

A Study on the English Translation Practice of Chinese Couplets with “Virtue Culture” and the External Dissemination of Values

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the international communication of fine traditional Chinese culture, the Chinese couplet—a highly condensed literary form combining aesthetic and ethical functions—deserves close attention in translation research. Compared with poetry and classical texts, scholarly work on couplet translation remains relatively thin, particularly the kind grounded in sustained translation practice. This paper takes the English translations of seven couplets on virtue-related themes as its corpus and examines them along three dimensions: the rendering of key ethical terms, the reconstruction of formal beauty, and the expression of cultural values. The analysis suggests that the translation of virtue-culture couplets benefits from a strategy of “concept guidance rather than concept imposition”, achieved through higher-order lexical choices, the reshaping of structural symmetry, and the use of culturally resonant imagery. By doing so, the paper offers a workable reference for couplet translation practice and for the outward expression of traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords: Chinese Couplets; Virtue Culture; English Translation; Translation Strategy; Value Communication; Cross-Cultural Expression

1. Introduction

In recent years, scholars have increasingly attended to the translation and outward communication of fine traditional Chinese culture, with extensive discussion of how cultural values can be expressed across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Yet within this body of work, the couplet—an extremely concise form bound by strict formal requirements—has received comparatively little systematic analysis at the level of translation practice. Most of the current research either

concentrates on the appreciation of particular instances or on generalizations, and relatively few sustained, text-based comparisons on the basis of real translation corpora.

There are special problems with couplets that have to do with virtues. Since their value orientation is obvious and their cultural load is concentrated, translators have to make a balance between the requirement of conceptual transfer, formal reproduction, and communicative effect. A gap which has rarely been studied is the one that is filled by the present study as far as the examination of these tensions is done with a complete set of translated examples.

Seven couplets, which are translated into English, are used as a subject matter in this paper since they are about virtue. By comparing source and target texts, it discusses how words are treated in the process of comparison, how the structures are reconstructed, and how values are expressed, and tries to trace the translation strategy and its communicative implications at the level of specific texts.

2. Research Context

2.1 Research Background

The couplet is an art form of Chinese language, whose essence of centuries of wisdom is distilled into two parallel lines. It is not just an ornament to be used at festive seasons; it also embodies ethical heritage, i.e., the values of benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*), and trustworthiness (*xin*) in a symmetrical poetic form [1]. The globalization of Chinese culture is becoming inevitable in an era of the in-depth globalization. But outward cultural communication is never an easy language translation, but a dialogue of meaning. The possibilities for keeping the rich moral dimension of couplets within its spirit and across the linguistic border therefore has a substantive nature.

Translation is a bridge in this procedure—it conveys not only the language but also the

cultural value. Many problems persist in contemporary translation practice with couplets that are stuck between formal equivalence and cultural loss [2]. For example, a couplet line “*zhōnghòu chuán jiā jiǔ*” which, literally translated, means “Honesty brings long family prosperity” is very close to the surface and is lacking in the moral metaphors of family ethos and virtue-as-foundation which are meaningful to Chinese readers. The translation of the virtue-centric couplets into English therefore is as much a linguistic challenge as an enterprise of building a narrative and achieving intercultural relevance.

The current research is set in this context. It takes Chinese couplets with a moral theme as its concrete example to discuss the process of the transformation of the narrative in the translation and the rearticulation of the traditional moral content of Chinese couplets in the international context. The shortness, rhythmic density and conceptual depth of the couplet make it well-suited to function as a cultural “micro-narrative” that can have subtle yet enduring communicative effects across cultures.

2.2 Research Questions

The study is guided by three questions.

What are the principal problems involved in translating couplets with a moral content into English—are they of form (parallelism and tonal balance) or of cultural imagery and philosophical ideas?

Second, how can this literary beauty of the couplet be preserved in the translation practice and how can the underlying values of the couplet be effectively translated? Are there ways of creating a balanced approach whereby the target text can serve as good verse and a coherent moral story?

Third, how would the successful translation of the couplets of virtue-culture contribute to the international image of Chinese culture, and could it help to create a more complicated image of China overseas?

2.3 Research Significance

This paper is not methodologically intended to put forward a new translation theory. Its worth is found in complementing a less discussed area: the English translation of couplets with a theme of virtue. In the field of translation, although studies on poetry, fiction and classical-texts

translation have been enriched, the study of the couplet, which is small yet highly cultural, has been relatively ignored. This study aims to show the concrete ways of working for concept handling, structural adjustment and image reconstruction and to ground the discussion in concrete texts instead of abstractions, by using seven concrete examples for this purpose.

In practical terms, couplets are a particularly portable form of cultural communication. They are short, structurally transparent, and value-explicit, suitable both for display and for circulation. Systematic English translation and reflection on virtue-themed couplets can yield bilingual material of direct utility, and can provide a useful experiential reference for translating similar texts in the future. Compared with grand cultural narratives, couplet communication is more granular and more workable—a quality this paper hopes to illustrate.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Studies on Couplets and Couplet Translation

The couplet is a uniquely Chinese art form, characterized by extreme conciseness of expression. From a literary standpoint, it adheres strictly to prosodic regulation. Tonal alternation and antithetical pairing are not constraints but the very source of the form’s phonic beauty: a well-crafted couplet is visually symmetrical and aurally balanced. In both form and content, the structure ultimately serves the expression of human feeling [3].

This very form constitutes the central challenge of translation. When a couplet is rendered into a non-tonal language such as English, how is its formal beauty to be re-presented? Scholarship has explored two main routes. The first pursues formal equivalence and attempts to reproduce the antithetical structure in English. In rendering “*tiān zēng suìyuè rén zēng shòu, chūn mǎn qiánkūn fú mǎn mén*”, for instance, the Yang Hsien-yi translation preserves the parallel syntax of the source [4]. But the literalness of such a translation may leave the English reader bewildered in his or her understanding of the poetry: the symmetry is there, but the cultural metaphors of “longevity” and “gate” are not [5]. Another is functional equivalence represented by Eugene Nida, who holds that the translation should first render the attitude of the source

language and not the form of the source language [6]. At the same time, Xu Yuanchong has added such expressions as “as Heaven’s gift” to his rendition of the same couplet to convey the philosophical concept of harmony between human and cosmos, but at the expense of changing the original antithetical structure [7]. This raises a fundamental issue of couplet translation: the translator has to be faced with the choice of formal likeness or spiritual likeness all the time. In fact this selection is a cultural transfer problem as indicated by some recent works, such as Liu Miqing’s outline of cultural translation [8]. Bassnett also notes that some words that have an ethical connotation like “*fu*” (fortune/blessing) and “*xiao*” (filiality) do not have counterparts in the English vocabulary, and therefore the meaning remains unclear when they are directly translated [9]. The translation of couplets is thus not only a linguistic translation, but also a search for cultural equivalents in the target language culture.

3.2 Virtue Culture and the Outward Communication of Values

The essence of Chinese virtue culture is based on Confucian ethics culture and the main moral elements of Confucianism include benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness, which are the key elements of classical society [10]. Today, it is not so important to restore these ideas without modifications but to adapt them to the present day. Trustworthiness, for instance, is an individual’s quality and is applied to contemporary commercial and institutional life; harmony, which was a principle in personal relations, now is extended to personal relations with the environment and to relations between human beings and nature. This reinterpretation is to be used to “re-energize” traditional moral resources in a manner that is appropriate to today’s development circumstances.

The articulation of a set of widely shared core values in contemporary China may be regarded as one such reinterpretation, at the national, social and individual levels. It is a blend of virtue culture and incorporates modern advancements like the rule of law, democratic participation and civic equality. This outward shift of values is into foreign communication and translation is a crucial ground. There are also some difficulties in translation, however;

because of historical and cultural differences, some value concepts are different in Chinese culture than in western culture. Thus, the communication outward should not just be directly translated [11]. A successful translation transmits the concept accurately while also using paratextual aids such as glossing and analogy to make virtue culture accessible across cultural distance [12].

3.3 Synthesis and Research Gap

Existing research on Chinese virtue-themed couplets and on the outward communication of values has made significant progress in several domains. Yet when attention turns specifically to the English translation of virtue-themed couplets and its function in value communication, a clear weak point emerges. Most current work remains anchored in a single field—literary studies or translation studies—and proceeds at the level of theoretical reflection. Studies of couplet translation often analyze isolated examples [13], while research on the outward communication of virtue culture tends to focus on policy-level interpretation. A systematic analysis of translation practice for the couplet form is still lacking.

More concretely, micro-level questions remain underaddressed. When confronted with hundreds of couplets on themes such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness, what translation difficulties are produced by the recurring cultural images (such as pine, cypress, plum, and orchid) and philosophical concepts (such as self-cultivation and the regulation of the family)? Which attempts at formal equivalence have proved successful, and which have created barriers to understanding? When values such as friendliness and harmony are conveyed, what beyond keyword rendering can be achieved through the reshaping of the couplet as a whole? Such micro-level questions can only be answered through the collection, classification, comparison, and analysis of substantial first-hand translation material.

The present study seeks to fill this gap. Rather than remaining at the level of theory or appreciation, it builds a small but thematically focused corpus of English-translated virtue-culture couplets, dissecting these real cases in detail in order to identify more workable translation strategies. The aim is to offer one practice-based case study for the international

communication of Chinese cultural “micro-narratives”.

4. Research Design and Corpus

This section explains the research design of the present study, covering the object of analysis, the analytical method, and the framework guiding the discussion.

4.1 Object of Study

The corpus of this study consists of English translations produced through a student innovation training program on the international narrative function of Chinese virtue-culture couplets. The objects of analysis are seven representative virtue-themed couplets corresponding to seven ethical dimensions: benevolence, propriety, trustworthiness, filiality, integrity, diligence, and benevolence-in-action. These couplets were selected from prize-winning entries of the 2025 monthly virtue-culture competition organized by the journal *Duilian*, and were translated and revised by the project team. They exhibit good text quality and explicit value orientation.

There were three criteria for selecting the corpi. First, that every couplet was to have a particular virtue as its subject; and not to have any general moral sense. Secondly, it was necessary that the source text show typical characteristics of structure, rhetoric (allusion, antithesis, or layering of imagery). Third, the translation had to allow for an interesting discussion, giving visibility to the translator’s options and compromises. Seven texts were selected as the analytical sample based on these reasons.

4.2 Method

The study is conducted by means of close reading, source and target text comparison. The analysis starts at the lexical and syntactic level, looking at concrete lexical and syntactic decisions when dealing with words related to the concept of virtue, historical allusions, and structural symmetry. It, then, places these choices in their cultural context, taking into account their impact on the expression of value content. Finally, a comparison is made case by case and some common tendencies from the seven examples are summarized.

The present study emphasizes the practical judgement and adjustment in the process of translation, unlike theory-led studies. It tries to demonstrate how translators deal with the seven

couplets and their translations, one by one, to achieve “formal preservation” and “meaning transmission” by reflecting methodology in concrete texts.

4.3 Analytical Framework

The study is done in a micro to macro way as a three-layered approach. The first is a question of linguistic form and translation strategy: How is the form of the source couplet (antithesis, prosody and allusion) treated in English? The second layer moves to cultural significance; in what ways do the main moral concepts of benevolence, filiality, integrity, etc. get transferred and what is the cultural baggage being carried over the language barriers in the historical references like the snow at Cheng Yi’s gate or the Golden Terrace of Guo Wei? The third layer of questions concerns value transmission and narrative integration: can the translations establish any relationship with virtue culture and the other cultural values in the contemporary world, and can they let the couplet be not only a literary form, but also a medium for dialogue between cultures.

This is a model that combines the language, culture and value as the three aspects of translation practice, and strives to highlight the inner method and cultural connotations of virtue-culture couplet translation.

5. Analysis of the English Translation of Virtue-Culture Couplets

To analyze the following, this section is organized according to three dimensions which represent the above-mentioned layered structure: rendering in virtue keywords (Section 5.1), formal beauty reconstruction (Section 5.2) and outward value expression (Section 5.3). Seven couplets are explored in these respects, and each section concentrates on a group of themes of significant examples.

5.1 Translating Virtue Keywords: Benevolence and Trustworthiness

The concepts of benevolence (*ren*), virtue (*de*), and trustworthiness (*xin*) lie at the heart of the Chinese ethical tradition and are the most representative value keywords in virtue-themed couplets. In English translation, these concepts seldom map onto a single English word, and their rendering involves not only lexical choice but also the cross-cultural intelligibility of the

value system they encode. This section therefore takes two representative couplets as cases through which to discuss the handling of virtue-keywords in English translation.

Example 1 (Benevolence)

*Benefiting all beings, cherishing hearts, the
soaring roc ascends Northern tides;
Embracing benevolence, holding virtue, the full
moon glows o'er Mount Ni's skies.*

(Trans. Zhang Xuebin)

Example 2 (Trustworthiness)

*Faith, as an ancient pledge, outweighs gold's
weight;
Virtue, like sacred oaths, outshines bronzes'
might.*

(Trans. Han Yiming)

In Example 1, the rendering of *ren* and *de* centers on avoiding everyday oversimplification of these terms. Choosing “benevolence” rather than “kindness” for *ren* emphasizes an ethically self-aware care for others that aligns more closely with the Confucian conception of “the benevolent person loves people”. Translating *de* as “virtue” draws on a term that, within English ethical discourse, simultaneously denotes character and normativity, and is therefore well placed to carry the multi-layered force of the original. The action verbs “embracing” and “holding” further turn abstract values into perceivable states of conduct, so that the virtue concepts are not left as static declarations.

Equally important, Example 1 does not present these ethical concepts as stand-alone ideas, but rather as part of the image of the great roc, the Northern Sea and Mount Ni, cultural images. In this case the translator acts both retentively and transformatively in dealing with these images. “Roc” is a good transliteration of *peng*, without luring the reader into the exotic realm of “phoenix”, and yet the sense of grandeur and spaciousness of the source is maintained. In “Mount Ni” transliteration plus a generic marker is used to allow basic cultural reference and enhance the identifiability. By making such decisions, the virtue words are seamlessly integrated into the translation's imagery, making it easier to read.

The cross-cultural reconstruction of abstract value concepts is the challenge of Example 2. In Chinese tradition *xin* is both an individual integrity, but also a morally binding social commitment. The choice of translation is based on the use of the core equivalent, “faith,” and

its supplementation with “ancient pledge,” since the religious overtones of the English word “faith” allow its ethical extension, while “trust,” for example, may be too close to the context. The culturally specific references to Ji Bu and the Nine Tripods are not translated as such, but as symbolic, “pledge” and “sacred oaths,” thus underscoring the value of trustworthiness and virtue as universally recognized virtues.

Although example 1 and 2 have a different thematic focus, they both have a similar orientation: “concept guidance rather than concept imposition”. The translators do not make the attempt to explain virtue words exhaustively. Rather, they make use of advanced-level vocabulary, verbative phrases, and embedded figurative language to allow such values as benevolence, virtue, and trustworthiness to be conveyed in cross-cultural settings in a comprehensible and resonant fashion.

5.2 Coordinating Formal Beauty with English Expression: Propriety and Diligence

But couplets focused on abstract ethical principles are not as reliant on formal structure and cultural imagery as are couplets focused on propriety and diligence. Typically, the value content of such couplets is expressed in historical allusion, spatial imaging and even structure symmetry, and the problem of translation is not single word equivalence but the recreation of structure and aesthetic effect in the target language. Two examples will be briefly explored here to look at how formal beauty of couplets is coordinated in English.

Example 3 (Propriety)

*Snow-laden stands Cheng Yi's abode, honoring
the teacher's creed;
Gold-piled crowns Guo Kui's terrace,
summoning talents in need.*

(Trans. Han Yiming)

Example 4 (Diligence)

*Virtue, under pear's shade, leaves traces of
governance just;
Diligence, amid bamboo's sigh, hears the
people's trust.*

(Trans. Zhang Xuebin)

Historical allusion is formally translated as the central translation task in Example 3. The values of respecting teachers and welcoming talents are boiled down into highly compact form in the source couplet, through the allusions of “snow at the gate of Cheng Yi” and

the “Golden Terrace of Guo Wei”. Not all these allusions are discursively unpacked in the translation, but are conveyed by the reorganization of images and the addition of structure. The two phrases “Snow-laden” and “gold-piled” carry over the visual impact of the source, whereas the two phrases “honoring the teacher’s creed” and “summoning talents in need” provide only the minimum of semantic clues required for the target reader to understand the ethical direction of the allusions. The rhythm and length of the two lines are rhythmic balanced, and the two lines have a consistent pattern of noun-phrase opening and verb-phrase closing, which corresponds to the symmetrical structure of the original in English. While Example 3 is mainly an allusion, Example 4 constructs a whole scene by putting together images. “Under the pear’s shade” and “amid the bamboo’s sigh” hint at the long Chinese ideals of good government and careful consideration for the masses. The translation doesn’t follow literal correspondence; instead, it enhances the picture by substituting images and using dynamic verbs. The phrase “Pear’s shade” does not send off the wrong message as it is not literally a shade, and the phrase “leaves traces of governance just” indicates that good governance is long-lasting. Taking up synaesthesia, which associates a natural sound with the official’s attentive listening, “Bamboo’s sigh” makes this listening a concrete value.

Examples 3 and 4 share a common strategy of establishing formal function—by means of syntactic structure, image choices, and phonic coordination—but they differ in emphasis. This suggests that, in English translation, formal beauty is not a matter of literal reproduction but of reshaping the aesthetic function with the rhetorical resources of the target language, providing a perceivable cross-cultural channel for the social norms and governance ideals carried by virtue culture.

5.3 Outward Expression of Values and Communicative Implications: Filiality, Integrity, and Benevolence-in-Action

In the English translation of virtue-themed couplets, translation is not merely linguistic conversion but the re-expression of values in a cross-cultural setting. Compared with the more strictly normative or abstract themes of benevolence and propriety, filiality, integrity,

and benevolence-in-action engage more directly with familial emotion, public morality, and the conduct of governance. The translation outcome here strongly affects the comprehensibility and reception of virtue-culture couplets in international communication. This section therefore examines three couplets to consider how flexible expression facilitates the cross-cultural transmission of values.

Example 5 (Filiality)

*Filial love thaws winter’s deep snow;
Virtue’s grace makes orchids grow.*

(Trans. Yang Yuanhang)

Example 6 (Integrity)

*Virtue, like Yu Qian, being straight and unbending, keeps steel-strong spine;
Integrity, as Hai Rui, cooling the court and people, plants the breeze of pine.*

(Trans. Liu Xiaoyu)

Example 7 (Benevolence-in-Action)

*Good governance thrives, peach blooms spread wide;
Virtuous ethos flourishes, crabapple shades abide.*

(Trans. Wan Shuxin)

The traditional family moral of filiality is put into an emotional metaphor in Example 5. The translator elects to use the term “filial love” instead of a term that expresses a hierarchical relationship, and he sees filiality as a feeling, so as to make it fit with modern views of family relations. Using natural imagery, “Thaws winter’s deep snow” is a piece that, emotionally, shifts from cold to warm, transforming warmth that is hidden in the actions of the child into a universal metaphor. The second line “virtue’s grace” plays on the more positive connotations of grace in English-speaking cultures and helps to reduce the cognitive barrier, making the abstract concept of *de* a more life-giving, nourishing force [14]. In general, it can be said that the translation of Example 5 helps to reduce the cultural gap that the traditional filial discourse may cause and embellish the values to be conveyed through emotional appeal.

In Example 6, it is a question of public morality and the ethics of office that are at more high risk of outwards communication. The narrow institutionally defined sense of “integrity” is not translated into the text; rather “integrity” becomes a value translated by character figures and bodily metaphor. The “steel-strong spine” brings an image of uprightness to the body, and the moral uprightness of Yu Qian can be

expressed as an ethical force beyond the historical context. “Cooling the court and people” and “breeze of pine” render the political metaphor of “fresh wind” into universal purifying and comforting experiences. This approach allows for a more subtle approach to moral instruction, as moral substance is conveyed through the character of the person, not just the concept and thus increases its cross-cultural tolerability [15].

Benevolence-in-action and active involvement in public life is at stake in Example 7. The terms “*shanzheng*” and “good governance” have a high degree of familiarity in the international arena and render the term as “good governance” will enable the target readers to immediately get the footing to interpret the text. The images of “peach blooms spread wide” and “crabapple shades abide” carry on the long Chinese tradition of natural metaphor to describe the reach of good rule, and the words “thrives” and “flourishes” suggest that governance is a process of life, growth. The translation aestheticizes the public values and makes it more appealing from the outside, by making it visual and natural.

While the subject and the expression change, what is common to all three of these examples (5, 6, and 7) is a cross-cultural intelligibility translation orientation. The translators use emotional metaphor, natural imagery and personification to convert traditional ethical information into elements of narration, based on common human experience. The values are not watered down, but their message is enhanced. This suggests that a translation from Chinese to English of a collection of verses that is concerned with virtue does not have to employ conceptual exposition; it can also seek aesthetic and affective paths towards the supple expression of values.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the above analysis of seven couplets on the theme of virtue, this paper has analyzed the translation of the vocabulary of virtue, formal beauty reconstruction and the external expression of values. The results of close reading and comparison indicate that the couplet which is a traditional form that is tightly-knit is very difficult to translate and has unique communicative power in inter-cultural context.

The treatment of virtue words determines the

general attitude of the translator. The historical and ethical dimension of concepts like benevolence, virtue and trustworthiness can be translated into equivalents, but at the cost of losing their historical and ethical richness. In the seven cases, the translators also tend to shift the level of lexical or introduce verbal construction, and to transform the abstract ethical concepts into action-oriented expressions. It is not meant to be a complete conceptual equivalence, but a quasi-value atmosphere in the context of the reception.

Formal level difficulty is not antithesis per se but the level of coupling of meaning and form in the source. Mechanical repetition of the surface symmetry is less effective than the quest for new balance in syntactic length, rhythm and imagery is demonstrated in several examples. In the English translations, instead of the Chinese tonal system, structural echo, end rhyme and imagistic correspondence are used to create internal order in the target language, which makes it possible for readers to enjoy the formal coherence of the language.

As stated in the cross-cultural communication aspect, it can be seen that there is a strong inclination to the translations analyzed. Instead of being directly described, virtue terms are usually expressed through the use of natural imagery, human characters, and the description of situations. This prevents the preachy expression, and allows the culture of virtue to be experienced in a gentler manifestation in an unfamiliar environment. Such selectivity is appropriate to the shortness of the couplet itself—in as much as it can be said, it is better to be suggestively accurate than over-interpretative.

The couplet, as a whole, provides a unique edge in the external transmission of the culture of virtue. Its tiny size focuses the expression of value into a potent container, and the culture images and rhetorical tools it offers allow for ample room to be left open for translation. Couplet translation, based on proper methods, can not only translate the meaning of the language but also be used to carry out cross-cultural value communication.

There are limitations to the study. The corpus is confined to Chinese-to-English practice and does not yet examine how readers from different cultural backgrounds actually receive these translations. The couplets analyzed also represent texts of relatively high literary quality

and explicit value orientation, and do not cover all types of virtue couplet. Future research could broaden the corpus and incorporate audience response and cross-language comparison to investigate the communicative effects of virtue-culture couplet translation more systematically.

In sum, this paper has attempted to respond from the perspective of translation practice to the real problems of communicating traditional culture across borders. The analysis suggests that, in cross-cultural settings, the translation of virtue-culture couplets need not rely on conceptual exposition alone; through formal reconstruction and aesthetic transformation, it can also achieve the effective expression of cultural values.

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