

ON BEING POLITE IN CHINESE

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In his article on *Politeness and Translation in Balinese* Dr. J. L. Swellengrebel presents us with a picture of one of those fascinating languages which incorporate at every turn the relative social position of the speaker, the addressee and the person referred to. He mentions various forms in which this is manifested, such as a different vocabulary for "talking upward" and "talking downward", as one might term it, but above all the various correct forms of addressing and referring to another person. It is clear that such a linguistic structure has its specific difficulties for the Bible translator, and we are presented with a number of highly ingenious solutions to them.

In the present article I should like to discuss some similar data with regard to the Chinese language, especially with reference to Bible translation into this language. Like any language, Chinese has its polite forms, although not nearly in such staggering quantity as Balinese. Yet I must immediately qualify this statement, for there are different kinds of Chinese. For those who are unfamiliar with this language, a short characterisation may be permitted.

Up to well in the twentieth century the only vehicle thought fit for literary writing was the so-called *wên-yen* or literary Chinese, as opposed to all varieties of spoken Chinese. This literary Chinese has its origin in the literature of ancient China, especially that of the 6th to 3rd centuries B.C. It is highly probable that during those early centuries the distance between written and spoken Chinese was small; but as early as the second century B.C. a process of cliché formation began, taking the literature of the past centuries as a model, and as a result the discrepancy between written and spoken language gradually increased, until in the end they had become two different languages.

When during the early years of the Chinese Republic some students began advocating the use of spoken Chinese in writing and the abolition of the literary form which was the sole privilege of the educated top layers of society, they did not create this new written language out of the blue. Their leader, Dr. Hu Shih, devoted an entire study to the phenomenon of written colloquial in the history of Chinese: his *History of Literature in Plain Language*. The outstanding examples of earlier recordings of spoken language are the great popular novels which were written down between the 15th and 19th centuries, and are still immensely popular today. In fact, these novels became a great help in determining the use in writing of the spoken language; in this, as in many other ways, the Chinese manifested their respect for tradition.

Yet, with the formation of a new literature in the spoken language new problems set in. This is not surprising, for writing down a spoken language means dealing with living material that is itself in constant

flux. Even in Western languages, where spoken and written language generally differ so little, we need a criterion for "Standard English" or "educated Dutch", for example. The influence of widely diverging dialects made itself felt in the choice of vocabulary and the building up of idiom; indeed, the formation of a general standard of Chinese is still an unfinished process. Yet we are already so far that what was first called "Mandarin", a group of closely related dialects spoken throughout most of China and especially North of the Yangtze river, has now evolved into *kuoyü*, "national language", or *p'ut'unghua*, "general language". For our purpose, therefore, we have essentially to deal with two types of written Chinese: the "classical (or literary) Chinese" and the "modern (written) Chinese".

1. Polite usage in Chinese style

Certain types of classical Chinese abound with politeness. This is especially true of the many manuals, still very popular today, of epistolary style. In these manuals many of the exquisite ways of addressing other persons, and indeed a whole special vocabulary for every action or subject, has been collected from the long literary tradition of the classical language. The astounding wealth of flowery phrases in the epistolary style, which many Westerners associate with the refined and cultured Orient, may even beat Balinese. But this, I believe, is the only style which still plays all the registers of accumulated politeness; side by side with it a new epistolary style has emerged which radically does away with polite forms, except an occasional customary beginning and end.

In general, however, the classical style is more sober. Politeness might here and there be expressed in the choice of a "higher" word, but not necessarily more than in our western languages in which a person may have either "passed away", "deceased" or simply "died". One could perhaps say that the written language itself, as distinct from the spoken, became a form if not of politeness, at least of cultured communication.

A. Polite forms of address

But let us become more specific. In his article Dr. Swellengrebel mentions five "layers" of politeness in addressing the second person. We find parallels to this not only in classical Chinese, but also in the colloquial of the early popular novels, no doubt under the influence of the classical terminology which determined the etiquettes. One modern Chinese grammarian, Wang Li, lists a number of these terms, some of which are still in use today: *chün*, '(ruler =) sir', *kung* '(duke =) my lord', *tzü*, 'master', *hsien-shêng*, lit. 'earlier-born', still the most common equivalent of 'sir' or 'master'. Corresponding to these terms are some self-depreciatory terms for the first person: to *chün*

belongs *ch'ên*, '[I, your] ¹ servant', to *tzü* belongs '[I, your] pupil', etc. Even more polite forms are *ta-jên*, lit. 'great man', and indirect ways of addressing a superior, such as *pi-hsia*, 'beneath [thy] steps', *tsu-hsia*, 'beneath [thy] feet', and *ko-hsia*, 'beneath [thy] gate'; these latter terms originated in the fact that the person addressed (*pi-hsia* was originally used for addressing the Emperor) was too exalted to be directly faced.²

B. Honorific prefixes

Another form of polite language is the use of honorifics. The classical example is, of course, Japanese, where honorific prefixes are still in daily use. Chinese, except in epistolary style (which indulges e.g. in terming a letter received a "fragrant despatch"), has only a few honorifics left in present-day usage, and then only in specific expressions: *nin kuei-hsing?*, 'Your honourable surname?', *kuei-kuo* '[your] honourable country'; also honorific classifiers such as *wei* in *chu-wei hsien-shêng*, lit. 'all seats gentlemen', i.e. 'ladies and gentlemen'. Self-depreciation again matches the honorific, as e.g. in the use of *pi*, 'worthless', when referring to oneself.

C. Use of the personal pronoun

The above examples point to the fact, confirmed by our grammarian, Wang Li, that in polite language the tendency is to avoid the use of personal pronouns. "Wherever a personal pronoun should be used", he says, "it is best to replace it by a designation of status or position. It is still feasible to refer to oneself as 'I', but it is not considered polite to call a respectable person 'you' to his face." Among the examples he gives are the following:

"How can [your] son be worthy of these words of [my] lady?"
 "Why does sister not understand its meaning?"
 "[I] think that Madam has remembered wrongly the words
 Madam has spoken yesterday."³

These examples have been taken from the famous novel *Hung lou mêng*, "Dream of the Red Chamber". In a note to them, the author states:

"In giving these examples from the Dream of the Red Chamber, we do not intend everybody to use such phrases . . . But it is

¹ The brackets indicate that the words between them are supplied for intelligibility in translation, but are not there in the original.

² Wang Li, *Chung kuo yü fa li lun* ("On the Chinese Grammatical System"), 2 vols, ed. Chunghua Book Co., Shanghai 1954, vol. 2, pp. 18ff.

³ Wang Li, *Chung kuo hsien tai yü fa* ("Modern Chinese Grammar"), 2 vols, ed. Chunghua Book Co., Hong Kong 1959, vol 2, pp. 7ff.

anyway more polite to call your mother 'mother' or your teacher *hsien-shêng* than to call them 'you'." ⁴

The avoidance of pronouns in classical as well as in modern Chinese is not merely a matter of politeness. It is a phenomenon embedded in the rules of the language. Once a subject has been mentioned, there is no need to repeat it or resume it in a pronoun, as we do in many Western languages. Classical Chinese even has no pronominal form of the third person in subject position; when necessary, the demonstrative *p'ei*, equivalent to Latin *ille*, was used. ⁵ There existed, however, much-used forms in other cases, such as the possessive form *ch'i* and the object-form *chih*. Pronominal forms of the first person (*wo*, *wu*) and of the second person (*ju*, *êrh*) existed from early times, but for them, too, sparing use was the rule.

In modern Chinese the picture is different, and it is also changing. The personal pronouns have always been more in evidence, presumably because in spoken language greater clarity is needed to avoid misunderstanding. In any case, Wang Li believes that the increasing tendency to use pronouns, and also to resume a subject or object into a pronoun, is a good thing, not only for the sake of economy of language, but also as "a sign of progress". ⁶ Yet he evidently disapproves of the tendency in modern Chinese, under the influence of Western languages, to add pronouns where they could still very well be omitted according to Chinese idiom. The following are among the examples he gives from modern literature:

"The trouble with Mr. Wang is that *he is* too clever." "He is" is unnecessary in Chinese.

"Youths, liking the merriment, . . . (came) . . . taking along *their* girl friends."

"Their" according to the Chinese idiom is an unnecessary addition (whereas its omission in English might in this case convey a sense of gross promiscuity). ⁷

Perhaps partly to offset the increasing use of pronouns, also in direct speech, a polite form of the second person pronoun has now come into general use, borrowed originally from the Peking dialect. This is the form *nin*, probably a contraction of *ni* (the usual modern pronoun of the 2nd person) and the plural suffix *-mên*. ⁸ Pekinese has a similar form for the 3rd person pronoun: *t'an*, from *t'a* and *-mên*; but this form has not come into general use.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16, n. 5.

⁵ Wang Li, *Chung kuo yü fa li lun*, vol. 2, pp. 7-9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷ Wang Li, *Chung kuo hsien tai yü fa*, vol. 2, p. 374.

⁸ See Kao Ming-k'ai, *Han yü yü fa lun* ("On Chinese Grammar"), pp. 312ff., where he traces the origin of the suffix *-mên*.

2. Usage in Bible translations

After these general indications we must direct our enquiry to the various translations of the Bible into Chinese. Do we find the usage of polite language, as described above, reflected in these translations? And if so, in what way?

A. Polite forms of address

As we might expect the greatest respect on the human level to be shown to royalty, we turn first to a passage such as 1 Sam. 19:4: "Let not the king sin against his servant David." For "king" all Chinese versions consulted simply have *wang*, the usual word, and also used in classical times by persons addressing a king. The corresponding depreciatory phrase "thy servant", also often used in referring to the self, as e.g. in 1 Sam. 17:34, has been rendered *p'u-jên* in modern versions and *ch'ên* in an older, literary version, the "Easy Wênli" version.⁹ Another polite designation is *ta-jên* (see above, 1A), used in some cases in rendering *kurios* by UV⁹ and Lü; e.g. Acts 10:4, when Cornelius addresses the angel. RC,⁹ however, has here the usual rendering *chu*, 'lord', which is also the normal rendering of *kurios* in UV and Lü, especially when referring to Jesus Christ.

An interesting example is Lk. 1:1, where UV and Lü also use *ta-jên* as a rendering of *kratiste*, the epithet of Theophilus. RC, however, has chosen one of the terms still in use in the epistolary style: *chün-tso*,¹⁰ which seems highly appropriate here.

Hsien-shêng, 'earlier-born', the general polite form of address still in common use, has often been used as a translation of *kurios*, in cases where a stranger is addressed; so in John 4:11, 15, the Samaritan woman addressing Jesus (but RC has again *chu*, possibly because it was felt that something more reverential should come from a woman's lips), Jn. 12:21, 20:15, Acts 16:30 (in these three cases RC also has *hsien-shêng*).

⁹The following abbreviations will be used for the various Chinese versions consulted:

UV: *The Mandarin Union Version*, published 1919, the text in general use today.

EWL: The so-called "Easy Wênli" version, a translation into easy classical style, published 1902; it is a remarkable version especially for its often beautiful and original translations.

Lü: The Revised Draft of the New Testament translation into *kuoyü*, the national language, by the Rev. Lü Chên-chung, published in Hong Kong, 1952.

RC: The new Roman-Catholic Bible translation into *kuoyü*, with critical apparatus, prepared mostly in Hong Kong by a team of Franciscan scholars under the leadership of Father J. Allegra. The last of the 11 volumes was published in Hong Kong, 1961.

¹⁰*Chün* in the sense of 'potter's wheel', from which 'potter', 'to cause to turn around', 'to govern'; and so it became an old form of polite address to officials. *Tso*, 'seat'.

In Mk. 12:33, *didaskale* has been variously rendered *fu-tzŭ*, 'master' (UV), *hsien-shêng*, which is what all pupils call their teacher (Lü), and *shih-fu*, another term for 'master, teacher' (RC). *Rabbi* in Mt. 26:25 has been transliterated by UV (*la-pi*) and RC (*la-p'ei*), while Lü has rendered it by *lao-shih*, '(old =) venerable teacher'. For *Rabbouni* in Mk. 10:51 Lü again has *lao-shih*, and the others transliterate; UV does add a note here, stating that *la-p'o-ni* means *fu-tzŭ*, 'master'.

B. Honorific prefixes

Next to polite forms of address, we spoke of honorifics. I have not yet come across a single instance of their use in the various Chinese versions. This is natural enough, since we deal with close translations from the Biblical languages, in which honorifics do not seem to occur. One might have expected, however, a limited use of honorifics in cases where the direct use of the pronoun would be impolite; for, as we have seen from the example of *kuei*, this honorific is really functioning as a substitute indication of the 2nd person pronoun. I also cannot recall having come across polite classifiers.

C. Use of the personal pronoun

This brings us to the most important question with regard to polite language: have the various Chinese translations counted with the tendency in Chinese to avoid the use of the personal pronoun? On the whole, it seems that they have not done so, but rather followed the usage of the original languages. Rev. J. C. F. Robertson, Far East representative of the B.F.B.S., tells me that when in China he has heard the UV referred to by schoolboys as the *niwo'tati shu*, the 'you-I-he book'. The frequent use of the personal pronouns is indeed a striking feature, not only of the now current UV, but also right from the beginning in the classical versions.

We must distinguish here, I believe, between the traditional tendency of Chinese to use personal pronouns sparingly as being part of its idiom, and the specific avoidance of such pronouns as a matter of politeness. Dr. Swellengrebel mentions the avoidance of personal pronouns in Bible translation, but he has done this himself to avoid determining whether "he" or "they" were involved; thus, Luke 8:23, "as they sailed", becomes "when sailing". In Chinese this is the common usage, reflected in the various translations; addition of the personal pronoun would, strictly speaking, only be necessary if the subject had to be made clear—and even then the subject can be expressed in other ways. This shows that in Chinese the personal pronoun had and often still has a greater demonstrative force than e.g. in our Western languages. An interesting example is Acts 4:13: "Now when *they* saw . . ." We must first note that the Greek does not need a specially expressed

subject, other than its formal inclusion in the verbal form. Since, however, Chinese has no inflexions, it becomes necessary to resume or repeat the subject in the translation (all the more because the subject, the "rulers and elders and scribes", vs. 5, is eight verses away). EWL resumes it by *chung*, 'the multitudes), leaving room, so to say, for the crowd which must have gathered around the elders. UV and RC, however, have just *t'amên*, 'they'. From this fact we may infer that in narrative style the problem is not urgent in Chinese. Yet it is interesting to note that the modern translation of Lü prefers to repeat the subject by *kuan-chang-mên*, 'the elders', which certainly seems stylistically better, if our grammarian quoted above is right.

Another example is Lk. 9:34: "As *he* said this, a cloud came and overshadowed *them*; and *they* were afraid as *they* entered the cloud." Here EWL is most sober: no personal pronouns are used at all, and only once is the plural subject repeated: *san mên-t'u*, 'the three disciples'. UV omits the first 'he', because the speaker has just been mentioned in the previous verse; but it has twice *t'amên* for '(overshadowed) them' and 'they (were afraid)'. Lü even adds *t'a* in '(As) he (said this)'.

We are more in the realm of politeness with a third example: Eph. 1:4, "even as he chose us in him . . ." ¹¹ To begin with the latter part, "in him" has invariably been specified in the Chinese versions as "in Christ". The rendering of "he" shows different solutions. EWL, in good classical style, omits the pronoun altogether, because then the agent remains the same as in the previous verse. UV feels this is not sufficiently clear, and repeats "God". RC and Lü, however, have *t'a*, "he". This illustrates the process of increasing use of the personal pronoun in modern language, mentioned already by Wang Li (see above, 1C).

But the example just given reveals another interesting feature, which, however, can only be seen in Chinese writing. This is connected with new ways of writing the personal pronoun of the 3rd person. Under the influence of Western languages, writers began to feel the need to distinguish between the masculine, feminine and neuter forms. This was done by differentiating the written forms of *t'a* (through substitution of different classifying components of the character). This differentiation in writing—for it cannot be heard—is now in general use. But the interesting thing is that along the same lines a reverential way of writing *t'a* has come into use in such Christian literature, and it has also been adopted by Lü: whenever God is referred to as *t'a*, the classifying component of the character is the classifier commonly used for things divine or supernatural. Thus, a respectful way of referring to God has been created, not unlike the use in most Western languages of capitals.

¹¹ An example briefly referred to by Dr. E. A. Nida, *Bible Translating*, par. 14.3.2, on the use of pronouns.

This new way of writing "He", however, has created a minor problem of its own: must this polite form be used whenever Jesus Christ is referred to? Lü follows the rule that, wherever Jesus is referred to as a human being, the normal *t'a* is written; where he is referred to as divine, especially after the ascension, the reverential *t'a* is used.

Politeness, however, is best seen in direct speech, and therefore we must turn to usages connected with the second person pronoun. Two examples from the Ten Commandments, as quoted in Matthew: in rendering Mt. 15:4: "Honour thy father and thy mother", none of the Chinese versions reproduce the genitive form; "honour father and mother" is clear enough. With the much-quoted phrase: "(You shall love the Lord your God) with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind", we see the same thing in the classical versions and in the UV: no genitive of the personal pronoun is reproduced. RC and Lü, however, add the personal pronoun in Mt. 22:37 and Mk. 12:30, but they omit it in Mark 12:33.

Furthermore, we should take note of the rendering of the imperative. In Mt. 22:37, "you shall" is rendered *ni yao*, 'you must', by UV, *ni yingtang*, 'you should', by RC, while Lü has only *yao*, omitting the pronoun. In Mt. 15:4, however, the alignment is different again: UV has *tang*, 'ought to', Lü has *yao*, as in the other example, while RC has *ni yao*, 'you must'. We should add in explanation that, while a direct imperative is possible in Chinese, it is often softened to a more polite 'must' or 'should'. The addition of personal pronouns, however, is not strictly necessary.

There are also cases in which the imperative has the force of a request, as in Jn. 4:7, where Jesus asks the Samaritan to give him water. UV has here: *ch'ing ni kei wo shui ho*, '[I] beg you give me water [to] drink'. Lü and RC omit the pronoun, which is perfectly feasible in Chinese. The age-old term *ch'ing*, '[I] beg [you]', still in general use, can be said logically to include subject and object. Yet both forms, with and without the 2nd person pronoun, are in current use.

Perhaps the best test of politeness is to see how God is referred to in direct speech. For this it is best to turn to the Psalms. I have found only one Chinese version, the classical EWL, consistently avoiding the use of the 2nd person when referring to God. In every case it has *chu*, 'Lord', instead of *êrh*, found in other classical versions. This procedure may sometimes have some disadvantages as to clarity; e.g. the frequent shifts between 2nd and 3rd person are no longer apparent. Ps. 9:1-7 refers to God in the 2nd person, vs. 8 changes over into the 3rd person, while in the final imperatives the psalmist reverts to the 2nd person. This distinction is no longer quite clear in the EWL translation, but by thus hovering on the borderline between 2nd and 3rd person it seems to me that a stylistic effect is reached for which many translators would yearn. More difficulty, however, might be given by the EWL

rendering of Ps. 16:2: "Thou art my Lord" by *wei chu nai wo chu* (intended: "only [thou], Lord, art my Lord", but one can also read "only the Lord is my Lord"). And even more confusing may be Ps. 17:6: 'I call upon thee . . . O God', EWL *Shên vü, wo hu-yo chu*, which reads "O God, I call upon the Lord"; as if God and the Lord were two distinct persons.

None of the other versions, however, show any inclination to avoid the use of "you" for God, not even the older classical versions, let alone the modern ones. Therefore it is perhaps too much to expect modern versions to return to a solution as given in the EWL. Yet it will certainly be necessary, in general, to review the frequent use of personal pronouns in the present versions.

But times change. In his final remarks on polite forms of address Wang Li foresees regretfully that familiarity will increase among the younger generation, and that in the end they may even become less polite than Westerners!¹² There has certainly been a change in the direction of Western syntax, and it seems that this process is inevitable, not only in Chinese but also in other Oriental languages. Yet there is perhaps some consolation in the thought that the change towards increasing use of personal pronouns may not be all for the worse. A well working system of politeness presupposes a static, caste-like society. It presupposes the predominance of respect as a guiding social principle, and as the framework in which human relations ought to move. This sense of respect is still deeply embedded in the Chinese view of life, so much so that I found a Chinese Christian writer stress the virtue of respect as almost higher than that of love. Yet this same writer adds that it lacks the warmth of Christian love. Familiarity can be seen as a negative consequence of diminishing politeness. The positive consequence is the possibility it opens for free and direct communication. The change, therefore, to such more direct communication as expressed in the greater use of personal pronouns, might also point to a liberation of the person from the rigid social bonds of the past, and this liberation opens up untold possibilities for the realization in a changing society of the great commandment: to love the Lord thy God, and thy neighbour as thyself. At the risk of being smitten by the semantic wrath of Professor James Barr,¹³ I should like to maintain theologically that the free and direct Biblical use of the personal pronouns, especially the intimate way of addressing God, may be another sign of the divine purpose in bringing man to his true destiny of being himself.

¹² Wang Li, *Chung kuo yü fa li lun*, vol. 2, p. 23.

¹³ See the review of Professor Barr's book, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, in *TBT*, 13:227-231 (October 1962).