

# A Study on Translation of Numbers in *the Analects of Confucius* from the Perspective of Cultural Translation Theory—— a Case study of the Translation Version by Gu Hongming

Ying LI<sup>1,\*</sup>, Rui Xiang<sup>1</sup>, Shuxin Xiu<sup>2</sup>, Weiwei Qu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research and Teaching Institute of College Foreign Languages, Bohai University, Jinzhou Liaoning, 121013, China

<sup>2</sup>School of Foreign Languages, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, Jilin, 130024, China

**Abstract:** The language of the *Analects of Confucius* is concise, rich in connotation and highly abstract, so the problem of lack of meaning or semantic insufficiency is very obvious, and the numerical meaning is one of the most obvious examples. Based on Susan Bassnett view of cultural translation, this paper analyzes Gu Hongming's translated version of *Analects* and finds that there are great cultural differences between Chinese and Western numerals in terms of definite reference and vague reference. In addition to definite reference, Chinese numbers also have the function of vague reference; In English, numbers are mostly used in definite reference, and vague reference is mostly based on larger numbers. This increases the difficulty for translators and readers to understand the original work. In addition to having a solid bilingual foundation, the translator should have a profound bilingual cultural knowledge to realize the translation of cultural information behind the language. The theory of cultural translation has certain feasibility in guiding the translation of Chinese classics into English, which can promote the foreign translation of Chinese classics and has certain practical significance in promoting the transmission of Chinese culture to the world.

## 1. Introduction

At present, cultural diversity has become the mainstream of global development. In this context, China has attached great importance to carry forward its soft power especially its culture. We should tell Chinese stories to promote the international exchange of Chinese culture. Excellent literary translation can promote mutual learning of civilizations and people-to-people exchanges, thus building quality language services and enhancing the national image<sup>[1]</sup>. The translation of Chinese classics is exactly a kind of literary translation<sup>[1]</sup>. Relying on the translation and introduction of classics to let Chinese culture go global, we let more people better know about Chinese sinology, and enhance the correct understanding of China in the international community. It laid the foundation for the West to better understand China in the future<sup>[2]</sup>. The *Analects of Confucius* is one of the classical cultural classics in China, which plays an important role in ancient Chinese civilization and attracts the attention of people all over the world. Its English version can better play its function of intercultural exchange. With Susan Bassnett's cultural translation theory as the guidance, Gu Hongming's English translation of *the Analects of Confucius* as the corpus, this study analyzes the translation methods in numbers of Gu's translation, and explores these methods under the guidance of cultural translation theory,

in the hope that the methods can be applied to other English translations of classics. There are great differences between Chinese and Western cultures, so are numbers. Therefore, how to better translate numbers of classical Chinese into English is a great question which is worth exploring and studying. Gu Hongming frequently adopts the domestication translation strategy, that is, he tries his best to convert the information in the original work into the scope of knowledge understood by the readers. Therefore, his translation has been deeply praised by the other translators with the characteristics of that time.

## 2. Culture and number

### 2.1 Number is part of the culture

Number is a part of language, which not only has the function of counting, but also carries the historical and cultural information of a nation. The East and the West have different geographical locations, different cultures, religions, social customs, etc., so the interpretation of number is also different. Due to the cultural differences between English and Chinese, the specific number preferred in English and Chinese are not exactly the same. By comparing the different interpretations of numbers by Chinese and Western nationalities, it is helpful to understand the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and analyze their different social psychology,

\*Corresponding author's mail: [773325428@qq.com](mailto:773325428@qq.com)

which is of great significance for cross-cultural communication. Chinese and English belong to different language families in the East and the west, and the different cognition of numbers in the two languages also reflects the different cultural connotations of the East and the West.

For example, the number “three” has different cultural connotations in Chinese and Western cultures. Three is a number that Westerners respect and love, symbolizing holiness, fullness and auspiciousness. Christianity advocates the trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; The Pythagoreans believed that the three represented birth, life and death, the past and present and the future, men, women and children. Three also means good luck. There is a saying in English “All things come in threes.” In the eyes of Westerners, three is a lucky and auspicious number, representing a perfect and stable triangle.

The number “three” in Chinese culture mostly comes from ancient philosophical theories and thoughts. In the Tao Te Ching, it is said: “From Tao there comes one, from one there comes two, from two there comes three, from three there comes all things”. That everything in the world is derived from the number three. In Chinese culture, there are also symbols of fullness and holiness. Like the three spirits of heaven, earth and man. However, because “three” has the similar pronunciation to the word “scattered” which is full of unlucky meaning, some festive occasions will avoid fall on a date with the number three. In addition, in ancient Chinese, the words “three” mostly represent the concept of quantity. It can be used for both definite and vague reference, but three is only used for definite reference in English, without vague reference function. This requires more attention in Chinese-English translation to faithfully translate the full text.

## 2.2 Numbers are also influenced by culture

Due to cultural differences between English and Chinese, the specific numbers preferred in English and Chinese are not exactly the same. There are great cultural differences between Chinese and western numerals in terms of definite and vague reference. In Chinese, the vague number refers to “one” to “ten”, “hundred”, “thousand”, “million” and other numbers, while in English, it refers to a large number of numbers, such as a hundred and one, not in a hundred year and so on<sup>[3]</sup>. The extended meaning of numbers in ancient Chinese goes far beyond the numbers themselves. This is called vagueness in semantics. Zhang Rulun once said that both the lack of meaning and the excess of meaning produce inconsistency between the form and content of meaning<sup>[4]</sup>. The language of ancient Chinese classics is concise and rich in connotation, which often shows a lack of meaning, so that later generations cannot grasp their meaning. The concise and abstract language of the *Analects of Confucius* leads to the obvious problem of insufficient semantic meaning, among which the number meaning in ancient Chinese is the most obvious example. Numbers carry a lot of Chinese cultural connotations. In the process of translating numbers into English, it is more important to interpret the cultural

meaning of numbers. The various peoples do not use the same systems of hypernyms, so the translation, beyond the literal meaning, is likely to brand itself of erroneous meanings<sup>[5]</sup>. There are two kinds of numbers in the *Analects of Confucius*: definite and vague reference. For some numbers, literal translation according to its literal meaning can also be understood by the target readers, and literal translation can better convey the content and form of the source language. For some vague numbers, which cannot be translated literally, translators need to use free translation or ellipsis translation methods to translate them.

## 3. Cultural translation theory

Translation has a long history. Since the 1970s, translation has gone from being a marginal subject that was ignored like Cinderella to being incorporated into the field of study by linguists, and then scholars have noticed that translation is closely related not only to linguistics, but also to literature, philosophy and even sociology, psychology and other disciplines. Research is being conducted in the aesthetic, philosophical, psychological, linguistic, physiological, and sociological areas<sup>[6]</sup>. This long process has pushed translation studies to new heights again and again. In the 1980s, translation studies ushered in a new stage: cultural translation.

The cultural turn of translation studies is a major breakthrough in the field in recent years. Susan Bassnett, as the first translation theorist who put forward the view of cultural translation, argues that culture should be regarded as the basic unit of translation. She believes that translation should take culture as the unit of translation, and translation is not a simple code-recombination process, but more importantly a communication behavior. Translation should not be limited to the description of the source text, but should focus on the functional equivalence in the target language culture.

In other words, translation is a kind of cross-cultural exchange. Freedom is also connected to creativity, which is another motivating factor mentioned by translator<sup>[7]</sup>. Since language is an inseparable part of culture, translators should master the two cultures behind the two languages while having a good command of the two languages they translate. Translation, in essence, is a kind of cross-cultural behavior. Susan Bassnett’s cultural translation theory breaks the traditional concept of translation studies, brings translation studies to a new stage, provides a new theoretical perspective for translation studies, and has far-reaching significance for translation practice and research.

## 4. Translation strategies of numbers under the guidance of cultural translation theory

### 4.1 Definite reference

Numbers precisely refer to the aspects mentioned, and it is best to keep these numbers in English translation to convey the original information truthfully and accurately. Regarding these numbers, literal translation could be

adopted to make the lexical meaning of the translation as similar as possible to the original text. Take a sentence for example: “曾子曰:‘吾日三省吾身,为人谋而不忠乎,与人交而不信乎,传不习乎?’”(篇一)As for this sentence, Gu’s translation: “A disciple of Confucius remarked, ‘I daily examine into my personal conduct on three points:-- First, whether in carrying out the duties entrusted to me by others, I have not failed in conscientiousness; Secondly, whether in intercourse with friends, I have not failed in sincerity and trustworthiness; Thirdly, whether I have not failed to practice what I profess in my teaching.’” In this example, there are several interpretations of "three", one is the triple check; The second is to examine from three aspects; Third, multiple inspections. Since it is followed by three aspects of "seeking advice for others", "communicating with others" and "passing on", Gu Hongming regards this as the definite reference and adopts the literal translation method to translate it into "three points", so as to make the translation reproduce the style of the original text and accurately convey the original content.

#### 4.2 Vague reference

The concise language of ancient Chinese classics often shows a lack of meaning, which makes it impossible for future generations to grasp its meaning. Numbers carry many cultural connotations, so it is more important to interpret the vague numbers from the cultural significance of the numbers. Due to cultural heterogeneity, "it is not easy to find appropriate equivalents<sup>[8]</sup>. In the process of translation, it is necessary to use liberal translation instead of literal translation. Liberal translation means smoothly expressing the meaning of the source text without keeping the form of the target text. claims that liberal translation emphasizes the conveying of the actual meaning of the words of the source text in a specific context. Take this sentence as an example. “子曰:‘回也其心三月不违仁,其余则日月至焉而已矣。’”(篇六) Gu’s translation: “Confucius remarked of his disciple, the favourite Yen Hui, saying, ‘For months he could live without deviating from a pure moral life in thought as in deed. With other people, the utmost is a question of a day or a month.’” In this sentence, "three" is also a vague reference, "march" refers to a long time. Corresponding to "sun and moon" in the following clause, "sun and moon" here means "short time". This sentence means that Yan Hui's heart can not leave benevolence for a long time, and the rest of the students can only achieve benevolence for a short time. Therefore, Gu Hongming did not use literal translation in translation, but used free translation to translate "march" as "for months."

In ancient China, the number nine was the symbol of the emperor. The height of the three main halls of the Forbidden City is nine feet nine; Tian 'anmen rostrum is nine rooms wide; The doornails on the palace and the gates were nine rows across and nine rows up; The steps in the palace are nine, or a multiple of nine; Because the homophonic sound of "nine" is "long", it represents a long time, and also symbolizes the rule of the ancient emperors can last forever. In the following example taken from *The*

*Analects of Confucius*, the translation of “九” to English needs paying much attention. “子欲居九夷。或曰:‘陋,如之何?’”(篇九) Translation by Gu Hongming: “On one occasion Confucius said he would go and live among the barbarous tribes in the East: ‘You will there,’ remarked somebody, ‘feel the want of refinement.’” The “九夷” here is the general name for the Eastern minority in ancient China. Therefore, Gu Hongming also adopted the liberal translation strategy when translating “九夷” into “barbarous tribes in the East”. In some ancient Chinese, the word “九州” is also common, and here it is also a vague reference, short for ancient China. Therefore, it is often translated as “China”.

#### 5. Perspective on Gu's translation of *the Analects of Confucius* through cultural translation theory

Through the above analysis of the definite and vague reference of the numerical translation examples, it can be seen that Basnett's cultural translation theory is reasonable as a guide for the translation theory of the *Analects*. Translation, as a language communication activity, is not only the conversion of one language into another, but also the exchange between different cultures. Although any communication is achieved in the process of decoding and transcoding information, Basnett believes that translation is not a simple process of decoding and transcoding. In the process of converting two languages, translators should fully understand the unique culture contained in the two languages and realize the communication between language and culture. For example, “八佾” in the *Court* in the third chapter of the *Analects*, “Eight Yiwu” is indeed its actual meaning, that is, 64 people, but it contains cross-cultural information behind it is the content that should be most passed on to the reader. According to *The Book of Changes*, only the emperor of Zhou Dynasty can use “八佾”, 六佾, 四佾 and 二佾 namely for vassal, officials and scholars. However, Ji Shi, he illegally used the “八佾”, so this is an unforgivable transgression. Gu Hongming's translation not only translated the actual meaning of numbers, but also translated the cultural information behind them with simple and concise notes of “an Imperial prerogative”, which not only enhanced the comprehensibility of the translation, but also avoided the loss of cultural information. In addition, the translation of the same number in different contexts is also a major translation difficulty for translators. For example, “one” has three meanings in Chinese thought, one is the origin of all things, that is, “Tai one” in Taoist thought, the second is the chaotic state of heaven and earth, and the third is the unity between the objects that are opposite to “many” and “two”. “one” is a unique ideological concept in Chinese culture. In the Western philosophical world, there is no first and second meaning, only a third meaning, that is, the numeral one. In order to distinguish it from the numeral, the term is translated as the one, but different translations are still used for terms containing “one” in different contexts. For instance, in the following sentence, “一”,

mentioned twice, should not be translated into one: “父母之年，不可不知也。一则以喜，一则以忧”。 So this translation is better: A son should always keep in mind the age of his parents, as a matter of thankfulness as well as for anxiety.

## 6. Conclusion

The numbers in the *Analects of Confucius* carry rich connotations of Chinese culture. In the process of translation, the cultural translation theory can be used as a guide to convey their cultural significance more accurately and vividly. The study of Gu Hongming's translation activities is of great practical significance for promoting Chinese cultural classics to the world, enhancing the soft power of Chinese culture and shaping the image of Chinese culture. Translation is inherently a difficult task. Yan Fu once said that the three difficulties of translation namely faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance. The difficulties of translation are not only reflected in the understanding and expression of the original text, but also in the understanding and mastery of culture and background knowledge. It can be seen that the translator's cultural knowledge reserve plays an important role in translation work. Therefore, in order to convey the culture behind the language in the translation of abstract and rich cultural classics, the translation should be based on culture as the translation unit, rather than just from the linguistic level to achieve lexical, syntactic and textual equivalence. Bassnett's cultural translation theory provides a theoretical basis for this study. There is a great cultural difference between the definite reference and the vague reference in Chinese and western numerals. In English, numbers are mostly used for definite reference, and vague reference is mostly based on larger numbers. Therefore, in the process of translation, the translator should not only master the bilingual language ability, but also have a good bilingual cultural background knowledge, actively spread Chinese culture and show the Chinese cultural heritage.

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