Preface

On Translation and Onto-Hermeneutics of Interpretation

In celebrating the 50th Founding Anniversary of the Journal of Chinese Philosophy, we have made effort to confront some basic issues of human understanding, particularly in reference to cross-tradition understanding. It is important to recognize the philosophical significances of translation, as we have to compare the Chinese tradition with the Western tradition, each having its rich content and legacy of visions and challenges. Even though the apparent issue is more translation from Chinese ideas and texts to Western (English), but there is equally a strong implicit demand of translation of the Western tradition to Chinese tradition. Therefore, we particularly appreciate the exceptional effort of our guest editors Professors Michael N. Forster, Guido Kreis, and Tze-wan Kwan contributed to this time-honored subject with highly creative perspectives.

As translation is a reciprocal process in which we can translate Chinese as the source language into English as the target language, or translate English as the source language into Chinese as the target language, there is somehow a tacit understanding that this reciprocal process should logically generate equivalent translations for understanding on two respective language communities. Both Chinese and English are needed for being both source and target language, but it was an empirical fact that translations of either does not produce equally adequate texts not only due to different translators’ translation works but due to abilities and training from the same translator in translating from a source language to a target language. Although translations can be made from one tradition to the other, different translators and even the same translator may not have the same degree of translational training and ability.

In light of the above, we could ask special conditions to obtain in order to meet to warrant validity, correctness and adequacy of a translation. Apparently, requirements of semantic correspondences and consistency of meaning may be suggested as the basic requirement for generating credible understanding. But what about clarity, object reference, truthfulness and significance? A full consideration of logic of translation must consider these as necessary / sufficient conditions for an adequate translation. On the other hand, I wish to point out that it is difficult to satisfy all these conditions as they cannot avoid considerations of psychology and understanding of the ultimate reality. A simple fact brings out the issue and its challenge: Whereas Western tradition may require equivalence of truth and clarity, Chinese traditions may require multiple suggestiveness and subtle allusiveness. These are different goals to obtain. For example, translating Chinese ideas or terms “dao 道”, “yi 易”, “shen 神” and the like are difficult to pin down in the Western languages which tend to reify and fixate them into definitive entities whether transcendent or psychological. The fact is that Chinese culture prefers an organismic understanding of reality and knowledge in a dynamic process whereas the European culture
based on the Greek and Hebrew religions tends to seek the objective and the transcendent.

We have come to see that behind the translation there is the cultural world of feeling-understanding derived from a comprehensive and profound experience and culture and mentality, etc., for thousands of years. In this light, each act of translation is necessarily hermeneutic and onto-hermeneutic reckoning which would reveal deep-structure of a long-term relationship between reality and humanity embodied in a community of life interacting with reality in various levels and dimensions.

From the above thinking, we have to see translation as a reciprocal process reflecting a background of differences of deep life and culture of two peoples embedded in different histories of time. From this basic understanding we may draw two conclusions, 1) translations cannot be truth-equivalent nor logically determinate. Quine names this situation as indeterminacy of meaning and reference, and however, he has argued for this indeterminacy without providing an explanation. What I have shown here is that meaning cannot be determinate because of cultural background and living experiences in contexts of use and understanding. These factors cannot be ignored or eliminated; 2) meaning therefore is a matter not only of reference and observation, but a matter of implication and intention. It must therefore involve the translator’s background understanding as well as his/her ability to see difference in similarity and similarity in difference. Beside one has to make a responsible and arguable decision in resolving the ambiguity of meaning. One has to be creatively decisive in making a choice or composing an integration. That is, a translation is a work of hermeneutic interpretation based on the translation’s understanding. But from this point of view, one needs not infer relativism, instead one could come to see understanding of translation as a matter of what Gadamer termed “fusion of horizons” on certain layer of human understanding and thus see translation as a matter of hermeneutic interpretation and even onto-hermeneutic interpretation as it presupposing a reference to a primary origin/root of reality (this origin/root of reality could be a unity of self and world as the source of meaning and reference which I called “*benti 本體*” following the tradition of the *Yijing 《易經》*).

To do translation is therefore to do an interpretation based on existing understanding of language and its cultural background generating meaning and reference. A translator may not have equal knowledge of the two languages and each language may suggest new facet of meaning and meaningfulness under different circumstances. This naturally suggests that translation can be complicated and ambivalent due to prior understanding and present reflections, and this also means that translation requires creative insights as each act of translation is a challenge to adequacy and decisions on closure of meaning and meaningfulness in either source language and target language.

On the other hand, our understanding of one language and its text in a metalanguage in one’s target language could enable one to grasp meaning of the text in the object or source language, and therefore make it possible to rephrase the object language meaning into one's target language, following the target language rules of semantics and pragmatics. This means that translation always has two sides, the side of language expression and the side of conceptual understanding. We may have little knowledge of the language expression, but we may achieve much more conceptual understanding which transcends the language expression.

In the Western tradition, the concern of translating Hebrew Bible or other canonic texts and documents into one’s target language basically requires both linguistic skills and conceptual understanding. This is how the Greek has to confront translating the Hebrew Bible into the Greek Bible and further concerned with how the Greek Bible to be adequately translated into other languages. It requires far more local target language rules to follow, but it often fails to consider the function of understanding in terms of
conceptual interpretation of either the source or target language or both. This seems to explain how issues of understanding Bible in translating Bible arise without considering an interpretive premise and framework of conceptual and empirical understanding.

As a historical fact, we have to recognize that Chinese did confront issues on how translations of Buddhistics texts into Chinese whereas linguistic rules of Sanskrit are sometimes ignored and thus deeper understanding of concepts and reality is required. This approach to deeper understanding presumes thorough thinking and in order to reveal that one can address this issue or point directly without source language becoming a block or the target language becoming a burden. Hence, we have doctrine of Chinese Chan Buddhism which is rooted in Daoism that one does not need to use language at all in order to make a point of understanding of reality. Doing so, the translation issue becomes absorbed into an issue of understanding, and therefore translation could be transformed into a point of onto-hermeneutical thinking or philosophical interpretation.

In fact, we may see translation in terms of a language expression and onto-hermeneutics of understanding as two aspects of more complete theory of translation. It is clear that before 19th century the Western scholars are more concerned with translation on the level of language expression, but since the publication of the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), translation becomes more a matter of hermeneutical understanding and eventually becomes onto-hermeneutical understanding in my own theory. We must recognize that the promotion of Chinese philosophical tradition in the Wei Jin 魏晋 and Tang 唐 Periods has made contribution toward translation based upon thinking and interpretation, not just a matter of semantic translation in languages.

The Daoist-Buddhist translators have to achieve understanding of text in order to make translation of a Buddhist text into a Chinese text, not always preserving its grammatical inflections or lengthy sentence structures. Of course, for literature purpose, translators often tried to preserve format and style, particularly in translating the Buddhist gathas into verses.

In the above, I have indicated that apart from translation being important for developing Chinese philosophy in the West, understanding of reality and onto-hermeneutical circle of understanding over a large corpus of conceptual reference. In addition to fusion of meaning fields are equally important for establishing Chinese philosophy in many target European languages since age of enlightenment. I will not elaborate the hermeneutical principles of interpretation here for translation but merely emphasize that such principles must be presupposed in any adequate translation toward understanding.

In the present volume, we have 3 authors arguing for a “foreignizing” approach for translating Chinese language. That is to introduce Chinese meanings or terms as much as possible into the target language so that the target language can be enriched with a new term understood in relevant context and explanation. Micheal Forster has pointed out that the French philosopher Francois Jullien (1951–) represents this approach. On the other hand, there is another French scholar Francois Billeter (1939–) taking the “domesticating” approach which is to allow foreign terms to conform to rules of meaning in the target language without introducing any formal distinction from the source language. In looking into these two approaches, I see certain relativity of degrees. There could be possibility of mutual transcendency of two languages, and yet we may have to face uncertainty and indetermination of meaning and reference as Quine1 pointed out. From this we can see translation as adjustment of language to interpretation or form to concept.

A good example of this adjustment is in the Chinese translation of the Aristotelian concept of being into the concept of cunzai 存在 (existence),

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you 有 (having existence), and benti 本体 (rooted being 本体). I have translated benti back into English as "onto-generative being". Therefore, I would distinguish the Western ontology from the Chinese onto-cosmology, as each term can be preserved within the two relevant languages. I must point out that Forster is insightful in realizing that "foreignizing" approach involves an infinite process of approximating to the ideal of a perfect translation and that means that we could approach an ideal world language text including absorbing all the differences of peculiarities of every existent language in the world.

Yijing Zhang's paper on Humboldtian comparativism is equally insightful by seeing translation of transcending differences and combining all in a universal perspective. This of course assumes already certain tacit interpretation across the board. Tze-wan Kwan on translating Western philosophical text into Chinese sees difficulty of translating the same term such as "being" from a philosopher which may not preserve consistency. He suggests that readability is more important than consistency. In fact, I see no real conflict here, because we can talk about two levels of understanding, namely, semantical and pragmatical due to a context or situation.

Qingjie Wang discusses the translation of Heidegger's terms “transcendental” and “transcendent” into Chinese. Even though Heidegger has made a relative distinction. This distinction can be certainly made in the Chinese. In fact, any conceptual difference can be incorporated in a common language with open understanding.

Micheal Beaney and Xiaolan Liang discuss the translation of the term logic into Chinese from the early 20th century. Logic has been translated by Yan Fu 嚴復 as “mingxue 名學” while some other scholars resist this translation, and therefore this is certainly something to think over. Chinese mingxue from the Neo-Moist tradition does implicate Western logic and it is only a convention to identify Neo-Moist logic as “mingxue”. To make the logical principles focal by using the word “louji 逻辑” is a good strategy to promote Western logic in Chinese thinking. This suggests that translation is an art of using language for the purpose of understanding or pursuing understanding in a certain direction.

Uganda Sze Pui Kwan has raised a significantly interesting and substantially important subject. She has thoroughly and convincingly discussed the translations of arithmetic and mathematics regarding the two translators. Meanwhile, it seems that she could have explained the etymology of arithmetic and mathematics in the Western tradition, so that we could have obtained a furthermore persuasively clear standard while judging the difference between fa 法 and shu 術.

To conclude, I wish to also sincerely thank all contributors and their excellent work, for each has made innovative approaches to understanding Chinese philosophy by translations or by hermeneutical interpretations. Otherwise, please note that, for a special need, certain articles requested a particular style, however, for future submissions, please continue to apply our standard Guidelines.

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