under the guidance of translation theories (Zhu Zhenwu 2017: 54), he promotes a "natural" View of translation, and he thinks a good translator should be "靈"(it's a traditionally Chinese character, which means genius and smart). This character consists of some imagery, three "口" under the character "雨" and one "巫". The "巫" represents the mysterious power of shamans in ancient times to communicate with all things in heaven and earth, which echoes the previously mentioned religious influences of many Chinese scholars, such as Taoism and Buddhism. Translation seems to be a sacred thing to Minford, similar to "psychic", in which the translator has to listen to the voices from the other

world and find a way to communicate with the spirits from other countries. Minford has another explanation for “靈”. In some dialects of Chinese, people often use the word spirit to describe whether an object can be used or not, and if a light bulb is said to be spiritual, it means it can still be used. In the same way, a good or bad translation can also be said to be spiritual or not. It is because of a certain foundation of sinology research that Minford’s translation thought and practice complement each other and have a self-contained translation thought, which guides his translation practice in the past half-century.

3.1. The “Nouvelle Chinoiserie” View

The phrase “Nouvelle Chinoiserie” was translated by Minford’s friend Geremie Barmé and became Minford’s unique insight in translation. In England in the 18th century, there was an organization called the “Society of Dilettanti”, whose members were mostly aristocrats, who often organized trips to Europe and shared what they had seen in architecture and other arts and the pleasure they had gained from them. The organization’s motto is *Seria Ludo* (which means “enjoy the scholarship”), which coincided with Minford’s academic pursuits, and he was determined to share the joys of Chinese literature he had experienced with Western readers, which was also the ultimate goal of his translation career. However, this seemingly arbitrary but ambitious idea of translation brought Minford controversy from some scholars, who argued that such an idea went against the prevailing trend of the time and that Chinese literature should be taken seriously rather than used to satisfy “Western consumerism”. This argument was directed at his translation of *Strange Tales from Chinese Studio*, some scholars considered it too casual and personal, so a “consumerist” label for catering to Western readers was formed. But in Minford’s view, both the author and the translator have a common right. The author creates works with personal thoughts and writing style, so there are various types of book themes. Many popular Chinese classics are supernatural themes. The reason why these works are popular is because the author created them first, rather than the translator translating them according to the interests of the readers. Translators, as the people who have the most direct access to a book and who transmit culture to readers in another language through translation, should have the freedom to choose the style of books and to make their own decisions about the style of translation. The reason for this relaxed translation stance is that Minford wants his translations to be easy but meaningful for the readers, following the purpose of the writing of the ancients Pu Songling and Cao Xueqin: to be an elegant writer and create pleasing books. (Ren Luman 2019).

3.2. “The Enriched Paratext is Important” View

As a veteran sinologist, Minford is well aware of the deep historical and social background behind every Chinese literary work, so he has developed the habit of preparing detailed paratexts when translating literary classics. The View was first introduced by Gérard Genette, who pointed out that paratext has materiality, as it is the key for entering and exiting the text, an undefined area between the internal elements of the text and the discourse of the external world. (Genette 1997: 2). The paratext includes the title and subtitle of a book, the author’s signature, dedication or gift, inscriptions or quotations, prefaces, inscriptions, and notes. It also includes the public and private history of a book, which consists of author interviews, letters, diaries, etc. Minford used to introduce the author’s life, the historical book and its influence in the literary field in the relevant translation paratexts, and would focus on detailed descriptions and explanations of Chinese culture. This is well illustrated in the introduction to his translation of *Strange Tales from Chinese Studio*, where Minford shows odd features of this book in its strange content and plot, and its peculiar writing style. He mentioned that Chinese readers and authors are strongly influenced by two kinds of literature: the novel of the weird and the novel of legends. So he also introduced the characteristics of Chinese literature in that period. Chinese novels developed at a time of political turmoil, when literati were influenced by traditional

Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Some literati, when unable to freely create, display their talents and turn their creative themes towards the bizarre as reflected in the interplay of foxes and ghosts. Writing such a detailed paratext is not only responsible for the Western readers, but also reflects Minford's deep love for Chinese culture as a sinologist, which led him to spend a lot of time and effort to improve the View. This is not only a way to improve the translator's literary skills, but also a proper way to promote Chinese culture.

3.3. "The Best of China" View

With the cultural stance of showing "The Best China" to the English-speaking world, Minford gives full play to a translator's subjectivity, ensuring that his translation is faithful to the original and close to the reader by tracing the original meaning and adhering to the direct translation. (Li Weirong 2016:152) As for translation Views of local Chinese translators, Minford believes that Yan Fu's "Faithfulness, Expressiveness and Elegance" applies to any interchange between languages, and if supplemented by Qian Zhongshu's Theory of transformation, then it can be considered as a more perfect View in translation. Minford summarized his views based on these four points. (1) Surrendering: the translator must throw away his or her ego, do his or her best to serve the original author, and not bring his or her views and thoughts and feelings into the translation; (2) Reincarnating: the translation should be perfectly reincarnated in the translated language; (3) Recasting: the translation should be recast in terms of linguistic structure; (4) Eternalpatience: the translator must have eternal and endless patience. (Li Yayan, Minford 2018) Minford follows the principle of preserving the original flavor of Chinese culture when translating Chinese literature, always keeping in mind and practicing his belief as a sinologist to promote the development of sinology. Learning Chinese well is only the first step in translation, followed by learning to make selective choices without being confined to the form and content of the original. The key point of "Rebirth" and "Recasting" lies in the creative transformation and innovative translation that the translator learns to bring out the elegance of Chinese culture and present the best Chinese culture to the world.

4. Analysis of the Characteristics of Minford's Translation Works

During Minford's nearly 50-year career as a Chinese-to-English translator, his translations have included several classics of Chinese literature, including *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Strange Tales from Chinese Studio*, *The Art of War*, *The Deer and the Cauldron*, and *Tao Te Ching*, and almost every one of his great works has taken him decades to finish. Although Minford's translation career of Chinese cultural classics is coming to an end, his highly distinctive translations have brought a fresh cultural experience to English-speaking readers. An excellent translator, Minford's published translations have been a hit in the Western world, presenting readers with some of the most important and distinctive aspects of Chinese culture. Four of his translations are selected and analyzed for their respective translation characteristics.

4.1. The Dream of the Red Chamber

Minford translated *Dream of the Red Chamber* and also studied it, especially his translation of the second 40 volumes. In his opinion, "although the latter 40 volumes are not perfect, no academic controversy can shake the status of this part as the end of the classic in Chinese literature history, and some episodes of this part are among the most famous classic scenes in the whole book" (Minford 2014c: 22). Minford also paid great attention to the literary elements, cultural connotations, and cultural values conveyed in his translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. And his collaboration work with Hawkes required efforts to address the issue of faithful reproduction and consistency of style in two ways. One is the identification of the style of the original work, which Minford experienced through a process of continuous study and

research. For the translation of literary works, identifying the stylistic qualities of the original work is a crucial first step. The second is to deploy all means of the target language as much as possible to reproduce the style of the original work. Minford has made a lot of effort, and Hawks has also given him a lot of help. One phenomenon worthy of attention here is that different translators may have different understandings and reproduction of the style of the original work. Since Minford was co-translating with Hawkes, the former needed to identify the style of the original work on the one hand, and to be consistent with the latter's translation style on the other. Penguin Press had explicit requirements for Minford to keep his translation stylistically consistent with Hawkes's first 80 volumes and not to have significant differences. Under the encouragement and guidance of Hawkes, Minford continued to explore and actively address the issue of stylistic reproduction. In translating the dialogues of the characters, Hawkes used to show the state of the dialogues through changes in paragraphs. Minford adhered to this style of Hawks, and in the translation of the second 40 volumes, he also split the dialogues that were originally one paragraph in the original text into paragraphs according to the characters. For example, in the 109th volume, when describing the dialogue between Baoyu, Baochai, and Xiren, the original one-paragraph dialogue is split into a dozen small paragraphs according to the different characters (Minford 2014c: 229). This is the same way Hawkes treats the multi-person dialogue between the Jia family and Daiyu when they first meet in the third episode (Hawkes 2014: 61).

4.2. Strange Tales from Chinese Studio

Strange Tales from Chinese Studio received much attention as soon as it was translated to Western readers, and there were many other famous translators translated it; Minford spent 14 years translating the book. His translation used the strategy of heterodox translation as the main strategy for translating Chinese culture to retain the exotic color of the original text in the translation and to allow Western readers to understand the real Chinese culture. (Li Haijun 2010:75) This is in line with "The Best China", where only a culturally appropriate translation method can the original culture be maximally presented to the readers. Minford deliberately created a storyline full of mythology and curiosity in a common language, catering to the curiosity of Western readers who have not been exposed to much fox and ghost imagery. In selecting the original texts, Minford chose 104 volumes of them, trying to reflect the diversity of the original stories in the selected translations. He believed that there is a certain fit between the Chinese literature of supernatural literature and the South American literature of magical realism, but that the literary interest in the original text has an irreplaceable Chinese cultural label over magical literature. Another popular translation is by the translator Herbert Allen Giles, who was more interested in introducing Chinese culture to the Western world, changing the long-standing prejudice against Chinese culture, and showing the world the real Sinology, the real Chinese culture. However, due to historical circumstances, his translation inevitably reflected the tendency of missionary and cultural imperialism. Compared to him, Minford's translation aims are purer. He hopes that readers can see through the work the expression of Chinese culture in all aspects of folk life, such as the daily life of the people, the traditional Chinese religion and myths and legends, and other more specific Sinological presentations, hoping to present Chinese culture as it is to Western readers. He studied and researched a large number of allusions in the original and spared no effort to translate them with alienation strategies, so as to convey the profound storyline of the original more fully while ensuring that it is not so difficult for English readers to understand. In addition, a large number of commentaries and reviews by Chinese and Western scholars are inserted in the translation, and such a rich sub-text also creates good conditions for readers to read and understand.

4.3. The Art of War

Minford first read *The Art of War* in 1966 when he was an undergraduate at Oxford University. He found the book was full of proverbial wisdom that could be called “A Book of Life”, containing strategic ideas that could be applied to areas other than warfare. He found Sun Tzu to be of great value to all people of all times, as he revealed the interactions of nature, humans and people in a simple, general language. Among the many translations, Minford’s translation, which conveys the idea that peace is paramount while also admonishing people to have a big-picture view and learn to focus on the essence of things, has been very well received in the Western world. He strived to reproduce the literary quality of the book, the aphoristic language, which sometimes resembles semi-rhymed poetic language; he was careful in wording, sentence construction and rhyme, and the structure of the translation is as close as possible to the original text, which has become the most distinctive feature of his translation. As a native English speaker, Minford’s Chinese-to-English translation is naturally more comfortable and more in line with the logic of the readers’ mind, and in the pursuit of Chinese rhyme, he adopted the English poetic style, so that the translation is not long and drawn out, but also catchy. Some scholars say that his translation is concise in wording and aesthetic in speech, reflecting the translator’s profound Chinese cultural skills, and the translation is now quite popular among Westerners (Wu Sha 2014). Most importantly, the translator’s determination to present Chinese culture to the world can be seen in the translation, which is highly characteristic of the translator as a sinologist.

4.4. Tao Te Ching

Having studied Chinese culture for a long time, Minford was gradually influenced by Taoist culture, even to the point of influencing his untheoretically unguided view of the “natural” translation view, which is why he is particularly fond of *Tao Te Ching*. Minford believed that almost all of China’s best poets were influenced by Taoist thought, as if Taoist cultivation were a requirement for poets, and his translation of *Tao Te Ching* is an anthology of poems filled with Taoist thought (John Minford 2018:18). *Tao Te Ching* is extremely important in guiding people in their real lives, while at the same time coalescing the inner spirit of Chinese culture and reflecting the profound vastness of Chinese wisdom. It is precise because of the special status of the book in Minford’s mind that, after gaining some experience in translation, he chose to make it his final work, devoting himself to letting Western readers read the connotations of Taoist culture in his translation. Influenced by the “spiritual reading” chanting of the Western church, Minford felt the meditation and chanting of the Taoist masters from a thousand years ago when he translated *Tao Te Ching*, so he brought his understanding and emotion as a guide before the translation officially began, striving to reach resonance with the original text before translating it into English with beautiful words. In addition to his emotional preparation, Minford spent several years preparing on a professional level, including collecting different editions and commentaries, studying the vocabulary and language of the book, and reading the studies of scholars from both ancient and modern times. When translating, Minford would add his insights into the content after certain chapters of the translation, making the translation different from both the traditional Chinese doctrinal classics and the deep and obscure philosophical jargon of the West, truly bringing the distance between the original and the reader with a translation that is highly personal and distinctive. Minford has a strong desire to give Western readers a greater understanding of China’s vast and long-standing cultural traditions in a way that could be music, art, and poetry (Ren Luman 2019). He added luster to the entire translation through external means such as typography, and as one of the very few translators who cared about such non-translational details, his translation took a year to be printed and released, and was ultimately a huge success. And the translation became a success that truly guided people in their daily lives.

5. Conclusion

Through the introduction of Minford's translation career and translation views, as well as the analysis of the translation style and characteristics of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Strange Tales from Chinese Studio*, *The Art of War* and *Tao Te Ching*, it can be found that Minford's translation career is profoundly experienced, and he has made proud achievements in the translation field, especially in the field of traditional Chinese literature. In his translations, he has firmly established a cultural stance of "The Best China" and guided his translation practice with his own characteristic "natural" view of translation, which has achieved a perfect integration. "For the fact of translation in history, we should not only look at the quality of its translation, but also at the role and influence it has had on cultural exchange" (Wang Kefei 1994: 59). Minford is concerned with both the dissemination and reception of Chinese literature and culture in the world, and hopes that Chinese literature and Chinese culture will become an important part of English culture and even world culture, enriching world literature and world culture.

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