

Retranslation Issues in Translating Russian Historical Texts: A Case Study of the Chinese Translation of Kiechanov's Tiansheng Lüling Research Volume

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ABSTRACT

Western Xia studies is a branch of Sinology. In recent years, the field has grown rapidly in China, and the translation of international Western Xia scholarship has advanced. However, most scholars focus more on the content of the translated texts than on the translation process itself. The translation issues of these texts are significant and worth exploring. Since Western Xia culture was influenced by Tang and Song China, international scholars often draw on Chinese historical sources and contemporary domestic research, in addition to original Western Xia texts and foreign-language materials. In a broader sense, these translations can be seen as a form of cultural retranslation. While Chinese scholars have focused on retranslation in English Sinology, Russian Sinology, particularly regarding Western Xia historical works, remains underexplored. By chance, I had the opportunity to read and proofread the Chinese translation of Professor Kiechanov's Tiansheng Lüling, a seminal work in Russian Western Xia studies. This experience was rewarding, and this paper aims to summarize the translation practices of Russian Western Xia texts, offering insights for future translations and filling a research gap in the field.

KEYWORDS

historical texts; retranslation; Kiechanov; Tiansheng Lüling

1 Introduction

As scholar Luo Zhitian (2012: 66) stated, "For researchers, people and events from different times and spaces can be regarded as 'others' or 'the other.' In simple terms, the past is 'not me' or 'the other,' meaning 'the past is a foreign country.'"^[1] For this reason, the translation of historical texts is more challenging than that of contemporary texts, due to the dual barrier of time and space. The historical context, social customs, and human relations of a bygone era are vastly different from those of the present. The greater the time span, the more pronounced these differences become. Furthermore, if one is born at a time of transition between eras, or during a period of historical transformation, the social and cultural disparities between just a few years may evoke a sense of dramatic change. As modern individuals, without a respectful attitude toward the culture of our predecessors, without sincere scholarly dedication, sufficient patience and perseverance, and a solid foundation in language skills and academic knowledge, it is impossible to produce meaningful translations. The process of back-translation of historical texts is even more arduous than ordinary historical text translation. This is particularly true unless it is a "no-source back-translation," where a work originally written in Language B to represent Language A's culture is translated back into Language A, with no significant cultural barriers or clashes. In cases where the original source text in Language A has been lost, back-translation from Language B would also be possible. In any case, for texts that involve source-language back-translation, it is essential to trace the original roots in the target language culture. According to the interpretive theory of translation, translation is essentially an interpretation. Therefore, this original root undoubtedly sets strict boundaries for the translator's interpretation and the degree of freedom in translation. This demands that translators be meticulous in their work, carefully considering and verifying multiple sources. At times, extensive bilingual or even multilingual research is required. The accuracy of the interpretation directly correlates with the level of understanding. The depth of the translator's comprehension of the work determines the quality of the translation. Apart from individual differences in comprehension ability, linguistic barriers and insufficient background knowledge are the primary obstacles on the path to understanding.

Back-translated historical texts often feature a blend of multiple languages and exhibit distinct characteristics of cultural fusion. As a result, even if the back-translation is as faithful as possible to the original work in the target language, it will never be fully equivalent in meaning. The translator's intercultural background, translation proficiency, understanding of the original work, and choice of translation strategies all contribute to differences. In such cases, achieving a so-called "100% return to the original text" is neither necessary nor feasible. Here, the significance of back-translating historical texts needs to be addressed. If it is a source-language back-translation and not used as a translation training exercise, back-translated Sinology texts are primarily intended for learning, reference, and research purposes. They can be analyzed from a translation perspective or used to seek insights and inspiration from different angles and viewpoints. When used for reference, the differences and unique interpretations in the back-translated text are precisely its essence and value, and must be faithfully preserved rather than erased. Therefore, when back-translating historical texts, careful consideration and balance are needed to maintain as much fidelity to the target language culture as

possible, while preserving the distinctive information in the back-translated text.

2 On Back-Translation

In the previous section, we briefly discussed the challenges of back-translating historical texts. But what exactly is back-translation? There is no unified definition of this term to date. In *Толковый переводческий словарь* (The Dictionary of Translation), back-translation is defined in two ways: 1) Перевод текста перевода на язык оригинал (translating the translated text back into the original language); 2) учебный вид уже переведенного текста на исходный язык (a pedagogical method of back-translating an already translated text into the source language) (Nelyubin, 2003: 123). The first definition aligns perfectly with the first definition listed by Jia Hongwei (2003) in his article *Rational Thoughts on the Back-Translation of Classical Texts*. This refers to a narrow sense of back-translation (also known as retranslation), which is commonly applied to the restoration of classical texts or passages related to classical works. The second definition, however, considers back-translation as a pedagogical tool used to train translation skills and assess translation competence, representing a broader application of back-translation. The broader scope includes back-translating lost classical texts, language teaching, and translation evaluation, among other fields. Unlike the narrow sense of back-translation, the broader approach does not require the translated product to be absolutely faithful to the original text in the target language.

In the case of the Russian texts discussed in this article, many of the clauses cited come from the legal literature of the Western Xia dynasty. There is a lack of comprehensive historical references on Western Xia law in Chinese historical literature, and the Western Xia language has long been a dead language. Although dictionaries of Western Xia script have been published in both Russia and China, the task of fully interpreting and decoding this language has not been concluded. The Chinese and Russian translations of Western Xia texts are thus only interpretations, not direct renderings of the original text. Consequently, the references to the Western Xia legal code in this paper are also merely interpretations and cannot be traced back to the original source.

However, both Chinese and Russian scholars of Western Xia studies initially began their archaeological interpretations of Western Xia through *Fan Han He Shi Zhang Zhong Zhu*, a bilingual Chinese-Western Xia dictionary. Scholars from both Russia and China generally agree that the legal system of Western Xia largely followed the Tang-Song legal system of China. Moreover, much of the core citation in this study is drawn from ancient Chinese historical records and contemporary Chinese research on Western Xia law. Therefore, while there are parts of the work that involve strict back-translation, there are also instances of "no-source" back-translation. The primary focus, however, is on the cultural aspect of back-translation.

For this reason, this paper adopts the broad definition of back-translation provided by Chen Zhijie and Pan Hualing, who define it as "a translation activity that traces the inherent linguistic and cultural connections between the proposed translated text and the target language text, and retranslates the linguistic and cultural materials or texts from the target language back into the source language" (Chen Zhijie & Pan Hualing, 2008: 56).

3 Kiechanov and Western Xia Studies

The previous section introduced the concept of back-translation as defined in this paper. Given the nature of the historical texts under study, it is essential to briefly overview Western Xia studies. Similar to Tibetan studies, Western Xia studies is a subfield of Sinology, focused on the local regime established by a minority ethnic group in China, contemporary to the Liao and Jin dynasties. Western Xia's political, economic, and cultural systems were heavily influenced by Tang and Song cultures. During Emperor Jingzong's reign, the Western Xia script was created by Ye Li Renrong, based on Chinese characters. The *Tian Sheng Revised Laws* (the text examined later) also reflects the legal traditions of the Tang and Song dynasties.

Western Xia studies emerged as a distinct field in the early 20th century. However, research in China was limited before the 1970s, with only a few scholars proficient in the Western Xia language. After the 1970s, national attention, key archaeological discoveries, and the publication of Western Xia documents by Russian scholars sparked significant progress. This fueled the growth of Western Xia studies in China, which has flourished in recent years. Russia's extensive collection of Western Xia texts has been a valuable resource, with scholars like Long Guofu, Nie Lishan, Kiechanov, and Ke Ping making notable contributions, some gaining international recognition.

Kiechanov, Director of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, is the leading authority in Russian Western Xia studies. He has authored over ten books and more than a hundred research papers. His key works include *An Outline of Western Xia History*, *New Collection of Collected Words*, and *The Tian Sheng Laws*. The work discussed in this paper is the first volume of his four-volume study on the *Tian Sheng Laws*, with the first

volume dedicated to research and the remaining volumes consisting of Russian translations of the Western Xia legal code.

4 Textual Features, Translation Strategies, and Methods in Kiechanov's Tian Sheng Laws Research Volume

4.1 Textual Features of the Tian Sheng Laws Research Volume

This volume is a research-oriented work. In addition to numerous citations from the Tian Sheng Laws and supplementary provisions from the New Laws of the Hai Year, it also includes a comparative analysis of the Western Xia legal code with those of the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties. The text draws on the cultural contexts of Korea, Japan, and Russia's Far East, with a comparison of legal terminology across East Asian countries, including Japanese, Tibetan, Western Xia, and Korean. This results in a phenomenon of linguistic mixing, with many terms being transliterated.

This work is a modern commentary, interpretation, and analysis of historical texts, with a focus on legal matters. The legal clauses cited follow fixed expressions and structures, filled with specialized terms from both Western Xia and Chinese Tang-Song law. The language of the work is logically clear and its writing is rigorous. However, due to its academic nature and the grammatical and stylistic features of Russian, the text contains many long sentences. Two common types of long sentences in Russian alternate throughout the book. On one hand, this adds a certain flexibility and variation to the otherwise rigid legal style. On the other hand, it can create some difficulty in language analysis, with certain sections of the text becoming overly wordy or lacking in conciseness, leading to a cumbersome sentence structure, especially when citing long Western Xia legal clauses.

Additionally, there are occasional grammatical and punctuation errors, leading to unclear meaning that requires careful contextual analysis. According to the Chinese translation of the Tian Sheng Laws by Shi Jinbo, the author may have intentionally sought to preserve the structural features of the original Western Xia legal texts. However, due to the vast differences in grammar and stylistic features between the two languages, this sometimes increases the difficulty of extracting the correct meaning. Moreover, at times there is semantic redundancy between the cited clauses and the author's own commentary, which needs to be trimmed during translation into Chinese by removing redundant information and streamlining sentence structures.

Regarding the translation of culturally loaded terms, the author primarily employs two methods: a combination of explanation and transliteration, and pure explanation. The first method facilitates cultural back-translation. The second method, however, may lead to misunderstanding or imprecise wording, resulting in incomplete or inaccurate interpretations. Some terms require extensive cross-referencing, consulting historical materials, and seeking expert opinions to pinpoint the correct Chinese equivalent. Some of the Tibetan and Korean terms involved, due to the author's limited language ability, could not be traced back to their original forms and were instead transliterated.

As for the names of foreign scholars cited in the text, the author uses Russian transliteration. Thus, when translating into Chinese, some names cannot be directly translated through the standard Sino-Russian transliteration tables. Instead, the original names must be found in the reference materials and then translated back into the original language for accuracy.

Moreover, the footnotes in Kiechanov's book deserve attention. References from European and American countries are listed in their original languages. However, when referencing Chinese and Japanese materials, the author uses transliteration instead of providing the original text. This adds further difficulty to the back-translation of such references.

4.2 Translation Strategies and Methods

Translation is inherently a dynamic system involving multiple participants. While it may appear that the interaction between the translator and the text leads to the creation of the translation, the complex interplay of various factors—including the translator's individuality and social identity, the original author behind the text, the culture surrounding the original work, and the text's inherent vitality—shapes the final output. Historically, readers were often seen as passive receivers in this complex system of forces. However, in today's increasingly individualized society, where personal identity and human rights are emphasized, readers find ways to assert their presence through various media. Translation activities can no longer ignore the expectations and demands of readers.

The rise of reception aesthetics, which stems from a renewed focus on human value and the awakening of individual self-awareness, highlights the role of readers in shaping their expectations. These expectations, in turn, influence their reception of the translated text. Thus, back-translation must "consider the existence of the reader and strive to align the translation with the reader's perspective as much as possible" (Ye Hongwei, 2016: 39)^[2]. While individual differences cannot be overlooked, "since Sinology works focus on Chinese subjects, readers' expectations for these translations tend to be more consistent. Readers prefer fluent, natural Chinese expressions over sentences that clearly bear the marks of

translation" (Zhang Jing, 2021:25)^[3]. Therefore, in order to preserve the core ideas of the original text, the translation strategy primarily adopts domestication, "seeking to return to the authentic, standard native language expression, using forms that Chinese readers find more appealing and that conform to Chinese syntactical norms" (Zhang Jing, 2021:25).

Given the characteristics of the Russian text and the differences between Russian and Chinese, the following translation methods were primarily employed in this back-translation process:

4.2.1 Clarifying Semantic Relationships, Structuring Complexity into Simplicity, Shortening Long Sentences, Information Reorganization, and Using Addition and Omission

Russian, as an Indo-European language, is highly synthetic, with rich grammatical categories, including gender, case, and number. The inflectional forms of words provide clear semantic clues in both form and syntactic relationships. Additionally, relative pronouns and adverbs in Russian explicitly indicate the logical connections between main and subordinate clauses, which results in the frequent use of long sentences. The nesting of subordinate clauses appears to maximize sentence construction efficiency, but it increases the semantic load of individual sentences. The use of connectors and anaphoric references further contributes to redundancy, making sentence structures complex and somewhat rigid.

To compensate, Russian also employs long sentences composed of multiple simple sentences, each formed by gerunds, adjectival phrases, prepositional phrases, or noun collocations. Kiechanov's work utilizes both types of long sentences, each with its limitations. The combination of subordinate clauses and fixed legal structures results in cumbersome sentence constructions, with redundant information becoming more prominent. On the other hand, the use of multiple simple sentences adds flexibility to the sentence structure, making it more concise and dynamic. However, since each simple sentence within the long sentence can serve multiple syntactical functions (e.g., subject, adjective, or adverbial modifier), this increases the difficulty of semantic analysis.

4.2.2 "With the use of Classical Chinese syntax, returning to the elegant and ancient style" (Zhou Hongmin & Cheng Min, 2016:27)

Since the Russian text describes the ancient laws of Western Xia, the style should be formal and standardized, with clear expression and a rigorous structure^[4]. The tone should remain consistent throughout the text, avoiding a mix of formal and colloquial language, and it should not be overly modernized. Instead, it should reflect certain characteristics of the historical period. However, this does not mean that the text should be written in archaic language. Instead, appropriate usage of four-character structures and function words such as "zhe," "zhi," "qi," and "wei" can lend the expression a refined, ancient quality.

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