

The Dialogue between Confucianism and its Translations

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Abstract

Using the translation of Confucian classics as an example, this article discusses the possibility for translations to serve as two-way bridges between two cultures. While translating is often seen as a one-way process, used to export ideas from the source language and culture to those of the recipients, the challenges in translating, and the solutions offered by the translator, may provide valuable insight, even to the benefit of the source culture. This article looks at the Confucian concept of *ren* (仁), and through its differing translations in different source texts and contexts, suggests that an understanding reached through translation may enrich the intuitive or even analytical understanding of the concept that pre-exists in the Chinese context.

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Keywords

Confucianism, translation, *ren* (virtue, humanity), *junzi* (gentleman)

Translation is an essential tool for promoting mutual understanding between the East and the West. A good translator not only renders the text into a form that is understandable to the recipient in a different culture, but also, at the same time, remains faithful to the original text. 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.

Any Chinese concept can be said to belong to several locutions at once. Rivalling schools may have used the same concept in order to advance very different ideas, and there have invariably been inconsistencies depending on the time and context of the semantics. Furthermore, the nature of concepts in China is peculiar. A Chinese word can function as a noun, an adjective, or a verb. Consequently, 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.

The question then arises: is it possible to move a Chinese concept into another thought system and yet retain its substance? We may think of deep-sea creatures that lose all their colour and shape

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when brought up to the surface. But perhaps one should look at the situation from a different angle and turn this challenge into an opportunity. Every translator reconstructs and refines the concepts, eventually bringing out new dimensions in them. By analysing a Chinese concept in our own ideational universe, we may thus be able to provide feedback back to the concept's home environment with regard to understanding and explicating its multifaceted nature.

For example, the central Confucian concept *ren*, 仁, is intuitively understood by all Chinese speakers. Any student of Chinese thought can certainly explain its meaning in a sophisticated manner. However, *ren* has been translated in widely varied ways. Many European translators, starting with James Legge and Richard Wilhelm, have resorted to using a different translation for *ren* in the *Analects* and in *Mencius*. Yet Confucius and Mencius lived only three generations apart. Zhu Xi's interpretation of the concept, one and a half millennia later, is again very different. The later interpretation became the most influential, and possibly the definitive one; yet it would be a mistake for a translator to see the early concept of *ren* exclusively through Zhu Xi's eyes.

When translating Confucian classics, as the *Analects* and *Mencius*, as well as selections of *Xunzi*, the Guodian corpus, and Neo-Confucian texts, into Finnish, alike other translators, I found it necessary to use different translations of *ren* in different contexts. In this process, I have developed the following understanding of the concept.

Among the earliest texts where we can find *ren* are two poems in the *Odes*. There, *ren* is paired with *mei*, 美, 'handsome', suggesting that the two terms are closely related in meaning; *ren* it is also used together with other 'manly' adjectives such as 'willing' (*hao*, 好), 'gallant' (*wu*, 武), 'good-looking' (*quan*, 鬚), and 'able' (*cai*, 德). In the *Analects*, this physical 'manliness' of *ren* seems to have evolved into a mental quality. Hence, Legge chose to translate *ren* as 'virtue', Wilhelm as 'Sittlichkeit', and Arthur Waley as 'Goodness'. My choice in Finnish was 'kunniallisuus' (honourability, respectability), which reflects my understanding of *ren* in the *Analects* as referring to exemplary conduct in accordance with the class values of the knight (*shi*, 士).

According to *Analects* VI.22, Confucius said: 'The man of virtue makes exerting oneself (for the sake of his ruler) his first business, and (his personal) success only a subsequent consideration – this may be called virtue.'¹ The Master's utterance in XIII.19 is similar in spirit. When Fan Chi asked about virtue, the Master said: 'Hold office with gravity, manage business with reverence, and with regard to the ruler, be loyal.'² In XII.1, the Master defines virtue as follows: 'To subdue oneself and return to propriety.'³ There are also other verses where *ren* is connected with *li* (禮), 'propriety' (III.2, VII.2). All these examples present *ren* as a requisite characteristic of a knight-official.

There are instances where *ren* seems to refer to 'benevolence' (VI.30) or 'humanity' (VI.26), the preferred choices of some translators (like D. C. Lau), who like to interpret the concept in similar ways in both the *Analects* and *Mencius*. Most strikingly, in XII.22 the Master states that *ren* means to 'care about others'.⁴ However, the 'others' – literally 'man' or 'men' – in the *Analects* more often than not refers to either one man, the ruler, or a special group of men, namely one's peers. When Zigong asks about becoming *ren* in XV.10, the Master advises him to make friends with the most virtuous knights.⁵ Nonetheless, it must be admitted that using one single translation through the *Analects* is not unproblematic.

Joachim Gentz (2018: 122) claims that 'we find no consistent meaning of the term *ren*, no common concept, idea, or even problem that would link these different propositions [in the *Analects*]'. While this view might appear somewhat exaggerated, a similar problem is present in the *Mencius*. In the latter work, however, the semantic field of the preferred choices for translating *ren* is comparatively narrow, ranging from benevolence (Legge, Lau, et al.) to Menschlichkeit and humanity (Wilhelm, Robert Eno). My solution was to render *ren* as 'veljellisyys' ('fraternity'), as a term that seems to best encompass the different dimensions of *ren* in *Mencius*.

Among the texts of the Guodian corpus, there seems to emerge another root for *ren* than the one found in the *Odes*. The text entitled ‘The Way of Tang and Yu’ appears very ancient. It states: ‘Loving one’s family but neglecting the worthy is (in accordance with) *ren* but it is not righteous. Respecting the worthy but discarding one’s family is righteous but not (in accordance with) *ren*’.⁶ Here I would translate *ren* as ‘heimoveljeys’ (‘kinship’).⁷ Actually, following this ‘kinship root’ might help the reader understand the way in which *ren* is used in *Mencius*.

In *Mencius*, *ren* is repeatedly related to serving and loving one’s parents (IV.A.27, VII.A.15), or even downright nepotism (V.A.3). *Ren* is also related to compassion (II.A.6, VI.A.6), and a ruler should manifest *ren* towards his subjects (III.A.3, IV.A.1). However, while one should treat the commoners in accordance with *ren*, a gentleman is not affectionate towards them (VII.A.45).⁸ Furthermore, as well as propriety, respect and loyalty, *ren* is a virtue that is dependent on the mutual interchanges between oneself and one’s peers (IV.B.28). In II.A.7, a man in possession of *ren* is compared to an archer who seeks to become as worthy as his peers. In that same verse, *Mencius* asks rhetorically whether an arrow maker has less *ren* than a maker of armours. One might assume that the answer is affirmative since arrows are meant to harm others, but *Mencius* thinks otherwise. From his point of view, what matters is to seek perfection in the spirit of a mutual aspiration for self-improvement.

I consider all of these usages of *ren* to refer to a comradely virtue, which we would associate, for example, with different fraternities. In accordance with the kinship root, *ren* involves compassion and affection, which begins with one’s parents and then can be extended to one’s peers. Its goal becomes to act as a glue binding together ‘the birds of a feather’ – the members of the knight class, such as Confucius and *Mencius*, striving to become gentlemen.

Returning once more to verse II.A.7, *Mencius* quotes a saying that he attributes to Confucius: ‘*Ren* is an honorary title conferred by Heaven.’⁹ In other words, to be called *ren* has to be earned. As ‘Heaven does not speak’ and ‘sees through the eyes of the people’,¹⁰ being conferred by Heaven means, in reality, approval by one’s fellow men. In this regard, Gentz’s argument as quoted above seems exaggerated as the manifestations of *ren* in both the *Analects* and *Mencius* are actually related. In both contexts, *ren* is a virtue of the knights, comparable in some respects to European ‘chivalry’. The same applies to *Xunzi*.

Both *Mencius* and *Xunzi* pair *ren* with ‘righteousness’ (*yi*, 義), a virtue that in *Mencius* usually refers to fair and correct conduct towards others, while in *Xunzi* it most often refers to what the society considers just and proper. This interpretation is reflected in *Xunzi*’s usage of *ren*, which in my estimation tends to be closer to the *Analects* than to *Mencius* (my choice in Finnish is ‘kunnokkuus’, meaning ‘decorum’.) Nevertheless, this pairing emphasizes the nature of *ren* as a virtue that is related to the rules and values of one’s class or the society at large.

Indeed, I would claim that it is only much later that *ren* acquires the universalistic flavour that justifies translating it as general ‘benevolence’ or ‘humanity’. In particular, this transformation becomes evident in the writings of some Neo-Confucian thinkers of the Song dynasty. They devoted their attention to cosmological questions such as the *raison d’être*, or principle, (*li*, 理) of all things and concepts. Zhang Zai (1020–1077) made a connection between the highest principle, the Heavenly principle, and *ren*. He stated that submitting to one’s own desires would be violating the Heavenly principle, whereas a person acting in accordance with *ren* could maintain one’s integrity and not violate it.¹¹ Moreover, he professed that *ren* gives form to all phenomena just as Heaven gives form to all things.¹² Zhu Xi (1130–1200), who understood *ren* as the inherent principle of one’s heart, also linked *ren* to the ability to resist one’s selfish desires and to communality.¹³ He further defined *ren* as a blend of the four most important human virtues, namely *ren* itself, wisdom, righteousness, and propriety.¹⁴ Seen through the Neo-Confucian lens, we are led to regard

ren not only as the ‘respectable’ core of human nature and the ‘fraternal’ basis of human society, if not of all humankind, but also as an essential property of the universe itself.

These musings above are the result of a translator’s intuition, and thus may be of little or no interest to serious philological or philosophical studies of Confucianism. They may be helpful in another way, however. When translating and being faithful to the original texts, I see no way of escaping the fact that even early Confucianism was sexist, heteronormative, conservative, elitist, and undemocratic. Addressing these defects is fundamentally important if one wants European audiences to see the valuable and useful aspects of Confucian thought.

For Confucius, to redefine the word used for ‘prince’ (*junzi* 君子) as a qualitative title describing an enlightened, noble man, and to make that title free for everyone to pursue, was truly revolutionary. Today’s students of Chinese thought may wonder what could be the modern, and even European, equivalent of the Confucian ‘gentleman’. I am now not referring to translations. *Junzi* has been translated as a ‘noble person’, with the aim of hiding the androcentrism of the original concept, but such practises are ahistorical. It is more important to see beyond words and think of the conceptualizations that the words express.

For the Confucians, to become a *junzi* was the goal of especially the *shi*, knights or later scholar-officials. They were literate, and they had the resources and ability to take an interest in society and the government. In today’s democratic societies, all citizens, at least in theory, have the resources to be socially and politically engaged. Therefore, the equivalent of a gentleman is a good, or accomplished, citizen, while the opposite of a gentlemen, the ‘petty people’ (*xiaoren*, 小人), can be identified today among the supporters of populist parties.

Let us return to *ren*, and the definition that I consider most illuminating: it is an honorary title conferred by Heaven. Heaven, as stated earlier, actually refers to the people. Thus, *ren* is a civic virtue that may be possessed by someone who truly deserves to be called a *junzi*. If a good citizen is both honourable and fraternal, then he or she is following the Confucian Way. It is my humble wish that this kind of mental conceptualization, deriving from my attempts to translate Chinese terms into Finnish, may serve as a small example of the ways in which translations can prove to be fruitful for the task – today as urgent as ever – of building two-way bridges between ideas, cultures, and peoples.

Notes

1. 仁者先難而後獲，可謂仁矣。 Translation modified from Legge (1972a: 191) (verse VI.XX).
2. 居處恭，執事敬，與人忠。 Translation modified from Legge (1972a: 271).
3. 克己復禮為仁。 Translation modified from Legge (1972a: 250).
4. 愛人。 In Legge’s (1972a: 260) translation, ‘to love all men’.
5. 友其士之仁者。 Translation modified from Legge (1972a: 297) (verse XV.IX).
6. 愛親忘賢忝而未義也。尊賢遺親義而未忝也。 (Jingmen shi bowuguan 2005: 157.) *Ren* in the Guodian corpus is written with a variant of the graph 忝, not 仁.
7. Holloway (2009: 107) notes: “In ‘Tang Yu zhidao’, ‘humanity’ has the same connotation as in other Guodian texts in that it is associated with the family and is a counterbalance to righteousness.”
8. 君子……於民也，仁之而弗親。
9. 夫仁，天之尊爵也。 Translation modified from Legge (1972b: 204).
10. Mencius V.A.5: 天不言。……天視自我民視。
11. 不循天理而徇人欲者……謂之悖德戕滅天理（者）賊。……仁人之身存……不逆其理而已。(Zhangzi quanshu 1:27.)
12. 天體物不遺，猶仁體事，無不在也。(Zhangzi quanshu 2:57.)
13. 仁是人心所固有之理，公則仁，私則不仁。(Zhuzi yulei: Chengzi zhi shu 1:161.)
14. 仁之包四德。(Zhuzi yulei: Chengzi zhi shu 1:8.)

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