

## Translation as an Expression of *Ren*

Philip J. Ivanhoe\*

---

Like Buddhism, Confucianism is a long and complex tradition that has spread throughout East Asia and the world. While the two have at times competed with one another, they also have deeply influenced and learned from one another and can continue to do so today. One of the most impressive features of the Buddhist tradition is its concerted and enduring effort to translate Buddhist sacred texts. Even today, there exist more than 12,000 Chinese translations of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit, Pali, and other ancient foreign languages first produced between 100 and 1000 CE (Wang 1984, 113–115). The prominent Parthian monk An Qing or An Shigao (fl. c. 148–180 CE) produced 34 of these earliest translated Buddhist scriptures (Loewe 1986, 670), along with others, employing the strategy of “matching concepts” 格義, first mentioned in the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (c. 530 CE).

One of many characteristics of this remarkable tradition of translation is its organized, team-based dimension, with Dao'an (312–385 CE) being the first organizer of such projects. Later, several members of his team assisted Kumārājīva (344–413 CE), one of the most renowned Buddhist translators in Chinese history, whose project was organized and sponsored by the imperial government of the later Qin era (384–417 CE) (Tang 2017). Such work was continued by Xuanzang, chief translator of the projects supported by Emperor Taizong, who composed a preface to their translation of the *Heart Sūtra*, in 649 CE (Guo 1994, 191).

---

\* Philip J. Ivanhoe is Director of the Sungkyun Institute for Confucian Studies and East Asian Philosophy at Sungkyunkwan University and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture*. E-mail: aiwenhe1954@gmail.com

The work of translation continues in contemporary times. A number of Tibetan groups have announced the goal of translating all of the *sūtras* into English. This is part of a larger effort encouraged by meetings such as the *Translating the Words of the Buddha Conference*, held in Bir, India.<sup>1</sup> Soka Gakkai, an organization promoting Nichiren Buddhism, has supported an extensive translation project for many years, enlisting such scholarly luminaries as the late Burton Watson. Dharma Realm Buddhist University<sup>2</sup> has also produced a long list of excellent translations of Buddhist sacred texts, working closely and in close collaboration with the Buddhist Text Translation Society<sup>3</sup> and at times with *Vajra Bodhi Sea*, a monthly Buddhist journal published continuously since 1970.<sup>4</sup>

Now, there are numerous reasons why Buddhism produced this remarkable legacy of translation and continues to add to it in the present age: among these is that it has been and remains a highly organized, proselytizing religion. But other, deeper features having to do with the practice of compassion motivate and support this work. Given that those within the tradition regard Buddhist teachings as the one true path that can lead sentient beings to the elimination of suffering, it follows that making the *Dharma* available to people is an act of compassion and, not incidentally, spiritually beneficial not only for the translator but also any who support such work (Kieschnick 2003, 164–184). One need not be a follower of the Buddha to agree with and endorse this argument; as long as one believes that Buddhist teachings are good for humanity, a proposition that strikes me as well beyond reasonable doubt, one should want to see them translated and available to as many people as possible.

The point of this commentary is to highlight the fact that there is no comparable, explicit commitment to translation within the Confucian tradition. The primary reasons for this are contingent and his-

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/translating-sutras/> (accessed November 2, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.drdu.edu/> (accessed November 2, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.buddhisttexts.org/> (accessed November 2, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.drbachinese.org/vbs/publish/main\\_index.htm](http://www.drbachinese.org/vbs/publish/main_index.htm) (accessed November 2, 2019).

torical. Confucianism developed in China and spread throughout East Asia over millennia, but for most of this time Classical Chinese was the *lingua franca* of literate people within these cultures. There was virtually no motivation to focus on, advocate, practice, and support translation and so no corresponding conception of it as *a good thing to do*. Times have changed. Confucianism now exists in a global context. Many people around the world are for a variety of reasons interested in Confucianism, but very few possess the linguistic skills needed to access many of the classic texts of the tradition, much less the vast reservoir of supporting works written by later commentators and other followers. Therefore, I suggest that those who espouse, admire, or are in other ways sympathetic to Confucian ideas should recognize a new imperative and initiate a new stage of the tradition, one that sees global outreach as an essential feature, core aim, and primary good. Confucian teachings have much to offer the world; one need not be a devoted believer in or committed follower of the Sage to agree with and endorse this claim. Those who appreciate the value of Confucian teachings should want to see the texts that embody them translated and available to as many people as possible and should want to do everything possible to ensure that the translations provided are of the highest possible quality—worthy of the classic works they represent. Such translations open the Way to those who presently cannot find or follow it; providing them is an act of benevolence 仁, not only on the part of translators but also those who support such work.

## REFERENCES

- Guo, P. 1994. *A History of Buddhist Thought in China: Sui and Tang Dynasties*. Fuzhou: Fujian People's Press.
- Kieschnick, John. 2003. *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Loewe, M. 1986. "The Religious and Intellectual Background." In *The Cambridge History of China: The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 BC–AD 220*, edited by D. Twitchett and M. Loewe, 649–725. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jun, Tang. 2017. "Translation and Buddhism in Pre-modern China: A Contextualized Overview." <https://translationjournal.net/April-2017/translation-and-buddhism-in-premodern-china-a-contextualized-overview.html> (accessed November 2, 2019).
- Wang, W. 1984. *Chinese Translations of Buddhist Scriptures*. Taipei: Heavenly Lotus.