

# The Influence of Foreign Trade Activities on Chinese Loan Words from the Historical Perspective

Yiming Zhao

Zhejiang Ocean University, Zhoushan, China

Yeli Shi

Zhejiang Ocean University, Zhoushan, China

**Abstract**—In the process of thousands of years' dynasties change and social development, it is not difficult to find the sustained impact of foreign trade on Chinese society. Trade has output both the goods and culture of China. At the same time it also brought in the material and non-material civilization from other places of the world. As a product of foreign culture, loan words are not only a microcosm of the outcome of trade activities in specific periods, but also enrichment to Chinese language. This article intends to elaborate the influence of trade activities on Chinese loan words with the development of history as the pointcut, focusing on the typical periods of the development of foreign trade in China, including the Han Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty, the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China

**Index Terms**—history, loan words, foreign trade, trade activities

## I. INTRODUCTION

Loan words are also called “foreign words”. In the academic circles, there has always been a dispute in the narrow and broad sense of the definition of loan words. The so-called loan words in a narrow sense refer to the foreign words which do not have the corresponding meaning in native language. Both the meanings of the word and all or part of the phonetic form are borrowed from the pronunciation of foreign language, which can be called transliteration words. In broad sense, loan words refer to the words which are absorbed from or influenced by foreign languages and other ethnic languages. Loanwords include transliteration words, and free translation words (Cao Liya, 2009). In this paper, the author agrees with the latter definition of loan words.

Most of the scholars' research and article writings have focused on the exploration and introduction of the origin and translation characteristics of loan words. Few people have analyzed from the perspective of foreign trade, and discussed the impact of the trade behavior in different periods on loan words. In fact, the development of foreign trade opened an important gateway for China to exchange with foreign cultures. Throughout the development of history, every time China entered into an active period of foreign trade, it would be accompanied by the emergence of a large number of loan words. Among them, the rise of the Silk Road in the Han Dynasty, the heyday of the Tang Dynasty with tributes from many of her countries, the Western powers' deepening of Chinese colonial trade after the Opium War, and then today's reform and opening up, all provide the suitable social soil for the birth and development of loanwords.

## II. WESTERN HAN AND EASTERN HAN DYNASTIES (202 B.C. - A.D.220): THE LANGUAGE FROM THE SILK ROAD

### A. *The Rise of the Silk Road*

As the first country in the world to cultivate silkworms and develop silk weaving, in the Chunqiu Period (770 B.C.- 476 B.C. ) and Warring States period (476 B.C. - 221 B.C.), China exported its silk to the West. And the international trade channel began to form due to silk selling. China was first known in the western world for silk, hence the name ‘Seres’ came into being, which means the country of silk.

After the establishment of the Han Dynasty (202 B.C. - A.D.220), in order to solve the long-term invasion and disturbance of the nomadic Huns in the northwest border of the empire, 138 B.C., emperor Wu sent Zhang Qian (the eminent diplomatist, traveller, explorer of the Han Dynasty) to the Western Regions to contact the Western countries. Zhang Qian had two trips to the western regions in his life, and collected a sea of important information about the geography and traffic about western countries and also grabbed the area for the Han Dynasty. He helped the Han Empire successfully win over the western countries, establish diplomatic relations, and succeed in isolating the Huns, all of which laid the solid foundation for the formation and development of “Silk Road”.

Until then, after the rise of the ancient Persian and Alexander the Great Expedition, the trade road from west of the Pamirs plateau to the Mediterranean had gradually formed. During the reign of Emperor Wu of China (141 B.C.- 87 B.C.), the expansion of China's territory was completed with the Hexi Corridor linking the Central Plains to the Pamirs

region. Thus “the Silk Road” took shape which connected the Eurasian continent trade channel with that of entire Asia.

### B. *The First Climax of the Introduction of Loan Words*

The rulers of the Han Dynasty attached great importance to the construction of cavalry and the domestication of horses. However, at that time, excellent varieties of horses were mainly produced in the western regions. Meanwhile, for western countries highly prized and loved China's silk, a large number of silk exported to the west regions and brought considerable income for the empire. Therefore, even after the rise of the Maritime Silk Road, the focus of foreign trade in the Han Dynasty still retained in the hinterland of the western regions. The influence of the trade in this period was also fully reflected in the loan words.

From the perspective of source of loanwords, they mainly came from the Huns, Dayuan and Turkic language etc. (Dong Mingming, 2013). Among them, the most representative loan words are from the Huns. For example:

Hu is another transliteration form of “Huns”. Its original meaning is “man” or “God”, first seen in the Western Han Dynasty. “There was the Han Dynasty in the south, and there was mighty Hun in the north. ‘Hu’ means God’s favored one, (Huns) not for the small courtesy troubles themselves.” It can be seen that “hu” originally only referred to the Huns, and later evolved into a general term that refers to West nations. With the frequent contact and conflict between the Han and Hun, many northwest nomadic cultural products, later even some of the products from the Western Regions were also prefixed with “hu”, such as hu fu (clothing of northwest nomadic), hu chuang (folding rope chair), hu jia (reed flute used by northern tribes), hu tao (Juglans regia), hu jiao (pepper) etc. (Shi Youwei, 1991). Even today, “hu” is widely used in China, typically referring to something introduced from the northern and western nationalities or from abroad.

Many other words also entered into Chinese vocabulary with the influence of Hun’s culture. For example, “chan yu”, the highest title of chief of the Huns, the full name of it is “Cheng Li Gu Tu Chan Yu”, transliteration from the Huns “sanok” or “tsanak”. The Huns called the “heaven” as “cheng li”, and call the “son” as “gu tu”. “Chan yu” meant vast. This title complimented the leader is as great as heaven. In the Han Dynasty, envoys were often sent to visit these nomads (Huns) with respectful greetings “Chan yu” and best regards “good in health” from the Chinese emperor to Huns (Peter Frankopan, 2017). Till now, “chan yu” is one of the most familiar official addressing to Chinese people of Huns leader in the Han Dynasty.

“Yan zhi”, was the title of Huns monarch’s wife in the Han Dynasty. Besides, people in the Hun also called Carthamus tinctorius as “yan zhi”. Huns women always liked to use the color made from Carthamus tinctorius to make up their face on the wedding, thus the married women were also called “yan zhi” (Gao Mingkai et al., 1984). With the introduction of the workmanship of the color made by Carthamus to China, “yan zhi” has become the pronoun of the ancient woman’s cosmetics.

In addition, the names of products from the western region became the main source of loan words in this period. For example:

Luo tuo (camel), was translated from Huns “dada”. It is a tall and back humped mammal, and it is the main transportation tool in the desert area (Gao Mingkai et al., 1984).

Shi zi (lion), the original word may be the ancient Persian Šer or East Ilan language Šē/Šī, and also was called “suan ni” (Gao Mingkai et al., 1984).

Pu tao, was transliterated from Dayuan’s language “budawa”. “Dayuan, was a town in the southwest of the Hun, and to the west of the Han, about thousands of miles far away from the Han Dynasty. People there were adept at cultivating and growing rice and wheat on the fields wherever they settled down. Wine was produced there (Gao Mingkai et al., 1984).

In the Eastern Han Dynasty, India’s Buddhist culture following the caravan on the silk road was introduced into China, and Buddhism-related loan words began to appear. The earliest introduction of Buddhism in China is generally believed during the reign of the Emperor Ming (A.D. 57 - A.D. 75). *History of the Later Han Dynasty* records: “Liu Ying (The name of a nobleman) had a strong sense of justice and ready to help the weak when he was young, and liked to make friends. In his later years, he liked to learn about the Emperor Huang and Lao Tzu, and learned to do Buddhist fasting and sacrifice ritual.” The “Buddha” originated from Sanskrit, called “fu tu” in Chinese (Zhou Zhenhe & You Rujie, 1986).

The foreign trade of the Han Dynasty was the olive branch of the Chinese rulers offered to the outside world. It created opportunities for the integration of foreign culture and Chinese culture, and promoted the emergence of the first loan word climax in Chinese history.

## III. TANG DYNASTY (A.D. 618 - A.D. 907): GOLDEN AGE OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE

### A. *Open Trade Policy*

The Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618 - A.D. 907) was a period of great development and prosperity of China's feudal economy and culture. The brilliant times of the Tang Dynasty, cannot do without the domestic policies of reducing military service in order to achieve the goal of food harvest and the people live and work in peace and contentment (Wu Jing, 2016). During this period, China’s foreign trade showed unprecedented prosperity.

In foreign relations, then Emperor Taizong said: “Since ancient times, the rulers have attached importance to the Han nationality in the Central Plains, and despised the minorities, but I treat them equally.” After Taizong, several successors

of the Tang Dynasty continued the enlightened foreign policy. The rulers' political concept had an important influence on the formulation of policies in various aspects. Therefore, in the Tang Dynasty, its diplomatic etiquette in the industrial and commercial and overseas trade, and the implementation of foreign policies were largely different from other dynasties (Xia Xiurui & Sun Yuqin, 2001). The Tang Dynasty upheld the concept of "trusting businessmen" and "supporting business".

In the context of open trade policy, the Tang Dynasty appeared unprecedented prosperity of foreign trade.

#### B. *Golden Age of Cultural Exchange*

During the Sui and Tang Dynasties (A.D. 581 - A.D. 907), Chinese ceramics was under great development. And in the middle and late Tang dynasty (from 8th Century to early 10th Century), porcelains became one of the bulk export goods, transported respectively from the northwest road and the southeast sea road to the West Asia and the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Thus, Southeast Sea Road is also known as "the Road of Ceramics". With the further development of sea and land trade corridors, the connection between China and the outside world was strengthened. During the heyday of the Tang Dynasty, it established political, economic and cultural ties with more than 70 countries in the world (Lin Hong & Wang Zhenfu, 2010). And Changan, the capital of the Tang Empire, was not only the world's largest international city, but also the melting pot of Chinese and foreign cultures (Zhou Zhenhe & You Rujie, 1986).

In a wide range of multilateral trade, not only rare fowls and strange animals, exotic flowers and rare herbs, gold and silver jewelry, jade and spices surged into China, more important was its company of the foreign culture which was also continually introduced into China. Loan words emerged in great number. Loan words in this period were featured by great diversity, richness and inclusiveness, which could mainly be divided into material and spiritual levels.

As to the material level, in the Tang Dynasty, there appeared a large number of loan words related to the name of exotic products. For example:

Ping guo (apple), the original word is Sanskrit "Vimbara" or "Bilva" (Shi Youwei, 2000).

Bo cai (spinach), came from Nepal in the Tang Dynasty. The original word may be the name of a country which was called Palinga in this area (Shi Youwei, 2000).

Fa lang (enamel), came from the West Region in the Tang Dynasty. In the Ming Dynasty it was known as the "fa lan", then developed into today's cloisonné. The original word for Persian was "fārang" (Shi Youwei, 2000).

Dou kou (round cardamom), the original word may be Arabic "takur", related to the ancient port name "Takola" (Shi Youwei, 2000).

Ba ba means parrot. The popular name of the parrot is starling. "ba ba" is corresponding pronunciation of Arabic "babgha" or "babbaghā" (Pan Yunzhong, 1957).

From the spiritual level, influenced by the Central Asian culture, the Tang Dynasty introduced a large number of exotic forms of artistic expression, such as music, dance, theatricals and variety shows, etc.. And it produced numerous loan words. For example:

Da la gu, a kind of Qiuci instrument with large tympanum and short drum cavity, could be tapped by fingers, originating from Persian "tabūrah" (Shi Youwei, 2000).

Zhe zhi wu (Zhezhi dance), a kind of Persian style dance, was featured by bells on the body and swaying dancing (Shi Youwei, 2000).

Su mu zhe (Akuna matata), a kind of dance, came from the Western Regions (Shi Youwei, 2000).

In addition, during this period, exotic religions such as Buddhism, Manichaeism, Islam, Nestorianism and Zoroastrianism were freely spread in China. After going through the Han Dynasty and the successive dynasties like the Wei, Jin and the Northern and Southern Dynasties, some of them developed quickly, especially Buddhism. It reached its peak in the Tang Dynasty. Buddhism-originated foreign words occupied a larger proportion in the loan words in the Tang Dynasty, e.g. San mei (Samadhi), chan (dhyana), cha na (instant), luo han (arhat), pu sa (Bodhisattva), lun hui (cycle of rebirths), pu ti (bodhi), yuan man (satisfactorily), yin yuan (karma), ci bei (grace), fa men (initial approach to become a Buddhist believer) etc..

The characteristics of the open and inclusive era of the Tang Dynasty provided a fertile soil for the integration and the development of multi-ethnic culture, for the growing trade brought the seeds of different cultures into this land, which took root, sprouted and thrived.

#### IV. LATE QING DYNASTY TO THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA (A.D. 1840 - A.D. 1948): ANOTHER OUTBREAK OF LOAN WORDS

##### A. *An Overview of Trade before and after the Opium War*

Before the Opium War (A.D. 1636 - A.D. 1840), with the gradual recovery and stable development of the social economy, China's foreign trade was further developed, sea trade in particular. During that period, the number of trade ports, trade countries, merchant ships, import and export commodities and trade value were all on the rise. However, due to the political situation, the Qing Dynasty had to implement limited sea trade policy. Overseas trade activities were restrained by the strict management of the Cohong system and customs system. Until the outbreak of the Opium War (1840), China was forced to open to the outside world, but still in a half-closed state.

However, even in an incompletely open state, the Qing Dynasty's foreign trade was still in surplus state. At that time,

for the major trading power, Britain, the gap between China and Britain trade volume was particularly huge. Sino-British trade was almost equivalent to the import without exports (Xia Xiurui & Sun Yuqin, 2001). In order to reverse this unfavorable situation and make up for the huge trade deficit, the East India Company of Britain ignored the ban of the Chinese government and smuggled opium into China, and started the evil opium trade.

After the two Opium Wars, the trade relationship and status between China and the West changed dramatically. Furthermore, the economic invasion of the big powers gradually destroyed China's original self-sufficient natural economy, which led to the transformation of China from agricultural society to industrial society. Since then, China entered into an era teeming with turbulence and change.

### *B. Another Eruption of Loan Words*

From the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China (A.D. 1840 - A.D. 1948), loan words reached the climax once again. In this time, the Chinese people both passively and actively accepted the penetration of industrial civilization and the impact of Western culture. On the one hand, the colonial activities imported a large number of industrial products into China, and it facilitated the activities of foreign businessmen and missionaries in China, which brought Western culture, science and technology, medicine, etc. into China. On the other hand, people gradually realized the importance of learning from the west to promote social change. From the initial reform to the subsequent revolution, Chinese intellectuals never stopped learning and introducing foreign advanced culture. As a result, loan words in this period involved many aspects, such as social life, cultural and political aspects, with prominent characteristics of modernization.

#### **1. Social life**

After the Opium War, a large number of industrial products dumped into China. At such a time when many daily necessities could only be produced in foreign countries, toward these products, Chinese people tended to add a word of "yang" (means foreign) in front of the name of these foreign goods, thus forming a series of descriptive loan words, e. g. Yang huo (match), yang yan juan er (cigarettes), yang che (Rickshaw) etc. (Luo Changpei, 1989).

It was evident that the influence of western trade on China was far more than that. With the introduction of industrial civilization and western social customs, a large number of loan words sprang up in daily life. For example, bai tuo (butter), shui ting (steam), ji pu (jeep), you mo (humor), mi si tuo (mister), mi si (miss), de lv feng (telephone), mai ke feng (microphone) etc. (Shi Youwei, 2000). These loan words were the sound imitation of the names of these products.

In addition, in the coastal areas, the important port cities such as Guangzhou and Shanghai, with the frequent trade with foreigners, English was frequently used. English as the representative of the western languages unavoidably infused into local Chinese dialects, and generated a special language. In Shanghai, as a "specialty" of communication in the east and west, "pidgin language" arose at the historic moment. The pidgin language compared with original English words was not standard. As a kind of mixed language it was largely influenced by the regional dialect pronunciation, e.g. Kang mu (come), gu (go), ye si (yes), na (no), bo la cha (brother) etc..

#### **2. Cultural and political aspects**

From the Westernization Movement to the reform movement of 1898 to the revolution of 1911, Chinese intellectuals had never stopped learning western culture and political system, and the object of study extended from Europe and the United States to neighboring Japan. In the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, a large number of foreign works were translated into Chinese, covering science, medicine, economics, philosophy and political aspects. A great variety of theories and political ideas were introduced to China. There emerged a large number of loanwords, e.g. Wu tuo bang (utopia), luo ji (logic), tuo la si (trust), he er meng (hormone), a si pi lin (aspirin), wei ta ming (vitamin), de mo ke la xi (democracy), sai yin si (science) etc.. When translators failed to find equivalence in Chinese, they would borrow words by transliteration.

Moreover, compared with Japan which had already started the Meiji Restoration Movement, and had been studying Western achievements and language for many years, China lagged far behind. Therefore, Japan was regarded as the "transit station" for China to learn the West, for their internalization of Western culture was more mature than Chinese. Thus, at that time, a considerable part of the loan words were borrowed from Japan, which contained a large number of words related to the political system, e.g. She hui (society), guo ti (state system), li xian zheng ti (constitutional government), gong he (republic), feng jian zhi (feudal system), guo hui (congress), yi hui (parliament), zheng dang (political party), zhu yi (ism), xian fa (constitution), nei ge (cabinet), yuan lao yuan (senate), wai wu sheng (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), cai pan suo (court), jing shi ting (Ministry of public security), yi yuan (parliamentarian) etc. (Shi Youwei, 2000).

From the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, China is in a historic turning point of civilization. The change and increase of foreign trade activities set off a new wave of loan words which cover almost every aspect of societal development and greatly enrich Chinese vocabulary.

## V. CONCLUSION

In 1978, China has formulated the reform and opening up policy, which has been in existence for more than thirty years. During this period, China has set up a special economic zone, joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), and became the world's largest cargo trading country. In the process of China's integration with the rest of the world, a new

climax of loan words came again, especially with the emergence of “Internet” acting as a catalyst.

However, loan words also should go through the elutriation of time. After a certain length of time, some may be deserted and forgotten; some may be outdated and barely used in daily life; and some may be retained as part of Chinese vocabulary, fully assimilated by Chinese culture.

The review of Chinese loan words development along the timeline of Chinese history, from the Han and Tang dynasties to the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China and then to the present, although the background of each era is not the same, it is not difficult to find the similarity between them – each prosperity period of foreign trade is accompanied by a climax of loan words, with no exception.

No matter what era it is, when trade crosses the borders of the state, moving from one nation to another, trade is not merely a trade for exchanging goods or making money. Trade acts as a stepping-stone for opening to the outside world, and a link between different countries and nations. It creates opportunities for cultural exchange and political cooperation, but also makes it possible for political confrontation and cultural collision. All these eventually lead to the growth of loanwords. Thus it can be concluded that foreign trade activities have great impact on the generation and development of loan words.

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**Yiming Zhao** was born in Hangzhou, China in 1995. She is a grade three student at Zhejiang Ocean University, China, majoring in business English.

She is currently an undergraduate student at Zhejiang Ocean University, China. Her research interests include Business English and Cross-cultural Research.

**Yeli Shi** was born in Zhoushan, China. She received her M.A. degree in literature and language from Zhejiang University, China.

She is an associate professor in the Foreign Language College, Zhejiang Ocean University, China. Her current researches focus on English Language and Business English teaching.