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Translation and Cross-cultural Transmission of Classical Chinese Literary Theories: A Review of *Classical Chinese Literary Theories in the English-speaking World: Translation and Transmission*

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Abstract: Embodying rich Chinese culture, classical Chinese literary theory makes up a crucial part of the national strategy for cultural outreach and serves as a vital pathway to enhancing cultural soft power and fostering inter-civilizational dialogue. Against this backdrop, Professor Wang Hongtao's *Classical Chinese Literary Theories in the English-speaking World: Translation and Transmission* anchored in socio-translation studies, chronicles the history of the English translation and overseas dissemination of classical Chinese literary theory. The book offers comparative analyses of translations across different periods and presents an empirical portrayal of this reception and dissemination in the UK, US, and Australia through surveys, thereby filling a critical gap in empirical research within this domain. This work has practical implications for promoting the global reach of classical Chinese literary theory and for constructing an international discourse system within the context of the "Belt and Road" Initiative for mutual learning among civilizations.

Keywords: Classical Chinese Literary Theories; translation; dissemination; socio-translation studies; international discourse system

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标题：中国古典文论的跨文化传播与英译——评《中国古典文论在西方的英译与传播研究》

摘要：中国古典文论蕴含着丰富的中国文化，其海外英译与传播是中国文化“走出去”战略的重要组成部分，也是提升国家文化软实力、促进中外文明互鉴的重要路径。在此背景下，王洪涛教授所著《中国古典文论在西方的英译与传播研究》以社会翻译学为理论锚点，总结中国古典文论的英译与海外传播历史，对不同时期译本进行比较分析，同时通过在英、美、澳三国的问卷展现中国古典文论在西方的英译与传播图景，填补了该领域实证研究的空白，以推动其真正走向世界，在“一带一路”文明互鉴、中国古典文论国际话语体系建构中具有现实意义。

关键词：中国古典文论；英译；传播；社会翻译学；国际话语体系

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1. Introduction

Amidst the deepening globalization and increasingly frequent intercultural exchanges between China and other civilizations, the overseas dissemination and reception of classical Chinese literary theory, as a core embodiment of the excellent traditional Chinese culture, directly impacts the enhancement of China's international cultural influence. For a long time, research on the cross-cultural dissemination of classical Chinese literary theory has suffered from fragmentation and insufficient empirical support, making it difficult to comprehensively portray its actual dissemination landscape in the West. Abstract concepts like “qi” (气) and “fenggu” (风骨), lacking equivalent expressions within Western discourse, are prone to translation distortion upon rendering.

Professor Wang Hongtao, who has been deeply involved in translation studies for many years, offers a systematic solution for promoting the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture through his monograph, *Classical Chinese Literary Theories in the English-speaking World: Translation and Transmission* (Peking University Press, 2023).¹ This work, an outcome of a National Social Science Fund project and a recipient of the second prize in the translation studies category of the second “Liang Zongdai Translation Award”, divides the history of the Western dissemination of classical Chinese literary theory into five stages. It comparatively analyzes the translations at different periods of time, utilizing primary data such as empirical surveys from 11

¹ 北京外国语大学（2025年11月4日）：“北外英语学院王洪涛教授荣获梁宗岱翻译奖”，URL.

universities and 251 audience questionnaires. This approach reveals the extent of dissemination and reception of classical Chinese literary theory overseas, constructing a research framework that possesses both historical depth and data-driven support, thereby elevating the research from fragmented discussions to a systematic, disciplinary-oriented issue.

2. Content and Chapter Structure

This book, with its center on the core theme of the translation and dissemination of classical Chinese literary criticism in the West, is divided into four progressively integrated parts, forming a comprehensive research system.

The first part clarifies key concepts and delineates the historical phases of classical Chinese literary criticism's development in the West. This paper systematically differentiates the connotations and denotations of crucial terms such as "classical Chinese literary criticism," "English translation," "dissemination," and "the English-speaking countries in the West." It precisely defines classical Chinese literary criticism as encompassing ancient Chinese literary theories formed from the Pre-Qin period to the late Qing dynasty, thereby distinguishing it from the broader sense of "ancient Chinese literary theory" and effectively mitigating conceptual ambiguities in research. Regarding the historical examination of dissemination, this paper adopts time as a framework to trace the developmental trajectory of the translation and transmission of classical Chinese literary criticism in the West from the Han dynasty to the late Qing dynasty. This trajectory is categorized into five stages: the incubation period, the germination period, the transitional period, the developmental period, and the mature period. By integrating historical events such as cultural exchanges on the Silk Road, diplomatic visits, and world wars, this paper analyzes the background, agents, media, and core characteristics of dissemination in each period, revealing the intrinsic link between the Western dissemination of classical Chinese literary criticism and Sino-Western cultural exchange, thereby providing historical support for subsequent comparative studies of translated works.

The second part bridges history and the present through comparative analysis of translated texts. Echoing the historical overview in the first part, this paper chronologically selects six representative classical Chinese literary works from the Han dynasty to the late Qing dynasty, analyzing multiple translations of the same work. This selection encompasses both literary works and theoretical treatises from different periods, balancing representativeness with comprehensiveness. Moving beyond simple textual comparison, this section employs a multi-dimensional approach, examining translator backgrounds, translation strategies, and the distinctive features of translations from various perspectives. Comparisons are conducted at lexical, syntactic, and textual levels, leading to the following conclusions, which offer insights for the effective "going global" of Chinese culture: Sinologists possess inherent advantages in the English translation and dissemination of classical Chinese literary criticism, aligning more closely with the operational norms of the Western Sinology; "contextualizing" the translated object facilitates a detailed interpretation of the translated text; the evolutionary characteristics of classical Chinese poetics in its translation and transmission within the English-

speaking world hold significant referential value; and the translation and dissemination of classical Chinese literary criticism necessitate careful consideration of sinicization requirements.

Part Three delves into an empirical investigation, introducing empirical methods into the study of the dissemination of translated classical Chinese literary theories. Focusing on the UK, the US, and Australia, this section conducted a questionnaire survey among faculty and students at eleven universities with strong ties to classical Chinese literary theory. A total of 251 valid questionnaires were collected, establishing a robust foundation for quantitative research. (p.174)¹ The empirical investigation, from survey design and data collection to statistical analysis, encompasses a comprehensive examination from an overall perspective to country-specific empirical analyses. Its logical rigor and thorough content center on the target readers' "awareness, acceptance, expectations, and assumptions" (p.175), comprehensively presenting the current state of the dissemination and reception of translated classical Chinese literary works in the West, as well as Western readers' comprehension and preferences. The findings are presented through charts and graphs, providing strong data support for the subsequent proposal of dissemination strategies.

Part Four directly builds upon the empirical findings of Part Three, adopting a social semiotics perspective as its core theoretical framework to systematically propose concrete strategies for the translation and dissemination of classical Chinese literary theories into English. The author posits that "a considerable volume of classical Chinese literary theory remains untranslated, and even for those works that have been translated into English, their dissemination and reception in Western English-speaking countries are relatively limited" (p. 245). In response, the author, from a social semiotics standpoint, outlines specific strategies for translating and broadly disseminating classical Chinese literary theories in English (p.267). These include comprehensively considering classic works from the Chinese milieu alongside the interests of the Western milieu, prioritizing Western mainstream platforms, and employing indigenous "codes" and methods to enter the Western literary system. Ultimately, this culminates in the construction of an international discourse system for classical Chinese literary theory. Furthermore, this section expands the research's significance, encompassing empowering the "Belt and Road" initiative, fostering analogical dialogue between Chinese and Western literary theories, and promoting the interdisciplinary integration of classical literary theory with contemporary socio-cultural trends, thereby addressing the contemporary imperative to enhance the communicative power and influence of Chinese civilization.

3. Brief Review

3.1 Presenting the Reality of Western Dissemination of Classical Chinese Literary Theory Through Diverse Methodologies

The significant academic merit of this work lies in its reliance on empirical research, addressing the current scarcity of such methods within the field of translating and disseminating classical Chinese literary theory into

¹ Wang Hongtao (2023): *Classical Chinese Literary Theories in the English-speaking World: Translation and Transmission*. Peking University Press. For the following citations, only page numbers are indicated, and no further explanations are provided for each.

English. The author employs a variety of research approaches. Albrecht Neubert (1997), a prominent Western scholar, advocated for integrating empirical research into translation studies, emphasizing the necessity of scientific rigor and a coherent theoretical foundation for the discipline of Translation Studies. In the application of core methodologies, the author utilizes statistical analysis to gauge Western audiences' awareness, recognition, preferred translations, and acceptance of translation strategies concerning English renditions of classical Chinese literary theory, which supplied the research with a rich source of primary data. Such empirical research offers a more authentic and precise depiction of the dissemination landscape, providing a scientific basis for subsequent dissemination strategies and establishing a replicable empirical research paradigm for similar studies. Comparative textual analysis is another research method in the book that deserves attention. Six representative translations are meticulously examined across multiple dimensions to delineate the evolutionary patterns of English translation strategies. Concurrently, historical research methods are employed to trace the dissemination trajectory of classical literary theory in the West, effectively integrating textual analysis with historical contextualization.

The organic amalgamation of diverse methodologies allows for mutual corroboration between historical context, textual nuances, and empirical data. This ensures both the breadth and depth of the research, enhancing the rigor and credibility of the findings. It serves as an invaluable exemplar for methodological innovation and perspectival integration in related scholarly pursuits.

3.2 Achieving Deep Integration of Text and Context Supported by Sociological Translation Studies

Another significant feature of this book is the precise positioning and flexible application of theoretical perspectives. Taking sociological translation studies as the core theoretical anchor, the book situates the translation of classical Chinese literary criticism into English within specific socio-cultural contexts, thereby achieving a profound integration of textual analysis and contextual interpretation, which bears evidence of a clear theoretical consciousness. Professor Wang Hongtao (2016, p.10) once noted that "sociological translation studies aim to examine all translation phenomena or activities that have social characteristics." The comparative analysis of translations in this book not only examines the linguistic transformation effects of translation strategies such as literal and free translation, but by integrating the background of Sino-Western cultural exchange across different historical periods and the aesthetic demands of Western societies, it also emphasizes the analysis of the social motivations behind the selection of translation strategies and their cultural transmission effects. This research approach avoids empty textual discussions detached from context, and also overcomes the limitations of purely cultural interpretations that neglect textual details. By combining macro and micro analyses, it achieves an organic unity of theoretical support and textual analysis, further enriching the application scenarios of sociological translation studies in the field of cross-cultural communication of classical Chinese literary criticism.

3.3 Building a bridge for dialogue among related studies

The author of the book identifies three primary strands in domestic scholarship on cross-cultural dissemination of classical Chinese literary theory. The first category encompasses studies on the translation of classical

Chinese texts into English, viewed within the broader context of cross-cultural transmission of classical Chinese literary theory. Scholars like Pan Wenguo (2004) and Wang Hongyin (2015) represent this approach, primarily focusing on the translation of classical Chinese texts. However, this line of inquiry often fails to fully take into account the special nature of classical Chinese literary theory as literary theory in its transmission and translation into the West.

The second category primarily involves historical research on the translation and introduction of classical Chinese literary theory in the West. Scholars such as Wang Xiaolu (2003) and Huang Zhuoyue (2013) exemplify this approach. Their work largely focuses on cataloging historical documents related to the translation and scholarly engagement with classical Chinese literary theory in Western contexts. While they document the history of these activities, there is less emphasis on the actual processes and dynamics of translating and disseminating Chinese classical literary theory in English.

The third strand consists of case studies analyzing translated works of classical Chinese literary theory from the perspective of textual analysis and interpretive exegesis. Scholars like Wang Xiaonong (2015) and Dai Wenjing (2017) contribute to this area. Although these studies offer rich insights, they are often limited to individual case analyses and lack a comprehensive, systematic approach.

This book adeptly bridges these diverse research trajectories. It not only draws upon the rational insights of previous scholarship but also transcends their limitations, thereby innovating research perspectives and methodologies.

Numerous scholars in the field have highly lauded the academic positioning of this book. Li Linbo (2025, p.107) asserts that “the endeavor of Chinese literary theory towards global poetics aims at achieving intercultural dialogue, exchange, co-construction, and symbiosis. In this process, *Classical Chinese Literary Theories in the English-speaking World: Translation and Transmission* has marked a significant milestone, serving as crucial literature for understanding and comprehending the theory and practice of translating and disseminating classical Chinese literary theory.” Similarly, Beijing Foreign Studies University (2025), in its announcement of the second “Liang Zongdai Translation Award” laureates, commended the book for its “significant theoretical and practical value in promoting the international dissemination of Chinese literary thought, constructing an international discourse system for Chinese literary theory, and enriching and expanding research on the history of Sino-Western cultural exchange.”

These evaluations precisely delineate the book’s academic standing. It not only refines the research system for the cross-cultural dissemination of classical literary theory and expands the application scenarios of social translation studies but also serves as a crucial bridge for dialogue among related research areas, providing a replicable paradigm for subsequent studies. Built on existing research achievements, it propels the cross-cultural dissemination of classical literary theory research toward a more systematic, scientific, and practically oriented trajectory. It functions as a vital link connecting traditional research with the demands of the new era, thereby further enhancing the academic influence of research on the cross-cultural dissemination of classical Chinese literary theory.

3.4 Contributing to the Construction of International Discourse Systems from a Chinese perspective

Mr. Fang Mengzhi (2017, p.100) proposed that “we must be adept at distilling iconic concepts” to construct our own discourse system in translation studies and make our voices heard in the international academic community. This book consistently upholds a native perspective, centering on the establishment of an international discourse system for classical Chinese literary theory. While drawing upon Western translation theories and research methodologies, it resolutely safeguards the indigenous characteristics and cultural connotations of classical Chinese literary theory. This approach not only addresses the contemporary demand for an objective interpretation of traditional Chinese aesthetics from a native viewpoint but also offers a viable pathway to break the dominance of Western discourse and enhance the international voice of classical Chinese literary theory, exhibiting a distinct sense of native Chinese awareness and contemporary value. The proposed “dual contextual adaptation and layered deconstruction” effectively preserves the core proposition of cultural authenticity while providing practical avenues for effective dissemination, offering a reusable methodology for cross-cultural communication. The distilled “dynamic communication perspective” transcends the limitations of studying singular cultural symbols, providing a theoretical paradigm for the overseas dissemination of Chinese cultural elements such as classical poetry, traditional Chinese medicine, and festivals.

4. Conclusion

Professor Wang Hongtao's *Classical Chinese Literary Theories in the English-speaking World: Translation and Transmission* is a major scholarly work in the field of cross-cultural communication and translation studies concerning classical literary discourse. Grounded in a sinocentric perspective, the monograph meticulously constructs a comprehensive research framework, systematically charting the trajectory of English translation and dissemination of classical Chinese literary theory in the West, and proposing viable strategies for its communication and dissemination. Within the context of deepening civilizational mutual learning under the Belt and Road Initiative, the book's significance transcends a mere retrospective summation of historical experience; it offers practical guidance for contemporary cultural dialogues, utilizing literary theory as a bridge. Within the system of contemporary global translation theories, this study examines the emergence and development of contemporary Chinese translation theories, and elucidates their subjectivity, innovativeness, and global significance.

Scholarly works on cross-cultural exchange can inspire readers to reflect deeply on relationships between civilizations and find the key to transcending cultural barriers (p.260). It is only when classical Chinese literary theory transforms from a historical legacy into a repository of intellectual resources for addressing contemporary ecological and aesthetic challenges, that its inherent Chinese aesthetic spirit and wisdom can truly transcend cultural boundaries. This scholarly work not only furnishes scientific decision-making references for the overseas dissemination of excellent traditional Chinese culture but, through its rigorous

academic inquiry, substantially bolsters efforts to enhance national cultural soft power, foster mutual learning among civilizations along the Belt and Road, and ultimately promote equal dialogue among civilizations. In doing so, it positions classical Chinese literary theory as a shared language for cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries.

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