Study on the Translations and Spread of *The Three-Character Classic* in Russia

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As a widely circulated and far-reaching Chinese ancient Mongolian classic, *Three-Character Classic* has received the attention of the West as early as the 16th century. Since seventeenth century, the *Three-Character Classic* has been translated into many languages and has become an important medium for many countries to learn Chinese and understand Chinese culture. With the deepening of cultural exchanges between China and Russia, in 18th century, Tsar Peter I has sent Orthodox missionaries to China many times and the Qing Dynasty government set up the Russian pavilion in Beijing. At the same time, the *Three-Character Classic* was spread to Russia by the Russian Mission in Beijing and four Russian translations of the *Three-Character Classic* appeared within a short period of one hundred years. In this paper, we will explore the spread and influence of the *Three-Character Classic* in Russia by investigating the causes and impacts of the four Russian translations of the *Three-Character Classic*.

Keywords: Three-Character Classic, translation, Russia

Introduction

*The Three Character Classic* has been circulating in Russia for a long time. Referring to the overseas spread of *The Three Character Classic*, many people assume that the earliest translation was the English translation published by the American missionary Elijah Coleman Bridgman (1801-1861) in 1835. However, according to Li Mingbin (1992), it has been verified that about a hundred years ago, the Russians had already had an indissoluble bond with the *Three-Character Classic* (Li, 1992). In 1887, the head of the Ministry of Revenue in feudal China, Yousun Mou, was ordered to visit Russia. He once mentioned the translation of Chinese ancient books in Russia in his “Russian Tour Collection” (Vol. 8) that “The Chinese books translated into Russian are *The Analects*, *The Book of Filial Piety*, *The Three-Character Classic*, and *The Book of Songs*” (Li, 1993).

The Translations of *The Three Character Classic* in Russia

The first touch of *The Three Character Classic* by the Russian people was the Russian Orthodox missions to study Chinese. According to Zhu Renfu, in 1619 and 1649, Russia sent two envoys to Beijing. At that time, the

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Qing government established the “Russian Pavilion” to receive Russian students in China (Zhu, 2006). After that, the first batch of Russian students came to China and the Qing Dynasty government “allowed the Russian national students to live in the Russian Pavilion when they arrived China and handed over them to the Guozijian to let the teaching assistants who were chosen to teach them Chinese” (He, 1996). At that time, the Russian Pavilion uses the Three-Character Classic as a literacy textbook for Russian students studying in China.

The Russian translation of the Three-Character Classic is inseparable from the Russians’ Chinese learning. Cai Hongsheng claimed that Illaline Kalinovich Rossohin should be the first one who took the Three-Character Classic from China to Russia because the Privy Council asked Rossohin to establish a Chinese school in 1741 (Cai, 2006). Yan Guodong reminds us that it should be written in 1740 because Rossohin was the first scholar in Russian Sinology translated the Three-Character Classic into Russian and made a Russian manuscript by himself to help students understand its original text in Chinese. Yan celebrates the fact that although this translation wasn’t published, later researchers found the original manuscripts of it in the Library of the Soviet Academy of Science (Yan, 2006). Meanwhile, it also has important value and significance in the history of Russian Sinology.

The second Russian translation of the Three-Character Classic was from Alexei Leontiyevich Leontiev (1716-1786) and was published in 1779 at the Printing Institute of the Royal Academy of Sciences in Petersburg. The reason why it can be published in public was mainly because of the social atmosphere created by Catherine II herself following the “Chinese style.” As B.W.Maggs pointed out, “In the second half of the eighteenth century...Russian poets and essayists have also participated in this effort to bring Chinese things to the Russian readers” (Maggs, 1977). The Three Character Classics was used as a Chinese textbook at the end of the eighteenth century in Russia by Leontiev’s translation. More importantly, it describes the traditional Chinese world and social views in a popular form. Moreover, compared with western Europe in a relatively short period of time, the appearance of Leontiev’s translation of the Three-character Classic was just the right time to make Russia understand the true Chinese culture.

Wu Yuxing emphasizes that the third Russian translation of the Three-Character Classic which was not officially published appeared at the end of the 18th century was translated by Anton Vladkin (1761-1811) (Wu, 2007). This translation which has 46 pages was a reference book for teaching of the Chinese language to the translation school of the Foreign Affairs Institute. The manuscript was deposited in the Archives Division of the Ningrad (present-day St. Petersburg) branch of the Academy of Oriental Studies. However, it has only received the attention of a few Russian sinologists.

The fourth and also the most famous Russian translation of the Three-Character Classic was translated by Nikita Yakovlevich Bichurin (Father Iakin, 1777-1853) and was published in 1829. According to Wu’s comment that nowadays, Russian researchers are still relying on Bichurin’s translation or the reprint of the Russian Mission in Beijing in 1908. I’d point out that the translation of Bichurin is almost perfect so that there is no one could match it. In making this comment, He Fangchuan urges us to Alexander Pushkin’s book review which introducing the Russian translation of the Three-Character Classic translated by Bichurin as “Three-character Bible”, “Concise Children’s Encyclopedia” because its language is concise and simple but the content is substantial with deep meaning (He, 2008). After the publication of Bichurin’s translation of the Three-character Classic, it caused comments and recommendations from many Russian newspapers at that time. After changes more than 100 years, the translation of the Three-Character Classic by Bichurin has been well-known to the...
Russian sinologists, and they mentioned it in their works from time to time.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, from the middle of the 18th century to the 21st century, the process of the spread of the Three-Character Classic in Russia in different historical periods has produced different social repercussions. The Russians have also understood it from the shallower to the deeper, and have never stopped. As the epitome of Chinese traditional culture, the spread and development of the Russian translation of the Three-Character Classic has always been an indispensable part of Russian Sinology research.

**References**


