

Confucian Translation Problems and a Phenomenological Solution

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Abstract

Traditional Chinese Confucian ideas, such as such as Tian (天), Dao (道), and Ren (仁), generally run counter to Western theoretical expectations, and are difficult to express in correspondence with Western philosophy. It is really surprising to find that, for a long time, they were loosely and smoothly translated by uniform translation (or word-for-word translation). As a result, the story of Confucian thought is concealed or distorted in Western concepts and discourse structures. The paper applies phenomenology to the question of Confucian translations. It explicitly embraces a new framework of translation, the goal of which is to engage us to rethink the unsayable of Confucianism, question the sayable we take for granted, and better promote the understanding of Confucianism in the West.

Keywords: Confucianism, Word-for-word Translation, Phenomenology, Confucian Thinking

Introduction

Chinese Confucianism was established in the Pre-Qin period and the construction for a harmonious society was its noble mission and motif. Confucius (551–479 BC), a Latinization of Kongfuzi, referring to master Kong, was the founder of Chinese Confucianism. As China's great thinker and educator, his foremost words (sayings) regarding his teachings and life activities are allegedly recorded in *The Analects*, or *Lunyu*, one of the most important Confucian texts.

In general, Confucian translation studies related to *The Analects* includes the comparative studies of Confucian translations, and Confucian translators' identity, etc. These topics belonging to both theoretical analysis or practical interpretation are within the framework of Western category. In a sense, it could be said that translations of Confucianism have been deeply trapped in the Western logicism, even unable to define the interpretations of Confucian scriptures done in the past and the English translations based on them. According to Kallio (2022), there are immense challenges related to the translation of Chinese classics into European languages. Perhaps the biggest one is related to philosophical and other concepts.

The deviations from the Confucianism in its modern and English expression, may cause a serious confusion arising from the misapplication of language. We are prone to define them as category mistake, a term put forward by Gilbert Ryle (2009), in his *The Concept of Mind*,

aiming to point out and try to solve a typical error in philosophical problems. As far as Confucian translation is concerned, category mistake refers to the fact that a concept is regarded as belonging to another category which is different from its original category. Category is the point of view from which experience is organized through language. The problem that this paper is specifically addressed to is how Confucian translation can escape this kind of category mistake.

The dominant approaches to word-for-word translation accept too easily the Western category without considering problems in scripture translation. The goal of this paper is to open up the question of Confucian translation studies and to engage us to rethink the unsayable of Confucianism, question the sayable we take for granted, and better promote the understanding of Confucianism in the West. A way out of this quandary is to follow Confucianism itself and let it be. The research centers around three points, i.e., the reflection on traditional logicism, the spiritual basis of Confucianism, and the construction of Confucian translation studies.

Intralingual Translation of Confucianism: A distorted Text

With the “dissemination of Western learning to the East” in the late nineteenth century, the introduction of Western thought made an obvious impact on Chinese Confucianism system. When interpreting the ideas and doctrines of Confucianism, word-for-word translation became a popular tool in light of the dichotomy such as tradition and modernity, conservation and progress, and barbarism and civilization. We here do not deny the convenience of “word for word” in machine translation, scientific translation and the like. But it is true that this uniform translation represents Confucian ideas as Western concepts, where Confucian ideas are no longer experienced as they are in themselves but things described at one’s disposal. Confucian ideas are obscured. The great Confucian texts, such as *The Analects*, become distorted ones.

Traditional Confucian ideological system attaches much importance to the unity of nature and man, the exterior and the interior, and its narrative discourse in daily life. From the 1930s, Confucianism was consciously separated by Confucian translation scholars from studies in classics and studies under masters, and established as an isolated discipline. This led to the articulation of different modern versions of Chinese Confucianism.

The distinctive and fundamental characteristic of modern Confucian transformation is that its work continues rather than follows the traditional Confucian system. It tends to pay more attention to rational judgment or scientific analysis rather than life experience or wisdom.

It is true that a number of concepts cut across different cultures and languages. Meanwhile, some concepts or ideas in China are unique in historical, cultural, and geographical points. Furthermore, in many instances some traditional Confucian words will take on added cultural and contextual significance through usage and time, and necessarily possess certain particularities. Thus, modern interpretations of Chinese Confucianism according to the terms of reference in Western thoughts will unavoidably be problematic.

Languages that have evolved in distant times or places may differ extensively in their resources for dealing with one or another range of phenomena. What comes easily in one language may come hard in another, and this difference may echo significant dissimilarities

in style and value (Davidson, 2001). Western philosophy from the time of the ancient Greeks and especially from Descartes on, has regarded more highly the systematic construction of philosophic knowledge. By contrast, thinkers in the Chinese tradition have put more emphasis on the pursuit of certain paths or goals in order to realize one's virtue. Chinese philosophy of language is not a search for meaning in the Western sense, and the notions of meaning related to the search for definition are absent from Chinese thought (Hansen, 1975).

Here we would like to give some examples of concepts in *The Analects* in order to generate further accounts. Confucius believes that Le (pleasure) is to be found in the midst of a simple life: "Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals? Is it not a joy to have friends come from afar?" (*The Analects* 1.1). So, pleasure of learning becomes one goal of life itself. For Ren (moral), a disciple of Confucius, the favorite Yen Hui, asked what constituted a moral life. What Confucius answered is, "Renounce yourself and conform to the ideal of decency and good sense" (*The Analects* 12.1). Another disciple Sima Niu asked what constituted a moral character. Confucius responded, "A man of moral character is one who is sparing his word" (*The Analects* 12.3). In other words, for Confucius, Ren (moral) is something that is relevant to self-cultivation. And for Junzi (a good man), a disciple of Confucius asked what constituted a good and wise man. Confucius answered, "A good and wise man is without anxiety and without fear." He added, "When a man finds within himself no cause for self-reproach, what has he to be anxious about; what has he to fear?" (*The Analects* 12.4). In his whole life, Confucius attuned himself to be such a man.

According to the above analysis, the focus of Confucius is to experience a man of moral character rather than defined concepts or knowledge exploration. These Confucian experiential paradigms stand in contrast to the Western categories operative within the paradigm of "problem of knowledge". Confucian poetic words are a kind of making or producing. It unfolds a landscape of Confucianism in which our experience (viewed in Le, Ren, Junzi) is constituted. Languages we will not think of as separable from souls; speaking a language is not a trait a man can lose while retaining the power of thought (Davidson, 2001).

Nevertheless, Western categories influenced by various currents of Western thought (theology, metaphysics, logic, and so on) are dominant in Western philosophy. If the problem of knowledge and its word-for-word translation are used as reference points from which to understand and translate Chinese Confucianism, the distinctive characteristics of the latter will remain partially withdrawn or concealed from our articulations.

Throughout history, concepts like those in *The Analects* possess a vitality. They are displayed in something like "appearance". We can only be disposed or attuned to the disclosure of them in and through poetic learning and translation.

As mentioned earlier, uniform translation is just putting Confucianism into a category framework of the Western thinking that has nothing to do with it. Category mistakes in the translation of Confucian thoughts are the reason of the loss and disappearance of the significance of Confucianism. Going beyond the Western conceptual discourse, is the first step in the cross-cultural communication of Confucianism.

Interlingual Translation of Confucianism: A Failed Experiment

One of the crucial problems in translating Chinese Confucianism into English is also its Confucian terms, which is strange in nature for the West. The English versions of *The Analects* are, however, not to render poetic Confucian thinking, but rather to find literal equivalents within Western conceptions, and translate them. These translations or word-for-word translation, for example, to use a Christian word “Heaven” for the Confucian “Tian”, are largely to miss the particular significance of the Confucian term.

In fact, it is the uniqueness of Confucianism that makes its interpretation in a non-Confucian society so difficult. It would be well if Confucian translators would check the present translations of these terms to see if we have missed that most fundamental aspect in presenting the uniqueness of Chinese Confucianism. The Confucian translators’ task is to uncover terms and to find ways of expressing this uniqueness of Confucian thought patterns. Without an accurate translation of the basic concepts which constitute the interpretation of Confucianism, the entire presentation of the Confucian ideas breaks down.

For example, if one inaccurately translates the Confucian concept “Junzi” into “gentleman” he will run into serious difficulty in getting across the meaning of “Ren”. To be sure, “gentleman” has something of the quality of “Junzi” in it, but it always does not possess a peculiar significance of “Ren”, the central Confucian concept, “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire” (*The Analects* 12.2). In this respect, the target readers will often get the drift of what those words are trying to say. Translation of Chinese Confucianism then, it would seem, is impossible. It needs probably a new interpretation, which prevents us from totally missing the ideas behind the Confucian words.

The English translation of Confucian scriptures first occurred more than 400 years ago. Most of those translators were mainly missionaries and sinologists. The translation strategy of early European Jesuits is to draw from the European religious system to articulate Chinese thoughts. The traditional Chinese Confucian thought was disciplined into a set of Chinese Abraham religions. Here are some examples of Confucian concepts translated by the early missionaries, “Tian” becomes “Heaven” (God’s paradise); “Dao” becomes “the Way” (God’s Way); “Ren” becomes “benevolence” (charity); “Li” becomes “principle” (logical principles from God); “Xing” becomes “nature” and the like. In these word-for-word translations, Confucianism is narrated and translated into English terms, concepts, and discourses that originally tell the Christian story.

The work of those translators has a deep root in a failed experiment, which was largely undertaken within the framework of Western philosophy and theology, characterized by concept-matching of Confucianism and so covering over the difference between the Confucian terms and their English translations.

In view of the above, Confucian translation is to suspend presuppositions, which lead to a lost Confucianism. Judgement thus applies to the “objects-in-themselves” of traditional, Lockean, empiricism, as well as to Kant’s Noumenal realm and the like, no less than the metaphysical Forms of Plato, all of which are therefore bracketed (Glynn, 1996). Confucian translators must turn instead to describe what is given in *The Analects*.

Confucius, a spiritual symbol of Chinese civilization, but in the early translations of Confucian scriptures, such as *The Moral of Confucius* published in 1691, was modeled as a “saint” who insisted on rationality, respected Heaven, advocated retreat, and stressed reality and sought truth from facts. Even his speech was similar to Jesus’s (Wang, 2015). Western religious words and terms presuppose the typical transcendental language and its conceptual system, which is almost non-existent in the traditional Chinese Confucianism.

The Western and Chinese cultures belong to two different concepts, bearing the different narrative structures. The main obstacle to the mutual understanding between Chinese and Western people is the thinking framework, including terms, concepts. The time has come to move beyond the confines of Western category to a broader arena of inquiry into its cultural background and historical meaning. Is it possible to do this without something getting lost in Confucian translation? Next, we wish to focus the interpretation and understanding of Confucianism in the phenomenological thinking.

Confucian Thinking: A Phenomenological Investigation

What is Phenomenology

The general assumption made through Heidegger’s phenomenology to Confucianism is to overcome uniform translation (or word-for-word translation) due to its distortion of the conceptual scheme of Confucian ideas as they are. Tradition paints [Confucius] as a strict pedant, laying down precise rules for men to follow in their conduct and their thinking. The truth is that he carefully avoided laying down rules, because he believed that no creed formulated by another person can excuse any man from the duty of thinking for himself (Creel, 1960). Phenomenology also has a strong resonance in translation studies. Its calling for, “Let thing be”, is specific to Confucian ideas wherever translation happens.

Phenomenology is a philosophical school founded by Edmund Husserl. Flourishing in the early twentieth century, it provides a foothold into philosophical problems, which involves both of philosophical logic, ontology, and metaphysics and of the nature of mind and the content of perception. Its most basic premise is that it is more difficult to capture the essence of everyday lived experience completely and accurately than one might have thought (Kelly, 2003).

For Edmund Husserl, his work is to develop a philosophical approach to logic that not only accounted properly for the formal relations allowable between propositions, but also for the content found within them (Husserl, 2001). His phenomenological analysis of the life experience makes linguistic utterances about the world possible.

Following Husserl’s research, Martin Heidegger began to transform the former’s “life world” into an existentialized experience triggered by context. Experience and speech are regarded as a kind of innate structure of language. Based on problems and concepts taken from Greek ontology and metaphysics, Heidegger fashioned a way of doing philosophy that was characteristically his own; a way of doing philosophy that involved a transformation in philosophical inquiry, and that opened up the entire philosophical tradition in a new and revolutionary way (Malpas, 2003).

Heidegger’s phenomenology represents a rethinking of both the question and of the tradition within which it arises. Just as Arendt (1971) states, the rumor about Heidegger put it quite

simply: Thinking has come to life again; the cultural treasures of the past, believed to be dead, are being made to speak, in the course of which it turns out that they propose things altogether different from the familiar worn-out trivialities they had been presumed to say.

The Narrative Structure of Confucian idea

According to Heidegger (2008), philosophy is different from science in that the former originates mainly from factual and experiential life while the latter from cognitive, rational or computational activities. In this respect, philosophy has returned from a secular concept alienated from life to a poetic world. Heidegger's thinking about the problem of philosophy is aimed to pointing us toward and directing us into its authentic mode.

Heidegger's phenomenology, is a channel through which translators of Chinese Confucianism can explore its cultural structure and poetic meaning. The formula of Chinese Confucianism, "the unity of nature and man", can find an echo in Heidegger's phenomenology and may be seen as the supreme hermeneutic principle in the translation of Chinese Confucianism. This new framework is a good choice that can help correct the mistranslation (or false positioning) of Confucianism.

Heidegger's phenomenology disrupts the paradigm underlying the Western concept of Confucianism and pushes us toward a poetic understanding of Confucianism as they are. In some respects, it places Confucian thoughts outside of the old ways of Confucian translation. In the way of Confucian thinking does a harmonious society manifest and unfold.

As Heidegger notes, the world grants to things their presence. Things bear world. World grants things (Heidegger, 2017). His phenomenological view of world realizes a fundamental shift in the way of thinking, from a logical and conceptual category to a structural whole. The structure of understanding and interpreting the world is fundamentally reconfirmed.

For Heidegger essence of idea or logos refers to the referential structure of the emerging presence of things. As Sonia Sikka (1997) notes, Heidegger therefore undertakes a poetic revision of the language of metaphysics and theology, based on insight into what this language originally sought to articulate, that in response to which it was first uttered. Philosophical concepts in Confucian translation hinders this utterance of Confucian thinking.

Insofar as it is the very root of interpretation, Confucian ideas always remains partially concealed or withdrawn from their English translations. Perhaps the most central issue at stake in the classical paradigm was that of the possibility of correspondence of our knowledge to the things as they are in themselves (Rogers, 2015).

Heidegger (1998) often uses the term "thinking" (Denken) to refer to the task of reflecting on being in a nonrepresentational way. The "being" of a thing consists in the way in which it points beyond itself (i.e. its actuality as a thing) into wider possibilities for meaning (Rogers, 2015). In this sense, the temple of Confucius is not merely a temple; rather it is a large-scale complex of temple buildings in oriental style in memory of Confucius. The Temple participates in the presence of the mainstream consciousness of the ancient China in a harmonious society which transcend the simple physical or material being of the temple. The importance of

Confucianism created by Confucius in maintaining the social ruling stability made ancient emperors put a high value on the temple of Confucius.

Taken up in this way, the essence of Confucian ideas thus has a referential structure. It indicates and constitutes the context which “carries” its significance. Translation of Confucian ideas is not what uniform translators had assumed, i.e. word-for-word translation, but to set up a spatial schema in which ideas such as Tian, Dao, Ren, etc. can be stored and analyzed. It is through this storing and setting, or enframing, that our understanding is directed in a decisive manner to see the world as a panorama of beings standing-forth at our disposal, where being itself is conflated into thinghood, designating things as independent entities as if they existed in a vacuum (Heidegger, 1977).

Translation of Confucian ideas becomes a matter of enframing words, a kind of co-responding wherein Confucian words can come to “speak” its meanings in the right way. Moreover, in this structure of disclosure, it is necessary that the translator engages with the meaningful unfolding of words in and through language.

Let Confucian Idea Be

Our major question concerns the insight into the words of Confucianism. Heidegger’s retrieval of the thinking of language enables us to understand Confucianism differently from the ways we are perhaps accustomed to viewing it. We will see that, in part, this difference entails our letting go of the general assumption about idea that results in the story of Confucian words concealed or distorted in Western concepts and discourse structures during word-for-word translation of Confucianism.

Then, how can we let Confucian ideas be? Most translations of Chinese Confucianism into English have been unsatisfactory, since there is no proper solution to this question. Phenomenology with its slogan, “Let thing be”, can provide a new perspective. It clearly shows a trend that is consistent with traditional Confucian thought, which can enhance the translation of Confucianism.

The core words of ancient Chinese culture were created in the Axis Period. The general feature is “word-based”. Confucianism inherited traditional Chinese culture and emerged in the form of “root” (or core words). These core words are the pearls shiny in the history of Confucianism.

To ask about the interpretation of Confucian scriptures is thus to ask after that which “makes possible” Confucian thinking present of core words or ideas, such as Tian, Dao, and Ren. It involves an etymological investigation that opens up the entire Confucian thought. As Heidegger (2004) mentions in his statements about the cultural history of translation, the translation is faithful only when the words in the translation are spoken in words of Sache. In his article *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger (2017) expresses his disgust at word-for-word translation and its flaws: this translation of Greek names into Latin is in no way the innocent process it is considered to this day. Beneath the seemingly literal and thus faithful translation there is concealed, rather, a translation of Greek experience into a different way of thinking. Roman thought takes over the Greek words without a corresponding, equally authentic experience of what they say, without the Greek word. The rootlessness of Western

thought begins with this translation. For Heidegger, word-for-word translation is a translation of Greek experience into a different thinking.

The etymological investigation into Confucianism is thus to ask after the structure by which ideas are able to be disclosed as words. As far as Confucianism is concerned, since that structure is one that is usually hidden by our ordinary modes of engaging with things, phenomenology must also be hermeneutical in that it must aim, not only to exhibit the basic structure of intelligibility, but also to recover that structure from its usual hidden-ness (Malpas, 2003). "Let Confucian idea be" means allowing ideas to show up outside of a pure Confucian frame and in this way is what at the heart of Confucian translation.

Toward a Thoughtfulness of Confucian Idea

It is clear from the preceding analysis, the glory and power of Confucian thought is obscured by Western conceptions, ontology, metaphysics and theology. The result is that Confucian thinking disappear behind modern and English translations of Confucianism. Such a detached, even alienated view of Confucianism is characteristic of modernity of Confucian translation.

Properly understood then, the modern preoccupation with Western conceptions in uniform translation does not constitute a reawakening of the motif of Confucianism (viewed in terms of a harmonious society), but is itself a symptom of the forgetfulness of that motif. Uniform translation fails to be essentially a mode of disclosedness, that of the clarification of Confucian ideas. It is held captive by Western characteristics.

The essence of modernity is, says Wang Ning (2002), a worldwide phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of time and space. Modernity, was part of the self-understanding that characterized European thought from the time of Bacon and Descartes (Gillespie, 2008). The world is thus defined as a one-way development, externalization and concretization. Besides, modernity has become the very narrative with a clear theme. As Frederick Jameson (2004) notes, modernity is not a concept,... It is a narrative type.

It is in our effort to refute translation of Confucian ideas in terms of Western category, that phenomenological participation is a return to Confucian ideas and in turn opens up a clearing for Confucian thinking. Taken up in this way, Confucian thinking captures a great deal of things which lie ahead in the recovery of the Confucian tradition. Things are interconnected as part of the limitless ordering of resources, but the nature of that interconnection is also such as to obliterate difference and distinction --- everything becomes transformable, interchangeable, homogenous (Malpas, 2003). It is this ground where we come to Confucian translation undistorted by one or another category framework.

Conclusion

The paper makes a critique of the category mistakes in the translations of Confucianism and presents an initiative constructive agenda in outline for Confucian translation studies concerned. Heidegger's phenomenology, characterized by anti-logicism, provides a more profound understanding of Confucian scriptures and it can make Confucian thought fully displayed in its translation.

Chinese concepts are more like living organisms than static objects, the latter being usually the case in European languages. A Chinese concept is thus a creature of a different linguistic universe and also represents a separate ideational universe (Kallio, 2022).

Ludwig Wittgenstein, a British philosopher of language, once said that the limits of one's language are the limits of his world. How can people from quite different countries get a real "understanding" each other? A poetic phenomenology can get out of the Western conceptional cage that uniform translation (or word-for-word translation) represents, and enhance the current situation in the translation of Confucianism.

To translate a Confucian text filled with fundamental words is to sing a song with the tune. By embracing Confucianism as thinking, we accept ourselves to be shaped by it. Let these notes be the right notes, let this pattern be the right pattern. Translation is a return to a Confucian world within which Confucian thought such as Tian, Dao, Ren, etc., and even ourselves, can come to presence.

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