Translation as the Manifestation of the Divine Glory

翻译作为神圣荣耀的彰显

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Abstract

Translation is never a simple task. Philosophical and theological materials are particularly challenging due to the complexity of the thoughts involved and the precision required for their expression. When the source and target languages comprise two radically different linguistic systems—such as European languages and Chinese—the very possibility of philosophical and theological translation is often called into question. However, the history of cultural encounters suggests that neither absolute translatability nor total untranslatability holds the full truth. The encounter with 'alien' thoughts occurs through language, yet simultaneously transcends it. In this context, an understanding of language in the light of divine revelation may shed new light on the power of translation and its role in communicating thought. This paper will first review Western attitudes towards the Chinese language, then discuss how a Christian view of language can transcend the dilemma raised by secular perspectives, leading to a deeper understanding of the power of translation.

摘要

翻译从来不是一项简单的任务。哲学与神学文本的翻译尤为艰难，因为其思想本身的复杂性，以及对表达精确性的严格要求。当源语言与目标语言分属两种截然不同的语言体系——例如欧洲语言与中文——哲学与神学翻译的可能性本身，便常常遭到质疑。然而，文化相遇的历史表明，无论是绝对的“可译”还是彻底的“不可译”，都无法道尽全部的真相。与“异质”思想的相遇，经由语言而发生，却又同时超越了语言。在这一语境下，从神圣启示的光照中来理解语言，或许能为翻译的力量及其在思想传达中所扮演的角色，开启新的洞见。本文将首先回顾西方对中文的态度，继而探讨基督信仰的语言观如何超越世俗视角所提出的困境，从而达成对翻译之力量的更深层理解。

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The Challenge of Translation

When the East first encountered the West, the uniqueness of the Chinese language startled West scholars. The anthropologist Wilhelm von Humboldt, was the first to study Chinese from a linguistic perspective, identifying it as having 'one of the most remarkable language structures known.' (Humboldt, 1826/1999, p.95) Unlikely highly inflected Indo-European languages, Chinese lacks definitive grammatical forms. Nevertheless, Humboldt was struck by how Chinese conveys grammatical significance through the inherent meaning of its words. He acknowledged that this provides the language with a unique strength: a direct grasp of conceptual relations that transcends mere observation. (Humboldt, ibid., p.107)

Despite his anthropological acumen, Humbold was unable to escape an ethnocentric position. He asserted that because the Chinese language is non-inflected, it is a less capable vehicle for thought than Indo-European languages. (Ibid., p.109) Sinologist Anne Cheng has noted, this perspective influenced Hegel's exclusion of Chinese from the history of philosophy and the general devaluation of Chinese thought within the 18th- and 19th-century intellectual milieu. (Cheng, 2014, pp. 969-970) Simultaneously, those attempting to translate Western concepts into Chinese—including missionaries—felt that Chinese vocabulary and grammar were insufficient for Western philosophical ideas. (Zhang, 2023[1], pp. 125ff) Nevertheless, abstract concepts such as ousia (essence) were eventually translated by coining neologisms from existing Chinese roots and have since been well received. For some Western scholars, this success proves that Chinese possesses the potential to communicate concepts shaped in the inflected linguistic structures. (Wardy, 2004, pp. 146-149) However, Chinese philosopher Yijing Zhang points out that these neologisms can never fully capture the original concept; rather, Western philosophical terms are truly understood only through the studying of philosophy itself.

翻译的挑战

当东方初次与西方相遇时，中文的独特性令西方学者深感震惊。人类学家威廉·冯·洪堡(Wilhelm von Humboldt)是第一位从语言学角度系统研究中文的学者，他将中文认定为"已知最为独特的语言结构之一"。（Humboldt，1826/1999，第95页）与高度屈折变化的印欧语系语言不同，中文缺乏明确的语法形态。然而，洪堡深感惊叹的是，中文能够凭借词语本身的内在含义来传达语法意义。他承认，这赋予了中文一种独特的力量：一种超越单纯观察、直接把握概念关系的能力。(同上，第107页)

尽管洪堡具有人类学上的敏锐洞察力，他仍然未能摆脱欧洲中心主义的立场。他断言，由于中文缺乏屈折变化，它作为思想载体的能力不如印欧语系语言。（同上，第109页）汉学家程艾兰(Anne Cheng)曾指出，这种观点影响了黑格尔,使黑格尔将中国排除在哲学史之外，也助长了18至19世纪欧洲知识界对中国思想的整体贬低。（Cheng，2014，第969-970页）与此同时，那些试图将西方概念翻译成中文的人——包括传教士在内——也觉得中文的词汇和语法不足以表达西方的哲学思想。（Zhang，2023[1]，第125页及之后）然而，诸如希腊词ousia（本质）之类的抽象概念，最终还是通过利用已有的中文词根创造新词的方式完成了翻译，并且此后得到了广泛的接受。对一些西方学者而言，这一成功证明了中文具备传达由屈折语言结构所塑造之概念的潜力。（Wardy，2004，第146-149页）然而，汉语哲学家张逸婧指出，这些新造词永远无法完全捕捉原初概念；西方哲学术语的真正理解，唯有通过对哲学本身的学习才能实现。

In developing the doctrine of the Trinity—a core tenet of the faith— a breakthrough occurred when early thinkers realized that divine truth lies beyond the capacity of human language, and ultimately transcends a human understanding structured by language.

在阐发三位一体教义——这一基督信仰的核心要义——的过程中，早期思想家们取得了一个突破性的认识：神圣真理超出了人类语言的承载能力，并最终超越了由语言所塑造的人类理解力。

Zhang has pinpointed a critical issue: the emphasis on both untranslatability and translatability relies on expressive equivalence with European languages as the metric for evaluating the Chinese language. In this regard, both perspectives are ethnocentric. However, Chinese and European languages represent two linguistic systems rooted in radically different worldviews. While the gap between these worldviews can never be fully closed, their encounter can yield common experiences that each system expresses in its own way.

Translation in the Christian Context

Zhang offers a crucial insight for our reflection on Chinese translation of Christian doctrine: we should not prioritize whether the Chinese terms provide a literal rendering of the original concepts. Absolute equivalence is impossible and, arguable, unnecessary, as these new terms are ultimately clarified through the study of the doctrines themselves. Nevertheless, the tendency towards ethnocentrism remains difficult to overcome. A Christian understanding of language offers an alternative perspective on this challenge, evaluating translation not by its literal accuracy, but by its transformative power.

张点出了一个关键问题：无论是强调“不可译”还是“可译”，其背后都以与欧洲语言的表达等值作为衡量中文的标准。就此而言，两种立场都带有欧洲中心主义的色彩。然而，中文与欧洲语言代表着两种植根于截然不同世界观的语言体系。尽管这两种世界观之间的鸿沟永远无法被完全弥合，但它们的相遇却能产生共通的经验，而每一种语言体系都会以各自的方式来表达这些经验。

基督信仰语境中的翻译

张为我们的思考提供了一个至关重要的洞见，尤其是在中文翻译基督信仰教义这一议题上：我们不应将重点放在中文术语是否对原初概念进行了字面上的忠实传达。绝对的等值是不可能的，甚至可以说是不必要的，因为这些新造词最终是通过教义本身的传授才得以澄清的。然而，欧洲中心主义的倾向仍然难以克服。基督信仰的语言观为这一挑战提供了另一种视角——评价翻译的标准，不在于字面上的精确度，而在于其转化的力量。

Given the infinity of God, human beings remain finite, confined within the parameters of their perception—namely space, time, and the structures of language. Language serves as both the medium of divine revelation, and the mark of human limitation. In the Genesis narrative of the Tower of Babel, the multiplicity of languages is treated as the divine punishment of human ambition for building a tower towards the heavens. (Genesis 11:1-9) These linguistic barriers cause misunderstandings and splits, effectively curtailing human power to ensure a state of dependence upon God. Ethnocentrism, then, can be interpreted in the light of the Babel; bounded by language, humans cannot easily surpass their cognitive limitations. Even in intercultural exchanges, while our worldview may expand, there remains an inevitable "untranslatability"—a part of the Other's world that is missing in mine.

For Christians, the awareness of the limitations of language led to a specialized use of terminology to formulate Christian doctrine. In this process, Christians transformed the original languages as well. In developing the doctrine of the Trinity—a core tenet of the faith— a breakthrough occurred when early thinkers realized that divine truth lies beyond the capacity of human language, and ultimately transcends a human understanding structured by language. So, "[Divine] nature is unnameable and unspeakable… by any of the terms we use the Divine nature itself is not signified, but some one of its surroundings is made known." (Gregory of Nyssa, 1893)

鉴于天主的无限性，人类始终是有限的，被囿于自身感知的种种界限之内——即空间、时间，以及语言的结构。语言既是神圣启示的媒介，也是人类有限性的标记。在《创世纪》巴别塔的叙事中，语言的多样被视为对人类妄图筑塔通天的野心的神圣惩罚。（创世纪11:1-9）这些语言的屏障造成了误解与分裂，有效地限制了人的力量，以确保人处于对天主的依赖之中。由此，民族中心主义便可以得到诠释——被语言所束缚的人，无法轻易超越自身的认知局限。即便在跨文化交流中，我们的世界观或许能够拓展，但仍然存在一种不可避免的"不可译性"——他者世界中总有某个部分，在我的世界里缺失。

对基督徒而言，对语言局限性的意识，促使他们以专门化的术语来建构基督信仰的教义。在这一过程中，基督徒也反过来改变了原有的语言。在三位一体教义这一基督信仰核心信条的发展过程中，一个突破性的时刻出现了：早期思想家们意识到，神圣真理超出了人类语言的承载能力，并最终超越了由语言所构筑的人类理解。因此，"[天主的]本性是不可命名、不可言说的……我们所用的一切术语，所指称的并非天主本性自身，而只是其周围的某一方面。"（尼撒的额我略，1893；译者注：即Gregory of Nyssa，又译为尼撒的格列高利或尼撒的贵格利，约335－395年，为三位一体教义奠定了重要的思想基础）

Understanding the limitations of Christian dogmatic propositions breaks ethnocentrism. Before divine revelation, all languages are insufficient and imperfect. The formulation of doctrines usually entails a transformation of the original language. Christian doctrine of the Trinity maintains that there is but one God existing eternally in three persons: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Pivotal for the formation of this doctrine is the demarcation between two previously interchangeable Greek words meaning essence/existence, *ousia* and *hypostasis*. Christians used the former to designate the common essence of the three persons, and the latter the individual existence of each person respectively. Before the distinction was made, both the common aspect of a thing's existence (e.g., James is a human being) and the individual aspect (e.g., James is James) resided in the single philosophical word *ousia*. This overlap caused tension and confusion. (Stead, 1977, p. 79; Marx, 1997, pp. 21f) The making of the Trinitarian doctrine led to the use of two distinct terms to clarify these two aspects of being.

When a doctrinal formula in its original language falls short of delivering the fullness of the mystery, the accuracy of its Chinese translation becomes a secondary concern. The more essential question is how a Chinese expression can transmit the mystery of divine revelation. Given the limitations of human language, "transmission" here should not be equated with "full expression". The Vatican's instruction on vernacular languages in the liturgy, *Liturgiam authenticam* (LA), emphasizes maintaining "a certain kind of vagueness" that "leaves the room for the mystery of God." (LA, no. 43) As the instruction points out, a comprehensive understanding of Christian doctrine is meant to be achieved through ongoing explanations in sermons and catechesis. (Ibid., no. 29)

理解基督信仰教义命题的局限性，便能破除民族中心主义。在神圣启示面前，一切语言都是不充分、不完美的。教义的建构通常伴随着对原有语言的转化。基督信仰的三位一体教义主张：只有一位天主，永恒地存在于三个位格之中：圣父、圣子、圣灵。这一教义形成的关键，在于对两个此前可以互换使用的希腊词——ousia（本质/存在）与hypostasis（位格/实体）——进行了明确的区分。基督徒以前者来指称三个位格所共有的本质，以后者来分别指称每个位格各自的独立存在。在做出这一区分之前，事物存在的共通层面（如詹姆斯是人）与个别层面（如詹姆斯是詹姆斯），都包含在同一个哲学词汇ousia之中。这种重叠造成了张力与混乱。（Stead，1977，第79页；Marx，1997，第21页及之后）三位一体教义的确立，促使人们使用两个不同的术语来澄清存在的这两个层面。

当一个教义表述在其原始语言中也无法完整表达奥秘的全部深度时，其中文翻译的精确性便退居其次。更为根本的问题是：一种中文表达如何能够传递神圣启示的奥秘？鉴于人类语言的有限性，此处的"传递"不应等同于"充分表达"。梵蒂冈关于礼仪中使用本地语言的训令《真实礼仪》（*Liturgiam authenticam*，LA）强调，应保持"某种程度的模糊性"，以"为天主的奥秘留出空间"。（LA，第43条）正如该训令所指出的，对基督信仰教义的完整理解，应当通过讲道和要理讲授中的持续阐释来达成。（同上，第29条）

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翻译丰富了上帝自我启示的方式，也提升了承载它的文化。

The final question to address is how this awareness of the linguistic limitations affects our understanding of the translation of divine glory. The Vatican II pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* (GS) offers some valuable insights here. Although GS focuses on the role of culture, its principles can be applied to language as well, given that language is a fundamental element that shapes culture. GS begins with the premise that we are inherently bound to the culture in which we develop our knowledge and understanding. (GS no. 53) Revelation is always mediated through a specific culture: "For God, revealing Himself to His people… has spoken according to the culture proper to each epoch." (Ibid., no. 58) Yet, truth is not bound "indissolubly to any race or nation," rather, it enters various cultural traditions to "enrich" them, even as those cultures "enrich" the manifestation of the truth itself. (Ibid.) Ultimately, as all cultures are imperfect, the communion between culture and Gospel truth serves to elevate and perfect the culture. (Ibid.) The dual concept of "enrichment" and "elevation" provides a vital framework for understanding the role of translation in divine revelation.

最后需要探讨的问题是：对语言局限性的这种认识，如何影响我们对“神圣荣耀”之翻译的理解。梵蒂冈第二届大公会议牧职宪章《论教会在现代世界牧职宪章》（Gaudium et spes，简称GS）在此提供了一些富有价值的洞见。尽管GS聚焦的是文化的角色，但其原则同样可以应用于语言，因为语言是塑造文化的基本要素。GS以这样一个前提开篇：我们天生就受制于自身在其中发展知识与理解的文化。（GS第53号）启示始终是通过特定文化来传递的：“自天主启示自身与其子民……曾依照各时代所有文化。”（同上，第58号）然而，真理并非“不可分割地绑定于任何种族或民族”，而是进入各种文化传统以“丰富”它们，同时这些文化也“丰富”了真理自身的显现。（同上）归根结底，由于一切文化皆不完美，文化与福音真理之间的共融，其作用在于提升并完善文化。（同上）“丰富”与“提升”这一双重概念，为理解翻译在神圣启示中的作用提供了一个至关重要的框架。

In our above-mentioned example of the formation of the Trinitarian Doctrine, the nuanced relationship between *ousia* and *hypostasis* in Greek language unites the two aspects of the Trinity—the shared nature of the three divine persons and the distinctiveness of each—in a communal framework, which is fundamental to the concept of the Trinity. (Xia, 2024) This "enrichment" is simultaneously the "elevation": the communal dynamic established by these terms represents a radically new idea that addresses the inherent tension within the philosophical concept of being.

In a similar vein, the Chinese translation of the doctrine can be viewed through the lenses of "enrichment" and "elevation". In the remaining space, I want to focus on the translation of the first part: "one substance". The Chinese equivalent of substance is *ti* (體). *Ti* primarily means body, and it extends to mean the origin from which all activities arise. In Chinese philosophy, it is paired with *yong* (用), or "usage," to form the concept of *ti-yong* (體用) – the principle that an original entity is always manifested through its applications. By translating "substance" as *ti*, *ti* brings the concept of "one substance" into this origin-application framework. This highlights an essential aspect of the Trinity often less apparent in Latin or Greek: that the three divine persons are known as one substance because they appear together in all their activities. Conversely, the act of translating substance allows *ti* (or its variations, *shi ti* 實體, or *ben ti* 本體) to be isolated as a standalone philosophical concept. It was only then that the idea of substance as a self-sustaining entity holding its own attributes came to the fore in Chinese philosophy, advancing the development of Chinese ontology.

在我们上文提及的三位一体教义形成之例中，希腊语中 ousia（本体）与hypostasis（位格）之间精微的关系，将三位一体的两个面向——三个神圣位格所共有的本性，以及每一位格的独特性——统一于一个共融的框架之中，而这正是三位一体概念的根本所在。（Xia, 2024）这种“丰富”同时即是“提升”：这些术语所建立的共融动态，代表了一种全新的理念，回应了哲学中“存在”概念内在的张力。

同理，这一教义的中文翻译也可以从“丰富”与“提升”的视角来审视。在余下的篇幅中，我想聚焦于前半部分的翻译，即“一体”。希腊语原文用的是ousia，拉丁语的对应词是substantia，即英语的substance。当年的中文翻译基于的是拉丁语的substantia。Substantia对应的中文是“体”。“体”的本义为身体，进而引申为一切活动所由生发的本源。在中国哲学中，“体”与“用”（yong）相对，构成“体用”这一概念——即本体始终通过其发用来显现的原则。将substantia译为“体”，便将一体这一概念纳入了体用的本源—发用框架之中。由此凸显了三位一体中一个在拉丁语或希腊语语境中往往不太显明的要义：三个神圣位格之所以被称为“一体”，是因为他们在一切活动中共同显现。反过来说，翻译 substantia 这一行为，也使得“体”（或其变体“实体”“本体”）得以被抽离出来，成为一个独立的哲学概念。正是在此之后，“本体”作为自存、自持其属性的实体这一观念，才在中国哲学中凸显出来，从而推动了中国本体论的发展。

Upshots

Translation enriches the way God reveals Himself, and elevates the culture that carries it. Viewed through this transcendent lens, we see that while any language—source or targe—is inherently limited, each serves as a unique channel for divine revelation. This perspective allows us to move beyond ethnocentrism. Ultimately, by manifesting the same divine mystery in ways that resonate with our individual hearts, humanity finds a renewed unity in God, who dwells within us in that unique way.

结语

翻译丰富了天主自我启示的方式，也提升了承载启示的文化。透过这一超越性的视角，我们看到，尽管任何语言——无论是源语还是目标语——都有其内在的局限，但每一种语言都是神圣启示的独特通道。这一视角使我们得以超越民族中心主义。归根结底，当同一神圣奥迹以触动每个人心灵的方式显现时，人类便在天主内找到了更新的合一——因为祂正是以那种独特的方式寓居于我们心中。

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