

A Study on Roger Ames' Interpretation of Confucian Concepts

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ABSTRACT

In the translation of Chinese Confucian classics, the concepts of Confucian philosophy are interpreted variously by Western missionaries and Sinologists in different ages. Taking the English translation of Confucian classics by American Sinologist Roger Ames as an example, this paper explores the translator's interpretation methods in dealing with Chinese philosophical thoughts and language phenomena and analyses his interpretation mode and viewpoint of Confucian terms in his translation. The unique cross-field interpretation mode under the background of eastern and Western culture can provide us with valuable reference.

Keywords: Roger Ames, Confucian, concepts, interpretation

I. INTRODUCTION

The clear logic and semantics of western languages are most appreciated by rationalism. Their role is to create a universal definition, which guarantees that there will be no ambiguity. The opposite of clearness is ambiguity, which is a state of emotion that cannot express clear thoughts. However, in ancient Chinese philosophical texts, the metaphorical language has more extended meaning than the clear, accurate and argumentative language. This strong contrast creates a special burden on translators of Chinese philosophy texts. For the Chinese, the opposite of clarity is not confusion, but ambiguity. Vague thought means that it can be explained by various semantics. Every important Chinese philosophical concept constitutes a semantic field, and any one of them can be chosen to explain it. "We can't realize the difference between our basic hypotheses and those of ancient Chinese thoughts which have been formed. Hence, we will certainly impose our own value on China, make unfamiliar things familiar, and bring the originally far distance closer.(1993: 44)" , said Roger Ames, a famous contemporary American Sinologist.

II. INTERPRETATION OF THE CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF CONFUCIAN CONCEPTS

When interpreting the key philosophical concepts in the *Analects of Confucius*, Roger Ames usually starts from the cultural characteristics of the concepts in the English world, and tries to interpret the connotation of

Chinese vocabulary flexibly while clearly showing the grammatical relations according to the English grammar habits, rather than depicting the essential characteristics of the vocabulary with a reference object as the coordinate.

For example, in his philosophical interpretation of the *Analects of Confucius*, Roger Ames first analyzed the differences between Chinese and English languages from the perspective of translation, and explained that the transliteration method in the translation of the Chinese character "Tian" was mainly because the commonly used English word "heaven" highlights some images that are absent in Chinese culture, but originated from the tradition of Jesus Christ, and so does the word "nature". In many Chinese contexts, the use of the word "Tian" alone actually refers to "heaven and earth" - it implies that "heaven" is not independent of the world. God in the *Bible* is often referred to as the "heaven" of creation, while "Tian" in classical Chinese refers to the world. Roger Ames (2003) further explained the philosophical nature behind the concept of "Tian", and believed that "Tian" should be a continuous self-expression derived from its own components. However, "Tian" is not just a "thing", but a living culture, which occurred, spread and became an irreplaceable element in human society. "Tian" is a concept share the same nature with man and God. This nature reveals its close relationship with the concept of "myth is history" - historical figures are revered as gods, which is the origin of ancestor worship of Chinese people. Although "Tian" is not the personality God in the tradition of Jesus Christ culture that responds to personal needs, but as an aggregation of ancestors, "Tian" protects its descendants without bias and tries to achieve harmony and perfection in all aspects.

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Regarding the concept of "ren" (benevolence) in the *Analects of Confucius*, Roger Ames first explained the two components of the Chinese character "Ren" from the perspective of *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, and drew a conclusion: "this kind of etymological analysis further confirms Confucius' view that one man cannot live in the world himself alone. He also quoted Herbert Fingarette's saying that if there were less than two people in the world, there would be no one." (2003:50) On this basis, Ames explained the word "Ren" from the glyph of oracle bone inscriptions, and claimed that "二" is the rudiment of the word "上". This interpretation highlights the increasingly prominent distinction between the higher level and the lower level in the process of "becoming benevolent". Therefore, it is necessary to formulate a standard for the humanistic society, that is, "the benevolence finds joy in mountains; the benevolence tends to live in tranquility; the benevolent are long-lived". The translator's understanding of "ren" has a direct impact on his translation. In explaining the translation characteristics of the word "ren", the translator pointed out that "benevolence" and "goodness" may be the best choice for translating "ren", but after careful consideration, he decided to use the "authoritative person". He claimed that "ren" referred to the perceptual, aesthetic, moral and religious consciousness embodied in etiquette and interpersonal relationship. It is not only embodied in the spiritual aspect, but also has the material direction. Therefore, if "ren" is translated into "benevolence", it is just like making psychological analysis of "benevolence" in a cultural tradition that does not take the concept of "spirit" to define human experience, which will greatly weaken the rich connotation of "benevolence" and make it more complicated. Likewise, "authoritative person" is also a novel translation. "Authoritative" and "authority" are cognate words; the latter refers to a person who becomes the representative of a group because of "benevolence", and embodies the value and customs of its cultural tradition through etiquette activities. In the *Analects of Confucius*, the metaphor of mountains (Chapter 6) is used to vividly depict the characteristics of "benevolence": serenity, solemnity, spiritual connotation, immortality, which are all regarded as the boundary between regional culture and group culture.

III. INTERPRETATION OF CONFUCIAN TERMS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMPARISON BETWEEN EASTERN AND WESTERN THOUGHTS

In the process of interpreting Confucian terms, Ames not only explained the sociality of Confucianism from the perspective of early Chinese society, but also studied Confucianism from western philosophy and sociology system. For example, Confucianism put forward the requirement of "*shendu*" (being self-restraint in privacy) for the individual cultivation and

self realization of "gentleman". According to Zhu Xi's explanation, "being self-restraint in privacy" requires that people should be cautious and careful when living alone, examine their inner heart, restrain desires, and do not lose their nature. In their translation of the doctrine of the mean, Roger Ames and David Hall translated "*Shendu*" into "be concerned about their uniqueness", and explained their relevance and sociality in ancient Chinese Confucianism and Taoism from the "*Shendu*" in *Xunzi*, *Daxue*, *Zhuangzi* and *Daodejing*. In addition, they also compared "du" to John Dewey's individuality in the notes of the translation of *Zhongyong*, which aims to emphasize the harmonious relationship between the individual and the community, which are both concerned in the two concepts. In addition, Ames also quoted a saying by Alfred North Whitehead, an English philosopher, "Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness" (2001:118), from which readers know that Western religions also have the method of *shendu* and self-cultivation advocated by Chinese Confucianists. This self-cultivation is the basis for the exchange of the two cultures, and it is also an important value that Confucian culture can be used for reference by the West. The purpose of these quotations is to remind Western readers to pay attention to the unique significance of Confucianism. The translators go back to western culture to look for the resources of interpretation, so as to create more possibilities for the dialogue and accommodation between Chinese and western philosophy.

In translating *Xiaoqing*, Ames and Rosemont explained the background information and significance of "filial piety" in terms of social politics, ethics and religion by means of comparison between China and the West. They found that in the Confucian society, the identity of an individual was first confirmed and realized through the role and relationship in the family, and then reflected in the larger community. Almost all interpersonal relationships become some kind of metaphor of family human relations. "Family" is an important tool to define a person, so "it is difficult for a person without relatives to survive and almost impossible to grow into a perfect person," (2010:30) while the traditional western philosophy ignores the existence of "family". Ames found that "it is really hard to find a family-centered concept in western philosophy that can be equal to the importance of filial piety in Confucian philosophy." (2009:124). "All ethical issues related to the family are wiped away by the concept of privacy, because it involves personal interests, religious beliefs and other issues, and moral and political philosophy does not involve in this field." (2010:40) Therefore, they believe that the book of *Xiaoqing* can expose a different kind of society and life care to the Western people. For example, if the society requires parents to support their children, should an extended family of Confucianism also provide employment

opportunities for unemployed parents? If individuals are only responsible to those who they freely choose to marry, then do children have obligations to parents, brothers and sisters, who are not bound by free choice? As for euthanasia, abortion, homosexual marriage and other issues, if not from the perspective of individual rights, but from the relative individuals, will there be a different answer?(2010:32) In the context of eastern and Western cultures with different understandings of "family", translators tried to avoid translating these concepts with western philosophical or religious terms. They (2010) believe that it is not appropriate to translate "*xiao*" into "filial piety", because "piety" usually refers to people's reverence for transcendent religious image in Abraham tradition, while "*xiao*" in Chinese Confucian tradition refers to "respect" for the living or dead relatives in this world. They think it should be rendered into "family reference", "family responsibility", "family feeling" or "family reversion", which can highlight the importance of family in Chinese Confucian tradition. Similarly, they also think that the translation of "*yi*" into "righteousness" is an application of the words in the Bible, and its original meaning is "to obey God's will". They also think that the translations of "*tian*" as (heaven) and "*Tao*" as "the Way" obscure the original meaning of core concepts in Chinese philosophy and add irrelevant Western cultural assumptions to these words, as well as the transcendental connotation that they do not originally have.

IV. CONCLUSION

It can be seen that Roger Ames's comparative interpretation model can reduce the strangeness of the culture of ancient Chinese classics, and provide more space for dialogue between eastern and Western cultures and philosophies. The cross-cultural interpretation interspersed in the foreword, introduction and annotation of the translation shows that the translator hopes to achieve the goal of pursuing the harmonious coexistence of Chinese and Western cultures through flexible localization strategies, which is also a way for Confucianism to enter the West. The translator's understanding of Confucian philosophy is based on extensive reading of Chinese classics and in-depth study of Chinese language, philosophy and culture. Moreover, he has repeatedly stated that he is providing a new understanding of the issues of common concern to Chinese and western thinkers, which can be seen as a responsible attitude towards the readers by "seeking harmony but not uniformity".

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