

# Research on Ku Hungming's Translation of Cultural Terms in *The Discourse and Sayings of Confucius* from the Perspective of Reader's Acceptance

Zhimin Teng

School of Foreign Languages, SIAS University, Zhengzhou, 451150, China.

E-mail: 10649@sias.edu.cn

**Abstract:** Ku Hungming was the first Chinese to translate Chinese classics into foreign languages, and his translations were well accepted by the westerners. The author does research on the translation of cultural terms in Ku Hungming's English translation of *The Discourse and Sayings of Confucius* from the perspective of Reader's Acceptance. The translation of cultural terms, including abstract ones such as "Ren", "Li", "Xiao", "Ti" and concrete ones such as "Ba Yi" and "Mu Duo", are analyzed in detail in this paper. The author comes to the conclusion that the reason for the wide acceptance of Ku's translation by the westerners at that time lies in his full consideration of the reader's acceptance ability in the process of translation. This is beneficial and significant to the present-day translators who are dedicated to spreading Chinese culture to the world through translation.

**Keywords:** Reader's Acceptance; Cultural Terms; *The Discourse and Sayings of Confucius*; Translation

## 1. Introduction

KuHungming was a Malaysian Chinese. He was well-known for his eccentricity as a translator. Unlike his peers who were intrigued by the tide of introducing western works into China, Ku took advantage of his proficiency in English for the dissemination of Chinese civilization to the foreign countries with his translation of Chinese classics. His translations of *The Discourse and Sayings of Confucius*-one of the famous Confucian classics in China-won him a good reputation as a noted translator at home and abroad.

The author has done some research on Ku's translation of *The Discourse and Sayings of Confucius*. This paper mainly focuses on his translation of cultural terms from the perspective of Reader's Acceptance.

The theory of Reader's Acceptance emphasizes the openness of work and the significance of the role of the reader in the actualization of the meaning and value of a literary work. It holds that the vitality of a literary work is unimaginable without the participation of readers. In addition, it claims that, among the author, the work and the recipients, a certain priority must be given to the recipients as an active rather than a passive role.<sup>[3]</sup> Thus, as for translation, the root of a successful translation lies in the fact that the translator keeps the reader's ability of acceptance in mind and reproduces the original spirit with perfect language.

## 2. Translation of cultural terms in the discourse and sayings of confucius

*The Discourse and Sayings of Confucius* has great influence not only on Chinese culture, but also on world civilization. As Chinese classics, it is full of cultural terms with deep connotations, which makes it much more difficult for translators to translate. As Wang Guowei pointed out, "The words of ancient people might not be so logical. There would be something about abstract arguments or concrete businesses in one article. The meaning of one word was so broad that it could refer to both one thing and the opposite. Therefore, if we translate the word into another language, in which there was no corresponding word, the original meaning would certainly be lost. ... The intention of the ancient speaker would die away. And that is why it is so difficult to translate ancient classics."<sup>[2]</sup> So does the translation of *The Discourse and Sayings of Confucius*, especially the translation of proper names in it.

In KuHungming's translation, he took full consideration of the readers. Different from other translators of the book, most of whom mainly translated the terms in a literal way, Ku tried to convey the deeper meaning and cultural points in the terms. He even added explanations, used analogies with examples in western culture, or made supplementary notes in the translation. For the sake of clearer understanding, the author analyzes Ku's translation of

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cultural terms in two aspects.

## 2.1 Abstract cultural terms

"Ren" is a fundamental cultural term in *The Discourse and Sayings of Confucius* and it occurs 109 times according to the statistics of Bojun Yang.<sup>[1]</sup> As a key concept of Confucianism, Yuanchong Xu translated it into "benevolence",<sup>[8]</sup> while Simon Leys translated it into "humanity".<sup>[7]</sup> "Benevolence" is perhaps the most used term to translate "Ren" nowadays. But Ku translated it into "morality", "a moral (life)" or "to be moral" when one of the disciples asked Confucius about "Ren".<sup>[4]</sup>

What are the differences between "benevolence", "humanity" and "morality"? "Benevolence" characterizes the true goodness of the mind and spirit, the unbiased kindness to do good, while "humanity" refers to psychological characteristics that all normal human beings have in common. Both words are abstract and it is hard for the readers to understand what "Ren" actually means. According to the detailed description of Confucius in the latter part of this section, we know that what Confucius wants to emphasize is the attitude shown in one's deeds. It is something in oneself, but not what one wants to do intentionally. It is a much broader concept than "benevolence" and "humanity". Thus he chose the term "moral life" or terms related to "moral" such as "moral character", "moral quality" and so on. Those expressions contain the meanings of "benevolence" and "humanity".

Actually, besides "Ren", when Ku translated cultural terms, he used some expressions with broader meanings. Instead of translation for the research of linguistics, his purpose to translate *The Discourse and Sayings of Confucius* is to spread Chinese culture, thus he didn't have to translate it literally. What he had to do was just to express the main idea and the theme to the readers. But he was also very flexible when he was handling those cultural terms.

Another cultural term used many times is "Li". Ku translated the term into "art" or "good manners" according to the concrete context in order to give the readers a better understanding of the text.<sup>[4]</sup>

"The essence of 'Li' is peace, friendliness and mutual respect between people" and the ritual is only the superficial aspect of 'Li'. In the case of Chapter 1, Section 12, he thought "it is not easy to render 'Li' in another language" and a long note is attached to explain the word 'art': "The English word 'art', if we mistake not, is used in various senses to express: 1st, a work of art; 2nd, the practice of art; 3rd, artificial as opposed to natural; 4th, the principle of art as opposed to the principle of nature; 5th, the strict principle of art. And here in Ku's version, he might have chosen the fourth and the fifth meaning of "art" to refer to "Li" in Chinese. But in Chapter 2, Section 3, he didn't adopt a fixed English term to translate the same Confucian term.<sup>[5]</sup> Instead, he chose the corresponding word according to his own comprehension of the context of the original text.

According to Confucius, "Xiao" and "Ti" are basic demands of moral qualities. But the two concepts to some extent show the inequality between father and son, elder brother and younger brother. The West is a society emphasizing equality among people. In order not to give the westerners such an impression of inequality of Chinese culture, he enlarged the connotation of these two cultural terms. A son with "Xiao" is a good son, while a person with "Ti" is a good citizen.

And there are many more cultural terms such as "Dao", "Yi", "Junzi", "Xiaoren" and so on. As for those words, Ku also translated them with a comparatively broad meaning, considering the reception of his readers and the better spread of Chinese culture to the West.

## 2.2 Concrete cultural terms

Besides those abstract cultural terms, there are also many concrete cultural terms, which refer to those things with Chinese characteristics and traditions or terms related to Chinese rituals.

"Ba Yi" was a kind of dance which only the King had the right to enjoy in ancient time. Yuanchong Xu translated it into "the royal dance of eight teams",<sup>[8]</sup> while Simon Leys translated as "eight rows of dancers".<sup>[7]</sup> Ku Hungming translated it into "eight sets of choristers [an Imperial prerogative]".<sup>[4]</sup>

In Yuanchong Xu and Simon Leys' translation, they both failed to express why the Ji Family had no right to employ the kind of dance. But in Ku's translation, he made a supplement to his translation in the text. Though only three words "the imperial prerogative", they also clearly expressed the special feature of the dance and told the reader what the Ji Family did was actually against the social norms in China and in the meanwhile informed the readers of the Chinese culture.

"Mu Duo" in the sentence "Now God is going to make use of your Teacher as a tocsin to awaken the world" originally refers to a king of the copper-made bell with a wooden tongue.<sup>[4]</sup> It was used as a tool to warn the people in ancient times in China. In the original sentence, "Mu Duo" has a metaphorical meaning, that is, a tool God uses to educate the masses. In Ku's translation, he adopted another word "tocsin" which is more familiar to the westerners to replace "Mu Duo" in order to express the connotations.

## 3. Conclusion

In the foregoing part, based on the theory of Reader's Acceptance which emphasizes on the importance of readers, the author has analyzed the translation of cultural terms, including abstract and concrete cultural terms, in Ku's version of *The Discourse and Sayings of Confucius* to show that the success of his translation in the West was attributed

greatly to his full consideration of readers in the process of translation. Nowadays, with the increase of international communication, more and more Chinese translators are committed to the cause of introducing Chinese culture into foreign countries. It is worth studying the Ku's translation and learning from him again. If the translators pay more heed to the reader's acceptance properly as Ku did, Chinese culture will surely be better spread around the world.

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