



AN INTERPRETATION OF FENG YOULAN'S ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL TERMS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TRANSKNOWLEDTOLOGY

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Abstract

Feng Youlan's translation of Chinese classics has long been a subject of scholarly attention and research. However, few studies have interpreted his selection of philosophical terms and his translation philosophy of "translation as interpretation" from the perspective of Transknowletology. Transknowletology posits that translation is a "cross-linguistic cultural practice and social act involving the processing, reconstruction, and dissemination of knowledge between local and global knowledge systems." This paper employs the theoretical framework of Transknowletology to elucidate Feng Youlan's choices in knowledge-based text selection, knowledge production methods, and his translation philosophy in rendering Chinese philosophical classics into English, thereby expanding the theoretical scope of translator studies.

Keywords

Feng Youlan, Philosophical Term Translation, Transknowletology

1. Introduction

Feng Youlan is a 20th-century philosopher and historian of philosophy who made epochal contributions to traditional Chinese philosophy and national culture. His philosophical works, spanning nearly the entire century, have influenced generations of scholars and reached audiences in Japan and the West, earning him recognition on the global philosophical stage (Li Zhonghua, 2003). While Feng is renowned as a philosopher, historian of philosophy, and educator, his extensive translation practice—encompassing self-translation, individual translation, and collaborative translation in both Chinese and English—along with his substantial body of translated works (totaling 26 pieces or volumes) and mature translation philosophy, also qualify him as a distinguished translator (Zhou Yong, 2020). In the prefaces to his English works, such as *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, and his English translation of *Zhuangzi*, Feng proposed numerous forward-looking translation ideas that integrate Chinese and Western thought, offering significant inspiration for the enrichment and construction of China's translation theories (Gu Feng, 2013).

Recent scholarship has examined Feng's philosophical classics and translation philosophy from various perspectives. Feng Quangong (2022) studied the translation methods of philosophical terms in Feng's *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, exploring the application of transliteration with explanation, semantic translation, and reverse analogical interpretation under the guidance of his "translation as interpretation" philosophy. Zhou Yong (2020) analyzed Feng's use of Western logical analysis, discussing his understanding of philosophical terms, translatability, translation standards, methods, and criticism, as well as his profound philosophical translation philosophy. Gu Feng (2013) investigated Feng's views on the nature of translation, translation ethics, ideology, and the "name-reality" relationship in translation. These studies have enriched research on Feng's translated philosophical works and his translation philosophy, yet few have applied Transknowletology to examine his translation of philosophical terms.

Chinese classics constitute a knowledge system and intellectual wellspring that embodies the shared life, beliefs, language, and memory of the Chinese nation. They represent local knowledge with Chinese characteristics and are an integral part of the global knowledge system. Translators serve as the agents of globalization, facilitating

the understanding, acceptance, and application of local knowledge worldwide (Zhou Fujuan, 2023). Transknowletology views translation as a cross-linguistic cultural practice and social act involving the processing, reconstruction, and dissemination of knowledge (Yang Feng, 2021c). “Knowledge is both the essence and the purpose of translation; it is both the theory and the method of translation” (Yang Feng, 2021a). Studying Feng’s English translation of philosophical terms through the lens of Transknowletology not only systematically examines the cultural act of reconstructing traditional Chinese knowledge in his deep translation process but also explores the social practice of promoting knowledge transfer in target cultures. This approach provides an innovative pathway for researching how local knowledge achieves international dissemination while interpreting Feng’s choices in knowledge-text selection, knowledge production methods, and his translation philosophy.

2. Feng Youlan’s Selection of Knowledge Texts for Translating Philosophical Terms

Transknowletology focuses on the transformation of local knowledge into global knowledge, situating translation within the historical context of different knowledge communities. It scientifically analyzes the practices and experiences of selecting, processing, and adapting knowledge across languages, as well as the cultural, social, and political conditions underpinning language conversion and concept formation (Yang Feng, 2021c). Translation is the process of globalizing local knowledge, turning knowledge carried by different languages into a shared global resource. Thus, the primary task in Feng’s translation of philosophical terms was selecting which local knowledge to reproduce.

In 1926, while at Yenching University, Feng wrote *A Brief Account of Plato’s Philosophy* and *Montague’s Theory of Universals*, and translated *Fragments of Heraclitus* and *A Comparison of 18th and 19th Century European Thought*. Invited by Professor Lucius Chapin Porter, an American professor at Yenching, Feng taught a course on *Zhuangzi* at the Beijing Language School for foreigners, using his own translation as the textbook. This translation was later published in 1931 by the Commercial Press in Shanghai, becoming the first English translation of *Zhuangzi* by a Chinese scholar. During the decade of hardship following the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War, Feng wrote six seminal works collectively known as the *Six Books of Zhenyuan*: *New Rationalism*, *New Treatise on the Nature of Things*, *New Treatise on the Way of Living*, *The Spirit of Chinese Philosophy*, *New Treatise on the Methodology of Metaphysics*, and *A New Treatise on the Nature of Man*. In August 1946, Feng collaborated with American sinologist Derk Bodde to translate his two-volume *A History of Chinese Philosophy* into English. For teaching purposes, Feng also wrote an English manuscript titled *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (Li Zhonghua, 2003).

Feng’s translated and authored works primarily focus on the study of Chinese philosophical history, with selected classics encompassing Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, and Taoism. These works are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, representing a distinctive local knowledge system that helps Western readers better understand Chinese philosophy, historical context, and social realities, thereby fostering cultural exchange and dialogue between China and the West. These translations are rich in Chinese philosophical thought, particularly in inheriting and developing Neo-Confucian ideas, with their philosophical terms constituting local knowledge emblematic of Chinese civilization. This local knowledge is both the essence and the purpose of translation.

Among these works, Feng’s *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, written in English, has achieved international acclaim and made significant contributions to the dissemination of Chinese philosophy in the West. Li Zhonghua remarked, “From the perspective of cultural history or Sino-Western cultural exchange, the influence of *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* far more surpasses that of the two-volume *A History of Chinese Philosophy* in the West. To date, the latter has only been translated into English and Japanese, while the former has been translated into nearly ten languages, including French, Italian, Spanish, Czech, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. If *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* is regarded as a broad act of translation, its writing inevitably involves numerous specific translations, including textual fragments and philosophical terms. Beyond its widespread popularity, the greater value of this work lies in its academic rigor and its ability to integrate philosophy into culture” (Li Zhonghua, 2003).

The inclination in translation material selection is closely tied to the translator’s personal characteristics and life experiences. Translators often choose works that align with their temperament, aesthetic preferences, and cultural orientation (Zhu Xianlong & Tu Guoyuan, 2009). Feng Youlan was immersed in traditional Chinese culture and thought from an early age. By the age of seven, he had begun studying *the Four Books*, followed by *the Book of Songs*. At nine, he moved to Wuchang with his parents, where his father guided and his mother supervised his education. There, he completed *the Book of Documents*, *the Book of Changes*, and began *the Zuo Zhuan*. Feng developed a passion for philosophy and logic early on, aspiring to study Western philosophy. He studied under prominent philosophers such as the pragmatist John Dewey and the neo-realists Woodbridge and Montague at Columbia University, where he delved into the works of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel. These familial and educational experiences laid a solid theoretical and practical foundation for his later understanding, selection, evaluation, adaptation, and interpretation of Chinese classical knowledge.

3. Feng Youlan's Options of Knowledge Production Methods in Translating Philosophical Terms

Transknowletology emphasizes the translation of local knowledge generated in human production, daily life, and scientific experimentation (Yang Feng, 2022a). It aims to achieve language transformation, discourse shaping, and knowledge construction through the processing, reconstruction, and dissemination of knowledge, thereby promoting the globalization of local knowledge. Since knowledge and its embedded ideas are rooted in their specific contexts, people always acquire local knowledge through situated practices. However, non-situational or universal knowledge can also be obtained through experimentation. Therefore, translating one form of local knowledge into another inevitably involves decontextualization and recontextualization. Translators must deeply understand the local knowledge behind language, including folk customs, lifestyles, and cultural taboos, while integrating their own unique experiences, living environments, and cultural backgrounds to modify and interpret the original text. Through the conflict, collision, exchange, and fusion of two forms of local knowledge, new local knowledge emerges (Qin Jianghua, 2022). Translators strive to transform perception into knowledge, knowledge into wisdom, and wisdom into beauty (Yang Feng, 2021b), meeting the demands of knowledge globalization and universality (Yang Feng, 2022b). In this process, translators are the agents of knowledge acts, the initiators of knowledge processing, and the disseminators of local cultural knowledge. The translator and their knowledge production methods—the pathways and approaches to acquiring, creating, and disseminating knowledge—cannot be overlooked. Translation can be regarded as a special form of meaning-based information processing. In other words, translation involves processing information in one language and generating equivalent information in another language that conveys the same meaning while preserving the original text's intent.

As a translator, Feng Youlan employed various strategies to handle local knowledge. In *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, his approaches to translating philosophical terms can be categorized into three main methods:

Transliteration (+ Explanation): This was the most frequently used method, often accompanied by corresponding English translations or Feng's own interpretations, enhancing readability and comprehensibility. For example, in translating the Taoist term “道”(Tao) from Laozi's phrase “为学日益 · 为道日损” (“In the pursuit of learning, one increases daily; in the pursuit of the Tao, one decreases daily”), Feng used the conventional transliteration “Tao” and added an explanatory note in parentheses: “Tao (the Way, the Truth).” Similarly, he translated Confucius's “朝闻道” as “To hear Tao in the morning,” explaining, “Here Tao means the Way or Truth.” For the Confucian concept “忠恕之道” (the principle of loyalty and reciprocity), he used “the principle of chung and shu.” These explanatory notes help readers grasp the nuanced meanings of “Tao” in different contexts, appreciating its richness.

Semantic Translation: Feng also employed semantic translation for key Confucian terms like “仁” (ren, human-heartedness). For instance, he wrote, “The idea of yi is rather formal, but that of jen (human-heartedness) is much more concrete,” and later alternated between “jen” and “human-heartedness.” In subsequent passages, he sometimes used direct transliteration (e.g., “man of jen” for “仁者”) and other times semantic translation (e.g., “Human-heartedness consists in loving others” for “仁者爱人”). For important terms, Feng typically used transliteration with explanation upon their first occurrence, followed by either transliteration or semantic translation in later uses, or a combination of both, reinforcing the connection between sound and meaning for readers. **Reverse Analogical Interpretation:** For some philosophical terms, Feng provided brief explanations before consistently using transliteration, including commonly accepted or his own transliterations. For example, in discussing Confucius's concept of “知命” (Knowing Ming), he explained, “Ming is often translated as Fate, Destiny, or Decree.”

The Confucian idea of “正名”(rectification of names) was uniformly translated as “the rectification of names” using semantic translation. Compared to transliteration with explanation, semantic translation was less common in *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, especially for core terms, where transliteration predominated, sometimes combined or alternated with semantic translation. Many explanatory terms in the transliteration strategy also exemplified reverse analogical interpretation. For instance, Feng wrote, “In the Taoist system, there is a distinction between yu (being) and wu (non-being),” using Western philosophical terms “being” and “non-being” to interpret the Chinese concepts “有” and “无.”

The primary task of translation is to establish correspondences between the source and target languages, considering the source author's intent while meeting target readers' expectations. Through mechanisms of language conversion, translators integrate the knowledge carried by the source text with their individual, social, and cultural knowledge into the entire knowledge production process, transforming it into knowledge in the target language. This knowledge then connects with related fields in the target culture, fostering the emergence of new knowledge forms (Zhang Shengxiang, 2022). Feng Youlan's choice of knowledge production methods in translating philosophical terms reflects his role as a knowledge agent operating under specific historical conditions, selecting and transforming local knowledge based on his practical experience. These methods enabled the reproduction,

conversion, circulation, and dissemination of traditional Chinese cultural knowledge in English, introducing the essence of Chinese civilization to the world and integrating it into the global cultural knowledge system.

4. Feng Youlan's Philosophy of Translation

Knowledge is the understanding and experience of the world gained from life practice. In the shared process of selecting which local knowledge to globalize for reproduction and dissemination, the translator's personality—their individuality, temperament, character, talent, and psychological disposition—plays a decisive role in their value judgments about translation materials (Liao Jing & Li Jing, 2018). Feng Youlan's translation of philosophical terms situates Chinese classics as an independent intellectual and cultural system within the framework of global thought, facilitating their comprehension and transformation. His philosophy of translating classics is the sublimation of Chinese translation wisdom and ideas, grounded in extensive practical experience in translation processing, management, and transformation.

Feng's translation philosophy is prominently articulated in the first chapter, *The Spirit of Chinese Philosophy*, particularly his view of “translation as interpretation.” Feng believed that “a Western student beginning the study of Chinese philosophy is confronted first with a language barrier, and second with the way Chinese philosophers express their ideas” (Feng Quangong, 2022). Influenced and inspired by Hu Shi, Feng maintained a high level of methodological consciousness from the 1920s to the 1980s in his research on Chinese philosophy and its history. At the end of the chapter, he cited Kumarajiva's analogy that translation is “like chewing food for others,” arguing that if one cannot eat independently, they must rely on others to chew for them. Whether discussing the suggestive nature of translation or agreeing with the “chewing food” analogy, Feng held that translations are inherently inferior to originals: “No matter how perfect a translation may be, it can never match the original.” In other words, a full understanding of Chinese philosophy requires reading the original texts. Since most foreigners do not understand Chinese, they must rely on translations to access and comprehend Chinese philosophy. This may have been Feng's motivation for “persisting despite the impossibility,” aiming to provide English readers with a window into Chinese philosophy and promote cross-cultural intellectual exchange.

Feng viewed translation as “a form of interpretation,” where translators can only interpret the original meaning based on their understanding—a highly insightful perspective (Feng Quangong, 2022). Feng practiced what he preached, as evident in his translation of philosophical terms, which demonstrated respect for the source culture (e.g., through transliteration and literal translation) while accommodating English readers (e.g., through explanatory notes). Translation is interpretation, and term translation is even more so (Feng Quangong, 2022).

Feng placed great emphasis on logical analysis, regarding it as the “golden finger” of Western philosophers. The greatest strength of Feng's *A History of Chinese Philosophy* lies in its consistent attention to the unity of formal and substantive systems in philosophy (Zhou Haichun, 2024). Feng believed that the relationship between names and realities is the heart of philosophy. Since the translation of philosophical terms involves this relationship, Feng attached great importance to it (Zhou Yong, 2020). By applying Western logical analysis, Feng explored the comprehension, translatability, standards, methods, and criticism of philosophical term translation, forming a profound philosophy of translating philosophical terms. Feng analyzed the differences between Chinese and Western languages, noting that Western languages express the connotations and denotations of concepts through morphological changes, while Chinese characters, despite lacking such changes, can convey precise concepts.

Feng also used logical analysis to clarify the connotations of Chinese philosophical terms. Before Feng, traditional Chinese philosophical terms were often vague and ambiguous. Feng employed logical analysis to render them clear and precise. He stated, “In our view, logical analysis is the method of distinguishing names and analyzing principles” (Feng Youlan, 2014d). Feng further proposed standards for translating philosophical terms: “Many ‘terms’ in Western philosophy can be used to analyze, explain, translate, and critique ancient Chinese philosophy. However, translations must be accurate, and explanations must be appropriate. This is no easy task” (Feng Youlan, 2001a).

Translation is a purposeful activity constrained by the cultural backgrounds, customs, and values of its environment. The motivation and purpose of Wang Rongpei's knowledge production methods in translating classics were to convey the essence of Taoist thought, classical poetry, and drama to target audiences and facilitate the circulation and application of knowledge. All knowledge is essentially local, rooted in human experience, experimentation, and practice. The so-called universality of knowledge is merely its global comprehension, transmission, usage, and justification, which determine its cognitive, evaluative, transformative, and interpretive functions (Yang Feng, 2021a). The translator's self-knowledge (individual knowledge reserves), modes of inquiry, and translation objectives influence and determine their understanding and transformation of others' knowledge (textual knowledge). In translating Chinese classics into English, Feng adopted methods such as transliteration with explanation, semantic translation, and reverse analogical interpretation to realize “translation as interpretation,” balancing Chinese thought patterns with Western linguistic habits. His goal was to accurately render the original text while preserving its artistic value and aesthetic appeal—seeking truth through knowledge, goodness through

meaning, and beauty through expression—thereby fostering dialogue between the local and global dimensions of knowledge and achieving the truth, goodness, and beauty of knowledge.

5. Conclusion

Transknowletology re-examines the nature and value of translation, the local and global dimensions of knowledge, and the relationship between source and target texts from the perspective of knowledge and translation. Upholding the three principles of translation—“truth, goodness, and beauty”—it emphasizes that translation is the transmission of knowledge, involving the reconstruction and dissemination of source culture knowledge through the medium of the target language. Thus, translating classics is a cross-linguistic cultural practice and social act that adheres to Chinese traditions and practices while transmitting Chinese knowledge and telling Chinese stories. Language is the tool for conveying knowledge, translators are the agents who possess knowledge, and texts are the material carriers of knowledge... Translators occupy the center of the translation practice field (Chen Daliang, 2022).

As agents of knowledge reproduction in translating classics, translators play a pivotal role in the transformation of local knowledge into global knowledge. Their adaptive and selective agency is the prerequisite for bridging knowledge. Just as translators introduced Western knowledge to China through translation, translators of Chinese classics brought China into the Western worldview through translation. Feng Youlan’s English translation of philosophical terms is a paradigmatic example of knowledge dissemination and generation through translation, reflecting his continuous extraction and adaptation of individual, textual, and social knowledge to produce cross-linguistic knowledge products that meet the demands of target cultures. Examining translators’ knowledge selection, production, and dissemination through the lens of Transknowletology can expand the scope of translator studies and provide new theoretical perspectives for research.

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