

# General Study on the Significance of Translating History Presented in a Series of Biographies — Case Study on the Translation of Chen Shou’s “Records of the Three Kingdoms”

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## ABSTRACT

With the world’s fast development and globalization, trans-cultural communications become more and more important. Translation is the best way to promote the effect of these communications. Since literary works are the best carriers of culture, translation in this field would count for much as a significant and profound action, among which translating historical books plays quite an important role. Among China’s historical books, most of the officially authorized ones represented by the Twenty-four Histories have been presented in a series of biographies. Based on the data collected from current translating activities in the modern world, this paper is to research on the meaning and significance of translating history presented in a series of biographies, with the typical one, Chen Shou’s “Records of the Three Kingdoms”, as a specific example.

**Keywords:** *Translating significance, History presented in a series of biographies, Chen Shou, “Records of the Three Kingdoms”.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the fast development of the world and all kinds of high-techs, communication between different countries becomes easier, more convenient and more effective, among which translation plays a very important role. Traditionally speaking, this translation is more concerned with those practical factors. For civilians, it is more about introductions to basic living conditions, styles and materials, that is, about ordinary life itself. For those in specific technical or academic circles, it is more about the specific techniques and researches, only those with certain expertise can be informed and make a good use of it.

Literary works, especially the classical ones are best carriers of national culture. If the communications, especially the trans-cultural ones, want to be highly feasible and accurate, the understanding for cultural connotation behind the words, no matter the spoken or the written ones, should never be underestimated and even ignored.

However, understanding of literary works needs fairly a long time and a minute deliberation, thus, only a few people would carry the action out. Usually, under normal conditions, people would be attracted by those fictions presenting exciting stories, but they would not care too much about the non-fictions, for example, the documentaries, the official files and the on about history etc. Only when there’s close relationship between the works and their life, would the non-fictions be on most civilian’s reading lists.

When Chinese culture is concerned, the “Twenty-four Histories”, the great classical works recording Chinese history from remote antiquity till the Ming Dynasty, should stand out to be the representative of the non-fictions that are well-known to all native people but not so much noticed by people in other cultures. The “Twenty-four Histories” is about 24 books of history presented in a series of biographies. They would help a lot if one wants to know more precisely Chinese history and culture. When people from other cultures are concerned, translating these works would be quite

meaningful and essential. It's really significant to translate these books about history, among which, Chen Shou's "Records of the Three Kingdoms" is quite a special and typical representative.

## 2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TRANSLATING CLASSICAL WORKS ON HISTORY

The fundamental requirement for communication would understand a different culture, while the fundamental requirement for understanding a culture would be the ability to understand and apply different languages. As long as there's need for communication between people from different cultures with different languages, translating activities would be necessarily involved. That's the reason why the Tower of Babel should be established, which is the most fundamental way to establish a real harmonious globalized world.

The earlier the history is, the less communication between two cultures would be. Ever since the beginning, the translating activities can be generally classified into two fundamental parts: interpretation and translation. Initially, interpretation takes place between people who are more familiar with each other, it goes directly to the central topic concerned. Compared with interpretation, translation is much more casual. While the translation usually begins with those official and necessary communications, let's say, the translations for religious books such as Bible and Buddhist texts, which will pave the way for closer interaction between different cultures in the future. Although with the advancement of multicultural communication, interpretation demands a higher lingual level and a good mastering of translation would pave the way for a better interpretation, the essential point would not be changed, that is, interpretation still goes to a situation in which the communicators are more mutually familiar with the concerned conditions. Under such circumstance, no matter when the time is, where the location is and what the condition is, translation is the fundamental one that could never be ignored or even omitted, among which the translation of literary works would count for quite a lot. Then, which books should be the translated targets? It is not an easy question to answer. Generally speaking, after repeated experiments, most translators will focus on the classical works.

While talking about the western canons, Harold Bloom draws conclusion on the typical characteristics of the canons, that is, the classical

works. He says that "The Canon, a word religious in its origins, has become a choice among texts struggling with one another for survival... Nothing is so essential to the Western Canon as its principles of selectivity." [1]<sup>P19-21</sup> Although it is about western canons, the saying here also holds true for classical works in any other culture, including the Chinese ones of course. To form a good system of canons, the selection is necessary, which must agree with the principle of selectivity. It is the people connected with the works who will make the selection. No one would ever get interested in something that has nothing to do with him or his surroundings. The acceptance of Shakespeare's works can be good evidence. Shakespeare is one of the most popular English writers in China. Here, people passionate for English literary works would mostly be those born after the foundation of new China, because people before are seldom familiar with English, not to speak of using English or even reading English works. While most experts in the English world concentrate on his historical plays, most Chinese appreciators are keen on Shakespeare's tragedies or comedies, with his sonnets attached. Going deep into the essence, no matter how far the works go, the historical plays would be more necessarily related with the real history, the fact, no one can create a king or a famous people without any existing evidence in reality to show they have really been there. However, it is the unavoidable factor for other works since imagination, more exactly, imaginary heroes are the basis for their creations, especially, for the fictional works. The British history really doesn't have such a close relationship with Chinese people, especially the modern ones, while the conflicts arising from different affections do exist in all human beings, which is the basis for the construction of all plays. Therefore, the canons are the works that can stand the test of time and truth, enduring the selection and resonating with the related ones' experience and feelings. Just as what Bakhtin says when he talks about the festive life, the second life, "The official feasts... did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it." [2]<sup>P8</sup> When the casual life, the second life is concerned, people would get more freedom and relaxation, but it is together with more artistic touch. While the official one is more related with the standard real life, it is closely connected with the existing pattern of things, the real history. When people want to know more about another culture, it must be better to choose the canons. Translating

activities aim at a better understanding to promote the mutual communication. Before the face-to-face communication, if the parties concerned could spend some time learning more about the targeted culture, the result must be a better one, the easiest way here is to get information from the translated canons.

Now it goes to the question about which canons are the best choices for understanding another culture? To stimulate the interest, the tragedies, the comedies, the novels etc., the fictional works full of imaginations with complex plots and exciting stories would be best choices. It's easy for such works to attract people because they would focus on more on describing the process event but not so much on displaying the essence, which is usually left for the readers to read and understand between the lines. What awakes here would be the subjective affections that are common for all. However, for mutual communication, to know each other better, non-fictions would be more reasonable and better choices, for example, the works on history. Histories are based on actual facts. Only time can decide what the history is but not the concerned ones' subjective moods, not even the writers'. Each culture has its own history because of the specific time, different subjects and unique circumstance.

In his Poetics, Aristotle says that "It is not the function for the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen--what is possible according to the the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse of in prose".[3]<sup>P20</sup> It's the truth displayed in different literary works, while the poets are talking about things probably to happen in the future, the historians are describing things that already took place before. "Poet" here doesn't narrowly refer to those ones who create poems or verses but the ones who write out different literary works, usually with artistic features, let's say, there is adoption of different rhetorical techniques; there's displaying of imagination for scenes not exactly existing in the real world, etc. Generally speaking, these "poets" are almost equal to the creations of fictional works nowadays, then their counterparts would be those fact-tellers, the historians. He says that "Poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular".[3]<sup>P20</sup> While the poetics are describing something that is common, histories talk about something specific.[4]<sup>P45</sup> Being common means being the same for anyone concerned, which is related with subjective affections. Being specific will decides the difference between one and the

other. Only when one knows clearly about the history, will one truly understand the concerned culture. Therefore, learning, translating and understanding history would be quite a good choice for a highly effective communication, which holds even truer for Chinese culture, because Chinese civilization stands as one of the most ancient civilizations in the world and it is with the longest history that has never been ceased in-between.

No individual can keep a never-ending life, but the world has ever evolved with continuous changes. Only knowing things for the moment clearly with an appropriate reference to the past would lead one to meet with a promising prospect. The most reasonable way for the latter generations to learn about the former ones would be checking information through the recordings, among which the written ones would be fairly true to the facts and thus more reliable. Then, when different cultures are concerned, it's really significant to take the action to learn and translate classic works, especially the ones on history.

### **3. THE GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO HISTORY PRESENTED IN A SERIES OF BIOGRAPHIES AND CURRENT SITUATION OF THEIR TRANSLATION**

In China's classical works, a lot of books are closely related with history, they are even directly called "histories" or "historical books", among which there is a very specific group, history presented in a series of biographies. This series of books focuses on famous people and well-known events really happening in China's history, with each book mainly about a certain specific period. They are known for all Chinese and also for those who are interested in China's history and culture.

Just as the name, history presented in a series of biographies, indicates, these books are about history recording the life events of certain people in different fields with different status, usually in a chronological or spatial order, which is usually what the biographies are doing. In the western world, few works such as Biography of the Greco-Roman Personalities by Plutarch of ancient Roman, seem to hold the same structure as history presented in a series of biographies common in the East, especially China. They are not complete equivalents to each other, but they are also proofs to show that there's cultural difference for different countries in the world, however, essentially

speaking, there would never be such an absolute division between different cultures because the same human beings are the center of the same earth. There would always be approaches to achieve effective communications between different countries or cultures, and the only difference is that how people would make use of these ways.

In numerous Chinese books related with history, history presented in a series of biographies, count for quite a big part, almost going thoroughly through the whole history of China and covering people and events in every field at different times. Although books in such form always developed well and they are most probably still being or to be created in China, the “Twenty-four Histories”, those 24 books about China’s history before the Ming Dynasty, are most widely acknowledged to be most typical and popular representative ones. Compared with works in the west, the books of history presented in a series of biographies really appear in China in a larger amount and they do play quite significant roles.

The “Twenty-four Histories” is the general name of the twenty-four official histories written by various dynasties in ancient China, all of which are compiled in biographical style. The recording in the “Twenty-four Histories” begins from the legendary Yellow Emperor period (about 2550 BC), down to the Ming Dynasty Chongzhen 17 years (1644). These historical books have not chosen the more easily seen narrative styles as historiography (the annalistic style, recording events annually according to chronological order), the chronicle endgame (the style recording events logically according to their developing process) ... With each book closely related with a certain period in China’s history, they record the real people and actual events, taking the main character’s life span as a clue. Beginning from the name of the main character in each part, the books talk about these individuals’ life experiences respectively, usually ending with the main character’s death. Besides some undoubtedly great ones as the kings of each periods, those ones with high and unique status or great contributions that will influence the nation or state, though the characters mentioned all become famous people in history nowadays, they could not have been so cared at that time with no such advanced recording instruments and techniques as they are nowadays. It’s no denying that just because they are recorded, they become such great ones in history. That is another undeniable significance of the historical books, especially the ones with

biographical style, history presented in a series of biographies.

With more and more people becoming more and more interested in Chinese culture, the translation of Chinese classical works has been promoted to an ever higher state accordingly. Classical works on history also naturally become the choices of people from other culture who want to know China well, among which the “Twenty-four Histories” would be a good selection. Among Chinese classical works, the 24 books contained in the “Twenty-four Histories” just stand for a small part of history presented in a series of biographies, of course a smaller part in books on history. However, they are really greatest works about history of China. These 24 four books, especially the first four, The Historical Records by Sima Qian, History of the Han Dynasty by Ban Gu, Book of the Later Han by Fan Ye and “Records of the Three Kingdoms” by Chen Shou, are the most popular ones widely spreading in China. Books on history contain very strong and accurate cultural sense, to understand them and well translate them would promote others’ understanding for related culture better. It’s significant to read, understand and translate these great works on history if one wants to get a better and more accurate learning and understanding for China.

In China, even though not everyone has read the “Twenty-four Histories” in details and understand them completely, to be exact, most people would not know them so clearly, people know more or less about them and at least hold a general idea about them. No one could live in the world without learning enough about one’s past, which is part of the whole country or even world’s history. China has such a long history with so many great feats. It’s almost impossible for people to be interested and learned about the whole history. Therefore, people would make a choice here. For books about history, a large percent of people will choose the “Twenty-four Histories”, among which the first one is most widely accepted, that is, The Historical Records. Many factors lead to this result. Subjectively speaking, there’s “First Complex” as a nature for all. Objectively speaking, just like other 23 books, The Historical Records is a book of history presented in a series of biographies, but there’s also a speciality for this book--it covers a very long history and is generally regarded as a general history while others are mostly acknowledged as dynastic histories about certain specific periods. If people are not so interested in contents about a certain period, they can go to the

former or the latter parts related with other period. General history offers the readers enough freedom to make the choice, which is much more extensive than the dynastic ones. Thus, there are full of attempts to translate The Historical Records in different languages, or in different countries. Although there's still no complete translated equivalent for the whole book in English, there are translated versions almost equal to it together with enough notations in other languages, for example, in Japanese and Korean, the general idea inside together with many details are well-known in many countries outside of China.

Besides this most special one, among all these books, Chen Shou's "Records of the Three Kingdoms" is another quite specific and valuable one. The book records the history of The Three Kingdoms of Wei, Shu and Wu from the first year of Emperor Wen of Wei's reign to the first year of Emperor Wu of Jin's reign.[5]<sup>P1</sup> In China's history, the period of the Three Kingdoms is quite special for the simultaneous existence of three state powers with separate kings, full of conflicts in all layers. Although there are three kingdoms at the special period, they are commonly classified into one dynasty instead of three. No matter how small one kingdom would be, it should hold all the departments and institutions necessary for a state. Thus, the period of Three Kingdoms vividly offers a miniature of the development of history with a strong Chinese characteristic with quite a lot of celebrities and renown events involved. Especially after many following creators' creative description and displaying of people and events in this period, people in the whole world know much more about it than many other periods in China's history. Stories, songs, works, plays.... The period of Three Kingdoms appear at different times in different forms among different circles, even in this digital world, many games and programs are designed on the basis of people and events from this special historical period. Get all the information and data collected, ordinary mentioning of people and events in this period is quite a common phenomenon both in China and abroad, even though the percentage of the latter is not a big one, which is surely a relatively higher one.

Thus, the history of the Three Kingdoms is quite a popular one even in the modern world. In order to learn and understand it better, the reading and translation of Chen Shou's "Records of the Three Kingdoms" is an instructive and profound action. However, it can be seen that there are many versions of translations for some other historical

books, while right up to today, there's still not a complete translation for this work, only some part inside have been translated into others languages, usually collected in anthologies with main content and clues remained but details abridged or adapted. Actually speaking, people outside of China know not so much about the detailed ideas in the book, most of them know some about the history and the culture of the Three Kingdoms period because of the popularity and the existence of the translated versions for the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. In fact, the "Records of the Three Kingdoms" is one of the "Twenty-four Histories", it is undeniably a historical book, while the Romance of the Three Kingdoms is widely accepted as a novel, which is even one of China's four great classical novels.

#### **4. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TRANSLATING HISTORY PRESENTED IN A SERIES OF BIOGRAPHIES**

As one of the greatest thinkers, educators and politicians in China's modern history, Liang Qichao knows Chinese culture so well. Once, he said that for China, at least for China two hundred years earlier than his time, it was the truth that "Among all kinds of learning in China, history is the most developed; among learning history of all the countries in the world, China is the most developed." [6]<sup>P14</sup> The "history" mentioned here doesn't necessarily hold an extensive meaning to contain all kinds of recordings and researches on history, but it's sure that the "Twenty-four Histories" would never be ignored or even omitted. The "Twenty-four Histories" are all officially acknowledged books in China. Besides the first four books, which are written by single individuals and later officially recognized, all the others are written under the organization of the official government directly. Thus, contents inside these books can better endure the test of time, experience and practice. They well live out the real people and events at different times.

It's not coincidence for all the writers of these books to choose the style of history presented in a series of biographies. Biography is about single individual's life itself. Meanwhile, it is not just simple recording of the actual event itself, it will talk about the surroundings and context. Publicized biographies would not focus on those ordinary people living in a certain period, not to speak of the lifeless ones. Taking the life experience of an important person as the clue, biography will get all

factors that will influence the main character connected and displayed. Since among all living creatures proved to really exist in the world nowadays, human beings are undoubtedly the most intelligent ones and take the central status, when individuals are set up as the targets of the narration, all factors such as locations, spatial and temporal ones, interpersonal relationships etc. are all necessarily concerned, none of which could be ignored. All these will pave the way for a more profound displaying and understanding of the origins and causes of all people and events then and then preparing better for anticipating a more promising effect in the future.

Given that culture is more related with the real and actual life than the imagination, to learn certain culture well, reading history is a good choice, while reading the officially authorized ones counts for much more, among which, the ones presented in a series of biographies are justified to be the most reasonable, persuasive and powerful choices. Going through the whole series of books contained in the "Twenty-four Histories", one would surely establish a solid and profound basis for understanding Chinese culture. Though these books just concentrate on the history of China before the foundation of new China, Chinese culture is a constantly continuous one that has never ceased to flow, and thus, knowing the culture in the past well will certainly lead to a more accurate and profound for the moment now and even for the future.

All these books presented in a series of biographies authorized officially are written in ancient Chinese, and even for most Chinese people themselves, there would be great difficulty in learning and understanding them. Thus, the action of translation has already been involved in reading, analyzing, and understanding these works, only that the translating activities here are all only related with one language, Chinese. Although there's great difference between ancient Chinese and modern Chinese, since they are just different in forms and tones, essentially they are the same ones, especially because of the greatness of Chinese characters, no matter how different they are when they are spoken forms, they refer to the same characters in written form, which make the translation a relatively easier one.

With the development of China in the world, China should not only accept cultural information from the outside world, China should also let others know more about China, especially the real China, which is a common anticipation for many people

from other countries because all human beings are unavoidably the members of the global community with a common shared future and because of China's stronger and stronger confidence and influence in the world. The better way for others to learn and understand us would not lie so much in making others try their best to learn about Chinese and enter Chinese culture by themselves as in making choices for them and offering them the easier way to know us by our own efforts, therefore, translation should play the important role. Translating exciting stories and spreading hot news would stimulate others' temporary interest for the moment, while translating non-fictions and talking about the actual life itself would truly attract others although there's a relatively longer and tougher way to go before others accept them. Then, translation of the non-fictions, especially the historical books would be quite an important, meaningful, and necessary action. When Chinese culture is concerned, the translation of the "Twenty-four Histories" would undeniably offer a more solid and reliable foundation for reaching it.

Actually, there are not so much translations for these historical books in other countries up till now. Translation would become something necessary only if at least one party related with the translated target holds a strong desire for knowing, not to speak of learning or understanding, it, and meanwhile, this one should know something about the language displaying the object or this one may find someone else who knows and can make use of at least two languages, one is the language applied in the object and the other is the language applied by the interested one. Even for the native readers, compared with other literary works, non-fictions themselves would not be so attractive, not to say for the people outside of the culture. Then it's natural that there are many translators trying to translate The Historical Records. The action of translation is in proportion to the ones interested in it.

The interesting phenomenon is that many people are interested in Chinese culture of the Three Kingdom period more than other periods, no matter how long and how much they have got in touch with Chinese culture. Going through information collected both online and offline in all fields, people know much about heroes and events in this period, there are popular legends for such great friendship between Liu Bei, Zhang Fei and Guanyu, with all their great feats displayed vividly respectively; there are great men in charge of the state powers that will change the direction of history such as Cao Cao, Sun Quan and Liu Bei;

there are wonders created by such great brainpower as Zhuge liang, Zhou Yu, Sima Yi etc...However, the image and stories of these great ones would be different from the records in Chen Shou's "Records of the Three Kingdoms". Just taking Zhuge Liang, the well-known intelligent image as an example. In the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, he is established as a perfect intellect with almost no shortcomings, he can make use of all the materials and conditions around and he can solve every problem no matter how difficult it is. However, Zhuge Liang in the "Records of the Three Kingdoms" agrees more with people in real life, he will also meet with problems that he can't handle, he may hold his own worries and confusions... The difference arises from that the former work is a novel and the second is just a historical book. One more important point should be emphasized here, the novel focuses on the plot inside, it must go directly to the next stage, but the historical book here is presented in a series of biographies, when it records the life experience of each individual, the great deeds concerned would be repeated from the concerned one's perspective, thus the ones involved would be offered a very complete multi-dimensional image. To know about the truth, the historical books, especially the ones adopting biographical style, would be the better choice.

As a typical representative and evidence, all these prove that the translation based on historical books will be truer to life and thus more meaningful. No doubt, the translation of classic works, especially historical works, in which the histories represented in a series of biographies occupy quite a large and important part, is really a significant and profound action. Though there's not enough translation for these books now, there must be a meaningful prospect for translating them as much and accurate as possible.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As one of the greatest leaders in China's history, Chairman Mao has spent quite a large amount of time and energy on reading, analyzing and criticizing the "Twenty-four Histories", he talks about the value about reading them and he has really drawn quite a lot of experiences and conclusions based on his understanding of these histories presented in a series of biographies. When it goes to the new century with more and more people recognizing the importance of peace and development for the whole world as a community with a common shared future, with all Chinese

knowing more and more the significance of holding and spreading the cultural confidence, the understanding, inheritance and renovation of traditional culture stand out to be quite important, among which translation for classical Chinese works, especially the classical historical books, and more, the ones presented in a series of biographies, the best carriers of culture quite true to life itself, deserves a great trying and effort, and which will necessarily lead to a bright and promising future for learning and understanding Chinese culture.

Theoretically speaking, more and more people begin to recognize the significance of translating historical books, the ones presented in series of biographies included of course. Actually, there's still lack of translation for them in reality. Positively speaking, the whole world is in a wonderful period of development, more and more new technologies are needed, the learning and researching of humanities, with history as an essential component, would not match the requirement of the society so well. However, when the civilization goes to a higher status, it's necessary for people to relax and calm down, then, the thinking and conclusion paving the way for the future could only arise from the past experience, thus, the workings on humanities would reach a new peak, with learning, understanding, application and translation of historical books, especially the histories presented in a series of biographies, included.

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