



On English Translation of *Yi* 義, an Important Value of Confucianism

儒家重要觀念“義”的英語翻譯之提議

Short Note

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Yi is one of the five core virtues of Confucianism; other core virtues include *Ren* 仁, *Li* 禮, *Zhi* 智, and *Xin* 信. Unlike *Ren* 仁, which denotes a vicarious experience that everyone can invoke and exercise on one's own, often between two individuals, or unidirectional empathy in essence,¹ *Yi* represents a sense of duty for an individual to act in accordance with societal expectations; it deals with the relationship between an individual and his community. It is a quality that must be recognized and endorsed by other members of a society. It is often used to characterize events of significant social impacts, such as “義舉 (an act of *Yi*)” and “起義 (revolution against a tyrannical ruler, literally ‘activation of *Yi*’)”. As such, *Yi* is commonly translated as “righteousness,” with a connotation of meeting and defending the standards and expectations of a society.²

While this translation is academically correct, it suffers three deficiencies: 1) “righteous” is a word that could occasionally imply hypocrisy; 2) it doesn't distinguish acts of different social significance, while *Yi* is usually reserved for those deeds of higher purpose; 3) it is pedantry, not commensurate with the degree of popularity that the word *Yi* is used by people from all walks of life in pan-Chinese communities.

There is a word in English that corresponds to *Yi* perfectly in terms of both popularity and semantic precision (plasticity as well): “honor.” Honor, when used to characterize an act or a person, is traditionally defined as a quality of “nobleness of mind, scorn of meanness, magnanimity” that earns “reputation” and “fame” in a society.³ It is a value highly venerated in the spheres such as

the military. In its current use, honor is defined among its many meanings by Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “a keen sense of ethical conduct: INTEGRITY.” Integrity has also been seen as a translation for *Yi*.

This author submits that “honor” is adopted as the translation for *Yi* in lieu of “righteousness.

“義”是儒家五個核心美德之一，其它美德為“仁”、“禮”、“智”、“信”。“義”與“仁”不同：仁是一種每個人都可以自己喚起和實行的替入式體驗，往往發生在兩個人之間，本質上系單方向的替入感受 (empathy)。¹ 而“義”代表的是個人按照社會預期規範其行為的責任感，涉及的是個人和其社區的關係。義是一種必須被社會其他成員認可讚同的品質，經常用於描述有重大社會影響的事件，如“義舉”和“起義”。鑒於此，“義”通常翻譯成“righteousness”，² 含有符合維護社會標準及預期的涵義。

雖然這個翻譯在學術上準確，但它卻患有三個不足：1) “righteous”一詞，偶爾會暗示“虛偽”；2) 對不同社會影響力的行為不加區別，而“義”通常只指那些目標崇高的行為；3) 迂腐，與“義”這個字在泛中華社區被社會各階層廣泛使用的程度不相稱。

英語中有一個詞，在流行程度及語義的準確性及彈性上和“義”完全對應，即“honor”。“Honor”當用於評價一個行為或個人時，傳統上定義為“心靈高貴、蔑視卑鄙、寬宏大量”、從而在社會上贏得“聲譽”和“名望”的品質。³ 在一些行業如軍隊，這是一種非常受到崇敬的價值觀。目前，在其多個含義里，《韋氏詞典》對“honor”的定義之一是“一種強烈的道德行為的意識，暨‘integrity’”。“Integrity”一詞亦被看到作為“義”的翻譯。

本文作者提議，使用“honor”作為“義”的翻譯，替代“righteousness”。

1. Xu, G. (2019). Defining *Junzi* and *Ren*: Confucius as the Father of Professionalism. *Archives of Boston Society of Confucius*, 1(1), 2-28. [Online] Available: <http://www.er4a2.net/bsc2019041002.html> [Accessed 2019, April 10].
2. Wong, D. (2018, September 14). Chinese Ethics 2.6. In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [Online] Available: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-chinese/>. [Accessed 2018, November 26].
3. Johnson, S., and Latham, R. G. (Ed.). (1876). *A Dictionary of the English Language*, p. 679. London: Green Ongmans.