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A Review of Studies on the Translation of *Shiji*

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Abstract: Based on the academic papers retrieved from the CNKI database, this paper presents a visual analysis of the number of domestic studies on the translation of *Shiji*, and classifies the literature along five dimensions: experience-based research, quantitative research, translation history research, dissemination and impact research, and minor-language translation research. On this basis, and organized around these five research directions, the paper conducts a classified review of *Shiji* translation studies, summarizes the shortcomings of existing research, and offers suggestions for future research. The study finds that although *Shiji* translation research has achieved certain results, experience-based studies account for a high proportion and multidimensional research is unbalanced. This paper aims to promote the development of *Shiji* translation research in a deeper and more comprehensive direction, with a view to providing a reference for its further development.

Keywords: *Shiji*; Translation studies; Classified review; Research suggestions

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1. Introduction

Since the seventeenth century, *Shiji* has begun to break beyond the boundaries of the Chinese-speaking world, embarking on a magnificent cross-cultural journey. Over the course of nearly four hundred years of translation and introduction, the translingual travel of *Shiji* has displayed distinct stage-specific characteristics. At the time when sinology flourished in the nineteenth century, Édouard Chavannes' French translation set an academic model with its rigorous textual research and exquisite rendering; in the late twentieth century, Burton Watson's translation and the multi-volume annotated translation produced by William H. Nienhauser Jr.'s team marked the entry of English translation into a new era. Contemporary translations into more than forty languages, including Russian, German, Japanese, and Korean, have together woven a three-dimensional network for the global dissemination of *Shiji*. Systematic scholarly study of the translation of *Shiji* began in the late twentieth century and has now formed a multidimensional academic landscape. Although existing research has yielded rich results, there remains significant room for academic growth. Through a systematic review of the research achievements concerning *Shiji*, this paper aims to construct a holistic cognitive framework for Shiji translation studies and to provide new insights for the

global dissemination of Chinese classics.

2. Statistics and visual analysis of research papers

To date, international scholarship on the English translation of *Shiji* has consisted mostly of scattered book reviews, introductions to translations, or incidental discussions within sinological works, and lacks independent academic papers, monographs, or specialized studies; the relevant achievements are concentrated mainly in the domestic research of Chinese scholars. The domestic literature on *Shiji* translation studies can be divided into several categories, such as Chinese-language academic papers, monographs, and book reviews in English-language journals, among which the first category is the most numerous. In order to obtain this literature, an advanced search by "Subject" was conducted on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), using "*Shiji*," "translation," and "English translation" as Chinese keywords, which yielded research literature on the translation of *Shiji*. After duplicate and invalid items were removed, 154 valid papers were obtained. The overall trend of these papers is shown below.

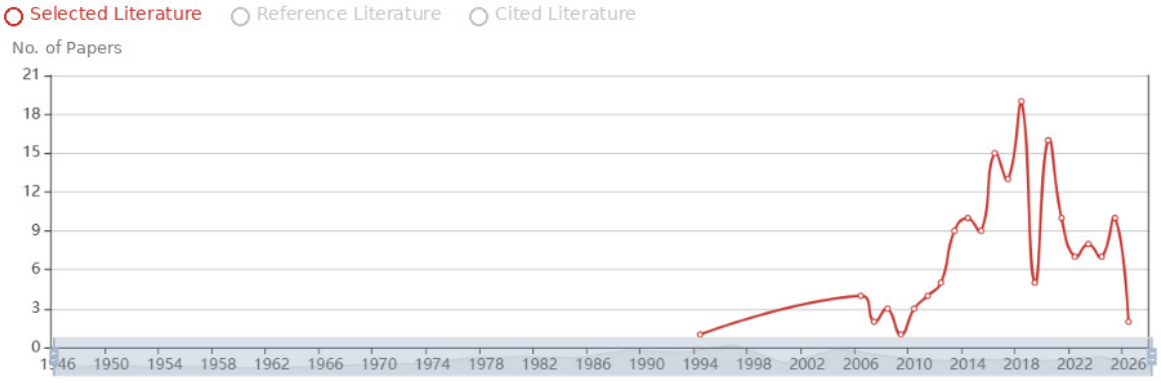


Figure 1. A visual analysis of the overall trend of research papers in CNKI.

As shown in **Figure 1**, domestic research on the translation of *Shiji* started relatively late. Luo compiled and translated Nienhauser's review concerning the translation of *Shiji* and published it in Social Sciences Abroad; this article concisely surveyed the major translation projects of *Shiji*[1]. The number of related research papers fluctuated from year to year while showing an upward trend, but the overall quantity remained limited; it was not until 2010 that the number of papers published each year gradually increased. In 2018, the publication volume of related research papers reached its peak, with an annual output of 18 papers. This shows that, although domestic academic circles were still somewhat indifferent to Shiji translation research, they had begun to pay attention to it, and the overall quality of the research papers still needs to be improved. Classifying the above papers yields **Table 1**.

Table 1. Statistical classification of studies on the translation of *Shiji*

Type	Experience-based	Review	Quantitative	Translation history	Dissemination and impact	Minor-language translation	Other	Total
Number of papers	118	3	4	7	15	5	2	154
Percentage (%)	76.7	1.9	2.6	4.6	9.9	3.3	1.3	100

It can be seen that, although the number of articles studying *Shiji* is quite considerable, the number of articles concerning *Shiji* and its translation is very limited, and most of these are experience-based, intuitive studies that focus on translation comparison, translation strategies, and the like, while research on other aspects still leaves a great deal of room. In recent years, under the call of "Chinese culture going global," research on the English translation of Chinese classics has opened up a new field for translation studies, and research on the English translation of *Shiji* has gradually drawn attention. The following sections mainly review five aspects of *Shiji* translation: experience-based research, quantitative research, translation history research, dissemination and impact research, and minor-language translation research.

3. A classified review of studies on the translation of Shiji

3.1. Experience-based studies

Experience-based studies occupy a relatively large proportion of *Shiji* translation research. This type of research is mostly based on the researcher's personal experience and subjective judgment, focusing on translation strategies and techniques and on the methods for translating specific words and sentences. Selections from *Shiji*, translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, is one of the classic English translations of Sima Qian's *Shiji*. Taking this as the text and drawing on translation aesthetics theory, Liu and Fan examined the Yang translation's rendering of the aesthetic factors of the original from the two aspects of presentational elements and non-presentational elements [2]. Based on the English translations of *Shiji* by Burton Watson and William H. Nienhauser Jr., Li and Kang explored the cultural mediation strategies the two translators adopted when handling the Daoist thought in the source language and the asymmetry between the source and target cultures [3]. Many researchers have also discussed the translation of culture-loaded terms in *Shiji*: for example, taking the English translation of " 中国 " in *Shiji* as a case to reflect on the problems of conceptual correspondence translation in terms of knowledge construction and discourse shaping [4], or pointing out that "retranslation" in *Shiji* is not merely a technical means but also a cultural practice of disseminating the benevolence of the Way of Heaven and realizing "great unity" [5]. A group of young researchers has studied the legal terms, costume terms, vessel and implement terms, animal and plant terms, calendar terms, geographical terms, military terms, and economic terms in Shiji, and has also achieved certain results. The comparative study of translations of *Shiji* is also a direction of interest to many researchers, involving the evaluation and analysis of specific translations or horizontal comparisons among the translations of different translators. Wu Tao conducted a detailed analysis of Burton Watson's English translation of *Shiji* from the perspectives of readers' receptivity and the principle of faithfulness, finding that Watson exercised the translator's subjectivity under dual constraints: the translation both accommodated the receptivity of target-language readers and fairly well retained the literary essence of *Shiji*, effectively achieving a unity of readability and faithfulness [6]. Some researchers, proceeding from the perspective of narratology, have compared the narrative structure of *Shiji* with that of Western novels and analyzed the features of the narrative structure in Watson's English translation of *Shiji* and its social and historical background [7]. Based on the English translations of *Shiji* by Watson and Nienhauser, Zhu and Li compared and analyzed the differences between the two in terms of translation motivation, individual versus team differences, and social context, emphasizing that the translation of cultural classics must take various factors into account and seek a balance between domestication and foreignization [8].

Although experience-based research has accumulated certain achievements in the field of *Shiji* translation, providing the academic community with multiple perspectives and lines of thought, several points that can be expanded remain at present. Case analyses dominate existing Shiji translation studies and are insufficiently systematic, making it difficult to construct a universal theoretical framework; the research methods rely heavily on subjective analysis and lack objective data support and scientific verification; and some studies, when focusing on translation techniques, neglect the historical-documentary nature of the works and the deeper value of cultural dissemination, thereby limiting the breadth and depth of research.

3.2. Quantitative studies

By constructing multidimensional corpus platforms and employing quantitative analysis tools such as word frequency statistics, sentence-length analysis, and term alignment, quantitative studies provide objective data support for the comparative study of *Shiji* original and its multilingual translations. This type of research is currently still at a developmental stage, and the academic share of its related achievements in the field of translation studies is not yet significant. Li mined the English-translation data of historical classics such as Shiji, analyzed the characteristics of their English translation and of the English translation of their terms, and attempted to use computational terminology algorithms to align and extract English term pairs [9]. The study found that there is a phenomenon of multiple correspondence in the English translation of terms in Chinese historical classics, for reasons including the dynamic nature of the referential meaning of terms and the existence of near-synonyms among the terms themselves. Quantitative research has provided a new methodology for *Shiji* translation studies, but a number of problems in this field remain to be solved. In terms of corpus construction, *Shiji* has many translated versions and translators' linguistic styles differ markedly; establishing representative corpus sampling standards and achieving standardized processing remain key factors constraining the depth of research. Existing studies mostly focus on descriptive analysis at the level of linguistic form, while quantitative research on non-linguistic factors needs to be deepened. The interpretation of research conclusions requires the construction of an interdisciplinary theoretical framework: relying solely on statistical data easily leads to a one-sided reading of translation phenomena, and subsequent research needs to strengthen the integration of linguistic analysis with translation practice and cultural studies.

3.3. Translation history studies

Research on the translation history of *Shiji* is mainly concerned with the translation course and developmental thread of *Shiji* in different historical periods and different linguistic regions. At present, research achievements in this area are relatively limited, and early studies mostly consisted of simple introductions to translations of *Shiji*. As research deepened, scholars began to proceed from a more macro historical background to explore the interrelationships between the translation of *Shiji* and factors such as society, culture, politics, and the economy, but these were mostly confined to the translation and study of *Shiji* in one specific country. Wei divided the course of *Shiji*'s translation and introduction in the United States into three stages: before the 1950s (the stage of sporadic translation), the 1950s to the 1980s (the stage of large-scale translation), and the 1990s to the present (the stage of complete translation) [10]. Wu, for his part, placed *Shiji* within the Twenty-Four Histories for discussion and briefly described its translation and introduction in the United States and its significance [11]. From the macro perspective of Chinese historiography, Zhu pointed out the importance that American scholars attach to the translation of *Shiji*, and Nienhauser's translation of the entire *Shiji* also reveals a new atmosphere in American Chinese studies regarding the research and translation

of Chinese historiography [12]. Unlike the above researchers, Li systematically reviewed the translation, introduction, and research of *Shiji* in the West, covering the translation courses and characteristics of the major translations as well as Western research on Sima Qian and *Shiji*, including research findings on their historiographical attitudes and other aspects, thereby presenting the developmental process of *Shiji* in the West from translation and introduction to in-depth research [13].

Current research on the translation history of *Shiji* still has several points that can be improved. The translation activities of *Shiji* span a long period and involve many countries and regions, and the relevant historical literature and archival materials are relatively scattered and difficult to obtain, so some studies can only conduct preliminary investigations. Existing studies mostly take single-language translations as their object and lack horizontal multilingual comparison, making it difficult to present its global translation and dissemination path fully. Translation history research is dominated by descriptive analysis, and the summarization of patterns of translation phenomena and theoretical exploration needs to be strengthened. Some studies contain subjective inference with insufficient support from objective historical evidence, and the credibility of the research needs to be enhanced.

3.4. Dissemination and impact studies

Research on the international dissemination and impact of *Shiji* has gradually become a hotspot, and the quantity and quality of related research achievements still need to be improved. Proceeding from a macro level, Wei systematically reviewed the English translation of *Shiji* and its reception history, finding that its reception developed from curiosity-driven reception and literary reception to diversified and comprehensive reception, with the degree of reception gradually deepening from surface-level literary reception to deep-level academic reception [14]. This process is one of the continuous fusion of readers' horizons and the deepening of interpretation, as well as a process of growing diversification and systematization. She also specifically described the translation situations of six English versions of *Shiji*, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to assess their reception and impact [15]. Taking *Shiji* as an example, Jin systematically reviewed the publishing paths and dissemination characteristics of outstanding traditional Chinese classics in modern and contemporary times [16]. Li and Zhu, targeting a specific translation, analyzed in detail—from the three aspects of recognizability, precision, and fidelity—the enhancing role of the paratext (such as annotations and references) in Nienhauser's translation of *Shiji*, and discussed the overseas reception of Nienhauser's version and the issue of fidelity in cultural dissemination [17].

Current research on the dissemination and impact of *Shiji* employs relatively singular methods and is dominated by descriptive research, with insufficient application of quantitative and empirical methods. Research on audience reception under different cultural backgrounds needs to be deepened, and the precision of dissemination-effect evaluation needs to be improved. Some studies emphasize the quantity and scope of dissemination, with insufficient systematic evaluation of dissemination quality and the cultural influence of translations, a low degree of integration with translation studies, and an inadequate revelation of the internal mechanisms by which translation strategies, translation quality, and dissemination effects interact.

3.5. Minor-language translation studies

Research on the translation of *Shiji* into minor languages has also gradually drawn attention. At present, *Shiji* has been translated into many minor languages, such as French, German, Spanish, and Arabic, but high-quality related research achievements are currently rather lacking. Taking research on the French translation as

an example, Lv roughly reviewed the translation, introduction, and study of *Shiji* in France [18]. Others pointed out that Tang Zaifu continuously participated in Édouard Chavannes' translation work on *Shiji*, holding that the cooperation between Tang Zaifu and Chavannes promoted the development of French sinology and advanced the foreign translation and dissemination of Chinese classics [19]. Other researchers have attended to the translation of *Shiji* in the German-speaking world, finding that its dissemination has gradually taken on a multi-dimensional and multi-layered developmental trend [20]. The resources and strength of minor-language translation research are relatively limited, and its research methods and theoretical system still need to be improved; it mostly draws on the achievements of English translation research, while original research methods tailored to the characteristics of minor languages need to be strengthened. Affected by the size of speaker populations, minor-language translation research suffers from conditions such as insufficient materials, with a low degree of corpus construction and interdisciplinary theoretical integration; the promotion and application of its research achievements are limited, and its academic and practical influence needs to be enhanced.

4. Research gaps and future research suggestions

4.1. Research gaps

Overall, *Shiji* translation research has the problems of an excessively high proportion of experience-based studies and relatively few high-quality research achievements. The various research dimensions are unevenly developed, with research on quantitative studies, translation history, dissemination and impact, and minor-language translation being relatively weak, making it difficult to fully reflect the overall picture of *Shiji* translation. In terms of research methods, innovation is insufficient: traditional qualitative analysis predominates, while quantitative and empirical methods are applied less, and the scientificity and reliability of research conclusions need to be improved. Interdisciplinary exploration is not deep enough and fails to fully draw on the theories and methods of related disciplines such as history and cultural studies, which limits the depth and breadth of research.

In addition, existing studies mostly focus on the translated text itself, while research on the translation process, the translator's psychology, and the interactive relationship between translation and its social and cultural context is relatively scarce, making it difficult to reveal the essential patterns of translation activity deeply.

4.2. Future research suggestions

Strengthen review-type research by conducting systematic sorting and summarization, and grasp research dynamics and developmental trends through precise data statistics and analysis, so as to provide a comprehensive and accurate reference for subsequent research.

Broaden research perspectives, strengthen macro-level research, attend to the relationship between translation and external factors such as society, history, and culture, and employ interdisciplinary theories and methods such as cultural communication studies to deeply analyze the dissemination mechanisms and cultural functions of *Shiji* translation in different cultural contexts.

Innovate research methods and increase the proportion of quantitative and empirical research. Further improve the construction of the *Shiji* corpus, expand the scale of the corpus, raise the accuracy of corpus annotation, and use corpus tools to carry out more in-depth research. At the same time, conduct empirical research such as questionnaire surveys and interviews to explore the patterns of translators' thinking and readers' reception.

Strengthen research on the translation of *Shiji* into minor languages, establish an academic exchange platform for minor-language translation research, and promote cooperation and resource sharing among researchers. Encourage more scholars to devote themselves to minor-language translation research, deeply explore the distinctive features and value of minor-language translations, and promote the broader dissemination of *Shiji* across the globe.

5. Conclusion

Current *Shiji* translation research has many shortcomings: experience-type studies are overabundant, high-quality achievements are scarce, the various research fields develop unevenly, empirical and quantitative research are insufficiently employed, and research methods lack innovation. At the same time, interdisciplinary integration is shallow, and research mostly emphasizes textual analysis while neglecting the translation process, the translator's mindset, and social and cultural connections, making it difficult to dig into the internal patterns of translation. In the future, the review and sorting of the *Shiji* translation field can be strengthened, relying on data analysis to grasp research trends; research horizons should be broadened by combining interdisciplinary theories to explore its cross-cultural dissemination mechanisms and value; research methods should be reformed by increasing quantitative and empirical research, improving the construction of specialized corpora, and supplementing this with surveys and interviews to investigate translators' thinking and readers' reception. Meanwhile, importance should be attached to minor-language translation research by building exchange platforms, consolidating research strength, and deeply exploring the value of translations, so as to help *Shiji* achieve broader international dissemination.

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