



Research Paper

On the Translation of Cultural-specific Items in *Confucian Analects*

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Abstract: *Confucian Analects*, as the most important Confucian classic, is the brightest pearl in China's culture depository. Its translation has been an important way of eastern and western cultural exchange. It is rich in cultural-specific items, which makes it more difficult for translators to understand and translate. The paper compares and analyzes the various translation strategies adopted to translate cultural-specific items in *Confucian Analects* with a purpose to make the English version of *Confucian Analects* play a better role in cultural exchange.

Key words: *Confucian Analects*, cultural-specific items, translation strategies

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I. Introduction

Translation is not only the conversion between languages, but also the communication between cultures. The cultures of different nations have both commonalities and individuality. The commonness of culture makes the languages of different nationalities comprehensible. However, a large number of culture-specific items derived from cultural individuality cause obstacles to the smooth communication and translation between cultures. As defined by some scholars, culture-specific items are "Those items appearing in the text which are difficult to transfer to the target text because they do not exist in the cultural system of the target language readers or have a different textual status from the corresponding items." The so-called different status of texts means that they have different values due to differences in ideology, usage or frequency of use.

The translation of *Confucian Analects*, one of the Confucian classics, has always been an important part of the cultural exchange between China and the West, as well as an important way and means of spreading Chinese traditional culture. The types and characteristics of the text contain a lot of cultural components, which makes the difficulty of understanding and translation correspondingly increased. Culture-specific items directly reflect the unique features of culture and the choice of translation strategies is a key factor affecting the effect of Chinese culture publicity. Therefore, it is of great practical significance to explore the translation of culture-specific items in *Confucian Analects*.

II. Translation of culture-specific items in *Confucian Analects*

Eugene Nida divides the cultural factors involved in translation into five categories: ecological culture; material culture; social culture; conceptual culture and linguistic culture. This paper analyzes the expressions of various culture-specific items in *Confucian Analects* in the four English versions based on the classification of cultural factors by Nida.

2.1 Ecological cultural-specific items

The names of mountains, rivers, animals and plants and their associative meanings can be classified as ecological cultural-specific items.

Example 1 孰谓鄹人之子知礼呼? 《论语·八佾》

a. Who says that old man knows the classical rites? (Cleary)

b. Do not tell me that this son of a villager from Tsou is expert in matters of ritual.

Footnote: A village with which Confucius' family had been connected. (Arthur Waley)

In Chinese, 鄹 is Confucius' birth place and son of 鄹 here refers to Confucius, implying disrespect. Cleary omitted "son of 鄹" and adopted "that old man" to express the disrespect for Confucius; Waley adopted literal

translation plus footnote to provide more information.

Example 2 子曰：“凤鸟不至，河不出图，吾已矣夫！” 《论语·子罕》

a. The Master said, “The phoenix does not come; the river gives forth no chart. It is all over with me.”

Footnote: The arrival of this magical bird and the sudden revelation of a magical chart were portents that heralded the rise of a Saviour Sage. (Arthur Waley)

b. The auspicious phoenix does not appear; the Yellow River does not yield up its magical chart. All is lost with me. (Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr.)

“凤鸟” refers to the phoenix, which is said to have appeared in the reign of Emperor Shun and the reign of King Wen in Zhou Dynasty(both were kind governors), indicating the prosperity of The Times and the success of the career. “图” refers to the river map. It is recorded that in Fuxi’s time (ancient China), a dragon and a horse appeared in the Yellow River with a map on the back, which was the “river map” based on Fuxi’s drawing of eight diagrams later. Ancient people regarded such a thing as a sign of the emergence of a sage king. Therefore, if the Yellow River does not come out of the map, it is not a bright world. Waley translated “凤鸟” into “phoenix” and “图” into “chart” supplementing the meaning of the phoenix bird and the river figure by means of footnotes. Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr. directly embodied the meaning in the translation by means of “adding words”. In addition, in ancient Chinese, “河” specifically refers to the Yellow River, which Waley translated as “river” to refer to all rivers in general, expanding the scope of “河”.

2.2 Material cultural-specific items

The material entities unique to Chinese culture, which are not found in Western culture and are difficult to be explained by simple explanations, are called the material cultural-specific items, including clothing, food, accommodation, vehicles, utensils, etc. There are many expressions in *Confucian Analects* relating to arts and crafts in the Spring and Autumn Period in Chinese history.

Example 3 子贡问曰：“赐也何如？”

子曰：“女，器也。”

曰：“何器也？”

曰：“瑚璉也。” 《论语·公冶长》

a. Zigong asked, “What do you think of me?”

The Master said, “You are a utensil.”

Zi Gong further asked, “What sort of utensil?”

The Master said, “The best jade vessel for food, used in ancestral sacrifice.”

(Pan Fu’en, Wen Shaoxia)

b. Tzu-kung asked saying, what do you think of me?

The Master said, you are a vessel.

Tzu-kung said, what sort of vessel?

The Master said, A sacrificial vase of jade!

Footnote: The highest sort of vessel. (Arthur Waley)

c. Zigong inquired, “And what do you think of me?”

The Master replied, “You are a vessel.”

Zigong asked, “What kind of a vessel?”

The Master replied, “You are a most precious and Sacred kind of vessel.”

Additional notes: The Hu and the Lian were sacrificial vessels used in the ancestral halls of the Xia and Shang dynasties respectively. (Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr.)

Both 瑚 and 璉 were temple rites, which were used to serve food to sacrifice. Confucius compared Zi Gong to 瑚璉, which meant that Zi Gong was a great tool for the state and had the ability to govern the country. Pan Fuen and Wen Shaoxia added the functional expression of 瑚璉 in their translation. In addition to pointing out the function of 瑚璉 in the translation, Waley also footnoted its status, suggesting its extended significance to the reader. The third version annotated 瑚璉 in more detail, including the dynasty in which it was used.

2.3 Social cultural-specific items

Appellation, custom, etiquette, lifestyle, behavior and literary and artistic achievements can all be classified as social cultural-specific.

Example 4 子见南子，子路不说。《论语·雍也》

a. When the Master went to see Nan-tzu, Tzu-lu was not pleased.

Footnote: The wicked concubine of Duke Ling of Wei. (Arthur Waley)

b. The master went to see Nanzi, and Zilu was not at all happy about.

Additional note: Nanzi was the concubine of Duke Ling of Wei who had a rather colorful and unseemly

reputation. (Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr.)

南子, the wife of the Duke of Weiling, came from the State of Song and was beautiful in appearance. Nanzi lived in the Spring and Autumn Period more than 2,000 years ago. For Western readers who do not have a background in traditional Chinese culture, Nanzi is completely unknown. The above translators all introduced the identity and background of Nanzi briefly by adding notes.

Example 5 子曰：“无为而治者，其舜也与？夫何为哉？恭己正南面而已矣。

《论语·卫灵公》

a. The Master said, “To rule doing nothing, that was Shun’s way. What did he do? He merely placed himself gravely and reverently in his imperial seat; that was all.”

(Pan Fu’en, Wen Shaoxia)

b. The Master said, “Among those that ‘ruled by inactivity’ surely Shun may be counted. For what action did he take? He merely placed himself gravely and reverently with his face due south; that was all.”

Footnote: The position of a ruler. (Arthur Waley)

c. The Master said, “If anyone could be said to have affected proper order while remaining nonassertive, surely it was Shun. What did he do? He simply assumed an air of deference and faced due south.” (Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr.)

In ancient times, it was regarded as a position of honor to sit in the north facing the south. Therefore, when emperors and vassals met their ministers or officials met their subordinates, they all sat facing the south, because “南面” refers to the position of emperors, vassals and officials. Pan Fu’en and Wen Shaoxia gave up the image of “南面” and translated it freely as “imperial seat”. Waley’s literal translation of the word “南面” is “due south” and the footnote is “the throne of the ruler”. The literal translation of “南面” by Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr. is “due south” without annotation.

Example 6 子贡曰：“《诗》云：‘如切如磋，如琢如磨’ 其斯之谓与？” 《论语·学而》

a. Zigong said, “It is said in the Book of Poetry: ‘As you cut and then file, as you carve and then polish.’” (Pan Fu’en, Wen Shaoxia)

b. Tzu-kung said, The saying of the songs, As thing cut, as thing filed, As thing chiseled, as thing polished.

Footnote: The Book of Songs p46, which describes the elegance of a lover. Tzu-kung interprets it as describing the pains the gentleman has taken to improve his character, and suggests that Confucius prefers the second maxim (poor, yet delighting) because it implies a greater effort of self-improvement. (Arthur Waley)

c. Zigong said: “The Book of Songs” Like bone carved and polished, Like fade cut and ground. Songs 55 (Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr.)

quoted from *Book of Songs*, 如切如磋，如琢如磨 originally referred to the skills of processing bone, ivory, jade, stone and others into the craft: cutting, filing, carving, polishing. In the text here, it referred to the gentleman’s self-cultivation process. Pan Fu’en and Wen Shaoxia adopted a literal translation, while Waley translated the technological process and pointed out its extended meaning through footnotes. The third version is also literal translation, noting the sources of the quotes.

2.4 Conceptual cultural-specific items

Conceptual culture-specific items include basic concepts and terms related to religious belief, world view, values, way of thinking, national spirit, etc.

Example 7 子曰：“君子坦荡荡，小人长戚戚。” 《论语·述而》

a. The superior man is always calm and at ease, the small man is always fretting. (Pan Fu’en, Wen Shaoxia)

b. The Master said, A true gentleman is calm and at ease; the mall Man is fretful and ill at ease. (Arthur Waley)

c. The Master said, “The exemplary person (junzi 君子)is calm and unperturbed; the petty person is always agitated and anxious.”

(Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr.)

君子 was a general term for noble men in classics in Western Zhou Dynasty and it appeared many times in *Confucian Analects*. Besides few cases, the meaning of 君子 has evolved from the status of the title to the level of moral cultivation. The first version translated 君子 into “The superior man”, however, “superior” as attributive is widely used in the English speaking world in a derogatory sense, to satirize those who think they are superior and have a sense of superiority. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English explains that:

superior: having or showing a high opinion of oneself

superior persons: esp. iron. the better educated or elite; prigs

Therefore, the negative reaction “superior” evokes in Western readers is bound to be quite different from the positive association “junzi” evokes in Chinese readers.

Waley equated 君子 with “Gentleman,” which, according to Longman’s Dictionary of Contemporary English:

1) a man who always behaves towards other people in a polite and honorable way and who can be trusted to keep his promises;

2) old-fashioned, a man from a high social class, especially one whose family owns a lot of property.

It can be seen that the meaning of “gentleman” in English is highly similar to that of 君子 in Chinese, and both have very strict requirements for personal cultivation.

The third translated the model person as an exemplary person and added pinyin and Chinese characters as an example.

Example 8 颜渊死。子曰：“噫！天丧予！天丧予！” 《论语·先进》

a. When Yan Yuan died, The Master said: “Alas! Heaven is destroying me, Heaven is destroying me!” (Pan Fu'en, Wen Shaoxia)

b. When Yen Hui died, the Master said, Alas, Heaven has bereft me, Heaven has bereft me! (Arthur Waley)

c. When Yan Hui died, the Master cried, “Oh my! Tian 天 is the ruin of me! Tian is the ruin of me.” (Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr.)

While the first two translations equated 天 with Heaven, the third dealt with it by attaching the Chinese character 天 to pinyin, largely because the commonly used English translation of heaven imposes certain imagery derived from the Jesus-Christian tradition that is not present in Chinese culture.

2.5 Language cultural-specific items

Each language has its own unique character, habit, temper, hobby, temperament, that is, it has its own language personality. Chinese language has its own unique features, such as onomatopoeic words, polyphonics, four tones, four-character idioms and other rhetorical devices such as dual and parallelism.

Example 9 子曰：“君子周而不比，小人比而不周。” 《论语·为政》

a. The Master said, A gentleman can see a question from all sides without bias. The small man is biased and can see a question only from one side. (Arthur Waley)

b. The master said: “Exemplary persons (junzi 君子) associating openly with others are not partisan; petty persons being partisan do not associate openly with others.” (Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr.)

Duality is a figure of speech in which a pair of phrases or sentences with the same number of words, same structural form and symmetrical meaning are used to express two relative or similar meanings. It is easy to chant, has musical beauty, and has a condensed meaning. However, due to the differences between Chinese and English, the transmission of these rhetorical devices is somewhat lacking in translation.

III. Comparison of translation strategies

Through the comparison and analysis of the translation of various culture-specific items in the *Confucian Analects*, the translation strategies adopted by the translators are as follows:

3.1 Annotation

By annotation, the culture-specific item is translated by a literal translation within the text, and a further description is placed in a note or footnote after the text. In the above analysis, when Waley translated 鄴人, “凤鸟” and “南面”, he adopted this strategy, and so did Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr. in dealing with 瑚琏. Its advantage is to retain the original characteristics, and Chinese traditional culture can be explained in details. The disadvantage is that the reading process will be interrupted to read the note.

3.2 Direct explanation;

Free translation is adopted within the text to make it understandable. In dealing with “南面” and 瑚琏, Pan Fu'en and Wen Shaoxia translated them in this way. The advantage of this strategy is that it does not affect readers' reading. The disadvantage is that the space of introducing the culture outside the text is limited, and it will weaken the aesthetic effect of the original text.

3.3 Substitution;

That is to replace the expressions of the target language culture with those of the source language culture. For example, Pan Fu'en and Wen Shaoxia directly translated 天 into “heaven”. Since the images represented by 天 and “heaven” in Chinese and Western cultures are not equivalent, translation readers' understanding of the original text will have certain deviations and sometimes even misunderstandings, such as Pan Fu'en and Wen Shaoxia's translation of 君子. Generally speaking, in dealing with more obvious cultural phenomena, it is not as safe as the way of adding text.

3.4 Deletion;

Deletion is to delete culture-specific items that affect textual coherence. As Thomas Cleary translation of 鄴人. This kind of translation strategy makes the target text more coherent, but its biggest disadvantage is that it affects the target readers' understanding of the source language culture, so it can be used in certain circumstances. In his preface to his translation of the *Confucian Analects*, Cleary wrote:

The aim of this presentation of teachings of Confucius has been to produce a streamlined version in a convenient format, centered on a translation that reads easily and yields meanings directly without distracting the reader unnecessarily by the interjection of Sino logical complications.

It can be seen that Cleary wanted to make an understandable English version so that readers would not be confused by the cultural characteristics of Chinese. Moreover, he adopted the form of 64 hexagrams in the *Book of Changes* to rearrange the various paragraphs of the *Confucian Analects*, believing that this would help overcome the difficulties of direct understanding of Confucius thought caused by cultural changes and differences in Confucian studies over the centuries. In short, his aim was to form a “popular version” of the *Confucian Analects* that ordinary people could read. Therefore, Cleary deleted some culture-specific items in *Confucian Analects* in order to avoid unnecessary difficulties in understanding the special things of Chinese culture for foreign readers.

3.5 Free translation

There are also some free ways to deal with culture-specific items, such as Pinyin + Chinese characters + introduction explanation. For example, in the translation of the concepts of 天 and 君子 by Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr., the translator analyzed the philosophical and cultural significance of these concepts in the preface, and avoided readers’ understanding of the *Confucian Analects* with Western cultural prejudices through pinyin and Chinese characters. “Our purpose in writing the Introduction is to inspire sensitive readers to understand Confucian teachings as authentically as possible, instead of exaggerating or tailoring them according to their own interests and knowledge.” (Roger Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr.)

Translation is a purposeful activity, “all texts are produced for and serve a specific purpose”. Waley translated his own version in order to give European readers an idea of what the authors of the *Confucian Analects* “... there is room for a version such as mine, which attempts to tell the European reader what it meant to those who compiled it.” (Waley, 1998:76) He attempted to tell the European reader what it meant to those who compiled it. There is a long introduction, more notes attached to the translation, and a note after the translation, which further discusses the textual issues in depth and aims to provide readers with more cultural background to understand the “real Confucius”.

When translating the culture-specific items in the *Confucian Analects*, translators consciously or unconsciously adopt the above-mentioned translation strategies under the influence of the translation purpose. These five strategies are basically equivalent to the eleven translation strategies of culture-specific items, such as extratextual interpretation, intratextual interpretation, assimilation (that is, choosing culture-specific items of the target language to translate culture-specific items of the source language), deletion and self-creation.

IV. Conclusion

Chinese classics are the crystallization of Chinese traditional thought and culture. In the era of globalization, the translation of Chinese classics has far-reaching historical significance and important practical significance for introducing Chinese civilization to the world, maintaining the inherent cultural identity of China, enabling equal dialogue between Chinese culture and Western culture, and promoting the integration and complementarity of Chinese and Western cultures. Therefore, translators engaged in the translation of classics should pay attention to the importance of culture-specific items in the process of English translation of classics, so as to adopt corresponding translation strategies.

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