

History of Translation in Modern Hubei: Local Voices in National Reform

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Abstract

This review critically evaluates *History of Translation in Modern Hubei* by Rongguang Yang, Quanwei Zhai, and Zheng Li, which examines translation practices in Hubei province during the late Qing and early Republican periods. The book situates these activities within broader modernization efforts and emphasizes translation's dual role as a medium for knowledge transfer and a catalyst for socio-political change. It is the first monograph to systematically reconstruct the translation networks in a central province using local archives. Drawing on extensive primary sources and interdisciplinary methodologies, the authors align their work with recent advancements in translation historiography, such as Theo Hermans' concept of "entangled histories" and Christopher Rundle's notion of translation as a tool for historical inquiry. The review highlights the book's strengths, including its detailed exploration of Hubei's role in intellectual movements like the 1911 Revolution. It also suggests avenues for further research, such as comparative regional analyses and deeper theoretical engagement. Overall, the book offers fresh insights into the transformative role of translation in shaping modern Chinese identity.

Keywords: Hubei Province, Intellectual Reform, Modernization, Regional Translation Practices, Translation History

Translation has historically played a pivotal role in the dissemination of knowledge and the negotiation of cultural identities, particularly during periods of profound societal transformation. In the case of China, the late Qing and early Republican periods marked an era of intense intellectual and political upheaval, where translation served as a central mechanism for introducing Western knowledge. These ideas—ranging from scientific principles to political ideologies—reshaped the intellectual, cultural, and political landscapes of China, and facilitated its ongoing process of modernization and reform. The translation efforts of this time not only transferred knowledge but also adapted and contextualized foreign ideas to meet China's unique historical and social needs. By doing so, these practices helped lay the foundation for modern China's intellectual and political systems.

In this context, *History of Translation in Modern Hubei*, authored by Rongguang Yang, Quanwei Zhai, and Zheng Li, examines the translation activities in Hubei province, which, despite being situated in central China, made substantial and often overlooked contributions to the wider translation movement. The book provides a detailed and insightful analysis of Hubei's translation efforts. It positions the province's intellectual activities within a broader framework of national and international intellectual exchanges. Drawing on meticulous archival research and interdisciplinary methods, the authors illuminate how translation in Hubei served as a medium for cultural negotiation, intellectual transformation, and national reform.

Scope and Structure

The book is divided into eight thematic chapters, each addressing a critical facet of Hubei's translation activities during the late Qing and early Republican periods. The authors employ an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates historical, cultural, and sociological perspectives. This framework allows the authors to reconstruct a detailed narrative of Hubei's translation history, and to explore the broader intellectual and political forces that shaped translation practices in the region.

The first chapter sets the stage by exploring the historical and socio-political context that gave rise to translation activities in Hubei. This chapter traces the intellectual climate in China at the time, characterized by increasing dissatisfaction with the traditional imperial system and growing interest in Western political and scientific ideas. The authors explain how intellectuals in Hubei, much like their counterparts in other regions, sought to reconcile Western knowledge with the need for national reform. In this context, translation emerged as a crucial tool for reformers who believed that modernizing China's political, legal, and scientific systems required the adaptation of foreign ideas to the Chinese context.

In Chapter 2, the authors focus on the key figures and institutions involved in Hubei's translation efforts. They provide detailed accounts of the intellectuals, translators, and networks that facilitated the translation movement in the region. Translators in Hubei were not merely passive conduits for Western ideas; they were active agents in the process of adaptation and negotiation. It shapes how foreign knowledge was received, interpreted, and localized. The authors highlight how translation societies, educational institutions, and publishing houses in Hubei played a central role in institutionalizing translation practices and facilitating the exchange of ideas across regional boundaries.

Subsequent chapters delve deeper into the types of texts that were translated in Hubei. They focus on the various domains of knowledge—scientific, political, and legal—where translation played a particularly significant role. For example, Chapter 3 examines the translation of scientific texts, which demonstrates how the translation of works on astronomy, physics, and medicine helped introduce Western scientific knowledge to Chinese intellectuals. These translations were instrumental in reshaping Chinese intellectuals' understanding of Western scientific thought and its applications. Thus, it contributes to the intellectual foundations of modernization in China. The authors discuss how these translations not only provided new knowledge but also stimulated debates about the compatibility of Western science with traditional Chinese thought.

In Chapters 4 and 5, the authors turn their attention to the political and legal texts that were translated during this period. These chapters explore the translation of Western political theories on governance, democracy, and constitutionalism, and how these ideas influenced Chinese reformers. By introducing works by thinkers such as Montesquieu and John Stuart Mill, translated texts provided Chinese intellectuals with new frameworks for understanding politics and governance. These translations informed the ideological foundations of China's emerging political movements, particularly the growing calls for constitutional reform and the establishment of a democratic system. The authors examine the tensions that arose as translators struggled to adapt foreign political concepts to the specific needs and realities of China's social and political context.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the role of Hubei's translators as intellectual mediators and the impact of their work on public discourse. These chapters provide profiles of key translators, offering insights into their motivations and intellectual contributions. The authors also examine the networks of translators and intellectuals that developed in Hubei, which highlights the collaborative nature of the translation movement in the region. On the whole, the book underscores the agency of translators in shaping the intellectual and cultural landscape of early 20th-century China by exploring the lives and works of these intellectuals.

In the final chapter, the authors reflect on the broader implications of Hubei's translation activities, particularly in relation to the 1911 Revolution. They discuss how translated texts introduced new political ideas that played a crucial role in the ideological debates leading up to the revolution. The authors argue that translation was not only a tool for knowledge transfer but also an active agent of political and social change. It provides intellectuals with the ideas and concepts needed to critique the traditional imperial system and advocate for modern, democratic governance.

Methodology and Scholarly Contribution

The authors' interdisciplinary approach to the study of translation in Hubei is one of the book's major strengths. By combining historical, cultural, and sociological perspectives, the authors offer a comprehensive and nuanced account of how translation functioned as a tool for cultural and intellectual negotiation. This methodology aligns with Hermans' (2022) notion of "entangled histories," which emphasizes the interconnectedness of translation and historical processes. Hermans argues that translation should not be seen as a mere transfer of words but as a dynamic process that shapes and is shaped by broader historical, cultural, and political forces. The authors of this book effectively apply this framework to show how translation in Hubei served as a bridge between local and global intellectual traditions, facilitating the integration of Western knowledge into China's modernization project.

Rundle's (2012) concept of translation as a lens for historical inquiry further informs the book's methodology. The authors go beyond descriptive accounts of translation and instead place translation activities within larger socio-political frameworks. They demonstrate how translation in Hubei was not just about linguistic transfer but was deeply connected to intellectual and political movements. Focusing on the translation of legal, political, and scientific texts, the authors highlight the role of translation in shaping the intellectual foundations of modern China. This perspective aligns with Qu's (2021) advocacy for "new translation history," which stresses the active role of translation in facilitating cultural and intellectual exchange.

The authors also make a significant contribution to the study of regional translation history. This is the first monograph to systematically reconstruct the translation networks in a central province using local archives. While much of the scholarship on translation in China has focused on major coastal cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, this book highlights the contributions of Hubei, a central region that has often been overlooked in translation studies. By focusing on a region outside the major urban centers, the authors offer new insights into the ways in which regional translation practices intersected with national and global intellectual movements. This contribution broadens our understanding of how translation functioned as a tool for intellectual and political reform across China.

Critical Reflections and Future Research

While this book provides a comprehensive and detailed account of Hubei's translation activities, there are several avenues for further research that could enrich the study. One of the most promising areas is a comparative analysis involving other regions of China. Such an analysis would allow for a deeper understanding of the diversity of translation practices across the country and their interconnectedness. The book convincingly argues that translation played a central role in the modernization of Hubei, but how did these practices compare to translation movements in other provinces? For example, coastal cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou were key sites for foreign influence and translation during the same period. Shanghai, as a treaty port with a well-established publishing industry, had far greater exposure to Western knowledge and a more extensive network of translators working in diplomatic, commercial, and intellectual spheres. How did the translation activities in Shanghai differ from those in Hubei? Did Hubei's translations emerge as a response to developments in other regions, or did they follow an independent trajectory? A broader comparative framework could offer answers to these questions and provide a clearer picture of how regional translation practices collectively shaped China's intellectual and political modernization.

Additionally, the book could engage more explicitly with how Hubei's translation activities interacted with national movements beyond the 1911 Revolution. While the book provides strong evidence of the role of translation in spreading revolutionary ideas, it would be valuable to examine how translation functioned as a tool of intellectual exchange across different social and political movements. The period under study also saw the rise of nationalist discourse, educational reform, and early industrialization efforts, all of which were deeply influenced by translation. A more extensive discussion on how translated texts in Hubei contributed to broader national debates on governance, economic reform, and cultural identity would add another layer to the book's analysis. This approach could align with existing scholarship on knowledge transfer in late imperial and early modern China, such as that by Wong (2018), who explores how translation facilitated modernization in East Asia in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries.

Another aspect worth expanding is the role of individual translators in shaping the translation landscape of Hubei. While the book offers profiles of key figures, a more detailed exploration of their professional backgrounds, ideological leanings, and intellectual influences would further contextualize their translation choices. Were these translators working independently, or were they affiliated with specific institutions that shaped their translation strategies? To what extent did their work reflect the political ideologies of the time? Engaging with concepts such as translation patronage, as discussed by Susan Bassnett and André

Lefevere (1990), could help explore the power dynamics behind the translation movement in Hubei. This perspective would also illuminate whether translators in Hubei had more freedom in their work compared to those in politically sensitive areas like Beijing or Shanghai, where censorship and ideological control may have been more stringent.

The book's theoretical engagement, while strong, could also be deepened by incorporating additional frameworks from contemporary translation studies. While the authors draw on Rundle's (2012) argument that translation is an important tool for historical inquiry, a more extensive application of Toury's (1995) descriptive translation studies could offer further insights into the norms governing translation in Hubei. Toury's approach focuses on understanding translation as a systemic activity shaped by cultural, political, and institutional norms. Applying this framework could help uncover whether translation practices in Hubei followed distinct patterns compared to other regions in China, and whether specific norms governed the selection and adaptation of texts. Additionally, André Lefevere's rewriting theory (1992) could be applied more explicitly to analyze how translations in Hubei were reshaped to fit the political and ideological needs of the time. Lefevere argues that translation is not just a linguistic process but a form of rewriting that reflects the power structures and cultural narratives of its context. Examining how translated texts in Hubei were modified to align with local reformist agendas could provide a deeper understanding of the interplay between translation and ideology.

Furthermore, the book could explore in greater detail the reception of translated works in Hubei. While much attention is given to the process of translation, less is said about how these works were received by local intellectuals, educators, and policymakers. Were translated texts widely accepted, or did they face resistance from conservative scholars who viewed Western knowledge with skepticism? What strategies did translators use to ensure their work was accessible to Chinese audiences unfamiliar with Western terminologies and conceptual frameworks? Addressing these questions would offer valuable insights into the impact of translation beyond its production and dissemination, highlighting the extent to which it influenced public discourse and policy-making in Hubei.

Lastly, expanding the discussion on translation's role in shaping education in Hubei would add another significant dimension to the book's findings. Education reform was a major focus of modernization efforts in the late Qing and early Republican periods, and translated textbooks, pedagogical materials, and scientific manuals played a crucial role in shaping new curricula. While the book touches on the importance of translation in education, a more detailed analysis of how translated texts were integrated into school curricula, teacher training programs, and public education initiatives would provide a more comprehensive view of translation's societal impact.

By incorporating these additional perspectives, this book could further enhance its contribution to the field of translation history. While the book already provides a well-researched and insightful account of Hubei's translation activities, expanding its comparative, theoretical, and reception-based analysis would solidify its place as a key reference in the study of regional translation practices in China.

Conclusion

History of Translation in Modern Hubei is a significant and timely contribution to the field of translation history. This book is essential for scholars of late Qing history, regional modernity, and translation historians seeking to decenter coastal narratives. Its interdisciplinary approach, meticulous research, and focus on regional translation practices make it an essential resource for scholars of translation studies, Chinese history, and cultural studies. By examining the role of translation in Hubei province during a pivotal period in China's intellectual and political development, the authors provide critical insights into how translation shaped China's modernization. While there are areas for further exploration, particularly in terms of comparative analysis and theoretical engagement, the book remains a groundbreaking study that sheds new light on the role of translation in China's intellectual history.

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