**gift/礼物(Lǐ Wù)**

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| Chinese Perspective | YANG Huilin | 30 May 2022 |

The Chinese have used two characters to translate “gift / present” – *li*礼 *wu*物. *Li*礼 was written initially as 禮, the left part of which (示) is the same as with祇 (god of the earth), and its right part豊 takes the shape of a vessel for sacrifice. Therefore, the original meaning of 禮 is the "ritual of sacrifice to obtain blessings from gods" (*Shuowen Jiezi*). Wang Guowei, in his article "Interpretation of Rites," offered a glyphic analysis, in which he seemed to have put the sacrificial ritual of “revering Heaven” adjacent to the service of “honoring ancestors”: "Since豊 is a vessel containing sacrificial jade offered to gods and ancestors, the sacrificial wine used in the services is thus called 醴, and therefore, we can further infer that anything related to the sacrificial services to gods and ancestors can be generally called 禮." The three characters (豊-醴-禮) share the same pronunciation and are originally related to the sacrifice of gods, however, after such inferring, the meaning has shifted to a “generalized’ earthly ritual.

The meaning of *li*礼has been further inferred or extended in Confucian classics. For example, Confucius advocates that the way of governance is to "Guide people with virtues and regulate their behavior with ritual." He believes that the "ritual" accompanied by "virtue" not only keeps people obeying the law but also enables people to exercise self-restraint, namely, "to know shame and to behave in a proper manner" (*Analects*). As a result, there are three classics related to rituals among the "Thirteen Confucian Classics" (*Zhou Li*, *Yi Li*, and *Li Ji*). The question "Where does ritual originate?" no longer only concerns sacrifice but has become an exploration of human nature.

Following this light, we find a typical dialectical analysis of *li*礼and *wu*物in Xunzi's "On Rituals": "Men are born with desires which, if not satisfied, cannot but lead men to seek to satisfy them. If in seeking to satisfy their desires, men observe no measure and apportion things without limits, then it would be impossible for them not to contend over the means to satisfy their desires. So contention leads to disorder. Disorder leads to poverty. The Ancient Kings abhorred such disorder; so they established the regulations contained within ritual and moral principles in order to apportion things." For Xunzi, the specific mean for this purpose is to "nurture the desires of men, and to supply the means for their satisfaction" so that they can "sustain each other." In simple words, to desire is natural, and rituals are not to "extinguish human desire" but to help balance one’s desire and needs.

According to Xunzi, the core of "ritual" is to make sure that "desires should not want for the things [*wu*物] which satisfy them, and goods [*wu*物] would not be exhausted by the desires."[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus "things/goods" (*wu*物) becomes the maintenance of "rituals" (*li*礼). The use of the two words "ritual" and "things" as a phrase appeared in the second century in an article written by Pan Xu潘勖 (? – 215)[[2]](#footnote-2), but the phrase at that time still referred to "ceremony/ritual" and "sacrificial goods," different from the so-called "gift" in later times. In the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420), we can find the term “*wei li*微礼” (a small gift) in a story about Minister Lu Na陆纳 and General Huan Wen桓温. The gift included “a bucket of wine and a plate of venison", closely related to “goods.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In sum, in Chinese tradition, there has been a shift of meaning from “ritual” to “goods” in the Chinese term “gift”. “Ritual” is reflected in the “goods/ gift.” Along with the gradual combination and mutual interpretation of "ritual" and "goods", the Chinese have varied expressions of “offering gifts”.

As to the translation in modern Chinese, the everyday usage of *liwu*礼物 (gift) does not necessarily reflect the ancient “ritual,” so “gift” or “present” is a natural translation. However, with the continuous translation and introduction of continental philosophy, we keep finding the differences in the semantics of the corresponding words, and even the "literal" Chinese translation of “gift," “present," and “given" is almost unable to convey their "spirit" (particular connotation). Taking this as a philosophical problem left to us by language, we may find the argument of the subject-predicate proposition, the philosophical implication of "gift" or “*doner*,” and the semantic puns of “present” and "time" are the best examples to illustrate this problem.

In *Routledge History of Philosophy*, the contrast between English and Chinese is extremely interesting. For instance, in Volume II, it reads: “Plotinus accepts Aristotle's view that being and unity are coextensive: to be is to be one thing, to be unified, and the more 'one' something is, the more of a being it is.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The Chinese translators put “是者” (what it is) in parentheses after “being” and “一” (one) after “unified.”[[5]](#footnote-5) It is, however, still hard to understand the Chinese translation of “the more ‘one’ something is, the more of a being it is.” How can “something” be “one”? Why the more one is the more a being it is? How can we express in Chinese the “being” as a verb and the “being” in “a being it is”?

British sinologist Angus Charles Graham offered a clue to these questions when he compared the different metaphysical grammar of the European languages and that of Chinese. In his view, there is a grammatical difference between the two: for one, it is the “Being” or “subject-predicate proposition” originated from Indo-European languages, and for the other, it is “*shi fei*是非” (being/non-being) and “*you wu*有无”(have/ have not) of ancient Chinese. He even cites a passage in Lan Gongwu's translation of Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* to explain the problem. Lan’s translation was based on an English translation, but the linguistic challenges are similar.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In order to explain “Being is obviously not a real predicate… not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing," Kant took "God is omnipotent" as an example to show that "the small word 'is' adds no new predicate."[[7]](#footnote-7) Nevertheless, since the Chinese does not have the capital word “Being,” the small word “is” does not make any sense. As a result, the Chinese translator used three different characters（为-在-有）to render the German “*Sein*” and the English “Being”.

We may understand the problem related to “the small word ‘is’” in Chinese via the clarification by Ernst Tugendhat that "Being ‘is’ only as long as the two parts are joined, creating a relation between two terms where one refers to the other as the predicate and subject."[[8]](#footnote-8) In other words, it is by duplicating “Being” (the subject) and “is” (the predicate), being as “a being it is” and being as a verb, that the Indo-European based “being” can be understood.

According to Graham, Chinese translators when using three different Chinese words to translate *Sein* and Being, are in fact “struggling to reproduce Western fallacies in a language which, whatever its defects, does not permit them to make these particular mistakes.” It tells us that “the way we think is affected, not only by the language we speak, but by the grammar we impose on it and by the languages in which the problems were originally stated”[[9]](#footnote-9).

Similarly, Heidegger announces that “his mediation is oriented by the sentence ‘Es gibt Sein, Es gibt Zeit’, which literally means: ‘It gives Being, It gives time.” It seems to be quite straightforward for the Western scholars that “the phrase ‘Es gibt’ invites the audience to hear an offering that is not reducible to what is offering. Hence the sentence 'It gives time' points to an offering that keeps withdrawing itself from what is offered. Already in the word ‘present,’ there is more than the now; what is also meant by the word is a gift bestowed upon man." [[10]](#footnote-10) However, for Chinese readers, it is not only necessary to understand the double entendre of "present" but also crucial to get the logic of the passive voice "the present is given," because the emphasis is no longer on the project of the self but the receptivity of the granting.[[11]](#footnote-11) In theory, active and passive verbs in Chinese can also be combined in one word. For instance, in the *Book of Changes*, "detain" was used in the sense of "detaining someone" as well as "detained by someone." However, concepts related to "gift," such as 赠-馈-贻and so on, do not mean "being given."[[12]](#footnote-12) Just as in Chinese, the basic logic of the phrase 'It is proper to return gift of courtesy' （礼尚往来）lies in 'reciprocity' rather than 'being given', the 'counter gift', something like 'tribute for blessings' in folk beliefs, is also different from 'costly grace' in Christian sense. This may make the Chinese translation and interpretation of "gift" in the modern context particularly interesting.

Jacques Derrida’s book *The Gift to Death* may serve as a good example here. The French title of the book *Donner la mort* is playing on the double entendre of the word “donner,” whose ordinary sense means "to give," and the idiomatic sense is “to put to death” or "to commit suicide." In other words, the word “donner” can mean both “offering” and “death,” which not only sounds completely strange to Chinese readers but also requires explanations to English readers. Therefore, the English translator states explicitly: “In the text, I have tried to follow the idea of ‘giving’ or ‘granting’ wherever possible. However, I have used ‘to put to death’ when comprehensibility demands. … Whenever ‘to put to death’ is used; however, the reader should also hear the sense of ‘giving’." [[13]](#footnote-13) Associating “donner” or “giving” to the Chinese words for "gift" or "granting," we may refer to another critical term of Derrida: hospitality.

Gerasimos Kakoliris listed Derrida's series of discussions on hospitality in his article "Jacques Derrida on the Ethics of Hospitality": “For Derrida, the logic of the concept of hospitality is governed by an absolute antinomy or aporia…On the one hand, there is *the*law of unlimited hospitality. On the other hand, there are the conditional laws of hospitality... The responsible action and decision consist of the need to negotiate between these two hetero**ge**neous requirements continuously."[[14]](#footnote-14)To put in another way, the law of unlimited hospitality or unconditional hospitality is practically impossible, and the "responsibility" we can assume is merely a "response that constitutes responsibility." It carries the same logic of “it is given," as in the case of "present" as "time" or the verb to be as an expression of Being.

For some Chinese readers, when reading Derrida, it is very easy and convenient for them to think of “hospitality” in terms of “tourism and hospitality" or “international affairs etiquette” because the Chinese translation of the word is “*hao ke*好客” (welcoming guests) or “*dai ke zhi dao*待客之道” (the hospitable way to receive guests). For others, they follow Derrida's speculation about the story of Abraham entertaining three guests and receiving blessings (Genesis 1:1-15) and regard Abraham as the model of hospitality. It is true that Derrida starts from the biblical story, and there are several other similar uses in the Bible implicating "entertaining or receiving guests," such as “showed us generous hospitality” (Acts 28:7); “practice hospitality” (Romans 12:13) or “showing hospitality” (1 Timothy 5:10, Titus 1:8). However, whether it is attributed to the Chinese "etiquette" or the Western Bible, it is probably far from Derrida's intent. The possible way to understand the logical connection between "gift" and "given" with the help of a “donor” is to read Derrida’s interpretation of Levinas.

Emmanuel Levinas insisted on “an ethics before ontology” because it is “rooted in alterity."[[15]](#footnote-15) This has helped Derrida to extend his discussion of "hospitality" and "hostage" in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*.[[16]](#footnote-16) According to Derrida, “hospitality” in Latin means both host and guest, and “hostage,” which means guest or outsider in Old French, is often translated in Chinese as “*renzhi*人质” (“people held by robbers in exchange for money”）. Derrida, in addition to referring back to the etymological root of the word, relates again to the syntax of "S is P": "the subject is the host" and "the subject is hostage," that is "the two brief and explicit definitions of the subject in the form of S is P."[[17]](#footnote-17) Through the correspondence and association of hospitality and hostage, the subject-host takes on the attribute of being-hostage “in the law of the ac**cu**sative."[[18]](#footnote-18) This "paradoxical reverting" allows us to be "mutually" problematized within the structure of the "relationship."

The "paradoxical reverting" of “the host as the guest” and “the subject as the object”, at least for Chinese readers, could only be understood in the mutually explanatory chain constituted by the puns of "present" and "given" as well as the "duplicity of Being." The Chinese term “*li wu*礼物” (gift), which consists of "ritual" and "goods," cannot convey the layers of transition of the meaning. Having said that, as far as the separate genealogy of Chinese and Western thoughts is cleared up in comparison, the "contradiction" will be turned into “contrariety” and “reciprocal illumination"[[19]](#footnote-19).

1. John Knoblock, trans., Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works, Vol. III (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “崇其庞章，备其礼物.” Pan Xu, “Ce wei gong jiu xi wen” (册魏公九锡文), in Wenxuan, ed. Xiao Tong, vol. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See “Lu Na zhuan (Biography of Lu Na),” in Jin shu (Book of Jin). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Furley, ed., Routledge History of Philosophy, Volume II, From Aristotle to Augustine (London: Routledge, 1999), 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. David Furley, ed., Routledge History of Philosophy, Volume II, From Aristotle to Augustine, trans. Feng Jun, et al. (Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2004), 429. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A. C. Graham, “‘Being’ in Western Philosophy Compared with Shih/Fei是非 and Yu/Wu有/无 in Chinese Philosophy,” in Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Literature (Singapore: The Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986), 322-359, esp. 354-355. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 354. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Quoted in Santiago Zabala, Being at Large: Freedom in the Age of Alternative Facts (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 50-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A. C. Graham, “‘Being’ in Western Philosophy Compared with Shih/Fei是非 and Yu/Wu有/无 in Chinese Philosophy,” 356-357. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jacques Taminiaux, “Philosophy of Existence 1: Heidegger,” in Richard Kearney, ed., Routledge History of Philosophy, Volume VIII, Continental Philosophy in the 20th Century (London: Routledge, 1994), 67-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Wang Li, et al, eds., Gu han yu chang yong zi zi dian (A Dictionary of Common Words in Ancient Chinese) (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1979), 316, 290, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. David Wills, “Translator’s Preface,” in Jacques Derrida, The Gift of Death, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Gerasimos Kakoliris “Jacques Derrida on the Ethics of Hospitality,” in Elvis Imafidon, ed., The Ethics of Subjectivity, Perspectives since the Dawn of Modernity (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Walter Brogan and James Risser, “Introduction,” in Walter Brogan & James Risser, eds., American Continental Philosophy: A Reader (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Jacques Derrida, Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Arvind Sharma, Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology: The Case for Reciprocal Illumination (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)