

Translating Spirituality: Addressing the Challenge in Converting the Terminology of Spirit from English to Chinese

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The term “spirituality” has taken on special meanings in recent decades through the increasing secularization of the West. It figures in defining the essentially human even as “thinking” is being attributed to intelligent machines. It also has a major place in the shared lexicon emerging as traditional religions come into relationship with one

another and with non-religious systems of thought and value.

My conviction is that “spirituality” primarily concerns what it means to be alive, breathing; aspiring, or hoping; inspiring, or encouraging and motivating others; creating, or giving form to the new—and doing all that as a human person. We will soon have super-capable machines, but we won’t speak of the “spirituality” of these robots.

Donald Evans, in his *Spirituality and Human Nature* (1993), says that we can interpret spirituality “quite literally as a reference to spiritual energy or even a spiritual entity which is animating my action from within myself.” This statement makes use of the word “animating.” “Anima” is the Latin word for soul, or motivating agency. It turns up in our words “animal” and “animated.” Thus, for the Romans even the stars were “animals” since they moved in the heavens. And Peter Van Ness, in introducing the book *Spirituality and the Secular Quest* (1996),

suggests that the term “spirituality” covers “moral seriousness” and “aesthetic sensitivity” along with responsiveness to community sentiments.

I might summarize all these inadequate gestures towards definition by saying that spirituality adds up everything we would attribute to the human experience and existence that is distinct from a human body acting merely as an automaton or well-programmed robot, charged with electrical and chemical energy.

In what follows I speak to four distinct challenges that present themselves to anyone hoping to translate key terms in spirituality.

- 1) How to translate when the spiritual experience referred to is rare. My term treated here is “Joy” important in the writings of the British author C. S. Lewis.

- 2) How to translate a term which hints of transcendence or mythic priority, but has fundamentally different

meanings in the East and in the West. My term here is “dragon.”

3) How to translate terms which name a core of values, convictions, and morals. My primary term here is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s two-word phrase “fundamental decencies.” As a corollary term in this connection I consider “conscience.”

4) How to translate a term which is grounded in the special social reality of a culture, and so differs in meaning from culture to culture. My term here is “person.”

The Term “Joy.”

Professor Xiangling Wang of Hunan University has had graduate students working at translating some of my narrative prose into Chinese. One book involved is my account of early experience titled *The World Has Edges*. The book is all about a child’s awareness of the

“more than what meets the eye.” We might summarize such in term of feelings, impressions, and impulses or movements by or of the human spirit. Quite understandably the student-translator wondered what the “edges” of the title were. My response could well be, “wherever matter meets spirit.”

So defined, “edges” would relate to a broad spectrum of early experiences, but in fact the core meaning was rooted in an experience I had just twice in my life. Something that rare is extremely difficult to pair with the experience of others, and so to translate from language to language.

Here was my experience at age three. I had traveled with parents to a town an hour’s drive south from my city of Cleveland, Ohio. Mother was visiting with a school friend, a single lady who worked for the local Board of Education. We all went to her workplace, a textbook depository. There were long halls, with closet doors opening on little rooms stocked, floor to ceiling, with textbooks.

While adults went on, perhaps to a lounge area, I hung back. One door in the hallway, only partly shut, opened up on a great mystery. A shaft of light from the hallway revealed a room full of dark shapes huddled, each no taller than a child's chest.

I stepped in, careful to stand in the light from the hall. Moving ahead a few steps, I pressed my upper body against one of the little tables. Then an alarm rang, a ringing sound coming from the shrouded shape. I had leaned against the cover of the typewriter, and its carriage had moved against my chest and its bell had rung out. There were no typewriters at home, and a roomful of typewriters was as alien to me as a room at the morgue or a chamber in a cathedral's crypt.

Yet it was not the typewriter's bell which provided the sharpest thrill. No, it was something quite different, in fact so different that I can be certain of only one recurrence in a lifetime. In that half-dark room, far from home, I knew an unmistakable pang for

something else. I was registering the utter Outside, the other side, the utterly different, yet oddly familiar.

Years before the writing of *The World Has Edges*, I published a five-part periodical version of much of what the book developed. As a preface to that series titled “A Street at the Edge of the World,” I wrote these words: “The persons we once were felt the difference between Inside and Outside. We didn’t know the word ‘finite,’ but we knew that we were on the inside of a realm with bounds. We knew that the landscape concealed as much as it revealed.”

In perhaps a dozen different books, the Irish-English author C. S. Lewis refers to “joy,” which for him was a rare and utterly precious experience. He describes it as intense longing for something not of this world. Scholars have related this to nostalgia for Paradise, or longing for one’s spiritual home. Lewis took the term from the poet William Wordsworth’s poetry of childhood, when one is “surprised by

joy.”

I cannot be certain that he and Wordsworth and I are talking about the same thing though we are all working in the same language. Some relate it to the German “sehnsucht.” My thesis director Louis Martz of Yale has written about something very similar turning up in the meditation of Augustine, writing in Latin. But the English variants are ones I know best. The English poets Henry Vaughan and Andrew Marvell refer suggestively to “white thoughts.” There are hints of such experience in Thomas Traherne, William Wordsworth, Eugene O’Neill, and in countless other places in Irish, English and American literature.

The Term “Dragon.”

Now consider with me the term “dragon.” Two years ago I lectured here and at Hunan University on the term. After the Hunan lecture, a student standing in the back of the crowded room asked me an unexpected

question: “Was I selling him the idea of God?” I was startled because, of course, I wasn’t. I did acknowledge that many would say that with both terms, “dragon” and “God,” we throw words in the direction of a great Mystery. Of course my reading had told me that in Chinese tradition it is quite possible to find the dragon being awarded divine status, and if the Han people are children of the dragon, they are children of God, much as a biblical writer makes progenitor Adam, and so the entire human race, the offspring of God. But I think we all know that the dragon varies through 180 degrees of difference from culture to culture, and indeed in my earlier lecture I had visuals showing several different versions of the state-sponsored dragon.

Notice with me now two very important ways the dragon is similar in East and in West and then explore with me a fundamental difference. Worldwide, the dragon is (first) reptilian and (second) associated with beginnings, but (third), in the East is

associated primarily with good weather, stable order and festive events while in the West is associated primarily with disruptive weather or storm, rebellion and evil.

First, the reptilian. Worldwide the dragon is a reptile, and must be understood in light of the reptilian. The mystery of the dragon as reptile is summed up at some length by the American biologist Carl Sagan in his book *The Dragons of Eden* (1977). Sagan was popular in the U.S. for his TV series *Cosmos*, but scholars know him as an expert involved with the Voyager space program and as the author of accessible scientific books.

Sagan points out that hind part of the human mind is often called the reptilian brain. It is the part of the brain that regulates primal desires and fears. It also preserves responses grounded in the remote past (this may explain why we human beings have an innate fear of snakes, perhaps because of a past in which we spent time in trees with snakes as uneasy

bedfellows).

To drive his thesis, Sagan goes beyond current conventional thinking by allowing that our mammalian ancestors overlapped with the dinosaurs. However, it is now speculated that the dinosaurs were warm-blooded, so that the hot breath of a pursuing reptilian monster might, just possibly, be preserved in the lore—and in our archetypal memories—of fire-breathing dragons.

Mysteries of the reptilian are reflected also in ancient Eastern and European notions of the snake as a figure of wisdom, power and healing. The snake of the biblical Eden had its counterparts in any number of ancient claims about the reptile. This would have been true of Babylonia, Egypt, Greece and Rome. The reptilian in all these places was associated with wisdom, magic, the uncanny. In the Americas the serpent figures prominently in creation stories of peoples bordering the Amazon River. In Canada, the Ojibwe people acknowledge an underground serpent as a

great energy source. (Curiously, the fact is that the area involved with this dragon was the site of a major uranium deposit.)

In short, the snake in its many biological and mythological manifestations embodies the human fascination with the reptilian in all its history and mystery, and the dragon partakes of this.

Second, beginnings. The dragon is present at beginnings, and is associated with creation, generation, and the founding of regimes. In providing the basic stuff for a world the dragon is identified with chaos and ocean.

China's traditions about dragons are, I think, so familiar as to need no elaboration here, except to note that tradition has the dragon as sire or father of the Han people, and the patron of dynastic regimes.

In ancient Babylonia and Assyria the founding myth had the god Marduk fighting the sea monster Tiamat. Tiamat's carcass became the raw material for the creation of the

world. In ancient Hebrew belief Tiamat became Tehom, or the watery deep (Genesis 1:1 in the Bible). God's spirit, or wind, moves over the deep (Tehom), and creation begins.

In Central America, which saw the rise of the Aztec people, the dominant myth was of Quetzlcoatl and his adversary Tezcatlipoca. Quetzlcoatl was often figured as a feathered or plumed serpent, in other words, a flying snake or dragon, and he was credited with creation of the world.

In biblical tradition the serpent is also associated with healing and new creation. Disobedient Israelites could be saved from poisonous serpents by looking on a bronze serpent raised on a pole. A huge stone serpent is present beside the altar in England's Salisbury cathedral, a richly symbolic placement acknowledging both the bronze serpent of Israelite history and the healing Christ of Christian belief, whose sacrificial death on a cross was like the serpent's healing role in Israelite experience. So the serpent is

implicated in both regeneration and new beginnings.

Third, good weather. In the West the dragon is associated with chaos, sea, bad weather and primordial evil. But in the East the association is more with good or temperate weather, with stable social order, with festive events. In a lecture delivered two years ago I speculated, building on the anthropologist Levi-Strauss, that perhaps it was the ongoing threat of rapid change in a so-called “hot” society—one in which change is uncommonly disruptive—which meant the West’s connecting of dragon with chaos and evil. Certainly by the dawn of the Common Era, two thousand years ago, the dragon-devil has become identified with the middle region of the atmosphere, where weather is made.

In the Bible’s New Testament the devil is prince of the powers of the air, and Jesus claims to have seen, somehow, the devil’s fall “like lightning.” In his *Paradise Regained*, the

poet Milton's version of Jesus's temptation has Satan the devil setting up his base of operations in the middle air, where he has his palace Pandemonium. In Milton's earlier epic *Paradise Lost*, Pandemonium had been established in Hell. The term "Pandemonium" is Milton's invention, and as you can guess, it makes the tight link between evil, bad weather, and chaos. It is the dragon's seat, so very unlike the mountain peaks in China where a benevolent dragon may practice good behavior among the terraced rows of tea bushes. Milton's dragon is evil and aligns itself with the equivalence established in *Apocalypse*, the last book of the Bible, between devil, dragon, Satan and quintessential evil.

What word could possibly convey in English the Chinese reckoning with the dragon as a magnificent creature of myth and national identity? On the other hand, what Chinese term exists to convey the majesty, dread, malignity and horror associated with the Devil-Dragon of John's *Apocalypse*?

The Term “Fundamental Decencies.”

A widely-read American novel, *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, tells of a man who rises from obscurity to wealth and grandeur in New York. But Jay Gatsby is hopelessly in love with an inaccessible married woman, and we learn that his money was accumulated by dishonest dealings. The narrator of the story, Nick Carroway from the relatively virtuous Midwest, is dismayed, appalled by Jay Gatsby’s story which he is telling. How could anyone depart so far from the fundamental decencies? This question is not unlike those circulating in U.S. papers today, where norms taken for granted are violated frequently by those in high office.

So what are the fundamental decencies? Are they common to different cultures? In the U.S. at the present we think it a common decency *not* to prefer your relatives in providing privileged jobs or positions. And isn’t it a common decency *not* to sleep with the

wife of the man servicing one's automobile? However, if we are hoping to identify a set of values common to all cultures, is it not possible that there is no such thing? A South Asian culture, for example, values clever betrayal, though most developed cultures would find such a concession impossible to manage.

In the background of Fitzgerald's novel is the great American pastime of baseball. A dark suspicion about Gatsby is that his money came by working with a bigtime gambler who corrupted the 1919 World Series in baseball. Outrageous! Even monstrous. A recent *New York Times* issue reports that the Boston Red Sox cheated, using iPhones to spy on the New York Yankees' in-game signals. New York was fined. Baseball fans would call this betrayal of the game "despicable." Was a fundamental decency violated? What would a South African, who loves soccer but not baseball, say?

Related to the topic of fundamental

decencies is that of conscience. In the English of Geoffrey Chaucer, a fourteenth-century British author, a term for “conscience” was “inwit.” Conscience was considered a special inner knowing. For a modern psychotherapist like the Swiss Carl Jung, conscience is described as an inner “voice.” And, according to Jung, it is not one’s own voice, nor is it the voice of the community or society. It is the voice of absolute moral authority, independent of self and society. Religious people might call it the voice of God, and non-religious might settle for the voice of the Right. Indeed, I am told that the Chinese term for “conscience” would be translated as “right knowledge,” Implied is the conviction that moral laws as objective as gravity or inertia make themselves known as conscience.

We know that every mature society must develop standards by which corruption, unfair advantage and exploitation can be defined and addressed. We might speak of “state conscience,” but of course the single word

“conscience” traditionally refers to private and personal morality. I must acknowledge that major problems are associated with the term “conscience” in English. Many moralists would say, with Freud the father of psychoanalysis, that it is no more than the internalized values of one’s family and society, or what Freud calls the “superego.” But even if conscience is usually no more than an internalizing of the best values to which one is exposed, cannot one wonder if there are not ethical values which lie outside the circle of one’s personal experience? We speak of the training of conscience, and what of the training of conscience that comes, not from hanging out with family and the familiar crowd, but from reading and travel? Can revelations of these truths and values come about through inspiring figures like a Confucius or a Buddha or a Jesus?

In short, can the inner voice be more than superego or the internalized message of one’s family and quotidian society? This is the sort

of question that any responsible spirituality will engage with. And I have not even touched on how differently conscience might be understood in a culture that functions in terms of shame rather than guilt. Alas, thus are the momentous struggles of the translator. What is one to do?

The Term "Person."

In English the term "person" traces to the Latin term "persona," or mask, which has for its Greek equivalent a term translated as "hypocrite." There is no escaping the irony here: language itself implies that we are nothing more than what we pretend to be.

I would protest this reduction. For you to know me, you must know my dreams, my aspirations, my spirit. To know you, I would assume I need to know what you would like to be, or hope to be. Also, as the Irish poet William Butler Yeats says, one wears a mask to acquire virtue. The mask, or literal "hypocrisy," is the tool of moral and spiritual

growth. So hypocrisy's assumed sinister nature is not as clear-cut bad as one may uncritically think.

So you glimpse the ironies and ambiguities that attend the English term "person." What if we expand the problem to include a common equivalent in English for "person," that is, "individual." That word first entered English in the age of Shakespeare and Milton, about the same time as did the term "self-consciousness." It derives from the Latin, and suggests what cannot be divided, or that which is characterized by a singular integrity. "Individual" is equivalent to the Greek for "atom."

Any Chinese listener must be puzzled—if not alarmed—at designating a person as "atomic," or discrete and entire apart from other people. How can you be human without family and community?

Against the assumed meaning of person as an indivisible individual, one must place in apposition the ongoing debate in Western

culture over the several parts of the human being.

In my lifetime I have heard more than once the rare term “trichotomous,” that is, the capacity to be divided into three parts. Some analysts want to describe the human person in terms of body, soul and spirit. In that trichotomy either soul or spirit may be designated as the supreme element of the person. “Spirit” may denote no more than the link between body and soul, though a link which somehow, for the mystically informed, is also a connection with nature and world.

I admit that much obscurity, divergence of opinions, and controversy is part of the “trichotomous” discussion. Rightly do we say that what each part is or does in its role in making a human person has not yet come to a settled judgment. No wonder that the translator has a daunting task with these concepts. If in essence we do not know what they really are, what real chance do we have at establishing common, translatable sets of

signs to use in describing them?

Let me summarize the four challenges I have listed, challenges that occur in translating spirituality.

With the term “Joy” we consider the challenge of translating a term for very rare experience, when comparison is difficult.

With the term “Dragon” we have noticed how a figure pointing to something archetypal and aboriginal can have radically different reference in East and West. Can one term ever suffice?

With the two-word phrase “Fundamental Decencies” we have considered the challenge of identifying core values which may differ from culture to culture. The related term “Conscience” points to the possibility of deep intercultural agreement on knowledge of the right, good, and true.

With the term “Person” we have noticed

how cultures differ radically in their constructions of the human entity, depending upon social reality.

I close with a very theoretical question, and then a hope. With the improvements of machine intelligence we keep hearing about the possibility of a “universal translating machine.” I guess this is remotely possible, though we do keep discovering new obscure languages in enclaves and hidden valleys. My question is, Are there things, and feelings, and hopes so fundamental, that a concise universal lexicon is possible? My own hope is that yes, there are, that they identify a core human spirituality, and that ultimately *everyone can converse with everyone else, and more importantly, can understand and value what the other persons are saying.*