

A Paratextual Study on English Translations of *Three Character Classic*

Li Zhou¹

¹ School of Humanity and Education, Foshan University, Foshan 528000, China

Correspondence: Li Zhou, School of Humanity and Education, Foshan University, Foshan 528000, China.

doi:10.56397/JLCS.2023.06.16

Abstract

The paratext is the supplement of the main text as well as the important carrier of information transmission. By means of Gérard Genette's theory, this paper analyzes and compares the differences between the three English translations of *Three Character Classic*, and holds that the paratext to a large extent reflects the will of publishers and translators and the paratext is of great significance to the evaluation and transmission of the translations and the translator studies.

Keywords: *Three Character Classic*, paratext, translation

1. Introduction

Three Character Classic, known as the "ancient wonderful book", is a household name for children's enlightenment reading material. It has a total of more than one thousand characters, three characters in one line and rhymes in each line. It covers aspects such as astronomy, geography, digital orientation, historical evolution, ethics and morality. Moreover, because of its catchiness, it allows children to silently embed their predecessors' wisdom, folk customs, and historical facts in their reading, and it is deeply loved by children, thus spreading to this day. With the rise of the "craze for traditional Chinese culture" in recent years, the *Three Character Classic*, along with *Guidelines for Children, Thousand Character Writing* and the *Book of Family Names*, have entered the CCTV's program *Lecture Room* and are once again warmly pursued by the society.

The *Three Character Classic* has been translated into English, Latin, Russian, French, German, and other languages. According to the author's statistics, there are a large number of English translations of the *Three Character Classic*, with as many as fifteen influential ones, respectively completed by early Western missionaries or sinologists and some domestic translators in recent years. Although there are many English translations of the *Three Character Classic*, there are few papers on the study of the English translation of the *Three Character Classic*.

There are only forty-eight papers on the topic of "English Translation of the *Three Character Classic*" on CNKI, including journals, academic papers and conference papers, and these researches are limited to the studies on the main texts of the different English translations of the *Three Character Classic*, such as the comparative study on the English translations (Liu Lei &

Zhang Wenghui, 2019), and the translation aesthetics study (Zhai Na, 2015), translation ethics study (Tang Can, 2012), translation strategies study (Liu Lan, 2016), etc. However, the research on the paratext of the *Three Character Classic* is still blank. The study of paratext “is a link that cannot be ignored in translation studies” (Zheng Wei, 2011), which is an important supplement to the main text. This paper takes the three English translations of the *Three Character Classic* as the objects of investigation, analyzes the differences of their paratexts, and probes into the role and significance of the paratexts in order to promote the translation of Chinese classics into English better.

2. Paratext Translation

The concept of “paratext” was first proposed by the famous contemporary French literary theorist Gérard Genette. In his book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, he conducted a comprehensive and systematic study of the connotation, nature, and function of paratext for the first time. In 2012, Peter Lang Publishing House published the symposium *Translation Peripheries: Paratextual Elements in Translation*, which introduced Genette’s concept of paratext with the theme of “paratext factors in translation”. Based on this, he introduced the theory of paratext into the field of translation research, opening up a new perspective in translation studies. In 2018, Kathryn Batchelor’s new book *Translation and Paratexts* constructed an open and inclusive theory of translation studies based on Genette’s concept of paratexts. This theory provides researchers with a basis and reference model for conducting translation studies from the perspective of paratext, and further enhances the importance of paratext

elements in translation studies.

“Paratext” refers to “all verbal and non verbal materials that serve as a coordination between the text and the reader, and are used to present the work” (Genette, 1997:1). Genette also divides paratext into peritext and epitext based on its location. Peritext refers to the information contained within a book or text, including a cover, title, subtitle, author, publication information, catalog, preface, illustration, appendix, annotation, postscript, acknowledgment, audio and video, etc. Epitext refers to the information that is not in the text but is closely related to the author or publisher, including the author or translator’s notes, public speeches, interviews, publisher’s advertisements, articles and letters related to the text, etc.

Içklar Koçak believes that paratext is crucial to translation research because it is an important link between authors, translators, publishers and readers (quoted from Xiao Li, 2011:17).

The paratext can provide guidance for readers to read the main text and play a supplementary role in generating the meaning of the main text. Only the translation study involving the paratext can be considered as a complete translation study.

3. A Comparison of the Paratexts of the English Translations of the *Three Character Classic*

This paper will make a comparative analysis of the paratexts of *Three Character Classic* in three English translations, namely, the Giles’ English translation (1900), the Pan Shizi’s English translation (1989), and the Zhao Yanchun’s English translation (2014) (see Table 1). These three translations were created in different times, and the paratexts are obviously different, which is of great research value.

Table 1. Basic information of the three English translations

Basic Information	Giles’ translation	Pan Shizi’s translation	Zhao Yanchun’s translation
Title	San Tzu Ching: Elementary Chinese	Three Character Classic	The Three Word Primer
Publishing House	Kelly & Walsh, Ltd	EPB publishers	Guangming Daily Press
Publishing Time	1900	1989	2014
Length (page)	178	217	119

3.1 Publisher Peritext

The publisher peritext includes the format of the

book, the cover and the title page, the layout, and the paper determined by the publisher (Genette, 1997:16).

3.1.1 Cover

The cover design of the Giles' translation is simple and the color is a single brown. There is no English title on the cover, except for the Chinese title "三字经" on the spine (see Figure 1). The cover of the Pan Shizi's translation is shown in Figure 2. The background color of the cover is black. The front of the cover includes the words "EPB PUBLISHERS", the illustration of "Kong Rong Rang Li" (a Chinese folk tale), the name of the translator, the English translation of the title and the Chinese title of the book. The top part of the back cover is the introduction of *Three Character Classic*, like "one of the most well-known Chinese classics, the *Three Character Classic*, written during the song Dynasty, was a primer at schools in ancient China as well as in Singapore during the 19th and 20th centuries." "The book expounds the philosophy of Confucius, details the rich and complex history of China and her famous personalities, teaches how one should conduct oneself in life as well as gives practical advice for daily living". At the bottom of the back cover is the author's honor and introduction, the publisher and the issue number. On the spine are the title of the book in both Chinese and English, the translator's name and the publisher's trademark.

The cover of Zhao Yanchun's translation is shown in Figure 3. The background color of the cover is white. From top to bottom are the Chinese title, the English title, the Chinese slogan, the translator's name, and the illustration of "Sages teach Children". The back cover are executive editors, cover designer, publisher logo, bar code and price. On the spine are Chinese title of the book, translator's name, and publishing house.

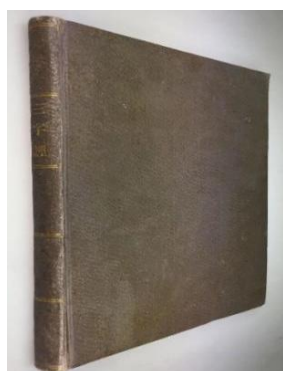


Figure 1. Cover of Giles' translation

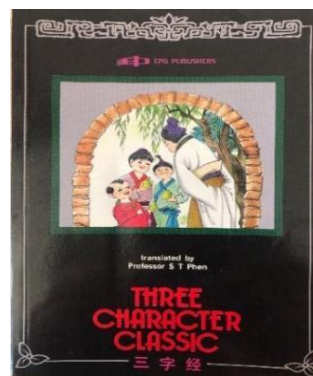


Figure 2. Cover of Pan Shizi's translation

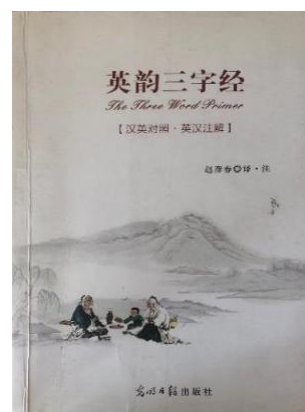


Figure 3. Cover of Zhao Yanchun's translation

3.1.2 Title Page and Subsidiary Pages

The title page of the Giles's translation is rich in information, with the words "ELEMENTARY CHINESE" at the top, followed by the traditional Chinese character of the title, as well as the English title, author's name, author's title, place of publication, publishing house, and time of publication. The subsidiary page contains printing location information.

The title page of the Pan shizi's translation is basically the same as the cover, except without the illustration, and the title of the Chinese and English has been moved from the bottom to the top. The subsidiary page includes common copyright information, as well as the cover designer, issue number, and printing location.

The title page of Zhao Yanchun's translation is also roughly the same as the cover, with only the background picture and English title deleted. The subsidiary page includes common information such as cataloging in publication (CIP) data, executive editors, cover designer, issuer, address, phone number, website, printing location, and so on.

3.1.3 Layout and Printing

From the text layout of the three translations, the source text and the target text are typeset against each other. As shown in Figure 4, the source text of the Giles's translation lines up in three traditional Chinese character horizontally, and the following sentence is distinguished by another line marked with Arabic numerals. To the right of the source text is the English translation. Each character in the source text is marked with phonetic notes and tones according to Wade-Giles romanization, and the corresponding English word is marked below the Chinese *pinyin* of the original Chinese characters. Then the source text is interpreted by means of the structure, component, radical and meaning of each Chinese character.

As shown in Figure 5, the source text of the Pan Shizi's translation has a contrast between traditional and simplified Chinese characters, with *pinyin* and tones below the simplified Chinese. The translation is divided into three parts: the English translation of each Chinese character; the English translation of sentences; detailed English notes. Besides, there are a few illustrations in the text.

As shown in Figure 6, the source text of Zhao Yanchun's translation takes four sentences as one paragraph. The preceding and following paragraphs are distinguished by small brackets plus Arabic numerals, and the sentences are marked with punctuation marks. The source text is in simplified Chinese Character with *pinyin* and tone. Below the source text is the translation, which takes three words as one sentence, and the notes are English and Chinese.

In terms of length, the Giles's translation has a total of 178 pages, including a preface, a text and an appendix. The Pan Shizi's translation consists of 217 pages, including the table of contents, preface, text, appendix, and index. The Zhao Yanchun's translation has total 119 pages, including the table of contents, preface, text, postscript.

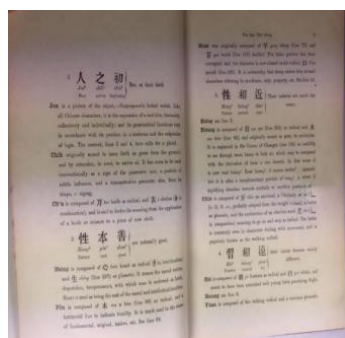


Figure 4. Text of Giles' translation



Figure 5. Text of Pan Shizi's translation

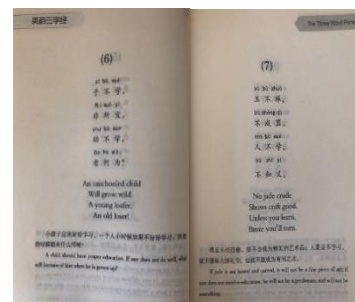


Figure 6. Text of Zhao Yanchun's translation

3.2 Preface and Postface

Postface is regarded as a variant of "preface". Preface and postface are the introduction of the book's publishing purpose, writing intention, subject content and so on.

In the preface of the Giles' translation, the translator gives a brief introduction to the book and its author Wang Yinglin, explains his motivation for translating the book, introduces the features of the book, and puts forward some suggestions on how to learn the *Three Character Classic*. He thinks that only by imitating the way Chinese children learn the *Three Character Classic* can they learn Chinese well and develop Chinese thinking.

The Pan Shizi's translation introduces Confucianism and its influence, the author's historical background and writing background, and also gives a brief introduction to the source text of the *Three Character Classic*. Finally, it introduces the arrangement and design of the translation.

The Zhao Yanchun's translation invites Professor Luo Xuanmin and Professor Yang Bingjun to give a preface to appreciate and recommend the translation. In the postface, the translator introduces the motivation and process of his translation.

3.3 Notes

The *Three Character Classic* is short and concise, although the full text is less than two thousand characters, but the connotation of the text is extremely rich. In order to make readers better understand, translators often use notes. The Ciles' translation uses the Wade-Giles romanization system to mark each character with phonetic note and tone. At the same time, according to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* written by Xu Shen, the structure, component, radical of each Chinese character are analyzed, and the relevant history, culture and allusions are introduced.

The Pan Shizi's translation also marks each Chinese character in the source text with Chinese *pinyin*. There are 103 notes in total, some of which are very detailed and involve a lot. Taking “小学终 至四书” as an example, the annotation introduces the elementary school education in ancient China, including the book on “small learning” written by Master Zhu Xi, the *Four Books* in ancient China, as well as the *Thirteen Classics*. The translator quoted classics to make the annotation as detailed and comprehensive as possible.

The Zhao Yanchun’s translation takes four sentences as a section, in English and Chinese, and below each section there is a brief annotation. Annotations are also in English and Chinese, as shown in Figure 6.

3.4 Internal Title

Internal titles refer to the titles that appear inside a book, mainly including the table of contents, chapter titles, and page headers (Genette, 1997: 294).

The Giles' translation has no contents. The contents of Pan Shizi's translation has a simple structure. It only lists the introduction, *Three Character Classics*, appendix and index without detailed chapter contents (As shown in Figure 7).

The contents of Zhao Yanchun's translation is all in Chinese, including the preface of Luo Xianxuan, the preface of Yang Bingjun, and the first sentence of each section and postface (As shown in Figure 8).

From the above comparison, it can be seen that due to the inheritance and continuity of the translations, the paratexts of the three editions have similarities, but due to the large time span, different translators and publishing institutions, the paratexts of the three translations also have significant differences.

Contents	
Introduction	
Three Character Classic	
Appendix	
I. A Brief Chronology of the Ruling Powers of China	199
II. A Table of Events in the History of China	200
Index	211

Figure 7. Contents of Pan Shizi's translation

[illegible]

Figure 8. Contents of Zhao Yanchun's translation.

4. Analysis on the Functions of the Paratexts of the *Three Character Classic*

Through the analysis of the paratexts of the English translations of the *Three Character Classic*, we can see that the paratexts reflect the will of publishers and translators to a large extent. The publishers try to make the translation appear as he wishes by manipulating and selecting the paratexts. However, the translators can further express their own feelings through the paratexts such as prefaces, postfaces, and notes or annotations.

The translators further express their own feelings through the use of paratexts such as prefaces and postfaces, and annotations.

4.1 Publisher Paratexts—Overall Control of the Presentation of the Translation

Publishers manipulate the paratexts of a translation for two purposes: to attract more readers and to make it easier for readers to read. The *Three Character Classic* is a precious cultural heritage of the Chinese nation, which has extensive and far-reaching influence. Therefore, it is necessary to properly wrap and propagandize the translation. Firstly, publishers add relevant information on the cover, back cover and title page to emphasize the translator's identity, level or introduce the

translator's accomplishments and honors. In the title page of the Giles' translation, there are words "Professor of Chinese in the University of Cambridge". In the subsidiary page of the Zhao Yanchun's translation, there is a list of the editorial board of the "Foreign Translation Library of Chinese Classics", which shows that Zhao Yanchun is one of the chief editors. The Pan Shizi's translation has "Professor" on its cover and an introduction to the *Three Character Classic* above the back cover: "One of the most well-known Chinese classics/was a primer at schools in ancient China as well as in Singapore in the 19th and 20th centuries." At the bottom of the back cover is the introduction of the translator, including his education background, title and honors.

The second is reflected in the cover design of the translation. The Giles' translation has a long history. Relatively speaking, it pays more attention to the literary value of the translation itself and does not care much about the form of expression, so the cover design is simple. However, the Pan Shizi's translation and Zhao Yanchun's translation try to convey certain cultural information. For example, the cover of the Pan Shizi's translation has an illustration and the translation text also has ten illustrations conveying traditional Chinese culture, while the cover of Zhao Yanchun's translation also has the illustration and Chinese landscape paintings, and the cover and edges are carefully designed. In addition, Publishers and translators must also consider the readers' reading experience. Reading experience plays an important role in the spread of books. Therefore, the layout of the translation should be carefully considered.

4.2 Translator Paratexts—Make Translators as Visible as Possible

Generally speaking, in order to make the translation more faithful to the source text, the translator needs to be as invisible as possible. The paratexts of the translation, such as preface and postface, notes or annotations, etc., provides the translator with a platform to express himself.

For example, the preface of the Giles' translation first introduces the *Three Character Classic* and its author. Then the author expounds the translator's motivation and puts forward some suggestions on how to learn the *Three Character Classic* well.

The preface of the Pan Shizi's translation first introduces the birth of Confucianism and its

influence on China. Confucianism was founded by the thinker Confucius during the Spring and Autumn Period. Confucianism is evident in the *Four Books and Six Classics*, which have had an important influence on Chinese scholars. The translator then introduces the life of Wang Yinglin, the author of the *Three Character Classic*, and Wen Tianxiang, another great scholar at the same time. Wen Tianxiang's loyalty to the country is the reflection of Confucian virtues. The translator goes on to explain that the *Three Character Classic* reflects the basic principles of the Confucian classics, which links the history of China from the mythological period to the Song Dynasty, and finally introduces the typesetting and features of the translation. In addition, the translator has attached two appendices and an index at the end of the book. The first appendix is a brief chronology of the ruling powers of China. The second appendix is a table of events in the history of China.

The Zhao Yanchun's translation not only invites other professors to write prefaces for it, but also has its own postface. The first preface is written by Professor Luo Xianxuan. In the preface, Professor Luo fully affirmed and praised the rhythmic beauty of his translation and the English-Chinese explanatory notes, and strongly recommended his translation. The second preface is written by Professor Yang Bingjun. In the preface, Professor Yang compares the Giles' translation with Zhao Yanchun's translation. Professor Yang believes that Zhao Yanchun's translation is superior in terms of word choices, antithesis, and annotations. In the postface, the translator briefly introduces his creative motivation and some thoughts during the creative process.

Translator visible is also evident in the annotations. Although the full text of *Three Character Classic* is less than 2000 characters, it contains rich cultural connotations. When the translation cannot fully convey the cultural connotations contained in the source text, the translator will use annotations. The *Three Character Classic* uses three characters as a sentence, and each sentence contains rich information. Therefore, the English translations of the *Three Character Classic* all have annotations. For example, the Giles' translation analyzes the structure, components, and radicals of each Chinese character, and introduces some historical and cultural allusions. The full text of the Pan Shizi's translation has 103 annotations,

while the Zhao Yanchun's translation has a four-character section with annotations below each section.

5. Conclusion

Paratext is an important component of translation, which is of great significance to translation studies. Among the numerous English translations of the *Three Character Classic*, the Giles' translation, the Pan Shizi's translation, and the Zhao Yanchun's translation were created in different eras, with significant differences in paratexts, which are of great research value. From the above analysis of the paratexts of the three translations of the *Three Character Classic*, we can see that paratexts can convey the creative background of the book, cultural allusions, author information, translator's translation motivation, and translation strategies and so on which can not be conveyed through the main text. And paratexts largely reflect the will of the publishers and the translators. Therefore, in order to fully understand the translation, it is necessary to analyze its paratexts. We can extract important information from it, which is of great significance to the evaluation and transmission of the translations and translator studies.

References

- Bardají, Anna Gil. (2012). *Translation Peripheries: Paratextual Elements in Translation*. Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Batchelor, Kathryn. (2006). *Translation and Paratexts*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Chesterman, Andrew. (2009). The Name and Nature of Translation Studies. *Hermes-Journal of Language and Communication Studies*, (42), 13-22.
- Génette, Gérard. (1997). *Paratexts-Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gray, Jonathan. (2010). *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and other Media paratexts*. New York/London: New York University press.
- Herbert Allen Giles. (1900). *San Tzu Ching: Elementary Chinese*. Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd.
- Liu Lan. (2016). Strategic Routes for Multiple Translation of *Three Character Classic*. *Journal of North China University of Technology* (Social Science Edition), (6), 138-144.
- Liu Lei, Zhang Wenghui. (2019). A Comparative Study of the English Translation of the *Three Character Classic* from the Perspective of Spatial Schema Theory. *Modern Chinese*, (1), 131-135.
- Pellatt, Valerie. (2014). *Text, Extratext, Metatext and Paratext in Translation*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- S T Phen. (1989). *Three Character Classic*. Singapore: EPB Publishers.
- Tang Can, Zhang Yingxian. (2012). On the translation ethics of Gile's English translation of the *Three Character Classic*. *Northern Literature*, (8), 103-104.
- Xiao Li. (2011). The Significance of Paratexts in Translation Studies. *Shanghai Translation*, (4), 17-21.
- Zhai Na. (2015). A Study on the Translation Aesthetics of the English version of the *Three Character Classic*. *Chinese Construction*, (6), 65-66.
- Zhao Yanchun. (2014). *The Three Word Primer*. Beijing: Guangming Daily Publishing House.
- Zheng Wei. (2011). Paratext Studies: An Important Link in Translation Studies. *Journal of Hangzhou University of Electronic Science and Technology* (Social Science Edition), (2), 50-53.