

Chinese Translations of the Concept of “Sea Power” in Modern China: Focusing on Yan Fu’s Translation of Masterpieces

Jin Zhang, Jinyu Liu*

College of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, China

Email: *jinyuliu2008@163.com

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Abstract

As a scholar, Yan Fu is best known for his translations of “Eight Famous Works”. As a naval instructor, Yan Fu studied in England, gaining a profound understanding of global affairs and the significance of sea power. Yan Fu’s translations not only introduced the concept of “Sea Power” to China but also facilitated its localization. In the translation of sea power, by supplementing historical background, theoretical foundations, and practical significance, Yan Fu endowed the concept of sea power with not only meanings related to “rights” and “power” but also with strategic implications for saving the nation from crises and achieving national rejuvenation. By comparing Western ideas of maritime exploration with China’s traditional “land-centered” worldview, and contextualizing these ideas in the face of internal and external struggles, Yan Fu used powerful language to construct cultural memory. By linking sea power with national strength, national security, and economic prosperity, Yan Fu made the concept of “Sea Power” one of the central elements in the formulation of modern Chinese maritime strategy.

Keywords

Yan Fu, The Concept of “Sea Power”, Translation, Cultural Memory

1. Introduction

The research is divided into the following eight parts:

Part one is the introduction, which provides a brief overview of the structure of the paper.

Part two is the theoretical framework, which introduces the basic concepts of conceptual history and cultural memory theory.

*Corresponding author.

Part three provides a detailed analysis of the shaping of the concept of “Sea Power” in translation from the perspective of conceptual history.

Part four introduces the reflection of traditional Chinese concepts of “Sea Power” in Yan Fu’s translations.

Part five introduces the reflection of Western sea power thought in Yan Fu’s translations.

Part six describes the role of translated texts as a pathway for the dissemination of the “Sea Power” concept from the Late Qing to Early Republic.

Part seven is the construction of Cultural Memory and social recognition of the “Sea Power” concept in translations.

Part eight is the conclusion, which summarizes the main findings and limitations of the research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Conceptual History

The theory of conceptual history (Begriffsgeschichte) originated in philosophical and historical studies within the German academic tradition in the 20th century. Conceptual history aims to study the evolution of concepts across different historical periods and cultural contexts (Koselleck, 2002). The formation of conceptual history is primarily attributed to the pioneering work of the German scholar Reinhart Koselleck. In his book *The History of Basic Concepts*, Koselleck introduced the concept of the “Sattelzeit” (saddle period), which has since been widely cited in subsequent studies (Liu, 2021). Alongside Koselleck, German scholars Otto Brunner and Werner Conze co-founded the field of conceptual history by analyzing the historical evolution of key concepts.

Concepts are not just collections of words, they carry the thoughts, ideologies, and social structural changes of specific historical periods. By analyzing the origins, changes, and dissemination of concepts, conceptual history reveals how ideas flow through history and ultimately influence social behaviors and structures. It focuses on key concepts that hold special significance in society and politics, such as “State”, “Society”, “Economy”, “Labour” and so on (Williams, 1985, p. 16).

Research combining conceptual history and translation focuses on the transmission and reception of Western concepts in China during the period of modernization. It mainly examines the evolution that occurs when Western concepts are translated into Chinese concepts in the modern period (Fang, 2020, p. 45). Translation, as an important medium of intellectual change in modern China, to some extent reflects the historical transformations of China. The translation of new terms and concepts is also a process of reinterpreting the intellectual resources of both the East and the West and reconstructing modern knowledge (Li & Hu, 2023).

2.2. Cultural Memory

Cultural memory theory was proposed by German scholars Jan Assmann (2011)

and Aleida Assmann (2011), with the aim of studying how memory is constructed, transmitted, and reproduced through cultural practices. This theory emphasizes the crucial role of cultural memory in social identity formation and historical narratives, particularly during periods of cross-cultural exchange and historical turning points. Jan Assmann's *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen) is the foundational work of cultural memory theory. It explores how ancient civilizations preserved the continuity of culture through the transmission and reconstruction of memory. Aleida Assmann, in *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses), analyzes how different types of memory—such as individual memory, social memory, and cultural memory—interweave with each other and impact society.

The connection between translation studies and cultural memory lies in the three-dimensional nature of human memory, as outlined by cultural memory theory: individual, social, and cultural dimensions. Cultural memory is mediated through symbolic objects, such as written words, images, and symbols, which have a long temporal span (Chen & Peng, 2014, p. 13). Luo (2014) argues that translation is cultural and plays a coordinating role in the synchronic dimension, while also having a sustainable role in the diachronic dimension. To ensure survival in memory, translation must take into account both the coherence of the text and its sustainability.

3. The Shaping of the “Sea Power” Concept from a Conceptual History Perspective

The concept of “Sea Power” first appeared in Western military and international relations theory, and later introduced to Japan, where the term “海权” was formally coined in Japanese and gradually spread to China, and its etymology and background can be traced back to several important historical and theoretical nodes.

Using the online etymology corpus etymonline¹ to search for “Sea Power”, the results show that it means, in geopolitics, the international power or international influence that a country possesses at sea. “Sea” evolved from “se, seo” in Middle English, meaning “waters; ocean; lake; pond”, and this etymology can be traced back to the Old English “sæ”, referring to “the vast expanses of saltwater covering most of the world” to individual large, clearly limited bodies of water. “Power” means “authority; strength; ability; regime; influence; power; potency”, and it evolved from the Middle English “poer”, meaning “force, ability”, with its etymological roots in the Latin “poti-” meaning “powerful; lord”.

Initially, “Sea Power” was not a specialized term or concept, but before the formation of a systematic theory of sea power, ideas and issues about maritime

¹<https://www.etymonline.com/>.

strength had already been explored in many famous works, demonstrating the development of sea power thought. Ancient civilizations such as Greece and Rome, although they did not use the term “Sea Power” frequently mentioned their powerful naval forces as one of the core factors supporting their prosperity.

In *History of the Peloponnesian War* Thucydides described the war between Athens and Sparta, discussing the importance of naval power from historical and military perspectives (Thucydides, 1972). Furthermore, Thucydides was the first to propose the concept of “Sea Power” defining it as “Power of the Sea”, which means the sea gives power to those who know how to conquer and move across it (Qi, 2019).

Livy’s *History of Rome* tells the story of Rome’s rise, including Rome’s struggle with Carthage for control of the Mediterranean during the Punic Wars, revealing the strategic significance of maritime trade and control of the seas in national competition (Livy, 2002).

In 1890, the American historian and strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914) proposed the theory of sea power in his work *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*. From 1890 to 1905, the subsequent two parts of the “sea power trilogy”, *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812* and *Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812* were also published. Thus, the systematic modern theory of sea power was formally established, and Mahan is consequently known as the founder of the theory of sea power.

Before the concept of “Sea Power” and its corresponding translation officially appeared in the Chinese context, there were already discussions on maritime defense and naval matters in late Qing dynasty China. This was accompanied by the construction of shipyards and the navy, which can be considered as a form of modern Chinese sea power theory before Mahan’s ideas were introduced (Nie, 2022). Moreover, the term “Sea Power” appeared in China before the introduction and translation of Mahan’s works on sea power theory.

In 1885, the book 《海战新义》 was translated by Li Fengbao published in Tianjin. This was the first appearance of the concept of “海权” in the text, where it stated, “从前分各国之海权强弱为一二三等，今则不便分等第” “凡海权最强者，能逼令弱国之兵船出战”. However, the translator did not define or explain the meaning of “sea power” (Pi, 1994).

In 1900, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* was first translated into Chinese and serialized in the Shanghai Asian-Eastern Times in the twentieth issue 《海上权力要素论》 and the twenty-first issue 《海上权力论》 with the subtitle “论地理有干系于海权”. The translator used the pen name “剑潭钓徒” and credited the original author as “北美海军参将马鸿”. In the translation, the concept of “Sea Power” was rendered as “海上权力” or “海权” (Qu & Ren, 2021).

The term “Sea Power” had already appeared in Japanese writings as early as 1868 in the book 《西洋事情增补》, where it said, “英人勃然而兴，海权悉归之，以至于今日”. The book was compiled by Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901) and

supplemented by Kuroda Yukimasa (1827-1892) (Nie, 2022).

In 1896, the Japanese Naval Command published the translation of Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* titled 《海上权力史论》. The translation was published by the Toho Association. In this translation, the term "Sea Power" was rendered as "海上权力" (Pi, 1994).

In 1898, Yan Fu wrote 《拟上皇帝书》 where he first used the term "海权" (Sea Power), discussing its importance and advising policymakers to develop a navy. In 1909, Yan Fu's translation of *The Spirit of the Laws* was published, where he mentioned Mahan and his theory of sea power in a note, stating, "往读美人马翰所著《海权论》诸书, 其言海权, 所关于国之盛衰强弱者至重, 古今未有能奋海权而其国不强大者" (Yan, 1981a, p. 474).

Apart from *The Spirit of the Laws* Yan Fu's translations of *The Wealth of Nations* and *A History of Politics* also mentioned the concept of "Sea Power". Yan Fu's annotations can be seen in the original manuscript of *The Wealth of Nations*, from which we can not only see Yan Fu's thoughts when translating, but also the source of Yan Fu's commentary, as shown in the following examples (Examples 1~3).

Example 1

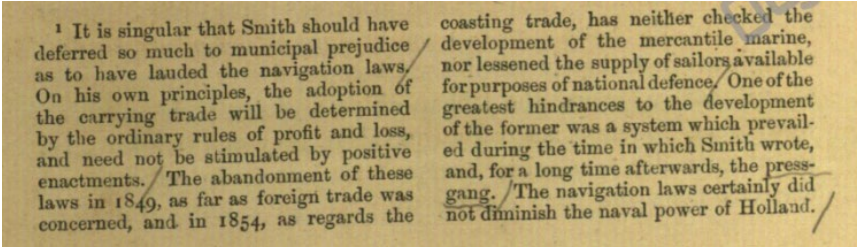
Translation Commentary

案: 斯密氏之论海运条例也, 可谓自信不笃者矣。何其言之多违反耶? 故后之计学家罗哲斯曰, 斯密之美海运条例而不为抨驳也, 殆耸于当时之议, 而谦让不发耳。以本书之例言之, 则境外稍商之业, 民自计其赢失而避趋之, 必非政令之所能沮劝也。海运条例至一千八百五十四年尽废, 而其后海船且日多, 习海之民亦日众, 未闻坐是以加少, 而英之海权以致微也。且当戈洛慕尔之行此令也, 荷兰之海权甚张, 又未尝受其醋也, 则吾不知所谓海运条例者果何所用也? 往者当斯密氏时, 英国家常令锋利军官率数十百永勇, 号压使队, 游行市中, 强募人走海, 或往印度, 民于是始视海为畏途。此其有损于英之海权, 过于竟废海运条例远矣 (Yan, 1981b, p. 380).

Footnote

It is singular that Smith should have deferred so much to municipal prejudice as to have lauded the navigation laws. On his own principles, the adoption of the carrying trade will be determined by the ordinary rules of profit and loss, and need not be stimulated by positive enactments. The abandonment of these laws in 1849, as far as foreign trade was concerned, and in 1854, as regards the coasting trade, has neither checked the development of the mercantile marine nor lessened the supply of sailors available for purposes of national defence. One of the greatest hindrances to the development of the former was a system which prevailed during the time in which Smith wrote and, for a long time afterwards, the press-gang. The navigation laws certainly do not diminish the naval power of Holland (Smith, 1880, p. 37).

Annotation



¹ It is singular that Smith should have deferred so much to municipal prejudice as to have lauded the navigation laws. On his own principles, the adoption of the carrying trade will be determined by the ordinary rules of profit and loss, and need not be stimulated by positive enactments. The abandonment of these laws in 1849, as far as foreign trade was concerned, and in 1854, as regards the coasting trade, has neither checked the development of the mercantile marine, nor lessened the supply of sailors available for purposes of national defence. One of the greatest hindrances to the development of the former was a system which prevailed during the time in which Smith wrote, and, for a long time afterwards, the press-gang. The navigation laws certainly did not diminish the naval power of Holland.

Yan Fu's Annotations in *The Wealth of Nations* on p. 37.

In this paragraph, the translator critically analyzes the navigation laws with the help of editor's notes, and points out that Smith gradually showed a lack of self-confidence and even skepticism in his discussion of maritime regulations.

Yan Fu uses Rogers's views to emphasize the interaction between sea power and policy. Taking the British shipping regulations and the attitude of the author Smith as an example, the policy that seemed feasible at first may reveal unexpected drawbacks in subsequent developments, bringing negative effects and harming national interests in the long-term implementation process, and when the drawbacks brought about by the policy first appeared, Smith was unable to express his skepticism due to the pressure of public opinion.

Yan Fu left a total of six black annotations, five diagonal lines, and a wavy line drawn below "pressgang" on the editor's note section of the manuscript. He divided this paragraph into five parts, extracted the main idea of each part and translated it into Chinese, supplemented it and appeared in the translation as translation commentary.

Example 2

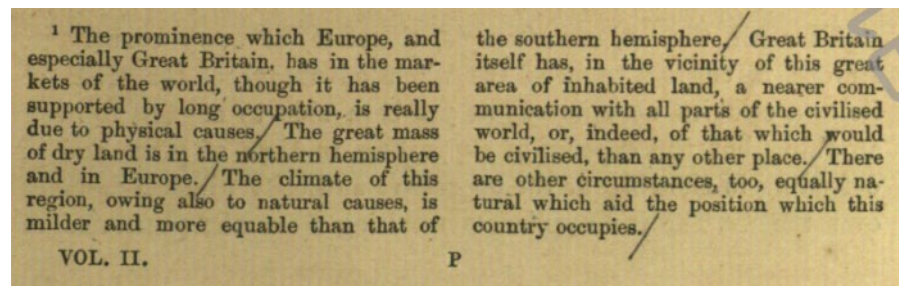
Translation Commentary

案：西人尝谓商市欧洲最盛，而欧洲又英国最盛者，虽曰人事，亦地形为之耳。设分地球为二半，其一为陆半球，其一为水半球，则英岛实处陆半球之中央；欧洲海岸，出入海线最长，而英为岛国，无地不可与水通；当墨西哥湾温溜之冲，气候温燠。总是三者，此所以能独握海权，牢笼商务，驾万国而上之，非偶然也。顾谓十九棋前，英以地势，其商业宜甲天下，是则然矣。第必曰其事将恒如此，则自诿之论，殆未可信。往者，世治初进，埃及、印度、安息实为奥区，浸假而希腊、而罗马、而英伦，则过是以往，势将又迁。汽车大行，而海线之长不足孤擅。故二十棋以往，将地大气厚者为文明富庶之所钟焉。然则，雄宇内者，非震旦，即美利坚也(Yan, 1981b, pp. 507-508)。

Footnote

The prominence which Europe, and especially Great Britain, has in the markets of the world, though it has been supported by long occupation, is really due to physical causes. The great mass of dry land is in the northern hemisphere and in Europe. The climate of this region, owing also to natural causes, is milder and more equable than that of the southern hemisphere. Great Britain itself has, in the vicinity of this great area of inhabited land, a nearer communication with all parts of the civilised world, or, indeed, of that which would be civilised, than any other place. There are other circumstances, too, equally natural which aid the position which this country occupies (Smith, 1880, p. 209).

Annotation



Yan Fu's Annotations in *The Wealth of Nations* on p209

This statement analyzes the prominence of the United Kingdom in the global marketplace and emphasizes the importance of natural factors such as geography and climate to the British sea power and commercial prosperity. Yan Fu added his own views on the basis of Rogers's views, and made further analysis and reasoning on the changes in the future business landscape.

Through an in-depth analysis of the relationship between natural factors and commercial prosperity, the translator not only reveals the background of the rise

of British sea power, but also emphasizes the impact of geographical conditions on sea power and commerce. It not only deepens the understanding of the shaping of sea power, but also prompts readers to think about how new advantages and geopolitics will shape new centers of power in the context of globalization.

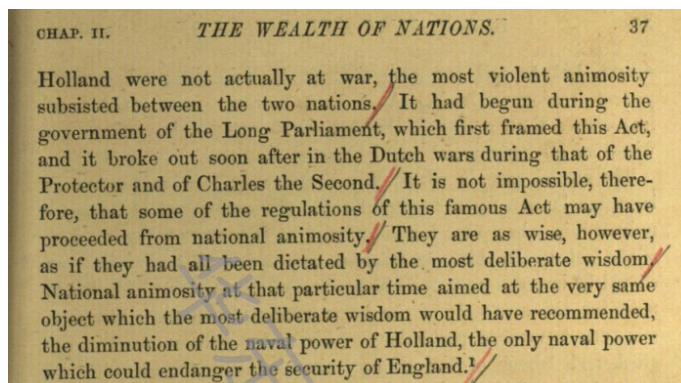
Yan Fu made five black slash annotations in the editor's note at the base of the book, dividing this paragraph into five groups according to sentences, and the narrative in the case is consistent with the commentary, which shows that he referred to and directly translated the editor Rogers' narrative when writing the case, which led to his own opinion.

Example 3

ST When the Act of Navigation was made, though England and Holland were not actually at war, the most violent animosity subsisted between the two nations. It had begun during the government of the Long Parliament, which first framed this Act and it broke out soon after in the Dutch wars during that of the Protector and of Charles the Second. It is not impossible, therefore, that some of the regulations of this famous act may have proceeded from national animosity. They are as wise, however, as if they had all been dictated by the most deliberate wisdom. National animosity at that particular time aimed at the very same object which the most deliberate wisdom would have recommended, the diminution of the **naval power** of Holland, the only naval power which could endanger the security of England (Smith, 1880, p.37).

TT 此例之立，始于戈洛慕尔护国时，所谓长议院者议行之。盖先是英荷交恶，自此例行不久而二国遂战。由今观之，例意固不必本于计利，亦非由于图强，特交恶之深而后出此。然其有益于固圉之图，虽智者之虑无以过此。当是时，能与英争海权者独荷兰耳，使其船舶降少，走海民稀，固吾英之上计也 (Yan, 1981b, p. 379)。

Annotation



Yan Fu's Annotations in *The Wealth of Nations* on p. 37.

This paragraph revolves around Anglo-Dutch relations and the promulgation of the Act of Navigation. With five black and red diagonal annotations on the manuscript, it can be seen that Yan Fu divides the meaning group by sentences, and divides this paragraph into five parts, corresponding to the five sentences in the translation, which shows the internal logic of this translation: first, from the source of the formulation of the regulations, to the intensification of contradictions after the promulgation of the regulations, which led to war, and then began to analyze the reasons for the issuance of the regulations, and then affirmed this measure, and finally revealed the real reason: the weakening of the Dutch maritime power.

4. The Reflection of Traditional Chinese Concepts of “Sea Power” in Yan Fu’s Translations

Since the late 17th century, when Emperor Kangxi reclaimed Taiwan island, the Qing Dynasty shifted its national defense focus to the interior of Northeast Asia and Central Asia. It wasn’t until the defeat in the First Opium War that enlightened individuals in China began to contemplate the construction of sea power, with the primary task being the consolidation of coastal defense (Wang & Pan, 2022). Works such as Lin Zexu’s 《四洲志》, Wei Yuan’s 《海国图志》, Xu Jishe’s 《海国图志》, and Liang Tingfang’s 《海国四说》 pioneered the modern Chinese way of “opening eyes to see the world.” However, at that time, the concept of “Sea Power” focused only on military coastal defense, without involving maritime rights, and the coastal defense concept was relatively conservative (Huang, 2015). Wei Yuan proposed ideas such as “using foreigners’ methods to control foreigners”, establishing shipyards, setting up firearms bureaus, and strengthening defense to achieve “sea defense without naval warfare”. Although these ideas were not fully realized, they were valuable as they were ahead of their time in advocating for coastal defense concepts and the building of naval military strength (Wang & Pan, 2022).

The defeat in the Second Opium War made the Qing government realize that the maritime threats could no longer be ignored. China’s backwardness in both thought and weaponry urgently needed to change, leading to a domestic surge in developing military industries and cultivating talent. Yan Fu, who grew up during this time, studied at the Fuzhou Arsenal Academy, served in the navy, and later went to the Greenwich Royal Naval College in the UK to study naval tactics, naval operations, and ship handling, excelling in both theory and practice (Pi, 2003). In the preface to his new edition of *The Crisis of the Japanese Imperial Navy*, Yan Fu described this experience, stating, “At the age of fifteen, I was selected to be a naval student, and China’s concept of the navy began from then” (Wang, 1986, p. 348).

However, China’s long-standing land-centered security concept and defense system overlooked the importance of the sea, preventing the concept of “Sea Power” from forming an independent cognitive framework. This outdated understanding led to repeated failures in coastal defense measures during the late Qing period. After the destruction of the Beiyang Fleet in the First Sino-Japanese War, the German occupation of Jiaozhou Bay, and the Russian occupation of Port Arthur and Dalian, Yan Fu, deeply understanding the current situation and the gap between Chinese and Western navies, realized that China urgently needed to focus on sea power and naval military strength. Thus, he frequently mentioned the importance of sea power in articles, translations, and letters, attempting to link China’s traditional concept of coastal defense with modern sea power theory, and reawakening the overlooked maritime consciousness in traditional Chinese culture. From the perspective of cultural memory theory, Yan Fu’s translation activities were not only knowledge transfer but also a process of reinterpreting and reconstructing Chinese traditional ideas.

In 1915, in his preface to the new edition of *The Crisis of the Japanese Imperial Navy*, Yan Fu mentioned the gap between the Chinese and Japanese navies, emphasizing the importance of the navy: “海军者，攻守之大器也” He also pointed out Japan’s significant transformation, from a once backward small country to a maritime power surpassing China, and noted the aggressive actions Japan took toward China, including the cession of Taiwan island and the collection of war indemnities following the First Sino-Japanese War. In the end, Yan Fu advised, “夫心有所危，则必号呼以告共国人，长其事者之职也” (Wang, 1986, pp. 348-349).

Moreover, in the commentary that deals with the power of Athens, Yan Fu extended the idea that “以岛民而擅海权者，未有不为天下之强国也” (Yan, 1981a, p. 467), stressing the importance of the geographical advantage of island nations in ensuring national stability and prosperity. Citing Britain and Japan as examples, Yan Fu highlighted the dual role of the sea as both a natural barrier and a resource platform. This narrative was not merely a retelling of historical events but an attempt to embed the concept of “Sea Power” as a key element for national security and economic development into China’s cultural memory, challenging the traditional coastal defense thinking that focused solely on defense.

By reconstructing historical memory, Yan Fu reinterpreted traditional Chinese ideas, aiming to shift China’s focus from land power to sea power, thereby providing theoretical support for future national strategies.

5. The Reflection of Western Sea Power Thought in Yan Fu’s Translations

During his studies in the UK, Yan Fu not only acquired naval knowledge but also studied subjects such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, and other natural sciences. His exposure to Western ideas and institutions made him acutely aware of the disparities between the East and the West in terms of thought, systems, and education. To awaken a sense of change in more Chinese people, Yan Fu read and translated several Western classic works across various fields, including economics, law, military strategy, history, and education, frequently referencing Western concepts of sea power.

Yan Fu was one of the first scholars to introduce Mahan’s theory of sea power to China (Feng & Hou, 2013). In the preface to his translation of *The Theory of French and Italian Navies*, Yan Fu briefly introduced Mahan’s sea power theory, using historical examples to explain the importance of sea power in the rise and fall of nations. He cited the cases of ancient Greece, Rome, the Netherlands, Spain, and others to emphasize sea power as a key factor in the emergence of great nations.

Beyond directly introducing authors and works, the prefaces Yan Fu wrote in his translations did not solely represent his own views but also included the perspectives of the authors or editors of the source texts. Yan Fu selectively translated these parts to support his own interpretations in the prefaces and translations.

Previous scholars, such as Liu (2018), has pointed out and explained this phenomenon. Liu identified and distinguished between prefaces that were entirely Yan Fu's contributions and those that were based on annotations from the source texts, particularly those by the editor, Rogers, which illustrated in Example 1 and Example 2 above.

Cultural memory theory posits that the construction of memory is a vital way of shaping cultural heritage and identity. Through his translations and annotations, Yan Fu introduced Western ideas about sea power into the Chinese cultural context as a form of knowledge capital, attempting to redefine the strategic significance of the sea in China's cultural memory. Yan Fu's translations were not just about disseminating Western knowledge but also about reshaping cultural memory, gradually guiding Chinese intellectuals to re-examine the position and value of the sea, thereby exploring feasible paths for future national development. Through selective translation and interpretation of historical experiences, he embedded the concept of "Sea Power" as a universal strategic idea, bridging cultural boundaries and giving it both practical significance and future potential within Chinese cultural memory.

6. Translation Texts: One Pathway for the Dissemination of the "Sea Power" Concept from the Late Qing to Early Republic

In the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, the country faced internal strife and external threats, and the issue of national survival was urgent. Sea power became a critical indicator of a nation's rise and fall, and Western theories of sea power gradually became systematized and refined. Against this backdrop, the concept of "Sea Power" was introduced into China through translated texts. However, the traditional concept of valuing land over the sea led to a delayed dissemination of the concept of sea power. Cultural memory relies on specific carriers and forms, and translated texts played a crucial role as an important medium in the construction of modern China's cultural memory. They also became one of the main paths through which the concept of sea power entered Chinese society. Among this group of translators, Yan Fu stands as a prime example of this translation process.

When introducing Mahan's theory of sea power, Yan Fu used the translation commentary to combine the complex concept of "Sea Power" with the historical context of China, assigning symbolic meaning to the term through his writing. This process can be understood as the integration of sea power into cultural memory, transforming it into an essential part of the narrative of national modernization.

Before 1903, the understanding of the concept of "Sea Power" in China mainly stemmed from the translation of overseas military theories. The concept was largely limited to the notion of "Maritime Power" and society still lacked sufficient attention to the importance of sea power (Wang, 2021).

The term “Sea Power” first appeared in a Chinese translation in 1885 《海战新义》, though it did not garner much attention (Pi, 1994). From 1896 to 1901, Yan Fu completed his translation of *The Wealth of Nations*, where the term “Sea Power” appeared nine times in the text and the prefaces. He was one of the earliest translators to introduce the concept of sea power to the Chinese public through translations. In 1900, Mahan’s *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* was translated into 《海上权力要素论》 and serialized in the *Asian-Eastern Times* for two issues. However, the translation only reached the first chapter and first section, and it was based on a Japanese translation (Pi, 1994). In 1903, Chinese students in Japan published an article titled 《海权消长始末记》) in the journal *Study Abroad Translation Compendium*, summarizing the history of sea power development in Spain, the Netherlands, and Britain. Starting from 1904, the term “sea power” became more frequently reported in influential newspapers such as *Xinwenbao*, *Shenbao*, and *Dagongbao*. This increase in frequency reflected a growing awareness and discussion of maritime rights, a phenomenon influenced by the Russo-Japanese War and the dispute between Shandong fishermen and Germans over fishing rights. As a result, the concept of sea power began to encompass the idea of “maritime rights,” thus becoming more comprehensive and nuanced, expanding beyond Mahan’s original concept of “Sea Power” (Wang, 2021).

From 1904 to 1909, Yan Fu published his translation of Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws*, in which the term “Sea Power” appeared 21 times in both the translation and preface. Compared to *The Wealth of Nations*, the concept of sea power appeared more frequently in *The Spirit of the Laws*, and Yan Fu’s discussion of the term was more in-depth. After the cessation of the *Yadong Times* in 1900, Chinese naval students in Japan continued to publish translated articles on sea power in the *Naval Journal*, also based on Japanese translations, though this was only completed up to the first chapter, second section (Pi, 1994). Although the full Chinese translation of Mahan’s seminal work on sea power was not completed before 1910, the introduction of the concept of sea power through periodicals and translated works had a significant impact on academia. The awareness of the importance of sea power deepened, and the discourse surrounding the concept grew considerably.

Cultural memory relies on specific forms and symbolic representations to be sustained, and translated texts served as the “formalized” carriers of the memory of sea power. Furthermore, translated texts are not only a medium for absorbing foreign knowledge but also play a role in reconstructing national identity. In his translations, Yan Fu not only introduced Mahan’s theoretical framework of sea power but also reinterpreted it in the context of Chinese history. For example, in his prefaces, he used historical facts about sea powers such as ancient Greece, Rome, Spain, the Netherlands, and Britain to illustrate the decisive role of sea power in the rise and fall of nations. He also highlighted the failure of China in the First Sino-Japanese War as a contemporary example, emphasizing the critical

importance of sea power for national development and survival. The symbolic construction of memory and the use of symbolic language transformed the abstract concept of sea power into a tangible concern for Chinese society.

Cultural memory is not a naturally occurring process but rather a product of memory policies driven by specific goals. The translation of the concept of sea power was not merely a cultural transmission act; it was also an intervention in memory with clear political objectives. This is reflected in Yan Fu's selective interpretation of sea power. He not only emphasized the importance of sea power for national strength but also integrated it into the Chinese context, providing a theoretical basis for contemporary political and military decisions. Through the translation of the concept of sea power, translators like Yan Fu linked this foreign concept to China's national interests, social transformation, and international competition, shaping a national narrative imbued with a sense of crisis. This narrative warned the Chinese people that if they continued to neglect sea power, China would not be able to stand on the world stage.

In summary, the translation efforts of Yan Fu and his peers made sea power a part of Chinese cultural memory. Through the dissemination of texts and ideas, the awareness of sea power gradually expanded from intellectual circles to the broader society. In this process, translated texts were not only carriers of cultural memory but also became crucial links in maintaining national survival and group identity.

7. The Construction of Cultural Memory and Social Recognition of the "Sea Power" Concept in Translations

In the late Qing and early Republic of China, the concept of sea power, as a newly emerging idea, was introduced to China through translation and gradually became a symbol of national strength and future development. As a medium for the dissemination of knowledge and a carrier for the "temporalization" of historical memory, translated texts had a profound impact on the value system and political practices of modern Chinese society. The concept of "Sea Power" was gradually shaped into a cultural memory symbol that could be recognized and accepted. Cultural memory relies not only on specific carriers but also on dissemination and cognition to form a collective consensus. Yan Fu, through his writings, embedded the concept of "Sea Power" into China's historical narrative and future vision. He not only brought this Western strategic thought into China but also constructed a new cognitive framework for Chinese society.

The process of constructing cultural memory is, in fact, a gradual transformation in social cognition. Through translated texts, the concept of "Sea Power" shifted from a theoretical notion to an actual force that influenced Chinese societal cognition. In the late Qing and early Republic, Chinese society had a relatively weak understanding of the importance of the sea, as the traditional notion of "valuing land over the sea" was deeply ingrained. Therefore, to change this traditional

view, in addition to emphasizing the importance of sea power for national prosperity in his translations, Yan Fu also published articles such as 《论世变之亟》《原强》《原败》《拟上皇帝书》《救亡决论》《一千九百五年寰瀛大事总述》《驳英〈太晤士报〉论德据胶澳事》, published in newspapers such as *Guowenbao*, *Zhibao*, and *Waijiaobao*. These articles criticized contemporary issues and served as a wake-up call to the public. Yan Fu's writings resonated not only among the intellectual elite but also gradually impacted broader social groups. Through continuous dissemination, the concept of sea power was seen as a necessary means for China to escape its decline and resist foreign invasion, becoming an important component of a new cultural memory.

The recognition of the concept of sea power expanded from individual cognition to collective cognition. The construction of cultural memory required its extension from academia to broader social groups. After recognizing the importance of sea power, Yan Fu, in correspondence with friends who shared similar educational backgrounds, discussed ocean-related issues. Later, through translated works and articles in newspapers, he spread the concept of sea power from the intellectual elite to all levels of society, and through the dissemination of policies and the education system, it gradually became a shared cognition within Chinese society. With the widespread circulation of issues related to sea power, the concept of sea power gradually evolved from a theoretical idea to a social recognition, influencing China's education system, policy-making, and public discourse during the late Qing and early Republic.

The ultimate goal of constructing cultural memory is to maintain collective identity and societal continuity. The spread and evolution of the concept of sea power in the early 20th century provided a new foundation for the construction of national identity in Chinese society. This memory was not only symbolic but also became normalized and institutionalized through education, politics, and cultural activities. For example, to commemorate the founding of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy on April 23, 1949, April 23 was designated as Navy Day; naval academies and maritime universities were established, playing important roles in the construction of a maritime strong nation; in 2023, Xinhua News Agency produced a documentary titled *Toward the Deep Blue*, which showcased the harmonious coexistence of the Chinese people and the sea, telling stories about caring for, understanding, and strategizing the seas. This normalized construction of memory has made sea power a core component of the narrative of national modernization.

As an important carrier of cultural memory, written texts not only spread the concept of sea power but also profoundly impacted the social cognition of the late Qing and early Republic. The construction of cultural memory made sea power one of the key cognitive frameworks in China's transition from tradition to modernity. Through the deep integration of text and memory, the dissemination of the concept of sea power in modern China was not only a process of knowledge transmission but also a reconstruction of social identity and the reshaping of na-

tional destiny. While Western sea power is based on the three elements of naval power, merchant fleets, and colonies, China's sea power aims to reevaluate the world, ensure national security, and prevent foreign invasion. This is fundamentally different from the Western colonial empires of Mahan's era that sought to expand maritime hegemony. With the joint efforts of the people, China has been able to realize its own sea power through the practice of the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road and the development of the People's Navy, striving to protect national interests, engage in friendly cooperation with other nations, and achieve common prosperity (Wang & Pan, 2022).

8. Conclusion

Combined with the history of concepts and the theory of cultural memory, the research meticulously organizes and analyzes the texts, conducting an in-depth investigation of the translation and interpretation of the concept of "Sea Power" in Yan Fu's translated works, focusing on its introduction, dissemination, and the construction of its cultural memory in modern China.

Firstly, by analyzing translation examples and integrating the theory of conceptual history, the study reveals that Yan Fu's translation of the concept of "Sea Power" has multiple layers of meaning. When translating classic works such as *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Spirit of the Laws*, Yan Fu provided deep interpretations and explications of the concept of "Sea Power". He did not only translate the literal meaning but also supplemented the historical background, theoretical foundation, and practical significance of sea power through his commentary translation. This translation strategy endowed the concept of "Sea Power" with a multi-layered meaning in the Chinese context: on one hand, it represented the combination of national sovereignty and maritime control; on the other hand, it was imbued with a strategic significance of saving the nation in times of crisis and achieving national rejuvenation. This translation method, grounded in practical concerns, helped "Sea Power" become an important component of the ideological transformation in late Qing and early Republic.

Secondly, through the analysis of the text and cultural memory theory, the study finds that Yan Fu's translation was not merely a mechanical transference of Western sea power theory but a reconstruction and reformation of China's traditional cultural memory. In his commentary notes, Yan Fu frequently referenced historical examples, such as ancient Greece, Rome, and the Napoleonic Wars, and through a comparative analysis of historical experiences, he made the Chinese society's understanding of the importance of sea power more persuasive. Moreover, Yan Fu situated "Sea Power" within the grand narrative of China's modernization, providing theoretical support for the social transformation of the late Qing and early Republic. This process of constructing cultural memory through translation shows that the dissemination of the "Sea Power" concept was not only an intellectual import but also a reconfiguration of collective identity and historical mission.

Finally, the translated texts facilitated the shift of the “Sea Power” concept from traditional notions to modern consciousness, transitioning from a land-centric worldview to a modern maritime strategic awareness. In the socio-political context of late Qing and early Republic, translated works and newspapers were core channels for the spread of the “Sea Power” concept. Translation not only enabled the transmission of knowledge but also, to some extent, shaped the contextual expression of new knowledge, injecting fresh ideological resources into Chinese society. Yan Fu, with his eloquent and precise translations and profound commentary notes, made the intellectual and decision-making elites of late Qing and early Republican China recognize the crucial role of sea power in national security, economic development, and global competition, promoting the top-down acceptance and assimilation of the “Sea Power” concept within Chinese society. This shift in thought contributed to the transformation of China’s maritime defense policy from passive defense to active engagement, marking the emergence of modern maritime strategic consciousness.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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