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English Translation of *Chinese Philosophical Concepts* by Wing-tsit Chan: A Case Study of *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy*

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Abstract: This study introduced Wing-tsit Chan's thoughts on the translation of Chinese philosophical concepts, analyzed the characteristics of Chinese philosophical concepts in their ways of expression, and took *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy* as a case study to explore Wing-tsit Chan's principles and methods of reproducing the inner spirit and expressive attributes of Chinese philosophical concepts.

Keywords: Wing-tsit Chan; *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy*; English Translation of Chinese Philosophical Concepts

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Wing-tsit Chan is one of the most highly acclaimed translators of Chinese philosophical texts and a researcher of Chinese philosophy after the Second World War. He is the longest-standing Chinese scholar who taught and specialized in Chinese philosophy in the West, and he was an active contributor to changing the misconception that there was no philosophy after the Qin and Han dynasties. He compiled and translated a host of Chinese philosophical texts such as: *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy*, *The Way of Lao-tzu: Tao Te Ching*, *The Platform Scripture: The Basic Classic of Zen Buddhism*, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, *Neo-Confucian Terms*, and *Reflections on Things at Hand*. These translations are well known in the Western world, and after Wing-tsit Chan's death in 1994, the New York Times published an obituary, hailing him as "an important translator of Chinese philosophy in the 20th century". (Cui, 2010: 297)

A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy is the most influential translation of Chinese philosophical texts by Wing-tsit Chan. This anthology of Chinese philosophical texts was compiled and translated by Wing-tsit Chan



over the course of twenty years and is over 850 pages in length. It has been reprinted five times since its first edition in 1963 by Princeton University Press. This anthology is recognized as the most authoritative anthology of Chinese philosophy in the Western world and has been used for many years as a textbook for courses on Chinese philosophy in Western universities, and has been the most cited compared with texts of the same kind in recent decades. Roger T. Ames described the publication of this anthology as “a major event in the study of Chinese philosophy in the United States”. (Cui, 2010: 266) Robert C. Neville hailed the publication of this anthology as “the most important thing in Chinese philosophy in the West.” (Neville, 2000: 42)

Chinese philosophical concepts are the concentrated expression of the inner spirit of Chinese philosophy, and their translation is an important way to construct Chinese philosophical discourse in the Western world. Therefore, sorting out and analyzing Wing-tsit Chan’s principles and methods adopted to reproduce the characteristics of Chinese philosophical concepts in *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy* will help to provide references for the translation of Chinese philosophical concepts, as a result, be conducive to the promotion of Chinese philosophy in the Western world.

1. Wing-tsit Chan’s Thoughts on Translating Chinese Philosophical Concepts

Before World War II, the main body of translators of Chinese philosophical texts were missionaries. Most of the missionary translators adopted the method of “reverse *geyi*” in translating Chinese philosophical concepts. *Ge yi* was the main method of translating Buddhist scriptures, aiming to translate Buddhist terms and ideas by using concepts and ideas from Confucianism, Taoism, and other schools of Chinese philosophy. Reverse *geyi*, on the other hand, is the opposite path, meaning the use of Western philosophical concepts to translate Chinese philosophical concepts. For instance, the missionary translators used Christian terms such as “the way,” “fate,” and “god” to translate Chinese philosophical concepts such as “道” “命” and “上帝”, thus religionizing Chinese philosophy. The disadvantage of this approach is that Chinese philosophy has been reduced to a “inferior variation” of Western philosophy, which makes Western readers lose their respect and interest in Chinese philosophy.

After World War II, with the increased acceptance of Chinese culture in the western world, the dominant method employed to translate Chinese philosophical concepts has gradually shifted from the “reverse *geyi*” of the previous period to the method of accurately reproducing the features and spirit of Chinese philosophical concepts. Wing-tsit Chan is a representative of this paradigm. In his article “The Evolution of the Confucian Concept *Jen*”, Wing-tsit Chan emphasizes that *Jen* should be translated in line with different contexts. In the preface of *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy*, Wing-tsit Chan summarizes seven principles of translating Chinese philosophical texts. The first three of these seven principles are related to the translation of Chinese Philosophical concepts: 1. to refer to classical commentaries as much as possible; 2. All Chinese philosophical terms must be explained; 3. All proper names must be cited in detail. (Chan, 1969: xi-xii) Attached to this anthology is Wing-tsit Chan’s monograph on the translation of Chinese philosophical concepts, titled “On the Translation of Certain Chinese Philosophical Concepts”. In this monograph, Wing-tsit Chan analyses the difficulties in translating Chinese philosophical concepts and the different methods of translating different types of concepts into English. Some terms, such as *yin* and *yang*, are very rich in meanings, so they should be transliterated. Some concepts should

be freely translated for revealing the gist. Some concepts have multiple meanings, such as “文” which can mean “texture”, “literature”, “symbol”, “culture” and other connotations that should be translated depending on different contexts. If there are multiple translations, the one that suits the author’s intention should be chosen.

Generally speaking, Wing-tsit Chan’s translation of Chinese philosophical concepts aims to represent the true spirit of Chinese philosophy and adheres to the principle of “all concepts must be interpreted”. He opposes word-for-word translation and sheer transliteration but stresses the importance of revealing the contextual meaning of Chinese philosophical concepts, so as to represent the polysemous nature of Chinese philosophical concepts.

2. Differences between Chinese and Western Philosophical Concepts in Way of Expression

Second problematic thinking, or causal thinking, is the way of thinking that dominates Western philosophy. In *Anticipating China: thinking through the Narratives of China*, Robert C. Neville and Roger T. Ames point out that second problematic thinking is based on the following presuppositions: first, the origin of the world is explained in terms of “chaos”; second, the world is of a single order; third, the world should be analyzed in a static rather than a dynamic way; and fourth, the universe is traced back to the first mover; fifth, the changes in the universe are determined by a transcendental mover behind it. (Hall and Ames, 2005: 6–7) In short, what Robert Solomon describes as “transcendental pretense” is the core of this thinking. It requires a transcendental cause (mind, first mover, God) to explain the creation and movement of things. This way of thinking emphasizes logical analysis and the univocity of definitions.

The first problematic thinking is analogical and associative thinking. This way of thinking emphasizes change, treats things as interrelated composites, does not assume that there is a transcendental motive behind things, and does not presuppose the “one” behind the “many”. (Hall and Ames, 2005: 7) This thinking does not look for the “essence” or “objective attributes” of definitions but relies on images and metaphors characterized by polysemy and ambiguity as the main means of expression. This way of thinking is implicit in Western philosophy but has profoundly shaped Chinese philosophy.

The difference between Chinese and Western philosophy is rooted in the difference between these two kinds of thinking. First, the first problematic thinking, i. e., correlational thinking, is implicit rather than explicit in the West, but it has profoundly influenced Chinese culture. Second problematic thinking, i. e., causal thinking, dominates Western culture, but is not explicit in Chinese culture.

These two ways of thinking have also profoundly influenced the expressive way of philosophical concepts in both western and Chinese philosophical traditions. Concepts in Western philosophy are characterized by clarity in reference. Western philosophy, dominated by the second problematic thinking, emphasizes the transcendental “substance”. Therefore, the expressive way of concepts in Western philosophy is also substantive, which is reflected in the correspondence between the concept and its referent, and in the clear demarcation between connotation and extension of the concepts.

The Chinese philosophical concepts dominated by the first problematic thinking have the following characteristics in terms of way of expression: firstly, the concepts and their referents do not correspond to each other distinctively. Chinese philosophy stresses that the real and the unreal are inter-dependent. Therefore,



concepts in Chinese philosophy are intended to refer to both the real and the unreal. Accordingly, there is a situation in which language is smaller than what it signifies, as “words are not enough to express the meaning,” as stated in the *Book of Changes* and “words are not enough to express the things,” as stated in *Zhuang tzu*.

The second is simplicity and flexibility in the way of expression. Because of the interdependence of the real and the unreal in Chinese philosophy, “propositions”, which aim at making judgmental statements about the nature of things, can only grasp the real side of things, while the unreal side is difficult to reveal. For the unreal side, Chinese philosophy uses a flexible way of expression to reveal. In Chinese philosophy, a concept with multiple referents is condensed in a concise character or two characters, aiming convey the infinite through the finite.

3. Wing-tsit Chan's Translation of Chinese Philosophical Concepts in *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy*

When a philosopher establishes a philosophical system, he will come up with a number of concepts. These concepts will form the concept system of this school. Zhang Dainian classifies Chinese philosophical concepts into three categories according to their different nature: supreme concepts, indefinite concepts, and definitive concepts. The supreme concepts refer to “the concepts that represent the origin of the world or the ‘substance’” (Zhang, 2000: 13), such as “*ti'en*”, “*tao*”, “*qi*”, “*li*” and “*mind*”. Indefinite concepts refer to “concepts that are common to all schools but whose connotations differ from one to another” (Zhang, 2000: 13) such as “*de*” “*beauty*”. Definitive categories refer to categories that have the same and definite connotations in all schools of Chinese philosophy (Zhang, 2000: 14), such as “*five element s*” and “*nature*”.

“*Ti'en*” (天) is a key concept in Chinese philosophy, belonging to the highest category concerning the origin of the world. In ancient times, “*Ti'en*” had two folds of meanings: first, it referred to a personified God, and second, it referred to the sky in an objective sense. In Chinese philosophy, the Confucian idea of “*Ti'en*” is with a transcendental dimension. For example, “天之降喪斯文也,後死者不得與於斯文也。天之未喪斯文也,匡人其如予何!” Both the fate of individuals and the rise and fall of civilisations are determined by “*Ti'en*”, and the Confucian “*Ti'en*” has a will but no personality. On the other hand, in Confucianism, “*Ti'en*” in some cases also refers to the laws of nature. For example, “大哉堯之為君也,巍巍乎! 唯天為大,唯堯則之。”(《論語·泰伯》) “*Ti'en*” in this sentence refers to the objective vast sky.

The Taoist “*Ti'en*” is basically natural sky. For example, “天之蒼蒼,其正色耶? 其远而无所至极耶?” (《莊子·逍遙遊》) The Taoist “*Ti'en*” also refers to the state of being natural. For example, “何謂天,何謂人? ……牛馬四足,是謂天;落馬首穿牛鼻,是謂人。”(《莊子·秋水》) Mozi speaks of “the will of *Ti'en*”, and his “*Ti'en*” is the supreme god with a will. “順天意者,兼相愛交相利,必得賞;反天意者,別相惡交相賊,必得罰。”(《墨子·天志上》) In Mozi's view, “*Ti'en*” can reward and punish people, and has a will. Mozi's emphasis on ungraded love is the embodiment of *Ti'en*'s will.

In Neo-Confucianism, “*Ti'en*” became the highest-ranking substance. According to Zhang Zai, “*Ti'en*” is emptiness, a state in which *qi* is dispersed but not yet gathered. “氣之聚散於太虛,猶冰凝釋於水。知太虛即氣則無無。” “由太虛,有天之名。”(《正蒙·太和》) In other words, “*Ti'en*” is the whole of *qi*, the infinite material world. Cheng Hao believes that “*Ti'en*” is *li* (理). “天者,理也。”(《程氏遺書》) Cheng Hao then went

on to equate *Ti'en*, *li*, and *xing* (性). “性即理也。”“道與性一也……性之自然者謂之天;自性之有形者謂之心;自性之有動者謂之情,凡此數者皆一也。”(《程氏遺書》) *Ti'en*, *li*, and *xing* are unified. Wang Yangming, on the other hand, equates *Ti'en* with *mind*, “心即天,言心則天地萬物皆舉之矣。”(《答李明德》)

To sum up, “*Ti'en*” is of two dimensions in Chinese philosophy: one is idealist, where “*Ti'en*” is the transcendental existence with will or the highest concept; the other is materialist, where “*Ti'en*” equates the natural sky, an objective existence opposite to the earth.

1. 顏淵死。子曰:“噫!天喪予!天喪予!”

Translation: When Yen Yüan died, Confucius said, “Alas, Heaven is destroying me! Heaven is destroying me!”

In this sentence, although “天” is impersonal, it is a transcendental existence with a will, and is the ultimate determining force in the development of human affairs and society. Wing-tsit Chan introduces the concept of “天” in the preface of the chapter “The Humanism of Confucius”. When this concept first appeared, Wing-tsit Chan used the combined method of transliteration + English equivalent + explanation to translate “天” as *T'ien*, and used the English equivalent Heaven as explanation, capitalizing the first letter to emphasize its terminological nature, then followed by the explanation: “His Heaven is purposive and is the master of all things.” (Chan, 1969: 16) He also emphasises that Confucius’ “*T'ien*” has a will but is not personified. In the translation of this sentence, Wing-tsit Chan uses “*Heaven*” to translate *Ti'en* without any elaboration or explanation. He has accurately grasped the transcendental nature of “*T'ien*” in this context, and the translation of “*T'ien*” with ‘heaven’ also reproduces the simplicity of Chinese philosophical concepts. However, as Roger T. Ames emphasises, Heaven is a Christian term; although it is much less anthropomorphic than “God”, the word “Heaven” has personalized connotation. When the Western reader reads “Heaven”, the transcendental “God” will inevitably come to mind. “Heaven” gives an anthropomorphic touch that “*Ti'en*” does not possess. In addition, “Heaven” in Western philosophy does not have multiple meanings, and the disadvantage of using “Heaven” to translate “*Ti'en*” is that it simplifies the connotation of “Heaven” and fails to successfully express the polysemous nature of “天” as a Chinese philosophical concept.

2. “知天之所為,知人之所為者,至矣。”(《莊子·大宗師》)

Translation: He who knows the activities of Nature (*T'ien*, Heaven) and the activities of man is perfect.

In this sentence, “天” and “人” are held in opposition to each other, but “天” and “人” are not in a relationship of domination and being dominated, but are interrelated and complementary, which is a reflection of first problematic thinking. “*Ti'en*” in this sentence means nature.

Wing-tsit Chan’s translation of “天” as nature, with its transliteration “*Ti'en*” and English equivalent “heaven”, accurately conveys the meaning of this concept in this context, and effectively reproduces the polysemous nature of Chinese philosophical concepts. However, the use of “heaven” to supplement the description of “*Ti'en*” gives Zhuangzi’s philosophy a transcendental attribute that it does not have.



3. 死生,命也。其有夜旦之常,天也。(《莊子·大宗師》)

Translation: Life and death are due to fate (ming, destiny) and their constant succession like day and night is due to Nature, beyond the interference of man.

Wing-tsit Chan uses “Nature” to translate “天” in this sentence, capitalizes the first letter to emphasize its terminological nature, and then adds “beyond the interference of man” to express the meaning of being natural.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Chinese philosophical concepts are characterized by simplicity, polysemy and flexibility. In the English translation of Chinese philosophical concepts in *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy*, Wing-tsit Chan attempts to represent the characteristics of Chinese philosophical concepts. As far as the reproduction of simplicity is concerned, Wing-tsit Chan adopts the method of selecting an English equivalent word or a transliterated word so as to express the simplicity of the original concepts and, at the same time maintain the coherence of the conceptual form. As far as the reproduction of polysemy and flexibility is concerned, Wing-tsit Chan usually introduces the multiple meanings of the concept when it appears for the first time and uses the combined method of transliteration and appending the English equivalent with a detailed explanation of the concept. When translating this concept in subsequently selected texts, Wing-tsit Chan will adopt different methods for the purpose of revealing its different contextual meanings. The strategies and methods employed by Wing-tsit Chan can provide historical experience and practical reference for the translation of Chinese philosophical concepts.

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