



# Translating Western Philosophical Concepts

## Observations from the Perspective of Translating into Chinese

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### Keywords

Translation, philosophy concepts, cultural differences, semantics, Chinese context

### Abstract

Translation of western philosophical concept into Chinese is often considered to be challenging. This is attributed to both linguistic and cultural differences. This article discusses these challenges under four categories, namely terminology, semantic understanding and context, philosophical disputes, and language reconstruction and combination. For each category, one or two examples are presented to illustrate the challenges. How each of these challenges is resolved is also discussed so as to provide the readers with some guidelines if they encounter similar challenges in their work.

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## 1. Introduction

The book entitled “*Blue Ethics: Ethical Perspectives on Sustainable, Fair Water Resources Use and Management*” edited by Dr Benoît Girardin and Dr Evelyne Fiechter-Widemann, is published by Globethics Publications. It has also been launched in French, Spanish and Chinese. On 7<sup>th</sup> December 2022, the Workshop 4 Water Ethics (W4W), the Swiss Chinese Law Association (SCLA) and Globethics.net hosted the International Conference on Water Management and Water Ethics in the Chinese context, in celebration of the recent publication of the Chinese translation. The translator was Mr. Jing Fei Jiang while the author supervised to ensure that the translated text had faithfully conveyed the meaning of the original text, among other things. The author was honoured to be invited to give a short presentation during the International Conference on his findings gained during the translation process. This article is based on that presentation.

## 2. Challenges in translating philosophical concepts

Translating western philosophical concepts involves not only the translation of the western language itself into Chinese, but also the expression of western philosophical ideas in Chinese.

It is often deemed challenging based on two perspectives:

- Linguistic, relating to differences in the language itself.
- Difference between cultures. Western philosophy and ethics have something unique not in Chinese in terms of its intellectual content.

Some challenges based on these two perspectives would be discussed under the following four broad categories. Examples are given for illustration, together with suggestions on how to handle them.

- Terminology
- Semantic understanding and context

Philosophical disputes  
Language reconstruction and combination

### 3. Terminology

There are English terms or phrases that have their equivalent in Chinese. These include fundamental terms like “water”, or more recently and commonly accepted translated terms such as “sustainability”. For example, the following terms in English have their equivalent Chinese terms.

Water Ethics      水伦理

Principle of Sustainability      可持续性原则

For many other terms or phrases, there are no direct equivalents available, hence suitable replacement terms must be used, as shown in Example 1.1.

#### Example 1.1

“Its first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, realized that, if the new country has to survive and thrive, it must achieve water security on a long-term basis. He told us that ‘every policy must bend at the knees for water’”

“Foreword”, *Blue Ethics*, p. 11:<sup>1</sup>

If the expression “bend at the knees” is translated literally, the meaning of the original text will not be clear as it does not have an equivalent expression in Chinese. There is also no suitable synonymous idiom available.

To overcome this situation, the “free translation method” is used to retain the meaning of the original text, but not the form of expression. The translated text is paraphrased as follows: “He told us that ‘make water issue the most

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<sup>1</sup> All examples in this paper are taken from the book: “*Blue Ethics, Ethical Perspectives on Sustainable, Fair Water Resources Use and Management*”. Refer to Bibliography section. The corresponding Chinese examples are also taken from the Chinese version of *Blue Ethics*.

important criterion in policy making.”” Hence the second sentence is translated as follows:

“他告诉我们，‘ 每一项政策都必须把水奉为至高准则。’”

《蓝色伦理》，“前言”，第14頁

Quite often during translation it is found that certain words need to be further emphasized to alert the readers their importance. The “amplification method” can be used to achieve the effect. Based on the differences in the way of thinking, language habits and expressions between English and Chinese, some words, phrases or sentences are added to the translation in order to express the meaning contained in the original text. Example 1.2 provides one of many such applications.

### Example 1.2

The title of the chapter 30:

“Beauty Matters to Inspire Respect. A Foundation Stone for Ethics”, In: *Blue Ethics*, Ch. 30, p. 223:

The translated title is:

“美对激发尊重举足轻重 - 伦理的基石”

《蓝色伦理》，第339頁

In this example, the verb “matters” has several common equivalent verbs in Chinese. However, in order to emphasize the term “matters”, a Chinese idiom is added: “举足轻重”. This transliteration means “a foot's worth of weight”, or “pivotal” or “play an important role”. By using such idiom, the Chinese readers can feel at ease as they are familiar with these idioms. It helps to create an impression to them that they are reading an original text written in their native language.

As there are many alternatives available for translating a term or expression, the translator has to fully grasp the intended meaning of the terms in the

original text in the native language, and to select the most appropriate equivalent or expressions available in the targeted language. This would ensure the meaning of the original text is faithfully conveyed and improve the readability of the translated text.

## 4. Semantic understanding and context

There is a common linguistic phenomenon where the same terminology could have multiple meanings in English, and also multiple meanings in Chinese. The same terminology may have different meanings, depending on the specific context in which it is used.

### Example 2.1

“International Water Law (IWL) furthermore provides a legal framework that serves to de-securitize the discussion to allow public empowerment towards environmental justice, at least in theory.”

“International Hydro-politics: Lessons for Water Diplomacy from the Jordan and the Nile”, In: *Blue Ethics*, Ch. 15, p. 122:

The term “de-securitize” can be used in a political context, as in the above sentence on IWL:

“a process in which a political community downgrades or ceases to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object and reduces or stops calling for exceptional measures to deal with the threat.”

The term “de-securitize” can also be used in a financial context:

“Desecuritization means reversing the securitization process. Securitization converts large numbers of individual loans into security issues. Desecuritization converts the securities back into individual loans.”

The more commonly used terminology would often have more numerous interpretations. An illustration is given in the following example.

**Example 2.2:**

“Figure 1: Mirumachi’s TWINS matrix of water conflict and cooperation, applied to bilateral relations over time between Sudan and Egypt (up to 2008) (from Zeitoun and Mirumachi 2008: Fig 3).”

“International Hydro-politics: Lessons for Water Diplomacy from the Jordan and the Nile”, In: *Blue Ethics*, Ch. 15, p. 119:

The common term “over time” could have different meanings depending on the context. In this example it means over a period of time, and in another context, it could mean beyond a specific time period. The translator needs to select the correct interpretation based on the given context.

## 5. Philosophical disputes

Buddhist culture and Confucian ethical culture can be considered the mainstream in Chinese culture, while the influence of Christian culture on Western philosophy is profound and long-lasting. Hence translation must consider these influences.

**Example 3**

“As explicated by sixteenth-century English pastors, the Golden Rule corresponded to the rule that Jesus placed at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6): ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you.’”

“Water, Vital Need and Global Justice: Ethical Perspective”, *Blue Ethics*, Ch. 27, p. 208:

The Bible verse is translated literally as follows:

“你们愿意人怎样待你们，你们也要怎样待人”

《蓝色伦理》, “水、重要需求和全球正义: 伦理视角”,

第224頁

Some translators may consider using the principle of *lex talionis*, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” i.e. “以眼还眼, 以牙还牙”. The reason being that, as quoted from this article in *Blue Ethics*: “At first sight, the maxim represents justice as equality or reciprocity between the two partners present, the agent and the patient, that is, the person who acts and the person who is being acted upon”. However, this Bible verse has a much profound and fundamental meaning. It is God’s command to not just simply treat others with decency but to being motivated by God’s love for everyone. Hence “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” is not an appropriate replacement, as it concerns prescribing a fitting counter punishment for a felony.

Some may be tempted to use a Chinese idiom that seems to have a similar meaning to this Bible verse:

“Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you”

or

“己所不欲, 勿施于人”

This idiom is from Confucius’ “*The Analects*”. It may not be appropriate to be used in this context. It is a negative statement, mostly implying not to actively do evil. The biblical teaching of this verse goes beyond the negative formulation of not doing what one would not like done to themselves, to the positive formulation of actively doing good to another that, if the situations were reversed, one would desire that the other would do for them.

The above example shows that the translator needs to have a good understanding of the philosophical content behind the original author’s text. The influence of culture and religion on philosophy further increases the challenges.

## 6. Language reconstruction and combination

For linguistic reasons, sentences must be reorganized in the translated language. For example: “historic amounts and volumes of export subsidies” is translated as: “出口补贴的历史金额和数量” which can be paraphrased as “export subsidies’ historic amounts and volume”.

Due to linguistic reasons, western philosophical writing uses longer sentences, whereas shorter sentences are more often seen in Chinese philosophical writings. To allow the Chinese readers to understand the longer sentences, components in the long sentence are reorganized by adjusting the semantic units according to the grammatical features of the Chinese language.

### Example 4

*“The difference principle, which allows social and economic inequalities provided that the inequalities are associated with functions and positions open to everyone in a context of fair equality of opportunity; any improvement in the lot of the most advantaged people is accompanied by an improvement in the lot of society’s most disadvantaged people (this is called the ‘maximin principle’).”*

*“The Social Justice Focus in Sustainable Development: Some Challenges of the Current Philosophical Discussion” In: *Blue Ethics*, Ch. 29, p. 219:*

The translated text would appear in this paraphrased format:

*The difference principle:*

if the inequalities are associated with functions and positions open to everyone in a context of fair equality of opportunity, then social and economic inequalities are allowed; improvement of the most advantaged people would be accompanied by similar improvement in society’s most disadvantaged people.



Following the above format, the translated text is:

“差别原则：如果由于各项职能和职位在公平的机会平等的背景下对所有人开放，那么承认社会和经济的不平等：众多最有利人群的改善伴随着社会众多最不利人群的改善（这一原则也称为“极大极小原则”）。”

《蓝色伦理》，“可持续发展中的社会正义焦点：当前哲学讨论的某些挑战”，第235页

The above example shows that in translating long sentences, the relationships of the components within the sentence structure need to be identified first. This is followed by reorganizing the semantic units in accordance with the Chinese linguistic rules to produce a target text which is more fluent and easier to read.

## 7. Conclusion

The four areas of challenge discussed are some of the major challenges encountered in translation, including philosophical work, resulting from linguistic and cultural differences. For success in translating western philosophical work, it depends very much on the translator's understanding and grasp of the original philosophical concepts which are influenced by the western culture and religion. It follows that translation of literate work or scientific text requires not only the overall understanding of these above mentioned articulation between languages and cultures but rhetorical, historical, technical and conceptual notions in a given work and/or overall a historical period.

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## 9. Short biography

Chee Chian Cheng obtained his BSc (Hons) in Computation at the University of Manchester, U.K. He holds an MSc in System Science from National University of Singapore and an MSc in Computer Study from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has taught computing at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore, for over 30 years. As he learned English, Chinese and Malay during school, he has a keen interest in language translation. He has obtained a Diploma in Translation and Interpretation from Singapore Chinese Chamber Institute of Business.

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