Translation as Scholarly Source: Value, Challenges and Reflections on the English Translation of Zhang Liangcai's *A History of Chinese Customs*

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Abstract: Produced from Zhang Liangcai's 1910 original manuscript, *A History of Chinese Customs* is the complete published English translation of China's general history of folk customs. Zhang's original work occupies a landmark position in the development of modernera Chinese folklore and socialhistorical studies. This paper reviews the background and core intellectual features of the Chinese source text, analyses major translation challenges, including ritualcustom terminology, ancient proper nouns, proverbs, dialectal lexicon, and lateQing reformoriented critical commentaries embedded in the original work. It further explores the scholarly contributions of this officially released English edition, acknowledges the inherent historical limitations inherited from the 1910 text, and offers practical reflections on translating earlymodern Chinese folklore classics for international academic audiences.

***Keywords*:** Zhang Liangcai; *A History of Chinese Customs*; Chinese classics translation; earlymodern folklore texts; history of Chinese folk customs

1. Introduction

Completed in the second year of the Xuantong reign (1910) at Ji'ao Studio in Pingxiang, Zhang Liangcai's *A History of Chinese Customs* represents the first comprehensive general history of Chinese folk customs authored by a Chinese indigenous scholar[1]. Rooted in the lateQing socialreform intellectual climate, Zhang's core scholarly objective was to investigate ancient customs to understand and improve contemporary social mores. The book divides thousands of years of Chinese customs into four distinct historical phases: the Age of Primitive Simplicity, the Mixed Period, the Age of Extravagance and Chaos, and the Period from Extravagance back to Simplicity. Its scope spans material life (food, clothing, dwellings, agriculture, animal husbandry), institutional rituals (marriage, funerals, comingofage ceremonies, sacrificial rites, village drinking rituals), social ethos (chivalric culture, scholarofficial value systems, clan status), and linguistic evidence such as proverbs, ballads, and premodern dialectal materials.

Within Chinese academia, this text is widely recognised as a transitional work bridging traditional Confucian ritual exegesis and modern folklore research[4]. Multiple reprinted Chinese editions have been published by the Commercial Press, China Social Sciences Press and other institutions[2]. For decades, however, this foundational earlymodern text lacked a complete Englishlanguage printed edition. Anglophone sinologists engaging with Zhang's scholarship had to rely on fragmentary quotations from the original Chinese text, creating obstacles for nonChinesereading researchers to access indigenous Chinese customs historiography.

To fill this research gap, the manuscriptbased full English translation *A History of Chinese Customs* has been formally published by Cosmos Publishing Group, Denver, 2025[3]. The translation preserves the original fourpart structural framework, section headings, preface, and appendix tables of preimperial legendary rulers. Drawing on handson translation practice, this article examines the textual characteristics of Zhang's monograph, typical translation difficulties, academic merits of the published translated volume, and practical insights for global dissemination of earlymodern Chinese folklore writings. It should be noted that this English edition is a faithful rendering of the 1910 source text rather than a newlycomposed modern academic study of Chinese customs. The original work inevitably carries intellectual limitations shaped by its lateQing historical context.

2. Context and Scholarly Characteristics of Zhang Liangcai's Original Work

2.1 LateQing reformdriven customs scholarship

In lateQing China, fengsu (customs) was treated as a vital dimension of state governance. Zhang's theoretical point of departure derives from The Book of Rites: "Rituals follow appropriateness; affairs follow customs." In his view, customs are collective behavioural habits gradually formed by social groups over long durations. Rulers ought to formulate laws and

rituals in accordance with existing folk conventions; meanwhile, systematic investigation of customs constituted a necessary prerequisite for social reform[7]. This intellectual milieu stimulated growing interest in folkcustom surveys among both official agencies and private literati in the final decade of the Qing dynasty.

Zhang collected source materials from Confucian classics including The Book of Rites and Zuo Zhuan, dynastic histories, masters' philosophical works, imperial encyclopaedias, and local gazetteers. Notably, he also incorporated viewpoints from Japanese and early Western anthropological scholarship. For example, he deployed Katō Hiroyuki's anthropological observations to interpret vestiges of primitive group marriage recorded in ancient ritual texts. Such adoption of new global intellectual resources is a typical marker of lateQing transitional scholarship.

Different from conventional ritual texts focusing primarily on elite ceremonial institutions, Zhang devoted substantial space to grassroots folk phenomena: witchcraft, gu poison, unsanctioned popular sacrifices, folk ballads, and dialect vocabulary all receive detailed discussion. His critical remarks concerning opiumsmoking, shamans, and harmful folk superstitions reflect the distinct reformminded moral stance common among lateQing intellectuals.

2.2 Strengths and inherited limitations of the 1910 text

The principal value of Zhongguo Fengsu Shi lies in its disciplinary pioneering significance[5]. Zhang constructed a largescale chronological framework for Chinese customs history, integrating material culture, ritual institutions, social morality, and linguistic relics within a single narrative. As Zhang Bo observes, it constitutes an early Chinese attempt to compose a holistic folkcustom history prior to the formal institutionalisation of modern folklore studies[5].

Even so, modern readers need to acknowledge its historical constraints. First, nearly all evidence is drawn from transmitted written documents; archaeological discoveries were unavailable for Zhang to crossvalidate his arguments. Second, several interpretations of primitive society draw upon nowobsolete earlytwentiethcentury foreign anthropological theories and require critical reevaluation by contemporary historians and folklorists[6]. Third, valueladen moral judgements permeate the whole book, as the author consistently measured folk practices against the ideal of social improvement. All these historical features are faithfully retained in the published English translation instead of being arbitrarily altered[3].

3. Core Translation Difficulties and Adopted Strategies

Four categories of textual content presented major challenges during translation: specialised ritualcustom terminology, ancient book titles and proper nouns, proverbs and dialectal materials, as well as Zhang's own lateQing reformoriented critical commentaries. The overarching translational principle prioritises scholarly fidelity. Unregulated domestication or random deletion of sourcetext information was avoided. Concise footnotes are supplied where necessary for Anglophone readers without deep sinological training[3].

3.1 Ritual and folkcustom technical terms

A large number of specialised ritual terms appear throughout the source text, such as the male capping ceremony (guan li), female hairpinning ceremony (ji li), the six wedding rituals, and the five grades of mourning costume. Multiple competing English equivalents circulate within sinological scholarship[12]. This translation adopts widelyaccepted scholarly renderings, supplemented by brief footnotes for contextual background without overloading the main body.

Example: san nian zhi sang (三年之丧): translated as threeyear mourning ritual, footnote: Traditional Chinese mourning observance; the actual observance lasted approximately twentyfive calendar months.

For the fivetier mourning system (zhancui, qicui, dagong, xiaogong, sima), Pinyin transliteration is retained alongside concise English explanations. These are core technical concepts repeatedly referenced in sinological research; casual free paraphrasing would undermine the conceptual precision of Zhang's original text.

3.2 Ancient texts, historical figures and ethnonyms

For premodern Chinese book titles, this translation employs established English translations used in Anglophone sinology: The Book of Rites, Zuo Zhuan, Discourses of the States, Comprehensive Meaning of Customs (Fengsu Tongyi), Dialects (Fangyan). No selfinvented title translations are created. Names of legendary emperors, ancient polities and official titles use standard Pinyin transliteration. Brief supplementary explanations are added for lesserknown institutions and ethnic denominations.

3.3 Proverbs, ballads and ancient dialect vocabulary

One prominent feature of Zhang's monograph is its extensive deployment of proverbs, rhymed sayings and archaic dialect materials as folkcustom evidence. Two risks emerge in translating this section: overly literal translation producing unintelligible English, or heavy poetic domestication erasing the documentary value of linguistic primary sources.

The adopted solution: proverbs receive literal English translation, with original Chinese characters provided in footnotes. Archaic dialect lexemes preserve Pinyin forms paired with succinct English glosses. This approach maintains the linguistichistorical documentary nature of the source material. Western proverbial equivalents are not substituted, because such substitution would destroy the primarysource character of Zhang's documentary collection[3].

3.4 The author's critical reformoriented commentary

The preface and chapterclosing segments contain Zhang Liangcai's original critical observations on harmful folk customs. These subjective commentaries form the ideological backbone of the monograph and cannot be abridged in translation. At sentence level, the translator clearly distinguishes quoted ancient source passages from Zhang's independent lateQing critical arguments, preserving the rhetorical tone of literati commentary rather than flattening it into generic modern academic prose. The translator's foreword to the published English edition explicitly alerts readers that the translated work reflects 1910 intellectual perspectives rather than contemporary scholarly consensus[3].

4. Scholarly Value of the Published Englishlanguage Translation

First, this complete printed translation fills a gap in Anglophone sinological resources. Despite its importance within Chinese disciplinary history, no full English printed edition existed before this project[3]. This volume offers international folklorists, cultural historians and socialhistory researchers a complete citable Englishlanguage text, enabling nonChinesereading scholars to engage with indigenous earlymodern Chinese customs historiography.

Second, it preserves the full documentary layers of the original work. Many translated Chinese classics omit appendices, dialect notes and ballad materials for readability. This translation retains the complete appendix table of preHuangdi legendary rulers, together with all proverbs and dialect entries, protecting the documentary integrity of the source text[3].

Third, it transmits not merely content on ancient Chinese customs, but also earlymodern Chinese intellectual history. By fully rendering the preface and authorial commentaries, the English edition allows overseas researchers to understand how lateQing reformminded literati interpreted traditional folk customs for social renewal. The book functions simultaneously as a source for ancient customs and as intellectualhistorical evidence from 1910[3].

Fourth, it provides a practical reference case for translating other earlymodern Chinese folklore texts. LateQing and Republicanera Chinese writings frequently interweave classical quotations, fragmentary historical evidence and contemporary critical arguments. This translation's solutions for terminology, footnote design, and handling of folklinguistic materials deliver usable experience for comparable translation projects.

Crucially, fidelity to the 1910 source does not imply endorsement of every historical judgement advanced by Zhang Liangcai. The translator's introductory note points out textual limitations: dependence on transmitted written texts, partial adoption of obsolete anthropological theories, and strong reformera moral bias. Readers are advised to crossreference against modern historical and folkloristic research[4][13].

5. Reflections on Translating EarlyModern Chinese Folklore Works for Global Circulation

Compared with preQin philosophical classics, earlymodern Chinese folklore and socialhistory monographs remain undertranslated for global academic audiences. Drawing on this translation project, two practical conclusions can be drawn.

First, translating texts of this type ought to prioritise documentary authenticity over fluent domesticating readability. Such works contain large quantities of unique ritual terms, proverbs and dialect fragments. Arbitrary simplification or cultural substitution sacrifices their value as primary sources. Moderate footnotes explaining institutions, figures and classical books greatly assist international readers without disrupting reading flow[3].

Second, translators should separate "textual rendering" from "updating scholarly viewpoints". The core task of a translator is faithful reproduction of the historical source text. Where original arguments have been revised or rejected by later scholarship, corrections and critical reminders belong in forewords, prefaces or endnotes, rather than being altered within the translated main text.

Zhang Liangcai's *A History of Chinese Customs* was produced at the intellectual turning point between traditional literati learning and modern social science. Rooted in classical Chinese documentary traditions yet absorbing global intellectual currents of its time, it constitutes an indispensable text for studying the origins of Chinese folklore studies. Its complete published English translation facilitates crosscultural dialogue on Chinese ritual and folk culture by making this milestone earlymodern Chinese work accessible to worldwide academic communities[3].

Acknowledgments

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