

On the Achievements of Translator Ma Junwu in the Field of Science and Technology Translation

Aimei Guo

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Southwest University of Science and Technology, Mianyang 621000, Sichuan, China

Abstract: During the Republic of China era, amid the intensification of aggression by Western powers, the deepening of the national crisis, and the advocacy of science and democracy by the New Culture Movement, a massive wave of science and technology translation emerged. This wave of science and technology translation marked the beginning of China's comprehensive and in-depth introduction of the western modern science and technology system, playing a crucial role in driving the transformation of China's traditional knowledge system towards modernization. It laid a solid ideological and knowledge foundation for subsequent scientific and technological development and social transformation. During this period, Ma Junwu, driven by a deep sense of patriotism, dedicated himself to the translation of scientific and technological literature. With his profound academic accomplishments and strong patriotic fervor, he became a significant promoter in this field. His life's work includes a wealth of translations, covering western scientific and technological works in multiple disciplines such as biology, mineralogy, and chemistry. Ma Junwu was a renowned political activist and educator during the Republic of China era, yet his scientific and technological ideas and contributions remain relatively unknown. This paper conducts a systematic study of Ma Junwu's translations of scientific and technological literature, starting with his life story and translation activities, and organizing materials related to his translations of scientific and technological literature. Through this, it analyzes the idea of serving the country through translation and his contributions to the translation of scientific and technological literature, summarizing the characteristics of Ma Junwu's scientific and technological ideas and their underlying philosophical connotations. Ma Junwu's scientific and technological ideas had a considerable impact on Chinese society at the time. Exploring the enlightenment brought by Ma Junwu's scientific and technological ideas is of great help to China's current implementation of the great strategy of rejuvenating the country through science and education and to better cultivating scientific and technological talents.

Keywords: Ma Junwu, Translation Ideas, Translation Achievements, Science and Technology Translation.

1. Introduction

“Conducting an in-depth excavation and overall review of the intellectual history of a discipline is the inevitable path for its development and maturation.” [2] Ma Junwu, along with many other scholars of his time dedicated to exchanges between the east and the west, actively engaged in the introduction and communication of western scientific, technological, and cultural knowledge amid the tumultuous transformation of Chinese society and the wave of the influx of western learning. [1] Ma Junwu's translation, writing, and other practical activities had a direct and far-reaching impact on the modernization and transformation of Chinese society. His related remarks, like hidden clues in the long river of history, are faintly visible yet of great significance in the development trajectory of China's modern and contemporary intellectual circles.

“If compared to a river, the Chinese culture is a river that never goes dried, although its water is sometimes abundant, sometimes not. The reason for that is the instillation of new water that was quite frequent in history. And there are two major origins for it, one is in India, the other is in the West. Basically, it was driven by translation.”[4] Advanced western scientific culture is an important stream of new water injected into the long river of Chinese culture. In the process of modern China's active absorption of western knowledge, Ma Junwu was a key figure. He not only personally participated in the translation of a large number of western scientific, technological, and humanistic works, introducing western advanced scientific theories and democratic ideas into China, but also, as an educator, actively promoted the popularization

and dissemination of scientific and cultural knowledge in China. He enabled western scientific and cultural knowledge to move from the studies of a few intellectuals to a broader social sphere, making concepts such as “science” and “democracy” truly closely linked with national education and social progress in China for the first time, achieving “a qualitative change in China's knowledge dissemination and intellectual enlightenment.” This change continued to ferment and had a profound impact on the modernization process of Chinese society, ultimately driving profound changes in multiple aspects such as ideology, culture, and social structure in Chinese society.

During the era in which Ma Junwu lived, the eastward spread of western scientific culture went through different stages. In the early period, western scientific culture entered China in a sporadic and fragmented manner. By the time Ma Junwu was active, the dissemination of scientific and technological culture reached new heights in terms of scale and depth.[3] Although many scholars participated in the introduction of western scientific and technological culture at that time, scholars like Ma Junwu who combined profound academic attainments, strong patriotic sentiment, and excellent educational concepts were rare. Ma Junwu's life's work of translations and writings is rich, covering multiple fields such as biology, mineralogy, chemistry, political science, and sociology. For example, his translation of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* opened a window for the Chinese academic community to understand the frontiers of western science.

“Chinese modern translation studies should stand on the ground of modern culture, seek the cultural roots that have

nurtured it for thousands of years, rebuild traditions, absorb the wisdom of western translation studies, and create a translation studies with a new cultural spirit by referring to the needs of real cultural changes.” [4] This paper takes Ma Junwu, a representative figure in the history of the dissemination of modern scientific and technological culture, as an entry point. It deeply interprets his translation and writing remarks within the context of the era and social trends of thought, and conducts a retrospective review and organization of his ideas. The aim is to clarify Ma Junwu’s position and role in the dissemination of modern scientific and technological culture in China, further explore the development trajectory of modern scientific and technological culture dissemination in modern Chinese history and the historical responses from the intellectual circles, and provide references for China to better carry out cultural exchanges and knowledge dissemination under the background of globalization.

2. Biography

“I believe that one of the great secrets of history lies in how an individual’s character can expand into the common traits of an era or a group, and how the common traits of an era or a group can be manifested in an individual’s character.” [5] Understanding Ma Junwu’s life story is the key to unlocking how this “pioneer of scientific translation” in modern times transformed his personal knowledge into the spirit of the era.

Ma Junwu (1881-1940), originally named Daoning, also known as Tong, later renamed He, with the courtesy name Houshan and the pseudonym Junwu, was born in Guilin, Guangxi, with his ancestral home in Puqi (now Chibi City), Hubei. As a renowned educator, translator, and pioneer of the democratic revolution in modern China, his life witnessed and participated in the critical process of China’s transformation from a feudal society to a modern nation.

Born into a scholarly family, Ma Junwu’s father, Ma Hengchen, was a master of Confucianism. Since childhood, Ma Junwu was enlightened with historical books such as *A Brief History of Past Dynasties*, laying a solid foundation in traditional Chinese culture. After his father’s death when he was nine, he continued to study diligently under his mother’s supervision, and his accomplishments in traditional Chinese studies grew day by day. In 1897, during Kang Youwei’s lectures in Guilin, the reformist ideas he promoted opened up a new intellectual horizon for the young Ma Junwu, making him realize that “without in-depth study of western learning, China could not achieve prosperity and strength.”

In 1899, Ma Junwu was admitted to the Guangxi Physical and Applied School and studied under the anti-Japanese general Tang Jingsong. Under his mentor’s guidance to “focus on mathematics and English,” he demonstrated an amazing talent for languages and became proficient in English in less than a year. Afterwards, he successively studied French at the Pichong Academy in Guangzhou and the Aurora College in Shanghai. In 1901, he went to Japan and enrolled in the Kyoto Imperial University to study applied chemistry, thus embarking on his academic path that integrated Chinese and Western knowledge.

After meeting Sun Yat-sen in 1903, Ma Junwu’s life trajectory underwent a major turning point. He transformed from a reformist into a staunch revolutionary democrat. In 1905, he became one of the first members of the Tung Menghui (also called the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance), participated in drafting its charter, and published influential

articles such as *Biography of Gambetta* and *On the People as the Sovereign* in *Min Bao*, becoming a prominent figure in revolutionary propaganda. During the Xinhai Revolution, he successively participated in drafting important documents such as the Outline of the Provisional Government of the Republic of China and the Provisional Constitution. After the failure of the Second Revolution, he went to Germany for further studies and became China’s first doctor of engineering in Germany.

In the field of education, Ma Junwu made particularly outstanding contributions. He successively served as the principal of Xiamen University, Beijing Industrial University, Shanghai China Public School, and other universities, with his achievement of founding Guangxi University being particularly remarkable. His educational philosophy of “revitalizing China and developing Guangxi,” the “spadeism” practical education concept, and the implementation of military training during the Anti-Japanese War period all demonstrated his firm belief in saving the country through education. During the Anti-Japanese War, under his leadership, Guangxi University gathered a group of eminent scholars and became one of the top universities in China.

On August 1, 1940, this pioneer who had dedicated his life to saving the country through education and science passed away due to overwork in Guilin at the age of sixty. His death triggered nationwide mourning, with leading figures from both the Kuomintang and the Communist Party sending condolences. Zhou Enlai sent eulogy “A master of the age”; Zhu De and Peng Dehuai sent a eulogy: “Educational legacy lives on,” [7] which fully demonstrates his charismatic personality and historical status.

Ma Junwu’s life was just as he said in the preface to his translation of *On the Origin of Species*: “Taking the essence of western civilization to cure the chronic illnesses of China’s weakness”. [11] With his knowledge and passion, he wrote a magnificent chapter in the history of modern Chinese intellectuals’ struggle to save the nation.

3. Translation Thoughts

“Translation ideas” refers to the translator’s high-level elevation or cognitive understanding of translation experience, which in turn guides his or her practice at a higher level. Translation ideas are usually manifested as certain principles, propositions, or basic concepts regarding translation. [9] From Professor Liu’s statement, we understand that translation ideas not only originate from the translator’s practical experience but also feed back and optimize his or her subsequent translation practice through systematic and theoretical elevation.

Ma Junwu explicitly put forward the core proposition that “translation of books is the foundation for strengthening the nation” [10] regarding translation as an important means of knowledge enlightenment and social transformation. He firmly held the belief that the primary purpose of translation was to serve the country, closely linking his personal fate with that of the nation and viewing the translation cause as a powerful support for achieving national rejuvenation and national prosperity. Based on this, the idea of “serving the country through translation” runs like a consistent thread throughout, constituting the core and soul of his translation thoughts. Next, we will take this as the core and delve into Ma Junwu’s rich and profound translation thoughts.

3.1. The Thought of Serving the Country through Translation

Ma Junwu lived in an era of turbulent national upheavals, with internal and external troubles converging. At that time, foreign powers encircled China, the national strength was in decline, and national sovereignty was severely trampled upon. The national crisis loomed like dark clouds over the heads of every Chinese. In his youth, Ma Junwu was deeply aware of the severity of the national crisis. Therefore, he began to continuously explore ways to save the nation and its people, assiduously studying Western scientific and democratic ideas as well as advanced culture. He knew that only by introducing external advanced concepts and wisdom could new vitality be injected into the crumbling old China. Hence, he hoped to introduce Western advanced ideas and management experiences into China through the translation of scientific and technological literature and advanced theoretical works in other disciplines, using this as a powerful driving force for social progress and development.

Ma Junwu once vowed to “translate all the world’s masterpieces into China,”[8] which fully demonstrated his great cultural ambition to enlighten the people and rejuvenate the nation through translation. For example, in *Mineralogy*, Ma Junwu wrote, “I have translated it specifically to contribute to the academic circles of our motherland,” which revealed his ardent expectations for the development of the country’s academic field. In his view, even if he could not personally participate in the specific work of national construction, he could still contribute to the prosperity and strength of the motherland by developing China’s modern science and technology through the translation of western advanced science and technology. This was his unique way of serving the country. In addition, in many other translation prefaces, Ma Junwu sincerely expressed his hope that the translation of certain foreign works would promote the development of relevant fields in China, such as “I secretly hope that this book can be of some help to the progress of botany in our country” and “The way to serve the country is to introduce Western European civilization...” All of these reflect his deep concern for the development of various fields in the country.

After translating Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserable*, Ma Junwu also added a postscript, in which he wrote, “May the youth of our country possess the purest emotions and love our motherland.” This short and powerful statement also profoundly demonstrated his patriotic heart and inspired generations of young people to fight for the destiny of the country.

3.2. The Thought of Translation for Practical Use

After the Opium War, with the intensification of the imperialist powers’ aggression against China and the implementation of their schemes to carve up China, the country found itself in a treacherous situation with crises emerging one after another. At this time, the thoughts of China’s elite intellectuals underwent profound changes, prominently featuring the idea of absorbing Western culture for practical use. From the First Opium War in the 1840s to the early 1880s, the direct purpose of translation was to “learn from the barbarians’ advanced technology to resist them” or to “learn foreign advanced weapons.” After the 1890s, the direct purpose of translation was to “stimulate the people’s

spirit, enlighten their minds, and reform their morals.” As a translator in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, facing the same historical context and mission, Ma Junwu also proposed the thought of translation for practical use.

Under the guidance of this thought, he translated a large number of works on natural sciences, such as Darwin’s two major works on the theory of evolution and Ernst Haeckel’s *Monism* which promoted the theory of evolution, hoping to help the Chinese people change their backward consciousness and keep their ideological concepts in line with the trends of the times. He compiled textbooks on mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and mechanics, focusing on the development of disciplines in China and meeting the urgent needs of teaching in secondary and higher educational institutions in the country. He translated practical works such as those on crystallography, antimony smelting technology, and wine brewing technology to provide references for relevant fields in China. He also translated a series of works on Germany’s national economy and people’s livelihood to promote the development of agriculture, industry, commerce, transportation, income distribution, and social security in China.

3.3. Thoughts on Terminology Translation

Regarding terminology translation, Ma Junwu explicitly put forward his views on the translation of scientific terms in some of his writings and translation prefaces. He said, “To introduce western ideas, one must either create new terms oneself or use those coined by the Japanese.” In the preface to *Practical Botany*, he said, “... (I) have been extremely cautious in naming. In addition to using existing Chinese terms and occasionally adopting refined Japanese terms, I have also created quite a few myself, always aiming to be most appropriate for the plants in question.” In the preface to *Practical Organic Chemistry*, he stated, “The terms set in *A Practical Course of Chemistry* translated by the Jiangnan Manufacturing Bureau... translate sounds instead of meanings or directly use chemical symbols as terms, resulting in extremely long, cumbersome, and unreadable expressions...”

From the above quotations, we can understand Ma Junwu’s thoughts on terminology translation methods. These thoughts include: first, using existing Chinese terms; second, borrowing refined Japanese terms; and third, creating new terms oneself. In addition, from his translation practice, we can also find the following terminology translation thoughts: (1) Transliteration, which can be further divided into: i. pure transliteration; ii. transliteration followed by the original term; iii. transliteration plus the original term plus an explanation; (2) Free translation followed by the original term; (3) Literal translation followed by the original term; (4) Zero translation.[6]

Examples of Ma Junwu’s implementation of his terminology translation method thoughts in his translation practice can be seen in the fact that he attached English (Latin, German)-Chinese term comparison tables at the end of some of his translations, such as *The Origin of Species* by Darwin (English-Chinese), *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (English-Chinese), *Monism* by Haeckel (German-Chinese), and *Practical Organic Chemistry* (German-Chinese). These are all results of his practice of his terminology translation thoughts.[13]

3.4. Thoughts on Translator's Subjectivity

Translator's subjectivity refers to "the subjective initiative demonstrated by the translator, as the subject of translation, in translation activities to achieve translation purposes while respecting the translation object. Its basic characteristics are the translator's self-aware cultural consciousness, humanistic character, and cultural aesthetic creativity." [14] This concept emphasizes that in the translation process, the translator is not passively and mechanically engaged in language conversion. Instead, the translator holds a unique subject status and can actively participate in every aspect of translation activities, from comprehending the original text, selecting translation strategies to expressing and polishing the translated text, all of which incorporate the translator's own cultural literacy, values, and aesthetic pursuits.

In Ma Junwu's view, a translator should not merely sit at the desk, holding a worn-out pen, and be preoccupied with shuttling back and forth between the source language and the target language. Rather, the translator should invest their own subjective emotions and constantly maintain a spiritual dialogue with the original author and the characters in the work. Only in this way can the translated work produce a captivating artistic effect in translation. Ma Junwu also expressed similar ideas in the Translator's Preface to *William Tell*. He said, "When translating this book, I have shed tears countless times. I am not one who is prone to crying, and I wonder how my fellow countrymen will feel when reading this book." Perhaps it is precisely for this reason that his translation of *William Tell* features "clear and powerful dialogues and melancholy yet rhythmical songs, which deeply move those who read it."

4. Translation Achievements

Ma Junwu was a renowned scholar during the Republic of China era. He was proficient in natural sciences such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, metallurgy, biology, and agriculture, and also conducted research in social sciences such as political science, economics, philosophy, and history. [12] With his outstanding knowledge and unremitting efforts, Ma Junwu left a profound mark in multiple fields of natural and social sciences. His 39 translated works cover literature, biology, political science, economics, history, philosophy, and many other aspects. The richness and breadth of his translated works are truly astonishing. These translated works serve as bridges, introducing advanced Western ideas and knowledge into China and having a profound impact on Chinese society. Next, we will delve into the important roles played by Ma Junwu's translated works in different fields from several key aspects.

4.1. Ma Junwu's Translation of Darwin's Theory of Evolution Promoted the Development of Biology Education in China

The translation of Darwin's theory of evolution was the most important achievement in Ma Junwu's translation career and also an important factor in establishing his important position in the history of Chinese translation. This translation activity almost spanned his entire translation career. Around the end of 1901 to the spring of the following year, Ma Junwu first translated the appendix *An Historical Sketch of the Progress of Opinion on the Origin of Species* attached to *The Origin of Species*. In 1916, Ma Junwu continued to translate

The Origin of Species, but stopped after translating a few pages. He resumed translation in 1918 and completed chapters 6-15 in seven months. Later, he found that the translations of the first five chapters had too many errors, so he gave up and started retranslating. In September 1920, the complete translation was published under the title *On the Origin of Species* by Darwin. Ma Junwu's translation of this work adopted a completely different translation strategy from *On the Struggle for Existence* by Darwin and *On Natural Selection* by Darwin. The latter two translations were the products of deletion, rewriting, and free play translation strategies, while *On the Origin of Species* by Darwin was the result of highly literal translation. To the best of the author's knowledge, in 1989, Professor Xu Guangtai from Tsinghua University in Taiwan designated Ma Junwu's *On the Origin of Species* by Darwin as reference material for his course History of Modern Western Science. Professor Li Weimin from Fudan University listed Ma Junwu's *On the Original and Selection of Human Beings* as required reading for his course *Human Beings and Multiculturalism* in the first semester of the 2008-2009 academic year. Ma Junwu's translations of Darwin's theory of evolution have benefited several generations of biology learners in China and promoted the development of biology education in China.

4.2. Ma Junwu's Scientific Translations Promoted the Development of Modern Scientific Culture in China

In the early Ming and Qing dynasties, the Chinese began to come into contact with Western scientific culture. However, from the mid-Qing Dynasty to the 1840s, due to the Qing government's policy of closing the country to the outside world, cultural exchanges between China and the West in terms of science and technology were at a standstill. During this period, the Chinese had very little knowledge of advanced Western scientific culture, and their existing understanding of western scientific and cultural knowledge had become very outdated. Many newly developed scientific knowledge were completely unknown to them. Among Ma Junwu's scientific translations, some filled the gaps in China's modern scientific knowledge. For example, his translation of *Mineralogy*, a work on crystallography. From the preface of Ma Junwu's *Mineralogy*, we learn that the earliest Chinese translation of mineralogy was *Identification of Metals and Stones* by Dana. This translation included content on crystallography, but the translator deleted all the content related to crystallography, which delayed the introduction of crystallography into China. It was not until 1910, when Ma Junwu translated and published *Mineralogy* by the German mineralogist Hussak, that this gap was filled. *Mineralogy* covers the formation and development of crystallography, basic principles, research on artificial minerals, mineral classification methods, and research on the optical properties of crystals. This was the first time the Chinese had access to detailed content on crystallography.

4.3. Ma Junwu's Translations on Women's Rights Promoted the Development of the Women's Liberation Movement in Modern China

Ma Junwu's translations on women's rights include *On Women's Rights* by Spencer and *On Women's Rights* (with an appendix of the Socialist Women's Rights Declaration)

published in New Citizen's Magazine (edited by Liang Qichao) in April-May 1903. Here, *On Women's Rights* is Ma Junwu's translation and commentary on *The Subjection of Women* by John Stuart Mill. Based on natural law and the theory of evolution, *On Women's Rights by Spencer* argues for the equality of men and women and their equal rights. *The Subjection of Women* by John Stuart Mill also advocates the equality of men and women and their equal rights. In Ma Junwu's translation and commentary, women's civil rights include five parts: the right to supervise and organize the government, the right to be concerned with national affairs, the right to hold high-level government positions, the right to enjoy the same rights as other family members, and the right to enjoy the same political rights as men. *The Socialist Women's Rights Declaration* is Ma Junwu's translation and commentary on the conference outline issued by socialists in Brussels, Belgium in 1891. In his translation and commentary, Ma Junwu divides "women's rights" into five categories: the right to supervise and organize the government, the right to participate in national affairs, the right to hold high-ranking government positions, the right to enjoy the same rights as other family members, and the right to enjoy the same political rights as men. *The Declaration of Women's Rights by Socialists* is Ma Junwu's translation and adaptation of the conference outline issued by socialists in Brussels, Belgium, in 1891. In his translation and adaptation, Ma Junwu categorized "women's rights" into five types: the right to education, the right to economic independence, political rights, marital rights, and the rights of the people. Ma Junwu's translations on women's rights unified China's understanding of the origins of western theories on women's liberation.

5. Conclusion

Sun Yat-sen highly praised Ma Junwu's character and talents with the remarks, "He is neither greedy for wealth nor afraid of death, proficient in both letters and science," and "His scholarship is rare not only in Guangxi but also in the entire country." This evaluation not only summarizes Ma Junwu's complete character as a modern intellectual but also reveals the underlying motivations behind his achievements in science and technology translation. With his academic attainment that bridged the East and the West and his patriotic fervor, Ma Junwu wrote a unique chapter in the history of Chinese science and technology translation in the early 20th century. His translation practice not only constructed an important channel for the introduction of Western scientific knowledge into China but also pioneered a new cultural dissemination model that integrated "translation-education-national salvation." This translation path, which closely combined personal talents with national needs, not only embodied the fine tradition of "practical application for national benefit" among modern intellectuals but also set an example for contemporary science and technology translators.

Translators have always been creators of translation history. It is their translation theories, inherited, explored, and summarized through long-term translation practice, that have propelled China's translation endeavors and written remarkable translation miracles into the annals of history. As the pages of Chinese science and technology translation

history unfold before us, although time passes and becomes the past, Ma Junwu's significant contributions and achievements to Chinese science and technology translation will forever be enshrined on the monument of Chinese translation history.

In today's world, where globalization and the scientific and technological revolution are deepening, re-examining Ma Junwu's translation ideas and practices not only helps us understand the formation process of China's modern scientific discourse system but also provides valuable historical references for constructing a science and technology translation theory with Chinese characteristics. As Ma Junwu stated in his *Reflections on Translation*: "Although translation may seem trivial, it is related to the fate of the nation." This aphorism still shines with wisdom today, reminding translation workers of their cultural mission and responsibility of the times.

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