On Feng Youlan’s Construction of an Image of Chinese Philosophy in his Chinese-English Translation

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ABSTRACT
Except *Chuang Tzu: A New Selected Translation with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang*, Feng Youlan’s translations themselves are little known, let alone their influence. As a matter of fact, Feng translated seven works from Chinese into English in total, and his English works also contain a lot of translation elements, for example, “Why China Has No Science – An Interpretation of the History and Consequences of Chinese Philosophy” 中国为 何无 科学 – – 对于中国哲学之历史及其结果之一解释 (1922) and *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* 中国哲学简史 (1948). Based on historical documents and the method of empirical analysis, the paper provides an analysis of how Feng Youlan constructed an image of Chinese philosophy in his Chinese-English translations from five perspectives: (1) he argued for the existence of philosophy in China; (2) he created a positive image of Chinese philosophy in the West; (3) he accurately translated Chinese philosophical terms into English; (4) he interpreted Chinese traditional philosophy from a Chinese scholar’s perspective; (5) he translated Chinese academic works.

1. Feng Youlan’s Chinese-English translations
Feng Youlan (1895–1990, also known as Fung Yu-lan) is widely known as a philosopher and educator. However, he also translated some Chinese works into English and constructed an image of Chinese philosophy in his Chinese-English translations. This paper provides an analysis of how Feng Youlan constructed an image of Chinese philosophy through his Chinese-English translations from five perspectives.
2. The existence of philosophy in China

Some Western philosophers have denied that philosophy existed in China, for example, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel said: “True philosophy originates from the Western world” (97). In Hegel’s opinion, there was philosophy in the Western world and no philosophy in China.

However, Feng Youlan held a different opinion from Hegel. He said: “… so-called philosophy in the Western world is roughly equivalent to the research object of xuanxue (玄学) of the Wei-Jin period (魏晋, 220–420), daoxue (道学) of the Song and Ming Dynasties (宋明, 960–1644), and yili xue (义理之学) of the Qing Dynasty (清, 1636–1912)” (History 17). In Feng’s opinion, some contents in Chinese culture were roughly equivalent to philosophy in the Western world, so there was philosophy in China. He also pointed out that there is no absolute equivalence but some differences between Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy, so although they were the same on essentials points, they differed on minor points.

When Feng Youlan and Derk Bodde (1909–2003) cooperated and translated Feng’s Zhongguo zhexueshi中国哲学史, they translated the title as A History of Chinese Philosophy. In other words, the two translators translated zhexue 哲学 as “philosophy.” More importantly, Feng’s views and translation met with agreement from Western scholars, such as Eduard Erkes, Homer H. Dubs, J. J. J. Duyvendak, Karl A Wittfogel, and Paul Demieville, although other Western scholars still used the term “Chinese culture.” In his “Review: A History of Chinese Philosophy. Vol. I: The Period of the Philosophers (From the Beginnings to Circa 100 B.C) by Fung Yu-lan and Derk Bodde,” Dubs said: “This book consequently marks an epoch in our understanding of Chinese philosophy.” (260) In his “Reviews: A Short History of Chinese Philosophy by Fung Yu-lan and Derk Bodde,” Demieville said: “Chinese philosophy, considered apart from the religious, social or literary aspects of Chinese thought, is still little known in the West – or was so before the publication of the works of Professor Fung Yu-lan.” (414)

The term 哲学 was not originally a Chinese term, but was invented and introduced from Japan specifically in order to translate the Western term “philosophy.” Thus, by means of using not “Chinese thought” but “Chinese philosophy” to translate Zhongguo zhexue 中国哲学, Feng Youlan argued for the existence of philosophy in China, and met with agreement from Western scholars.

3. Creating a positive image of Chinese philosophy

While Feng Youlan argued for the existence of philosophy in China by means of translation, he also created a positive image of Chinese philosophy by means of translation.

Firstly, he argued that Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy are equal. Feng wrote an article “Why China Has No Science - An Interpretation of the History and Consequences of Chinese Philosophy” in 1920, which received American professors’ agreement in 1921 and published it in International Journal of Ethics in 1922. In the article, he wrote: “Before attaching the different types of Chinese ideals, for the sake of convenience I shall introduce two words which seem to me to indicate, respectively, two general tendencies of Chinese philosophy: They are ‘nature’ and ‘art,’ or, to translate more exactly,
‘nature’ and ‘human.’” (Supplement 149) Furthermore, Feng translated the Chinese philosophical term *xiaoyao* as “happiness.” Based on these three key terms: “nature,” “human,” and “happiness,” Feng expressed his idea: Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy are like the small bird and a giant bird in *Zhuangzi*. Although the two birds both attain happiness, they have different bodies. Chinese philosophy seeks happiness of the heart and mind in a natural way, while Western philosophy seeks that of the physical world through humanity’s conquering of nature. Although the two philosophies both achieve happiness, they take different ways. Finally, Feng pointed out that “… China has no science, because according to her own standard of value she does not need any” (Supplement 149). In Feng’s opinion, Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy are equal and the difference between them lies only in the way that they function.

Secondly, he demonstrated that there was logic in traditional Chinese philosophy. The ways Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy took were different. It is true that logic in traditional Chinese philosophy was not remarkable, in other words, logical thought in Chinese culture was not developed well compared with Western culture. However, this does not mean that Chinese ancient people did not have logical thought, a fact that some Chinese and Western scholars did not know before Feng Youlan. The philosophy of the School of Names (mingjia 名家) was considered absurd in history, but Feng used logical analysis from Western philosophy to demonstrate that in fact it contained elementary logic. For example, “Discourse on the White Horse” 白马论 had been considered ridiculous since ancient times. Feng however analyzed it: “Since the extension of the term ‘horse’ and ‘white horse’ is different, therefore a white horse is not a horse.” Thus, Feng showed that “Discourse on the White Horse” contains logic and the philosophy of the School of Names is not absurd. For this the reason, Feng wrote:

The term *Ming chia* has sometimes been translated as “sophists,” and sometimes as “logicians” or “dialecticians.” It is true that there is some similarity between the *Ming chia* and the sophists, logicians and dialecticians, but it is also true that they are not quite the same. To avoid confusion, it is better to translate *Ming chia* literally as the School of Names. This translation also helps to bring to the attention of Westerners one of the important problems discussed by Chinese philosophy, namely the relation between *ming* (the name) and *shih* (the actuality) (Short History 136).

In Feng’s view, the School of Names and Western logicians are similar, because their philosophies contain logic, yet there are also some differences, because the School of Names was rooted in Chinese culture and discussed the relation between name and actuality, which was a tradition in ancient China. Thus “the School of Names” contains two kinds of meanings, especially its logical aspect.

According to the above analysis, Feng used the translation “School of Names” instead of “sophists” and “logicians” to create a positive image of Chinese philosophy.

4. Correct translation of Chinese traditional philosophical terms into English

In general, Western scholars were not adept at understanding Chinese and Chinese philosophy compared with Chinese scholars. Due to misunderstandings, they sometimes mistranslated Chinese philosophy and culture. Take the translation of *mingjia* as an
example again. Western sinologists translated it as “sophists,” “logicians,” and “dialecticians” before Feng Youlan. According to Feng, those translations did not express the true meaning of mingjia. In the author’s opinion, “the School of Names” is a better translation.

Take the translation of “道” as another example. “道” in different contexts has different meanings. In the Laozi, “道” is nameless because the book says: “The Dao which can be told is not the true Dao; The Name which can be told is not the true Name” (道可道, 非名可名, 非常名). In the Book of Changes, “道” is nameable, because the book says: “Sincerity is dao of land, dao of a wife, and dao of a minister” (地道也, 妻道也, 臣道也). So Feng Youlan said:

> We may distinguish between the two concepts by referring to the Tao of Taoism as the Tao, and to that of the “Appendices” as tao. The Tao of Taoism is the unitary “that” from which springs the production and changes of all things in the universe. The tao of “Appendices,” on the contrary, are multiple, and are the principles which govern each separate category of things in the universe (Short History 261).

In Feng Youlan’s opinion, “道” in different philosophies refers to different concepts and should be translated differently.

Some Western scholars are in favor of Feng Youlan’s opinion and translation. For example, when translating “易之为书也,广大悉备,有天道焉,有人道焉,有地道焉” in the Book of Changes, Cary F. Baynes translated it as “The Changes is a book vast and great, in which everything is completely contained. The tao of heaven is in it, the tao of the earth is in it, and the tao of man is in it” (326). The translator used “tao” instead of “Tao” when the translator translated “道.”

Feng Youlan knew much about Chinese philosophy and cultures, so he distinguished “道” in Laozi from “道” in the Book of Changes and translated them in different ways. Although his opinion and translation are correct, they have attracted few scholars’ attention.

5. Interpretation of traditional Chinese philosophy from a Chinese scholar’s perspective

Feng Youlan said: “A translation is an interpreting or commenting” (Zhuangzi i). This means that different translations and translators have different interpretations. Take the translation of Zhuangzi as an example. Western scholars such as Herbert A. Giles and James Legge first introduced Chinese classics to the world. Many of them were foreign missionaries, so they understood Chinese classics from two perspectives, as foreigners and as missionaries. When Feng translated the Chinese classics, he interpreted them from two perspectives, as a Chinese person and as a philosopher. Take the translations of a passage from the Zhuangzi chapter titled “The World” as an example:

Source text: 不离于宗，谓之天人。不离于精谓之神人。不离于真，谓之至人。以天为宗，以德为本，以道为门，兆于变化，谓之圣人。以仁为恩，以义为理，以礼为行，以乐为和，熏然慈仁，谓之君子。(Zhuangzi, “The World”)

Feng Youlan & L.C. Porter’s translation: not to be separated from the essential is called the heavenly man; not to be separated from the pure is called the spiritual man; not to be separated from the true is called the perfect man. To regard heaven as the essential, virtue as the fundamental, Tao as the entrance, and to follow the indications of changes is called the
Sage. To regard benevolence as (the source of all) kindness, justice as (the source of all) distinctions, ceremony as (the rule of all) conduct, music as (the ideal of all) all harmony thus diffusing a fragrance of gentleness and goodness, this is called the Superior man (43).

Herbert. A. Giles’s translation: he who does not separate from the Source is one with God. He who does not separate from the essence is a spiritual man. He who does not separate from the reality is a perfect man. He who makes God the source, and Te the root, and Tao the portal, passively falling in with the modifications of his environment – he is the true Sage.

These are but four different denominations of the ideal man.

He who practices charity as a kindness, duty to one’s neighbor as a principle, ceremony as a convenience, music as a pacificator, and thus becomes compassionate and charitable, – he is a superior man.

We sink here to a lower level, though still a high one. The “superior man” is the ideal man of Confucian ethics. In him divinity finds no place (437–438).

Based on the two translations, we find that when the three translators translated traditional Chinese philosophical terms, their translations contain different features. The following table shows the differences.

| The Chinese traditional philosophical terms | Feng Youlan & L.C. Porter’s translation | Herbert. A. Giles’ translation |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| tianren 天人                              | heavenly man                           | He who is one with God         |
| tian 天                                  | heaven                                 | God                            |
| de 德                                    | virtue                                 | Te                             |
| ren 仁                                   | benevolence                            | charity                        |
| yi 义                                   | justice                                | duty to one’s neighbor         |
| li 理                                    | conduct                                | convenience                    |
| ci 慈                                   | gentleness and goodness                | compassionate and charitable    |

In Herbert A Giles’ translation, the translation of 天人 is “He who is one with God,” 天 is “God,” 仁 is “charity,” 义 is “duty to one’s neighbor.” It is clear that Herbert A Giles’ translation is full of Western religious features. In Feng Youlan & L.C. Porter’s translation, the translation of 天人 is “heavenly man,” 天 is “heaven,” 仁 is “benevolence,” and 义 is “justice.” There is no doubt that Feng Youlan & L.C. Porter’s translation preserves the Chinese features as closely as possible.

This example shows us that retranslation is necessary and translation from Chinese to English by Chinese translators is a necessity to some extent. Now we may understand why Hegel said: “To keep his fame, Confucius’ books shouldn’t have been translated” (118). The translations that Hegel read were full of Western features, so he was not able to read about the true Chinese philosophy and culture.

From the above example, we can draw a conclusion that qualified Chinese translators should take an active part in translating Chinese philosophy and culture into other languages because they are often better at understanding and translating Chinese philosophical terms.

6. Translation of Chinese academic works

Feng Youlan translated five articles from Chinese into English, introducing Chinese scholar’s academic achievements. They are “Chinese Foot-measure of the Nineteenth
Centuries” 中国历代之尺度, “The Origin of Ju and Mo” 原儒墨, “The Confucianist Theory of Mourning Sacrificial and Wedding Rites” 儒家对于婚丧祭礼之理论, “The Place of Confucius in Chinese History” 孔子在中国历史中之地位 and “Some Characteristics of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang” 郭象哲学的特点.

The first, a speech by Wang Guowei 王国维 from 1926, introduces Chinese foot-measures in history with a strong academic flavor. The translation was done and published in Journal of the North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society by A. W. Hummel and Feng Youlan in 1928. The other four works were written by Feng and translated by the author himself.

Feng wrote a Chinese article titled “Some Characteristics of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang” 郭象哲学的特点 in 1927 and translated it into English himself, including it as an appendix in his translation of Zhuangzi, Chuang-Tzu: A New Selected Translation with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang published in 1931. Feng was thereby the first scholar to introduce the ancient philosopher Guo Xiang 郭象 in English.

Feng Youlan wrote a Chinese article titled “The Place of Confucius in Chinese History” 孔子在中国历史中之地位 in 1927 and translated it into English by himself, publishing it in the English magazine The Chinese Social and Political Science Review in 1932. At the beginning of twentieth century, Confucius was regarded only as a teacher, and Feng’s article recreated Confucius’ role as a sage in history.

Feng wrote a Chinese article titled “The Confucianist Theory of Mourning, Sacrificial and Wedding Rites” 儒家对于婚丧祭礼之理论 in 1928 and translated it into English by himself, publishing it in The Chinese Social and Political Science Review in 1931. The article introduces the Confucian theory of mourning, sacrificial, and wedding rites from a humanistic and positive perspective: mourning and sacrificial rites are an expression of emotion, while the wedding is a mode of the immortality of spirit.

Hu Shi 胡适 held the view that the Confucian school originated from the Yin people 殷民族. Feng did not agree with Hu Shi’s view and wrote a Chinese article titled “The Origin of Ju and Mo” 原儒墨 in April 1935, which he translated into English himself and published in The Chinese Social and Political Science Review in July 1935. Feng pointed out that after the collapse of the Zhou dynasty 周朝, some nobles who excelled at music, dance, drawing, etc., became common people. They made a living by teaching and became Ru 儒. Some of these Ru worked not only as teachers but also as consultants for the new ruling class. Those Ru became the Confucian school 儒家. In Feng’s opinion then, the concept of Ru is wider than that of the Confucian school.

Wang Guowei and Feng Youlan were both eminent scholars, so Feng’s Chinese-English translations spread their academic achievements to the world, displaying Chinese scholars’ understanding of Chinese culture. A lot of Western scholars discussed the above translations, for example, Rodney Taylor and Gary Arbuckle (350), Thomas A. Wilson (275), etc.

7. Conclusion

On the one hand, it is well known that Feng Youlan as a philosopher was a representative of Chinese philosophy in the Western world. On the other hand, he also constructed an image of Chinese philosophy in his Chinese-English translation from five perspectives: (1) he argued for the existence of philosophy in China; (2) he created a positive image of China; (3) he correctly translated traditional Chinese philosophical terms into English; (4) he
interpreted Chinese traditional philosophy from a Chinese scholar’s perspective; (5) he translated Chinese academic works. There is no doubt that Feng Youlan made a contribution to the field of Chinese-English translation, spreading Chinese philosophy and culture and building a bridge between China and the world.

Note

1. Feng Youlan’s translations include *Chuang Tzu: A New Selected Translation with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang* (1931), “Chinese Foot-measure of the Nineteenth Centuries” (1928), “Some Characteristics of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang” (1931), “The Confucianist Theory of Mourning, Sacrificial and Wedding Rites” (1931), “The Place of Confucius in Chinese History” (1932), *Aids to the Study of Chinese Philosophy* (1934), and “The Origin of Ju and Mo” (1935). In addition, Feng’s English works also contain a lot of translation elements, in particular, “Why China Has No Science—An Interpretation of the History and Consequences of Chinese Philosophy” (1922) and *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (1948).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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