

No need to translate (in grey):

Translating the Term ‘Person’ into Chinese—Difficulties and Challenges “Person” 的中文翻譯—困难与挑战

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Start to translate:

The term ‘person’ is at the centre of human rights discourse, yet it is one which is exceedingly difficult to translate into Chinese. I will first point out in what ways the difficulty manifests itself and then look at attempts to provide a translation. I will also look into the background of the term in Western discourse and attempt to understand why the complication arises. Unfortunately, I cannot resolve the problem.

Recently the United Nations issued a “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”. The title was carefully chosen to avoid terms such as ‘the disabled’, that is, to avoid terms which define the person according to their incapacity, as in terms such as ‘the blind’, the ‘deaf’, ‘the lame’. The danger with such formulations is that they risk making the incapacity the core of a person’s identity. Traditional Chinese terms reflect the traditional Western names, thus we have 盲人 *mang-ren* the blind, or more general terms such as 障礙者 *zhang’ai-zhe* ‘the disabled’ or in earlier United Nations documents 殘傷者 *canshangzhe*. In translating the new Convention, the phrase used is 殘疾人 *canjiren* and the title of the Convention is the rather awkward 保護和推動殘疾人權利與尊嚴國際公約 *Baohu he tuidong canjiren quanli yu zunyan guoji gongyue*. The awkwardness comes in that on first reading one would read the key part of this name as 殘疾人權 *canji renquan*, the human rights of the disabled, and it is only when we find the *li* after *quan* that we realise that the words must be divided as *canjiren quanli*, the rights of disabled persons. The term ‘*ren*’ is not an adjective describing rights—human rights—but a noun: person. This example shows that the translators were stuck and forced to introduce the unnatural ‘*ren*’ into the phrase *canji* rather than the more natural 殘疾者 *canjizhe*. Looking at the Chinese text alone, it is impossible to understand what was going on.

Often the word ‘person’ is simply translated as 個人 *ge-ren* in the singular or 人人 *ren-ren* in the plural. The problem with this translation is that *ge-ren* is also the translation of ‘individual’. The result is that the Chinese text cannot differentiate between ‘one individual’ and ‘one person’, both become 一個人 ‘*yige-ren*’. When one also takes into account the formation of the term ‘individualism’ 個人主義 *geren zhuyi*, then it will become clear that there is no difference in Chinese between the terms ‘person’ and ‘individual’ and that the former term becomes tarred with all the negative connotations of individualism, with selfishness and egoism. Indeed, in a memorable piece published in December 1915 this is precisely what 陳獨秀 *Chen Duxiu* lauded in Western thinking and commended in contrast to Chinese thinkers:

西洋民族，自古訖今，徹頭徹尾，個人主義之民族也。英、美如此，法、德亦何獨不然！尼采如此，康德亦何獨不然？舉一切倫理，道德，政治，法律，社會之所向往，國家之所祈求，擁護個人之自由權利與幸福而已。

From of old up to now, Western nations have been thoroughly individualistic peoples. The UK and USA are; France and Germany are no different! Nietzsche was; and surely Kant was no different!

Mention any goal in ethics, morality, politics, law or society, or any demands of the State, all are purely to uphold the free rights and happiness of the individual.¹

This text shows in a glaring fashion the dangers inherent when ‘person’ is mistranslated as ‘individual’. The result is a complete misreading of Western culture.

There may be instances in Western languages in which ‘person’ and ‘individual’ are pretty much synonymous but once we stray into philosophy it is clear that they cannot be treated in this way. The term ‘individual’ stresses the exclusiveness of that human being, his/her isolation from others, reaching a negative peak in ‘individualism’. ‘Person’, on the other hand, has connotations of respect and dignity and a social dimension quite absent from the term ‘individual’. If human rights discourse is essentially about individualism, then it is a selfish enterprise that is not worth pursuing. If human rights are concerned with persons, then it is a matter of understanding the reciprocal rights and responsibilities of people within society. In other words, Chen Duxiu utterly failed to realise what human rights were about.²

Chen himself was probably unaware of the problem, but other thinkers were not so impeded. 高一涵 Gao Yihan (1884-1968), writing in the same issue of *New Youth* as Chen, uses the term 人格 *ren-ge*, which is now used for ‘personality’, to refer to the person.³ This he understands as the basis of rights. Fifteen years later 羅隆基 Luo Longji (1898-1965), following the thought of Harold Laski 拉斯基 (1893-1950), uses the term 做人 *zuo-ren* ‘being a person’. According to Luo, this term includes three aspects: firstly, life and the basic necessities of life, secondly personality or the “achievement of what is best for me” (成就至善之我 *chengjiu zhishan zhi wo*) and, thirdly, the social goal which he states in Benthamite terms as “the greatest good of the greatest number”.⁴ Here it is clear that Luo understands the human person as a social being and the achievement of personal happiness as part of a goal of social happiness. We are far removed from the selfish individual of Chen Duxiu’s text.

Some authors, aware of the problem of translating the term ‘person’ have tried other alternatives. In the very restricted field of Chinese Catholic philosophy and theology, the favoured term is 位格 *wei-ge*. This term, it should be noted, is largely incomprehensible to the average, educated Chinese person. It comes from the theological background of trinitarian discourse. Christians believe in one God, a God who is also three persons. The accepted formula for this is 三位一體 *san-wei yi-ti* three persons—one entity. The term *wei* is a more respectful classifier for human beings than the generalised *ge*, but the form *wei-ge* is not immediately comprehensible. Thus it is not helpful to talk about the personalist philosophy of Emmanuel Mounier 慕尼爾 (1905-1950), for instance, as 位格主義 *wei-ge zhuyi*; or rather this form of translation requires an explanatory note. Here I shall not adopt the term *wei-ge*.

The problem of finding an appropriate word in modern Chinese for the term ‘person’ suggests that perhaps the Chinese lack the idea as such, that they cannot understand the human being in society, but this is nonsense. In traditional China the term *ren*, human being, naturally carries the implication of a social being. Chinese philosophy has a rich tradition of seeing human relationships as essential in defining what it is to be human. The problem lies rather in a traditional

¹ Chen Duxiu, “The Basic Difference in Thought of Eastern and Western Nations,” *New Youth*, 1:4 (December 1915) 陳獨秀，東西民族根本思想之差異，新青年 1.4 (1915 年 12 月)。

² In fact, I think that the 1915 article by Chen is not really about human rights. It is more intended to galvanise traditional Chinese society to break out of its mould. A short piece of political persuasion is not designed to give an adequate exposition of either rights or the human person.

³ Gao Yihan, “The State is not the Final End of Life,” in Stephen C. Angle and Marina Svensson (eds.), *The Chinese Human Rights Reader*, pp. 81-88; 高一涵，國家非人生之歸宿論，新青年 1.4 (1915 年 12 月)。

⁴ Luo Longji, “On Human Rights,” *Xinyue* 2.5 (1929). 羅隆基，論人權，新月 2.5 (1929) reprinted in Zhu Ronggui, *The Former Generation talks about Human Rights*, Vol. 4, Sinjhuang, Fu Jen University, 2002, pp. 47-67 朱榮貴主編，前輩談人權，第四冊，新莊市：輔仁大學，2002 年，47-67。

culture that put so much emphasis on the social context as to obscure the respect due to the individual. It is for this reason that when early Chinese thinkers were looking for a word to translate the term ‘person’, what struck them was not its rootedness in society but its independence from society and for this ‘individual’ seemed the best choice. But they went too far in cutting the social mooring ropes and left the boat adrift on a sea of selfishness.

Laski and Griffin on ‘Person’ in Ethics

In the next section of this discussion I would like to consider two thoughtful contemporary accounts of personhood and human rights. The first account comes from Harold Laski and is important because it informs the views expressed by Luo Longji mentioned above. Laski’s key work, *A Grammar of Politics* was translated into Chinese by Carsun Chang (張君勱 Zhang Junmai, 1887-1969) and published in 1930.⁵ Chang also wrote a summary of the book, which is included in the edition published after his death in 1970.

According to Chang’s summary, Laski argues that rights are “the best development of the self” 權利應該為「最善之自我發展」(p. 6). Moreover, this is not only for the self alone but for people in general. Rights exist in a social setting; “they are not something independent of society.” 「權利非離社會而獨立」(p. 8). “The enjoyment of rights is thus based on the relationship between my carrying out my duties and the good of society” 「我所以享權利，即以我之職掌與社會幸福之關係為基礎。」(p. 9). “The individual cannot have rights which are opposed to the good of society” 「個人不得有反於社會幸福之權利」(p. 11). Indeed rights imply a threefold development: the best interests of the individual, of each social grouping and of society as a whole. 權利系統有三方面：個人之利益、各種社團之利益、全社會之利益 (p. 73). Translating Laski, Chang gives a definition of rights that emphasises their social aspect. Rights are

the indispensable conditions by which each person can realise the fullest good for himself. Rights are not produced by the law but are pre-existing conditions for it. Rights are what the aim of true law seeks to realise. The differences in good and bad between States lies in as much as they are able to realise the goal of rights or not: what is in accord with it is a good system; what is against it is bad. What it is that enables this theory of rights to stand is that society is what brings together each individual. Being individuals each person has that which is proper to himself and that cannot be demanded of others. The achievement of this independence of the self cannot be achieved apart from society and the good of society is found chiefly in its existence. (p. 25)

權利：「各人得實現其最善之自我所以不可或缺之條件而已。權利非法律所產生，乃其先決條件。權利者，正法律心目中所欲實現之物也。各國制度，所以有或善或惡之分者，即以其能實現權利之目的與否而定，如是者善，反是者惡。此種權利理論所由以成立，不外以社會為各獨立自我之所合成，惟其獨立，斯有各人之所特有而不得求諸他人者。此獨立自我之完成，不能離社會，而社會之義主乎其存，常有抹煞個人特性之慮，於是有權利系統之確立，所以謀自我實現之塗轍而已。自我之權利，非空漠之要求權也。」

Chang also uses the term *renge* ‘personality’ to express the notion of ‘person’. Thus he sees the boundary of national law as the personality of the human being 國家的法律之疆界是人的性格 (p. 8).

“The whole system of rights is built on personality” 「權利系統，所以以人格為基礎者」(p. 10) and the State must not act against this or invade it 國家不可以違背或侵入人格。

Laski, however, also describes rights as teleological:

Our rights are teleological. They have to prove themselves. That is why, I confess, one of the main comforts I derive from the study of Aristotle is the conviction that he attempted to delineate a

⁵ On Carsun Chang, see Marina Svensson, *Debating Human Rights in China*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, p. 162.

pragmatist theory of the State. He gave to his rights the rich validation of experience; and surely a right that has no consequences is too empty to admit of worth.⁶

Thus we find that in Laski the term ‘person’ (*renge* in Chinese) is used to refer to the foundation of rights, but at the same time ‘rights’ are seen as teleological, that is as finding their value in as much as they contribute to the good of the whole society.

This combination of a foundational and a teleological ethic of the person and of rights is found in a much more contemporary thinker, Professor James Griffin of Oxford University. Griffin has gathered together various papers and lectures he has given over the years and edited them into a book entitled *On Human Rights*.⁷ In this book he seeks to give an account of human rights grounded, chiefly, on personhood. Griffin believes that “personhood... generates... rights” (p. 192). Moreover, “from a well-developed form of the idea of personhood, we should be able to derive all human rights” (p. 192). Griffin singles out three features of personhood: “autonomy, liberty and minimum provision” (p. 51). He describes these components of personhood as follows:

To be an agent... one must (first) choose one’s own path through life—that is, not be dominated or controlled by someone or something else (call it ‘autonomy’). And (second) one’s choice must be real; one must have at least a certain minimum education and information. And having chosen, one must then be able to act; that is, one must have at least the minimum provision of resources and capabilities that it takes (call all of this ‘minimum provision’). And none of this is any good if someone then blocks one; so (third) others must not forcibly stop one from pursuing what one sees as a worthwhile life (call this ‘liberty’) (p. 33).

Although the wording is quite different from that of Luo Longji or Laski, the basic idea of the person as an autonomous being within society is not so different. Perhaps Griffin puts more stress on the concepts of autonomy and liberty and thus comes closer to the type envisaged by Chen Duxiu in 1915, but in practice Griffin’s account is far from one of unbridled individualism.

Griffin proposes two ways in which ethics can work. In the first way we have a basic definition that serves as the ontological basis for rights. In the second, the method is teleological, that is, we understand what the purpose of being a person is and defend human rights in so far as they help us to achieve this purpose. In his initial presentation, Griffin seems to allow for both accounts (pp. 36-37). The first stresses that persons are not things and that they have unique value and therefore cannot be replaced by anything else: “personhood... has a value independent of promoting the ends that make a human life good.” (p. 57) The second way “is to see the exercise of our personhood as an end the realization of which enhances the value of life.” (p. 57) This is what he calls a teleological method and it would seem to be the one he prefers. (see p. 80). It is thus worthwhile drawing attention to the fact that both Laski and Griffin have an account of the person and human rights that is foundational and teleological.

The Foundational and the Teleological

We can see, then, that in ethics the term ‘person’ can work in two different ways. The first way stresses the foundation of ethics. The person is a given that must be accepted as a fundamental value. This way of doing ethics is not above criticism but it is one that is widely used in the Catholic tradition. Thus Venerable Pope John Paul II wrote,

It is therefore urgently necessary, for the future of society and the development of a sound democracy, to rediscover those essential and innate human and moral values which flow from the very truth of the human being and express and safeguard the dignity of the person: values which no

⁶ Harold J. Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty*, Union, NJ, Lawbook Exchange, 2003 [Yale University Press, 1917], p. 18.

⁷ James Griffin, *On Human Rights*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.

individual, no majority and no State can ever create, modify or destroy, but must only acknowledge, respect and promote. (*Evangelium Vitae* #71)⁸

Pope Benedict XVI quotes this text and notes that “the defence of universal human rights and the affirmation of the absolute value of the person’s dignity” are the foundation for ethics.⁹

If we seek to translate this idea of person as the foundation stone of ethics into Chinese, we may try to turn to the simple term *ren* 人. We are simply stating that the human being is a person, in classical Chinese: 人人也 *ren ren ye*. It is, however, important to realise that this simple statement is not purely tautologous. There are many cases in which a human being is no longer treated as a person. A criminal, for instance, especially a person condemned to death is often treated as a non-person. In classical Japanese society people whose tasks involved dealing with animal skins (leather workers, shoemakers, makers of drumskins) were classed as 非人 *hi-nen* or non-persons. In more recent discourse they are known as 部落民族 *buraku* people. Hence, by affirming that not only all human beings are persons, but that they are always persons and should always be treated as such, we are in fact saying something important.

The second, teleological approach puts the emphasis on the ideal for which we are aiming. In standard Chinese terms this is the 君子 *junzi*, the ‘gentleman’ who is unlike the 小人 *xiaoren* the small-minded man. In fact Confucius’ demands on what it is to be a gentleman are very similar to the kind of claims that Griffin, Laski and others see as the goal of the person. The gentleman is someone who is committed to an ethical ideal both in his personal life and in society. The term thus maintains the sense of the person as being involved in society and relating to others around him.

That is not to say that the term *junzi*, or its common English translation as ‘gentleman’, are without problems. Two in particular stand out: firstly there is a problem of gender, the terms simply do not refer naturally to women; secondly, there is a problem with social status, since both the Chinese and English words have been, and still are, used to describe people of higher social status. Thus the words tend to exclude all women and all people of lower ‘class’. This makes it difficult to apply them to the term ‘person’ in the sense that it potentially includes everyone.

Although I am not aware of the source of the expression, yet I have heard that someone suggested using 仁者 *renzhe* to translate the word person. This term is a substantive formed from the term *ren* 仁, benevolence. Thus a *renzhe* is someone who implements benevolence, in all the very broad senses that Chinese tradition can give to that term. It expresses the teleological sense of person without the social exclusiveness of *junzi*/gentleman. This suggestion has much to commend it as the neatest translation of the term ‘person’.

THE DUAL role the term ‘person’ plays in ethics is what makes its translation into Chinese difficult. At the foundational level, the word serves to distinguish human beings from other animals. It establishes a basic minimum standard of treatment and must involve some idea of the distinctiveness of the individual human being, expressed in the Chinese term *reng* (personality) as well as the autonomous sphere of that human person. At the teleological level, it is an ethical ideal by which the individual acts in society, drawing goods from society but also providing service to society in a reciprocity of rights and duties that overcomes the individualistic tendencies that could arise from the foundational perspective.

I have no solution to propose as the best way to render these two dimensions, foundational and teleological, in one Chinese word. I have suggested that the simple *ren*, human being, grasps the former concept and the ethical ideal of benevolence, the homonym: *ren* in Chinese, best

⁸ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, available at http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0141/_INDEX.HTM (consulted 8 July 2010).

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, “For a broad and confident vision of human reason”, *L’Osservatore Romano* (weekly ed. in English), 23 June 2010, 15-16 at 16.

expresses the latter aspect. I am reminded of 董仲舒 Dong Zhongshu's (c179-c104 BCE) famous saying, “仁人也 *ren ren ye*” (benevolence is human beings).¹⁰ Perhaps we could invert this saying “人仁也” *ren ren ye* (human beings are what exercise benevolence) to give a definition of the person as the human being in his/her capacity to interact in society, since that is what is intended by a very broad definition of *ren* (benevolence). But however we translate the word, we must remember that this is a definition that applies to every single human person, no matter what good or evil they have done. To be a person is to be both the subject and the object of *ren* (benevolence) and even if in practice one fails in exercising one's role as benevolent, this should never be construed as an excuse to deny the latter, namely benevolent treatment.

No need to translate:

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¹⁰ Dong Zhongshu, *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals*, Ch 29. 董仲舒，春秋繁露第 29.