

Taking Advantage of the Dollar: A Case Study of Platitude Press in the Cold War Context, 1950–1954

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Abstract

During the Cold War, Hong Kong occupied a pivotal role as a bridge between the Free World and the Communist World, making it crucial for the United States (U.S.) to counter the spread of communist ideologies. Literary translation emerged as a significant avenue for advancing U.S. foreign-policy objectives by winning over the hearts and minds of audiences worldwide. Consequently, the prevalence of U.S.-commissioned literary translations in Hong Kong became a crucial aspect of Cold War dynamics. Existing scholarly research has primarily focused on the financial support provided by the U.S. to intellectuals involved in literary translations, while overlooking the nuanced perspectives and attitudes of these intellectuals toward such funding. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the attitudes and reactions of local intellectuals towards financial assistance from the U.S., using Platitude Press (*Renren chubanshe* 人人出版社) as a case study. It argues that the relationship between the U.S. and local intellectuals during the Cold War era was not one-sided but rather interactive, leading to a more complex and multifaceted history of Cold War activities in Hong Kong.

Keywords

literary translation, the U.S.-commissioned translation, Hong Kong,
the Cold War, Platitude Press

1. Introduction

As is widely known, the Cold War was characterized by the ideological confrontation between the Free World, led by the U.S., and the Communist World, spearheaded by the Soviet Union. Unlike conventional warfare involving military conflicts, the Cold War primarily strived to win over soul and mind and seek recognition from other countries (Wang 2015b, 35). In addition to political, economic, and military competition, cultural propaganda played a pivotal role in shaping the course of the Cold War. That explains why scholarly attention has shifted towards exploring the Cultural Cold War as a crucial aspect of this historical period since the 1990s.¹

Hong Kong's significance in the context of the Cultural Cold War has attracted scholarly attention, with American financial support for literary translation in the 1950s emerging as a contentious topic. While existing scholarship acknowledges the U.S. role in shaping Hong Kong's literary landscape (Li 2013; Wang 2015b; Shan 2018), it often overlooks the subjective viewpoints of the intellectuals actively involved in literary production. This paper endeavors to delve into the attitudes of intellectuals towards American assistance, with the literary translation activities of Platitude Press as a case in point. Platitude Press was established in 1950 by Xu Guansan 許冠三, a historian who came to Hong Kong after the establishment of new China. One of the objectives of this publishing house was to nurture a new generation of writers (Huang 1953), thereby positioning the translation of foreign literature as a pedagogical instrument. Despite scholarly acknowledgement of the Platitude Press's translation activities receiving financial backing from the U.S., the perspectives of the press's employees have been largely disregarded. To the employees within the publishing house, the financial assistance from the U.S. appeared to be a mere exchange of benefits. This is where my article enters the debate. As mentioned, there remains a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding the attitudes and responses of intellectuals who were beneficiaries of this U.S. aid. In this way, the Cultural Cold War history in Hong Kong records only the important role played by the U.S. in shaping the literary landscape, which inadvertently overshadows the subjectivity of intellectuals who received and used the U.S. funds, leaving them a subject image in the Hong Kong literary history. To address this research gap, this paper centers its investigation on the attitudes and reactions of intellectuals towards the U.S. assistance.

The case study focuses on the literary translation activities of Platitude Press. The present scholarship considers the press as the beneficiary of the United States Information Agency (USIA). Through meticulous archival examination, the study finds that Platitude Press was not the key publishing house to which USIA hoped to lend a hand. Instead, the connection between the two parties was established through the publishing house's proactive approach. Leveraging USIA's urgent need to produce anti-communist propaganda materials, Platitude Press took the initiative and secured funding from USIA, which in turn facilitated its own publication plans. Drawing upon official records from the USIA, the present research examines active collaboration between intellectuals and USIA. By shedding light on the agency and motivations of intellectuals in their engagement with USIA, this study aims to not only complement the literary history of the 1950s Hong Kong but also complicate the prevailing perception of U.S.-aided cultural activities in the Cold War context.

2. Translation in History from Below

Translation history provides an effective approach to contextualizing the literary translations undertaken by Platitude Press within the context of the Cold War in Hong Kong. Rundle (2014) claims that he sees "translation both as a historical object in its own right and as an approach to interpreting other historical subjects, on the understanding that the introduction of this latter approach (without excluding the former) is a necessary step towards developing a genuinely interdisciplinary discourse on translation history" (7). Drawing on Rundle's understanding of translation and history, this article sees literary translation as a gateway to exploring a relatively underexplored chapter in the Cultural Cold War in the 1950s Hong Kong.

The present scholarship builds connections between literary translation and the Cold War context in Hong Kong, which has been limited to the history of prominent figures, with an emphasis on the dominant role of the U.S. in influencing intellectuals. Li's (2013) article discusses Kuang Wenmei's translations of American literature, highlighting how her adaptations aimed to portray a favourable image of the U.S. In Shan's (2018) monograph titled *Translation and Contexts*, two chapters are devoted to literary translations sponsored by USIA, with one delineating the literary translation activities initiated by *Jinri shijie chubanshe* 今日世界出版社 (World Today Press) and the other examining Eileen Chang's translations of American literature under

the financial support of USIA. Wang's (2015b) doctoral thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of USIA's impact on literary translations in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Despite their efforts to reveal the tension between the U.S. and local intellectuals, these studies foreground the role of USIA while neglecting the contributions of the intellectuals engaged in literary translations with the agency's assistance. As a vital sector of the Cultural Cold War in Hong Kong, this group of intellectuals played a crucial role in producing propaganda materials that aligned with U.S. ideology, portraying a positive image of the U.S. and a malicious image of communism. Despite their importance, the intellectuals' subjectivity, particularly their attitudes towards U.S. financial assistance, has barely received scholarly attention. This can be attributed to several reasons. Firstly, the evidence of intellectuals involved in various aspects of literary production in the 1950s Hong Kong is scarce in literary history records. Those who collaborated with USIA or other information institutions often hesitated to acknowledge their association with the U.S., which resulted in limited documentation of their involvement. Moreover, many of these intellectuals devoted themselves to literature only after leaving Hong Kong, which rendered them less prominent figures in the literary history of the period. As a consequence, their literary activities have received insufficient attention from academia due to the dearth of primary sources. Only famous literati with a multitude of primary sources, for example, Eileen Chang, are likely to gain favor from researchers (Chen 2004). However, considering their contributions to literary translations against the background of the Cultural Cold War in the 1950s Hong Kong, it is still valuable to probe into these lesser-known intellectuals.

In historical studies, history from below is an approach to offer "an alternative perspective to what might be termed as 'top person's history'" (Sharpe 2001, 26) and "major historical events" (Cuevas 2022, 21). Such histories explore "the historical experiences of those men and women whose existence is so often ignored, taken for granted, or mentioned in passing in mainstream history" (21). Writing "history from below" has become increasingly popular among historians,² and translation studies scholars are no exception. In Ye's (2022) article, ordinary translators of four commercial literary magazines by the China Book Company are examined to complement the selective translation historiography prevalent in current translation history. The selectiveness manifests as a focus on iconic translators and casts aside of the ordinary. A similar

pattern is observed in the history of literary translations in Hong Kong within the context of the Cold War. Therefore, “history from below” provides this paper with an effective theoretical tool to investigate the overlooked agents involved in literary translations during this unique historical setting, thereby shedding new light on the diverse actors and their contributions in shaping the 1950s Hong Kong literary landscape.

3. The Prevalence of U.S.-Aided Literary Translation in the 1950s Hong Kong

The establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 spurred the U.S. to intensify its efforts to combat and suppress communism, as the new communist regime on the global stage signaled an increase in communist influence. In this context, Hong Kong emerged as an extended battlefield of the two forces during the Cold War. The strategic significance of Hong Kong for the U.S. stemmed from multiple factors. Firstly, the U.S. saw colonies as a potential tool of confronting the penetration of worldwide communism (Mark 2004, 31–32), which explains why Hong Kong, a British colony, attracted the attention of the U.S. Additionally, Hong Kong’s geopolitical proximity to the mainland China, its considerable population of Chinese intellectuals, and its well-established and convenient British infrastructure made it an ideal platform for the U.S. to conduct its propaganda activities (Tucker 1994, 198). Thus, Hong Kong played a crucial role in the production and dissemination of propaganda materials, as evidenced by the fact that all United States Information Service³ (USIS) posts in Southeast Asia were required to seek clearance from the Consulate General in Hong Kong before committing to publication agreements with local publishers (“IIA: Information Center Service: Small Book Translation Program” in East Asia and Pacific Country Files [EAPCF]).

Simultaneously, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also had vested interests in Hong Kong. Firstly, Hong Kong provided a crucial space for gathering information, not only for the U.S. but also for the CCP. Lacking a comprehensive international network, the CCP heavily relied on Hong Kong to corroborate information collected from other sources (Tsang 1988, 134). Secondly, the CCP viewed Hong Kong as a potential tool to exacerbate the Anglo-American “contradictions.” In January 1950, the British government accorded diplomatic recognition to Beijing, hoping to maintain its economic benefits in China and its power status in

the international stage, which led to contradictions between the British government and the U.S. The newly found PRC was willing to allow Hong Kong to be held by the British. In this way, the PRC was able to hold the initiative and make use of the Anglo-American contradictions (Mark 2004, 12–30). Thirdly, owing to the trade embargo imposed by the U.S. on China since the onset of the Cold War, normal trade exchanges between the two countries were disrupted. However, U.S. goods intended for China often found their way through Hong Kong (Zhang 2001, 37), thus rendering the city economically valuable for the CCP.

The interplay between the two forces made Hong Kong a pivotal and complex arena during the Cold War. However, the confrontation between Communist China and the U.S. posed a significant threat for the British government, as it jeopardized the stability of Hong Kong society, which was a paramount concern of the Hong Kong government.⁴ Therefore, in this unattributed battle, British Hong Kong assumed the role of arbitrator, seeking to control and mitigate potential risks. A critical aspect of its responsibility was regulating seditious publications produced by both China and the U.S. The outcomes of the government's efforts to control communist publications were exemplified by the March First incident, which has received special attention from academia (Zheng, et al. 2010). On 1 March 1952, the Southern Bureau of the CCP dispatched a relief mission to Hong Kong to visit those afflicted by the fire in Kowloon. However, the Hong Kong government barred the mission from entering Hong Kong. Subsequently, on 4 March 1952, the *People's Daily* published a brief review publicly condemning the British Hong Kong government, and *Ta Kung Pao* reposted the review the following day. The authorities considered *Ta Kung Pao*'s reposting seditious and subversive. *Ta Kung Pao* faced a six-month suspension of publication as a consequence of its action (Wong 2020, 88–89).

Reading through the official documents of USIA, it became evident that the British Hong Kong government did not tolerate seditious propaganda materials from the U.S., despite its alliance with that country. In fact, British Hong Kong closely monitored all publications produced by USIS. A notable incident occurred on 24 March 1953, when a book retailer was arrested by the Hong Kong police for selling and disseminating USIS publications that contained seditious content ("Objection by Hong Kong Government to Distributions of USIS Pamphlet," in EAPCF). Additionally, further evidence of the government's discontent with USIS activities arose

from the printing and dissemination of a labor pamphlet issued on 1 May 1953, which elicited dissatisfaction from the authorities:

The Political Adviser expressed the Government's view that the agreed role of USIS is "dissemination, by overt means, of materials on American policies and the American way of life." He implied that unattributed and anti-Communist activities did not fall within this framework. He admitted that he had been informed by the Consulate General during the past several years of a large number of USIS activities which were and are unattributed and strongly anti-Communist. He stated that he himself will take as liberal a view as he can and will approve production of anti-Communist materials on the ground that "anti-Communism" is an aspect of American (as well as British) policy. However, he warned that he would have to object to any publication whose anti-Communist message was so strong that it might jeopardize the peace and order of the [c]olony. ("Relations between Consulate General and Hong Kong Government with Respect to USIS Operations," in EAPCF)

The quotation above reaffirms that the primary objective of the British government in Hong Kong was to ensure the stability of Hong Kong society. The government's reaction to the labor pamphlet, along with the arrest of the bookstore, highlight the significance attached to monitoring and regulating the dissemination of potentially destabilizing materials. This cautionary response served as a clear warning that prompted the British Hong Kong to be vigilant in tracing all publications released by USIS.

Thus far, the evidence presented clearly indicates that the British Hong Kong government took significant measures to suppress any seditious publications within the territory to maintain social stability. Against this backdrop, literature emerged as a comparatively implicit form of propaganda. Unlike CCP publications,⁵ US-aided literary works were prevalent. This fact has been observed and acknowledged not only by various scholars but also by USIS itself.⁶ An internal file of USIS that examined the publishing industry in Hong Kong recorded the following:

Five years ago[,] there was no publishing industry in Hong Kong of any importance.... In those days, men and women who had formed a reading habit and in the meantime did not understand English had to get their books from the China mainland.

This situation urgently demanded the establishment of a free publishing enterprise to counter the Chinese Communist domination of the market. Yet the local book market did not really offer enough sustenance for such a business. This explains why nine out of ten free publishers who set up shop later on had to subsist largely on foreign, mostly American, financial support. (“The Publishing Business in Hong Kong,” in *Classified General Records of USIS [CGR USIS]*)

In an effort to disseminate U.S. ideology and counter communism in Hong Kong, USIS extended substantial backing to the publishing sector, encompassing intellectuals, publishers, printing companies, and other related domains. Financial support was provided generously by the USIS to facilitate these endeavors. Even though the U.S.-aided literary translations were prevalent in the 1950s Hong Kong, in the eyes of those who received financial support, they might not perceive the American assistance as being a gold mine. The following sections delve into the intellectuals’ attitudes toward the U.S. funding, with the Platitude Press as a case in point.

4. Financial Support or “Benefits Exchange”: A Perspective from the Platitude Press

As mentioned above, the present scholarship considers the U.S. funding as a shaping force of the translation landscape in the 1950s Hong Kong. What is surprising is that the employees of Platitude Press regarded the USIS financial support as a form of “benefits exchange” (Zhao 2018, 250), which presents a different narrative that deviates from the conventional understanding of the literary translation activities in this historical setting. This is where this paper enters the debate. It is widely accepted by academics that Platitude Press received economic assistance from the U.S. Nonetheless, the method by which this financing was acquired has not been clearly discussed in any detail, which is key to revealing the publisher’s attitudes and reactions towards the U.S. support. To unravel this riddle, it is necessary to first depict the historical settings that gave birth to Platitude Press. The publishing house was founded in 1950 by Xu Guansan, a historian, with the original intention of providing a platform to publish his scholarly works, although his historical research was not popular among ordinary readers in Hong Kong (Murong 2005, 57–59). Therefore, at an early stage, he decided to publish literary works, which

was probably a better strategy to attract local readership (58). In 1952, Xu invited Huang Sicheng 黃思騁 and Li Kuang 力匡, both of which were famous writers at that moment, to establish *Renren wenxue* 人人文學 (*Everyman's Literature*), the flagship literary journal of Platitude Press. However, Platitude Press did not gain profits from literature; instead, the publishing house was soon confronted by financial difficulties.

At the beginning of the 1950s, Hong Kong was not a suitable platform for the development of serious literature due to the weakened economy. The founding of the PRC triggered a significant influx of Chinese refugees, including a substantial number of intellectuals seeking greater freedom and improved living conditions in Hong Kong (Wong 2020, 18). However, their expectations were thwarted as the sudden surge of job-seeking refugees resulted in heightened unemployment rates. In this challenging economic climate, many intellectuals had to collaborate with U.S. information institutions, producing anti-communist materials as a means of securing their livelihood. Platitude Press was among the entities facing this situation. A detailed archival investigation reveals that the press received substantial financial assistance through its cooperation with USIS. USIS entrusted six translated books to Platitude Press for printing and publication, through which the press made a profit of US\$1,267.74 dollars, approximately HK\$7,000 dollars at the time ("Department of State Report on Book Translation Program (ICS)," in EAPCF).

One former employee of the publishing house recollected their relation with USIS thusly:

那時美國新聞處提供稿件、版權、供我們出版。賣得的利益，歸出版社所有，賣不好，他們可以包銷……出版社經濟當時十分拮据，為了生存，這樣一種商業交易，未嘗不可接受。

USIS provided the manuscript and copyright for us to publish their books. The sales profits remain our property. If the sales are not satisfactory, USIS would be responsible for selling the printed volumes.... The publishing house was suffering from the financial strain, so it was understandable to accept the benefits exchange with USIS to maintain the operation.⁷ (Zhao 2018, 250)

The provided citation serves as evidence of the press's acceptance of USIS funding and the manifestation of US ideology (Wang 1995, 79), but the "benefits exchange" in the eyes of the intellectual was ignored by scholars. A thorough examination of official USIS documents reveals that Platitude

Press did not hold significant importance as a publishing house in the eyes of USIS. The investigation into Hong Kong's publishing industry revealed that USIS regarded *Ziyou chubanshe* 自由出版社 (Freedom Press), *Youlian chubanshe* 友聯出版社 (Union Press), *Chuang ken chubanshe* 創墾出版社 (Pioneer Press), and *Yazhou chubanshe* 亞洲出版社 (Asia Press) as the crucial publishers ("The Publishing Business in Hong Kong," in CGR USIS). In other words, USIS did not see Platitute Press as a key partner. The reason behind Platitute Press's ability to establish a close relationship with USIS can be attributed to the manager's resourcefulness.

Unlike World Today Press, the official publishing house of USIS, other local publishing companies faced financial constraints in sustaining their operations. As a result, these companies sought opportunities for cooperation with USIS in hopes of obtaining the necessary funding. The manager of Platitute Press, Alex Sun, displayed adeptness in taking the initiative and actively seeking opportunities to work with USIS. The USIS official documents recorded Alex Sun's active approach to engaging with USIS:

Alex Sun of Platitute Press came in today and told Dick McCarthy about a scheme he has in operation which seems to me to have a great deal of merit.

He has started a correspondence school in conjunction with New Asia College assistance, which will sell [c]ollege courses to [o]verseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. He says he and his father can get the scheme registered in Taiwan, and believes that he has the resources to carry through. ("Correspondence between Delmer Brown and Arthur W. Hummel," in CGR USIS)

Although Public Affair Officer Arthur Hummel did not believe that the idea could be "carried out by Alex as well as it should be" (Correspondence between Delmer Brown and Arthur W. Hummel," in CGR USIS), the above extract underscores Alex Sun's unwavering commitment to seizing every opportunity to engage with USIS.

Contrary to the prevailing impression of U.S. funding shown in the present scholarship, the case of Platitute Press provides a different insight, demonstrating the initiative of intellectuals involved. As evidenced in the available publications, Platitute Press actively pursued the publication of both original works by Hong Kong writers and translations of foreign literature. The latter aspect proved to be instrumental in the publishing

house's efforts to establish connections with USIS. In the following sections, the article will delve deeper into how Platitude Press strategically utilized its collaboration with USIS to effectively execute its publication plan of translating foreign literature.

5. Taking Advantage of USIS Change in Publication Focus and Strategies

Since the First World War, the U.S. government has incessantly organized propaganda agencies, laying the groundwork for the tradition of cultural propaganda as a diplomatic strategy (Wang 2015b, 35–41). The inauguration of Eisenhower marked a significant advancement in U.S. psychological warfare and propaganda efforts, with a focus on conveying a full and fair image of the U.S. (Barhisel 2015, 125). In line with the national ideology, USIS believed that publication and wide distribution of books could effectively cultivate latent animosity against Chinese communism among the Chinese population (“Proposed Chinese Pocket Book Project,” in EAPCF). As such, the Book Translation Program, designed to publish translated books reflecting and disseminating U.S. values to overseas Chinese readers, was an important vector of USIS in Hong Kong. Although the massive production of literary translations via this program has been widely explored by scholars (Li 2013), the translation of U.S. literature did not initially receive prominence in it (Barhisel 2015, 120). This was due to the perception that literature was regarded as a form of soft power during psychological warfare (Wang 2015b, 14–23), implying that it might be less effective in directly conveying an anti-communist spirit compared to other forms of political propaganda materials, such as pamphlets with overtly anti-communist content. Furthermore, USIS faced “special translation difficulties for the Chinese language” (“Small Book Translation Program,” in EAPCF), which contributed to their reservations regarding this aspect of the Book Translation Program.

USIS selected texts for translation with circumspection, focusing on whether these translations were in conformity with the U.S. objectives. According to the publication schedule provided by USIS Hong Kong, a total of forty-five books had been translated as of the first half of 1952. Literary works were relatively scarce among these translations. Instead, a predominant emphasis was placed on books that introduced U.S. values and aimed to disillusion readers regarding communism.⁸ However, USIS adopted a more accommodating approach towards the translation of

U.S. literature at a later stage. This change in policy followed a request made by Hsu Yu 徐訏, an influential Hong Kong novelist, who sought permission to publish a Chinese translation of an American book. The USIS files recorded Hsu Yu's request:

Hsu Yu, a popular Hong Kong writer and proprietor of the Pioneer Press, has requested this post to obtain on his behalf the right to publish a Chinese translation of *I Led Three Lives* by Herbert A. Philbrick, published by McGraw-Hill. While this particular book lacks any special interest for our own translation program, any request for the Chinese rights to an American book is so unusual that we believe such a phenomenon should be encouraged. The translation will probably be published in any event, whether the publisher secures the language rights or not, since publishers here habitually ignore copyright formalities.

Since it would not be appropriate for USIS to take any legal action to encourage adherence to copyright, the best contribution we can make is to obtain the legal rights for private publishers on books which do not run counter to our objectives and to encourage them to take legal action when cases of infringement do occur. ("IIA: ICS: Book Translation Program," in EAPCF)

Triggered by the local publishers' ignorance of copyright formalities, USIS decided to accommodate any request regarding the translation of U.S. books. In this way, the publication plan of Platitude Press and the USIS strategy converged and led to a shared objective with Platitude Press, which planned to produce translations of foreign literature.

As mentioned earlier in this article, the literary landscape of the 1950s Hong Kong offered limited space for serious literature. This is because the depressed economy offered little chance for intellectuals to concentrate on serious literary pursuits, as such endeavors were less financially rewarding compared to commercial literature (Liu 1969, 204). Similarly, the translation of foreign literature was not perceived as a lucrative business, contributing to the scarcity of literary translations during this period.⁹ Notwithstanding the special milieu, a small number of intellectuals recognized the value of translation and its potential significance:

翻譯可以說是訓練思想最好的工具……可以從英國教育制度中看出來。在英國大學裏，最難，同時也最受人尊重的課程是古典（即希臘拉丁文）課程。從英國中學起，拉丁文就是最主要的一門功課，而讀拉丁

文除了讀文法以外，就是把英文譯成拉丁，再把拉丁譯成英文。拉丁是最準確的語言之一，經過這種呆板的訓練之後，一個學生在尋找適當的字眼時，他的語言文字表達能力和思想自然而然會準確起來。

Translation is the best tool to train one's mind...which can be found within the British education system. In British universities, the most respectable and the most difficult course was the classics, that is, Greek and Latin. In Britain, Latin is a main course in the school curriculum from the middle school stage. Except for the grammar, this course requires to translate between English and Latin. After this translation training, the accuracy of Latin will equip the student with the ability to find the appropriate word, and thereupon his expression skills will be precise naturally. (W. Tang 1952, 22)

Acknowledging the value of translation, intellectuals assigned various functions to the act of translating. Some viewed translation as a means of enhancing the bilingual abilities of the populace. Given the frequent use of both Chinese and English in Hong Kong, proficiency in translating between the two languages became a prerequisite for securing decent employment opportunities. A periodical targeted at young students, *Qingnian wen you* 青年文友 (A friend of the young), attached great importance to the practical utility of translation. In pursuit of this objective, the periodical established a column entitled "A Shortcut to English," wherein short English essays were published for the readers to practice their translation skills. In other words, the periodical treated translation as a method of learning or improving one's English proficiency (Editorial Board 1952, 1).

There were also literati who attributed the function of fostering Chinese writing skills to translation. The *Zhongguo xuesheng zhoubao* 中國學生周報 (*Chinese Student Weekly*), a newspaper targeting young readers in Hong Kong, held several translation competitions to "arouse interest in translation and improve the writing skills" (3). In addition, the newspaper established a dedicated column for publishing translations of foreign literature, aiming to "provide guidance and reference for the readers to learn writing skills" (3). The employees of Platitude Press shared a similar vision of translation's role. This was intertwined with their aim to cultivate more young writers.¹⁰ They believed that literary translation was an effective tool for introducing advanced writing skills to young readers. By emulating the syntax, lexicon, and structures of the translated articles, readers could gain valuable insights into the intricacies of writing and further develop their own writing abilities (Huang 1953).

As evident from the above discussion, Platitude Press's intention of translating foreign literature perfectly matched the widening scope of USIS's translation scheme. The shared interests provided Platitude Press with a favorable opportunity to collaborate with USIS for the publication of translations. Furthermore, the situation became even more advantageous as USIS broadened its financing channels to address distribution challenges it encountered:

Two facts stand in the way between the book which could influence public opinion and their potential audience. They are:

1. The absence of Chinese publishers with initiative and imagination enough to take the financial risks involved in translating or in printing original manuscripts;
2. The complete lack of efficient distribution channels to bridge the gap between the publisher and the reader.

Chinese publishers in Hong Kong will not take a chance; they must have an assured profit before they undertake the publication of a book. This means that publishing in this city is limited to such sure-fire items as popular novels, reprints of classics and occasional translations of foreign books which have enjoyed previous widespread popularity or notoriety. ("Proposed Chinese Pocket Book Project," in EAPCF)

The citation above highlights USIS's concern about building a direct connection between their translated books and potential readers. To address this challenge, Public Affair Officer Richard M. McCarthy proposed two solutions: first, subsidizing the printing of the book by purchasing copies for distribution outside Hong Kong; second, giving financial aid in the publication by private firms of translations of American books ("Proposed Chinese Pocket Book Project," in EAPCF).

Thus far, this article has demonstrated the crucial role of literary translation in the publication plans of Platitude Press as well as the advantages that USIS provided to Hong Kong publishers. The ensuing discussion will showcase how Platitude Press successfully advanced its publication plan, particularly with regard to translations of foreign literature, by effectively utilizing the two proposed solutions to reach potential readers.

6. Catering to the Needs of the Book Translation Program: Translation of American Literature

The present scholarship tends to focus on USIS-commissioned translations, shedding light on the prominence of USIS's influence over intellectuals. However, Platitude Press's collaboration with USIS in the printing and publishing of translated works is a different case. Contrary to the conventional notion, the example of Platitude Press offers a perspective on USIS's support for intellectuals' translation activities against the backdrop of the Cultural Cold War in Hong Kong.

Platitude Press was intricately connected to the USIS Book Translation Program in Hong Kong. According to official documents, the press actively printed and published books for this program. USIS had a strategic plan to publish two series of publications in Hong Kong: the "Russian Problem Series" and "American Problems Series,"¹¹ aligning with the U.S. tenet of promoting anti-communism and portraying a positive image of the U.S. Initially, Platitude Press encountered challenges in executing its own publication plan. However, the situation changed when the USIS Book Translation Program opened its doors to any translation of U.S. books after Hsu Yu's successful application. Subsequently, following the example set by the Pioneer Press, Platitude Press approached USIS the following year with a translation proposal.¹² In 1953, USIS received a translation initiative plan from Platitude Press, wherein the press applied for the copyright of two collections of American short stories,¹³ namely *The Open Boat* and *The Rose* ("Quarterly Report: Distribution of Books and Other materials," in CGR USIS). USIS not only granted the copyright for translation but also bought five thousand copies of the two translations, showing financial support for the press.

However, these two collections of translated short stories were not only deliberately catering to the USIS objective; they also fulfilled the interests of Platitude Press. In terms of content and ideology, these two collections were less politically oriented compared to the "Russian Problems Series" and "American Problems Series," which were specifically entrusted to the press by USIS. Each translated article was accompanied by an introduction that emphasized the literary contributions of the authors, as well as the aesthetic value and literary techniques of these short novels. Additionally, Platitude Press also diverged from USIS in its selection of writers. Literary titles favored by USIS were almost evenly distributed between older American classics and contemporary titles that

were middlebrow best sellers of regionalist interest or safely realist, but Ernest Hemingway was not acceptable, as his works were presumably not hostile enough towards communism (Barnhisel 2015, 119). However, Platitude Press made a deliberate choice to include Hemingway's short story "The Killer" in *The Rose*, providing a translator's note that outlined his life and writing style. In doing so, Platitude Press successfully achieved its intention of introducing foreign literature and advanced writing skills to its readership, further demonstrating the press's active approach in collaboration with USIS.

Aside from its active approach, Platitude Press also received USIS financial support for translating and publishing works, aligning its objectives with a pedagogical purpose. One such instance was USIS's sponsorship of the translation and publication of Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*, wherein the translation fee was covered and seven thousand and five hundred copies purchased ("Book Translation Program (ICD)," in CGR USIS). USIS's choice of Willa Cather was driven by the U.S.'s ambition to show its national character and its distinctiveness from European life. The Frontier thesis formulated by American historian Frederick J. Turner (2015) in 1893 emphasized the history of the colonization of the Great West as a defining aspect of American history (10). As U.S. society progressed, it sought to distinguish itself from European traditions. *O Pioneers!* exemplified an important American character—the frontier (Barnhisel 2015, 122), and depicted how Americans adapted to their new environment, deviating from old traditions. This served the U.S. intention to highlight the uniqueness of American literature and its departure from Anglo-European tradition well (119). However, the U.S. interpretation of Willa Cather was incongruous with the pedagogical purpose of Platitude Press. To mitigate the U.S. ideological intention, the publisher added a preface to the translation, downplaying the frontier character and emphasizing Cather's (1953) literary skills and her wise selection and use of language (2). This allowed Platitude Press to instill its own literary taste and perspective in Hong Kong readers.

7. Translation of Foreign Literature in *Everyman's Literature*

As revealed above, Platitude Press actively sought to establish a business relationship with USIA Hong Kong to secure funding for its publication plans. This demonstrates the press's focus on sales, a crucial factor influencing the publishing house's profitability. However, the Cold War

context influenced the overseas sales of publications from Platitude Press. During this special period, transporting publications from Hong Kong to the mainland China became impractical.¹⁴ Therefore, the press relied heavily on the overseas market, which could be accessible through the USIS worldwide network of branches.¹⁵ *Everyman's Literature*, the only literary periodical published by Platitude Press, seized the chance again. A thorough examination of the relevant archives reveals that USIS categorized *Everyman's Literature* as “translation from other languages, or locally written material produced without USIE (The United States International Information and Educational Exchange Program) assistance, but further USIE objectives” (“Book Translation Program (ICD),” in CGR USIS), which means that USIS did not intend to sponsor this periodical initially. However, Platitude Press managed to attract USIS's attention. To secure USIS assistance on sales of *Everyman's Literature*, Platitude Press adopted two approaches. As the first approach, the periodical published numerous politically oriented articles, prominently featuring anti-communist themes, especially in the first few issues. One such column titled “Introduction and Commentary on Books and Periodicals” aimed to promote and introduce scholarly monographs that vehemently criticized socialism and communism. An illustrative example of this approach is the introduction of Friderich A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*:

依據海亦克教授的分析，社會主義所懸的目標根本是一個烏托邦，一個「假想的天堂」……只要依照社會主義所堅持的路線做去，一切生產手段收歸國有，一切生產活動都經國家計劃，不管是哪一個國家都會得到與德、意、俄三國相同的結果英美亦不能避免。

According to Professor Hayek's analysis, the goal of socialism was nothing but a utopia, or rather, “an imagined heaven”.... Abiding by socialism will lead to the nationalization of production means and production activities. Any socialist country will face the same consequences as Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union. (D. Tang 1952, 61)

In addition to anti-communist and anti-socialist monographs, novels and poems with a political focus were also prevalent. One notable example is Huang Sicheng's “*Xundao* 殉道” (Martyrs), which vividly portrayed the detrimental impact of the CCP on the lives of people in the mainland China (Huang 1952).

The second approach employed by the publisher was to remove communist elements from the periodical. Due to limited foreign language

capabilities, the literary translations featured in the periodical were pre-existing translations previously published in the mainland China.¹⁶ However, USIS would not sponsor a periodical containing Chinese literary works, leading to necessary amendments to these Chinese renditions. The names of original mainland translators were replaced with pseudonyms fabricated by the editors, and titles of original translations were changed. For example, in the tenth issue, a short story titled “*Napolun yu lunxuan* 拿破崙與輪癲” (Napoleon and the rash), originally translated by Huang Yuan 黃源, a left-wing writer in the mainland China, was published under a pseudonym to conceal any traces of communism. By fulfilling USIS’s objectives, the periodical received support, with USIS purchasing half of the printed copies (“Book Translation Program (ICD),” in CGR USIS). With the backing of USIS support, the sales of *Everyman’s Literature* were guaranteed. Moreover, apart from articles tailored to USIS, the remaining articles were able to fulfill its pedagogical intention. As previously mentioned, there were a multitude of literary translations in the periodical. It was through these translated articles that the periodical’s literary aesthetics were conveyed to the reader.

The chief editor of the periodical, Huang Sicheng, dedicated himself to establishing a new literary language system during his stay in Hong Kong, driven by his dissatisfaction with the state of literary writing in the region (Huang 1959a). To develop his own literary ideas, Huang extensively read translated literature published in the mainland China, which profoundly influenced his language criteria by drawing from mainland literary resources. Huang’s language ideas primarily revolved around two aspects. One was *yuwen guifan* 語文規範 (standardizing the Chinese language), striving for a unified and standard usage for each certain word, lexicon, or grammar rules (Song 1983). The other was to eliminate convoluted and traditional Chinese expressions in literary language. Both goals indicated his acceptance and importation of polemics pertaining to language policy in the mainland China (Liu 2021). Moreover, Huang’s strong personal attachment to his homeland is clearly evident:

共同語言對於促進人與人之間的感情，是非常重要的……香港與中國近在咫尺，對於自己的標準語言如此忽視，實在是一種奇怪的現象。

Communication among people requires the use of a shared language [...] It is intriguing that Hong Kong seemed unaware of its own standard language despite its proximity to China. (Huang 1962)

Despite the pro-American situation in the 1950s Hong Kong, Huang still declared that Hong Kong should remain connected to China, particularly in terms of language. Therefore, from the aspects of both his literary tradition and personal attachment, Huang was closely intertwined with his homeland, the mainland China. However, Huang was hardly able to promote his language standards openly via *Everyman's Literature*, for it would have meant the support of the mainland China for the communist regime at the time.

Huang tackled this dilemma with the aid of literary translation. Huang (1959a) took a derogatory attitude towards the original works of both mainland China and Hong Kong writers, emphasizing the importance of Western literature for the young generation. As he lacked the ability to translate foreign literature, he instead diligently selected numerous translated literary works previously published in the mainland China, aiming to provide models for the young readers. Huang replaced all convoluted and outdated Chinese expressions according to his own language criteria, thereby creating a writing model for the young to emulate. The comparison between Huang's corrected translation and the original translation of Paul Heyse's *L'Arrabiata* is presented for further illustration:

The existing translation: 安托尼諾正想執住長的槳，把船划出海去的時候，突然又中止了，向著由索林特小市而下通碼頭斜度很大的一條路的高處看去。(Heyse 1935, 111–112)

Huang's intralingual translation: 安東尼諾正想要動長長的槳把船划出海去的時候，突然又停了下來，朝索林特小市通向碼頭的陡坡望上去。(Heyse 1953, 14)

There is no need to back-translate the two texts, as they would result in the same English version. However, when comparing Huang's rendition to the original version, it becomes evident that Huang's translation is more fluent. This improvement is partially achieved by modifying the usage of the particle “*de* 的.” According to Huang (1959b), in the Chinese context, adjectives must be accompanied by the particle “*de*,” which can make the sentence seem awkward and less fluent, especially when multiple adjectives are used (25). In this way, Huang changed the phrase “*xiedu hen da de yitiao lu de gaochu* 斜度很大的一條路的高處” into “*doupo* 陡坡,” thus making the sentence more succinct by reducing the excessive use of “*de*.” As for the alteration of “outdated” Chinese, we can

observe those two translations of Henryk Sienkiewicz's short novel *The Lightkeeper*:

The existing translation: 所以他不能貿貿然的將第一個應徵者錄用；最後又因為實在沒有人後補這職司。(Sienkiewicz 1935, 44)

Huang's intralingual translation: 所以不能貿貿然的將第一個應徵者錄用；最後，又因為實在沒有什麼人願意候補這個職位。(Sienkiewicz 1954, 46)

As shown above, the term “*zhisi* 職司” is altered into “*zhiwei* 職位,” which indicates the meaning of occupation. The original term “*zhisi*” was first found in a traditional Chinese essay, “*Mingtang yueling lun* 明堂月令論” (On bright-hall and monthly ordinance), and the alternation reflects Huang's preference for modern vernacular.

In addition, Huang also attempted to promote the standardized literary language and thus started to make amendments to the lexicon and words. *Everyman's Literature* published a new translation of Rabindranath Tagore's *The Skeleton*, crafted by Huang, who built upon Yu Renfeng's 余人鳳 earlier version. Huang changed the sentence “*libaitang li de zhong xianzai qiaodao le liangdian* 禮拜堂裏的鐘現在敲到了兩點” (Tagore 1947, 13) to “*libaitang li de zhong xianzai qiaozhe liangdian* 禮拜堂裏的鐘現在敲著兩點” (Tagore 1953, 7). This adjustment was made because he believed that “*le* 了” indicated an action that had already passed, which was incompatible with “*xianzai* 現在,” a word suggesting an ongoing action (Huang 1955). In the same vein, in the intralingual translation of Frigyes Karinthy's (1948) “*Barabbás*,” Huang made similar adaptations. “*Zhe Nasale ren, lingdaole genzhe ta de yiqunren, zou dao tamen mianqian* 這拿撒勒人，領導了跟著他的一群人，走到他們前面” (22) was altered into “*Zhe Nasale ren, shuailingzhe gensui ta de yiqunren, zoudao tamen mianqian* 這拿撒勒人，率領著跟隨他的一群人，走到他們前面” (Karinthy 1953, 23).

Platitude Press issuing *Everyman's Literature* fulfills its pedagogical aspirations while ensuring decent sales. For the intellectual Huang, it provided an opportunity to promote his literary pursuits. In this sense, the investigation of literary translations in *Everyman's Literature* demonstrates how Platitude Press capitalized on USIS's publication strategy.

8. Conclusion

Platitude Press dedicated itself to literary translations, publishing substantial translation collections and translated articles through various channels. Examining its translation activities helps to address a gap in Cold War historiography of Hong Kong. The existing literature often portrays USIS as the dominant force in cultural activities, especially literary translations, obscuring the active role of intellectuals in their approach to USIS. Adopting a “history from below” framework, this article focuses on Platitude Press to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role and contributions of intellectuals during the Cold War era.

The detailed examination of Platitude Press reveals the employees’ proactive approach to USIS and its underlying mechanism. Devoted to unprofitable career of serious literature, Platitude Press faced financial difficulties in fulfilling its operations and publication plans. To secure external funding, they sought a collaborative relationship with USIS, leveraging its objectives of promoting a positive American image and anticommunism sentiment, as well as its book translation advertising strategies. In this way, Platitude Press managed to publish two translation collections of short stories and a multitude of translated articles, which served as a conduit of their literary aesthetics.

The two-sided entanglement between USIS and Platitude Press offers one lesson about the early Cultural Cold War in Hong Kong. The correlation between American assistance and the intellectuals’ literary activities was not unilateral. Instead, it is a dynamic process involving both USIS’s need for intellectuals but also intellectuals’ utilization of USIS. Traditional analytical frameworks have often overlooked the agency of intellectuals, depicting them as subordinate to USIS. However, the case study of translation activities initiated by Platitude Press uncovers the subjectivity of intellectuals in the Cultural Cold War and reveals the intricate dynamics between the USIS and intellectuals.

The case study of Platitude Press contributes to a nuanced understanding of complexities inherent in the history of the Cold War in Hong Kong by challenging the prevailing argument that literary translations in the Cold War Hong Kong were predominantly USIS-commissioned. Besides, the present study also epitomizes the role that translation plays in the construction of Cold War history. Only through the detailed textual analysis of translated texts can we uncover how Platitude

Press identified the gap between USIS objectives and its own publication plans. Therefore, this case study highlights methodologies that translation studies can bring to Cold War historiography, as well as the significance of interdisciplinarity in historical studies.

Notes

- 1 For an influential work on this topic, see Scott-Smith and Krabbendam (2003).
- 2 For example, Cronin (2008) shifts the spotlight towards the oppressed and the marginalized, endeavoring to challenge the elitist nature of the historiography of the Middle East and North Africa and unravel “the politics of the people.”
- 3 USIS performs the public diplomacy function of U.S. foreign policy through its posts.
- 4 The British government’s aspiration for stability stemmed from its economic benefits in China. For the country’s economic ties with China, see Wolf (1983).
- 5 At the outset of its establishment, the PRC was besieged by international anti-communist powers. Allowing Hong Kong to be held in the hands of Britain was a way of continuing normal diplomatic relations with the UK. In this sense, the CCP did not pay much attention to Hong Kong in the early 1950s, as indicated in the small number of literary productions. For the literary activities of the CCP, see Cheung (2005).
- 6 For information on the U.S.-aided translation activities, see Li (2013); Li (2022); Wang (2015a).
- 7 All English translations of Chinese originals are provided by the author.
- 8 Books introducing U.S. values include *America*, *Great Rehearsal*, *Higher Education in the United States* and *Our Foreign Policy*, while books aimed at the disillusionment of communism include *One Who Survived*, *Why I Escaped*, *Brian-washing in Red China*, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, *Russian Purge*, and *Extraction of Confession*.
- 9 In fact, translation was not an important business in Hong Kong since the evident feature of Hong Kong is the bilingual system, and the well-educated did not need to rely on translation to read English originals.
- 10 Most of the employees of Platitude Press worked in education or shared their writing skills on public platforms frequently. The flagship literary

periodical of Platitude Press, *Everyman's Literature*, aimed at fostering new writers in Hong Kong. This periodical will be discussed later in this paper.

- 11 The two series consisted of six books in total, and five of them were published by Platitude Press. The five books are *Lenin*, *Higher Education in the United States*, *Great Rehearsal*, *Pocket History of the United States*, and *Forced Labor in Soviet Union*.
- 12 The publication plan of Platitude Press comprised two parts. One was literary translation, and the other was original writing by the employees of the publisher.
- 13 Platitude Press also published a collection of French short stories, yet only the translation of American literature won support from USIS.
- 14 Since the Cold War, the United States has set a trade embargo on China, limiting the connection between the mainland China and Hong Kong.
- 15 The copies that USIS Hong Kong bought from private publishers would be distributed to other branches in Asia, including Taipei, Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia.
- 16 Most of the employees working for both Platitude Press and *Everyman's Literature* were only able to read and write in English. However, there were substantial translated articles of world literature. A detailed textual analysis reveals that the periodical intralingually translated the pre-existing translated articles.

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