

Excavating the Landscape: An Archaeological Study of Samuel Beal's English Translations of Chinese Buddhist Texts

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Abstract:

Samuel Beal was the first British scholar in the 19th century to systematically translate Chinese Buddhist texts into English, holding a pioneering position in the history of the overseas dissemination of Chinese Buddhist literature. Adopting the translation archaeology framework of Anthony Pym and Lieven D'hulst, this study integrates library archival materials, work inventories, and socio-historical data to archaeologically examine Beal's translation landscape across four dimensions: intellectual biography, work archives, spatiotemporal distribution, and patronage mechanisms. The research findings are as follows. First, establishing an intellectual biography reveals that Beal's dual identity as a clergyman and a sinologist infused his translation practices with intertwined religious and academic characteristics. He focused on the comparison between Buddhism and Christianity, embodying the exploratory spirit of comparative religion. Furthermore, he was dedicated to bridging the gap in the translation and study of Chinese Buddhist texts in the English-speaking world, thereby establishing his academic status as a pioneer in related European research. Second, in terms of text selection, Beal altered the prevailing convention in Western academia, which heavily favored Sanskrit and Pali source texts. By translating and introducing Chinese classics such as the *Diamond Sutra*, *Travels of Faxian*, and *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, he greatly enriched the source texts within the translation field of that period, highlighting the independent academic value of Chinese Buddhist texts in Western Buddhist studies. Third, regarding spatiotemporal distribution, his translations were published between 1862 and 1899, forming a network of knowledge dissemination centered in London and radiating globally. Fourth, his translation practices relied on a multi-dimensional patronage network connecting the government, academic institutions, religious organizations, and publishers. Through this network, he acquired original source texts, financial support, language acquisition opportunities, and publication channels. This reveals that translation activities are deeply embedded within specific socio-historical environments, demonstrating the complexity of translation as a social practice. The study concludes that Beal's translation achievements, serving as a medium for the flow of Buddhist knowledge connecting China, India, and Britain, significantly elevated the status of Chinese Buddhist texts in the international Buddhist community and laid a crucial foundation for modern Buddhist studies and Sino-Western cultural exchange.

Keywords: Samuel Beal, Chinese Buddhist Texts, English translation, translation archaeology

Strands: translation & interpreting

