1 Introduction

Ethics is always complex, in practice or theory. The more complex, the more necessary to deliberate on it. According to Chen Jiaying (2015), a contemporary Chinese philosopher, “studies on ethics are always interwoven with studies on the discourse of ethics” (6). Translation ethics are no exception; careful analysis of their discourse is indispensable.

This chapter explores Chinese discourse on translation ethics and aims to elucidate the Chinese tradition. Liang Shuming (1893–1988) ([1949] 2011, 78), a philosopher who has been described as the last Confucian, has argued that as a country with a long history, China is a society “centred on ethics,” in the sense that ethics permeate almost every aspect of Chinese history, including politics, culture and the military (Cai [1910] 2009, 8). Zhu Guangqian (1897–1986), a prestigious contemporary aesthete, in his masterpiece *Tragic Psychology*, observes that the Chinese people rarely engage with abstract thinking, nor do they strive to address questions that have little to do with reality. For them, philosophy is ethics, and merely ethics (1985, 215). For Liang and Zhu, “ethics” refers to Confucian ethics, which have been practised in China by both individuals and institutions for the past two millennia and have developed into something like a collective unconsciousness. Translation scholar Zhang Boran makes a similar observation: the national psychological structure of the Chinese people has been consistent for much of its history (see Zhang and Xin 2016, 48). Chinese tradition is thus deeply affected by Confucian ethics (Gan 2019, 1).

Unlike virtue or Aristotelian ethics (Yu 2007; see also Chapter 2 “Virtue ethics in translation” in this volume), Confucian ethics is neither normative nor virtue-based but a combination of both (Liu Yuli 2011, 7). It is comprehensive because it contains the key parameters of ethics: principles, values and virtues, and can function as both virtue ethics and deontological ethics in Western ethical terms (Tao 1998). The key principles and values include *xin* [faithfulness], *zhong* [loyalty] or *shuzhong* [reciprocity and faithfulness], *cheng* [sincerity] and *ren* [benevolence]. There are also virtues based on the concept of *junzi* [exemplary and righteous person] (cf. Cheung 2006, 34–35); the ideal personality in Confucian ethics, *junzi buqi* [not to be a mere utensil], means an exemplary person should not just be a specialist, but *xiu qi zhi ping*, which means, starting from one’s family, one should develop into a *junzi*, to harmonise a family, govern
a state, bring peace to the world and play positive roles in different capacities.3 The concept of wulun [five relationships], the essence of which is mutual respect, has also played an important role in the long tradition of Confucian ethics.

As Zhang and Xin (2016, 48) observe, the functions and values of Chinese translation theories are generally born of Confucianism, as seen in key terms like xin, zhong and cheng, which are still used to discuss translation ethics, in addition to more modern concepts like respect, responsibility and trustworthiness. Two other striking features in the Chinese tradition – the emphasis on morality and responsibility on the part of translators and interpreters, and the convergence of ethics and politics in translators’ practice – also have origins in Confucianism.

Confucian ethics was undermined dramatically around the May Fourth Movement in 1919, when China began to transform from a feudal empire into a modern country, and from 1949 to the late 1970s, when China started to reform and open up. Since 1919, many Chinese have attributed the country’s backwardness and weakness to Confucianism and considered it a major hindrance to progress. This change of perspective also affected translation ethics, and its foundational principles shifted from Confucian ethics to socialist and Marxist ideas. Today’s China is witnessing a revival of Confucianism, even though Chinese socialism and Marxism remain predominant ideologies (see also Chapter 4 “Ethics in socialist translation theories” in this volume).

Translation ethics in the Chinese tradition are thus closely related to Confucianism. But rapid development in Chinese TS in the past two decades have made emergent ideas in translation ethics equally important.

2 History

Translation has been practiced in China for about 3,000 years. Roughly, there have been four waves of translation, following Wang Kefei and Fan Shouyi’s analysis (1999), and their respective ethics have not always been the same.

First is the wave of Buddhist sutra translation from what is largely India today, which spanned a period of almost ten centuries, from the East Han (25–220 CE) to the Song (960–1279) dynasties. In this period, translation ethics were dominated by the value of faithfulness as represented by xin. In spite of some Taoist influences, the dominant frame of reference was nevertheless Confucianism (Nakamura 1957, quoted in Chang 1998).

The second wave is the translation of science from Europe during the period of the late Ming (1368–1644) and early Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, around the seventeenth century, when Jesuit missionaries from Europe came to China to spread Catholicism. They also translated between Chinese and Latin and other European vernaculars with the help of Chinese scholars like Xu Guangqi (1562–1633), who were then government officials and had the opportunity to become translators (cf. Tang 2007b, 361). These official-cum-translators were well versed in Confucian classics and steeped in Confucianism. During this period ethics and politics converged because “the writings on translation reflected political and ideological agendas rather than linguistic or methodological concerns” (Tang 2007b, 360–361). Xu Guangqi’s statement has become well known: “If we wish to surpass other countries, we must learn from others and become learned; to learn from others and become learned, we must translate” ([1631] 2009, 154).

The third wave lasted from around the turn of the twentieth century until the 1930s, when China was engaged in a war against Japanese aggression. In this period there emerged great thinker-cum-translators such as Yan Fu (1854–1921), Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and Lu Xun (1881–1936), whose works helped change the way China developed (Wang and Fan 1999). Such figures have all had a strong sense of cultural ego (Zhang and Xin 2016, 77). Yan Fu’s thought on
translation in particular made an important contribution to translation ethics, especially through the Confucian concept of *xin* [faithfulness] (discussed later).

After this third wave, China witnessed an ebb in translation from 1949 to 1966, during which the incoming translation was chiefly from the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, efforts were also made to translate Chinese literature into foreign languages to promote the newly founded People’s Republic of China (Ni 2011). The ensuing decade was the so-called Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), in which not much translation was done, and what was done featured extreme control of political ideology (Li Jing 2008).

The fourth wave started in the 1980s, when China began to reform and open up. This wave carries on into this century. In this period a wide range of books from a variety of languages have been translated into Chinese, and at the same time more and more Chinese books have been translated into other languages.

Since the end of the last century, with the rapid development of TS as a discipline, the issue of ethics has drawn increased attention from translation scholars, starting with the work of Xu (1998) and Lü (2001). In one of the first systematic analyses in the past two decades, Xu (1998) discusses three levels of translation activity, in which a translator must mull over the purpose of the translation, her own competence and the morality of the translating act. The study is acclaimed as an in-depth theoretical exploration of translation ethics (Lan 2018, 87). Lü (2001) is the first scholar in China to propose establishing “translative ethics” for better and more regulated communication between cultures. In this wave, modern concepts like respect, difference and responsibility were introduced and emphasised.

In the twenty-first century, a wide variety of explorations of translation ethics burgeoned in the form of journal essays, MA theses, PhD dissertations and book publications. Within a body of research consisting of 18 PhDs and monographs, Wang Dazhi plays a special role as the first in China to do a PhD in translation ethics. Her understanding of translation ethics (2005, 2009, 2012) has drawn followers in the field, such as Tu (2013) and Liu Yunhong (2014). After an examination of two translation waves in the Chinese history of translation, Wang proposes a relativist view of translation ethics. She firmly believes that translation ethics must be relative rather than universal because, according to her, no such ethics could solve all ethical problems in translation (2012, 161–166; cf. Koskinen 2000; van Wyke 2013, 551). Wang Dazhi (2005, 47) also stresses that the concept of ethics features nationality and temporality, similarly to Zhang J. (2009), as noted later. Tracing her ethical ideas to the source leads us to Wang Haiming, a Peking University-based scholar of moral philosophy. Wang H. (2004, 4) defines ethics as “the law of ‘the is’ and the norms of ‘the ought to,’” because in his eyes ethics unite law and norm. Many TS scholars in China have been influenced by this conception of ethics, including Wang D., Tu and Liu Yunhong.

Following Wang D.’s definition of translation ethics, Tu sums up three models of translation ethics during the late Qing and early Republic period: masterly, servantly and masterly plus servantly. These models are represented by Lin Shu (1852–1924), Yan Fu and Lu Xun respectively. Lin tries to make almost all values comply with Chinese ones, Yan tries to serve the upper class by delicately bringing advanced ideas from the West and Lu has a strong sense of ego in his early practice but later evolves to respect the original (Tu 2013, 123–174). But it may be more accurate to see Tu’s (2013) work as a descriptive sociological study, in Pym’s terms (2012, 2).

Peng Ping (2008), Wang D. and Tu in fact try to deduce the ethics of the “ought to” from the “is,” i.e. the real practice of translation, a contentious issue in ethics since David Hume, also discussed by Chesterman (1993).

between professional and personal ethics, but her distinction is regarded as problematic by some scholars (e.g., Shen 2018, 28). Such scholars may fail to consider that at times the personal ethics of translators and interpreters may contradict their professional ethics (cf. Camayd-Freixas 2013). Zhang D. (2015) in her meta-study approaches translation ethics from the perspective of “ought to.” Ren (2016) points out that ethical issues arise not just during the process of translating but before and after, and in the profession as well, implicitly denying and defying Wang Dazhi’s (2012) definition of translation ethics, discussed earlier. Ren also argues that translation and interpreting cannot be divided due to advances in technology and translation services in China. In fact, Ren is also the first scholar in China to discuss interpreting ethics (Ren 2010; see also Chapter 14 “Conference interpreter ethics” in this volume).

Some studies are influenced by Western ideas, as seen in Lü (2001), Liu W. (2011) and Luo X. (2012), among others. Lü (2001) draws on Habermas’s communicative action theory. Liu’s reconstruction of ethics is also Habermasian. Luo’s model of translation ethics targets the problematic ethical situation in China’s translation world, but there is an apparent discrepancy between the model's postmodern background and the Chinese reality.

3 Core issues and topics

Despite the absence of explicit discourses in China’s long tradition of translation, four issues are prominent throughout this history: faithfulness, responsibility, the convergence of ethics and politics, and the ethics of difference. Along with these core topics, new issues have also emerged, such as the professionalisation of translation vis-à-vis the challenges posed by machine translation (MT) and AI, the ethics of reciprocity in the globalisation of Chinese culture and literature, and the ethics of translation variation.

3.1 Faithfulness

The very first principle for all translators in history, xin [faithfulness], zhong [fidelity] or zhongshi [equivalence] has long been central to both Chinese and Western translation theory (Tan 1999, 27; Zhang 2004, 108). This notion echoes other Chinese characters or words like cheng [sincerity], which is regarded as a key ethical concept in translation (Wu and Wang 2008) and what makes a translator a translator (Zhang and Li 2008). For Wu and Wang, only with sincerity is the translator able to address the contradictions and relationships between the major subjects like the author, the reader and the patronage. According to Zhang and Li, a sincere translator will try her utmost to be faithful to the original.

In fact, xin was used from the time of Zhi Qian, a translator of Buddhist sutra during the Three Kingdoms (220–280 CE) until Yan Fu and the 1920–1930s, when the term was replaced by zhongshi, to convey the requirement of linguistic equivalence between the source and target texts or faithfulness to the ST (Wang Dongfeng 2004, 3–5). Lin Yutang ([1933] 2009, 493) (1895–1976), a renowned Chinese writer and translator, argues, “faithfulness is the very first responsibility on the part of translator.” Xin and zhong both refer to accuracy in translation, but zhong is broader and richer ethically (Wang Dongfeng 2004, 5). Xin was also replaced by zhong/zhongshi because the latter is easier to understand for its colloquial nature (Zhang 2004, 109).

As a longstanding issue in translation practice, often in different guises, the demand of linguistic equivalence in fact constitutes the ethics of “fidelity” or “faithfulness,” somewhat like the “ethics of sameness” in the West (van Wyke 2010) or Chesterman’s “ethics of representation” (2001, 139). The “ethics of representation” virtually dominates in China, according to Chu
Chi Yu (2009, 9). Chu advances such ethical concepts as trust/trustworthiness, respect and equality in his discussion of prescriptive, descriptive and ethical translation studies (2009, 11). On another occasion he argues that zhongshi [faithfulness], regarded as a criterion in the Chinese translation tradition, can help interpret the major Chinese translation discourses: the emphasis on zhi [following the sense in plain words without refining] in the translation of Buddhist sutras is faithfulness in form; Yan Fu’s tripartite dictum “xin, da, ya,” discussed later, is faithfulness in meaning or content; shensi [similarity in spirit], as advanced by Fu Lei (1908–1966), a famous modern translator of French literature, and huajing [transformation of realms], described by Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998), a renowned erudite, are faithfulness in literary art (Chu 2007, viii).

Yan Fu’s concepts of xin, da, ya, noted earlier, warrant much attention. The “three principles” were in fact “three hurdles” (Zhu 2018, 11) in Yan’s preface to his translation of Thomas H. Huxley’s Evolution and Ethics ([1898] 2009): “Translation involves three difficulties: xin, da, ya.” Yan failed to denote explicitly what he meant by xin, the first concept in the trinity, but it has often been read in his wake to mean “fidelity to the original” (e.g. Chan 2004, 5; Wong 2007, 88, 90, 96). A frequent translation of the trinity is “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” (see Zhu 2018, 11). In Zhu’s (2018) new interpretation of the tripartite model, xin, da, ya are construed as “truthfulness, accessibility and appropriateness,” with xin [truthfulness] meaning “the translator being truthful to what she sees as true in the ST” (2018, 12–13).

In a seminal but disputed essay, which prefaces a prestigious anthology of Chinese translation discourse he compiled, Luo Xinzhang delineates the features of the Chinese TS tradition ([1984] 2009). In this essay, Yan Fu’s xin found its way into Luo’s concept of qiuqin [“ST-oriented fidelity-seeking,” in Zhu’s translation (2018, 6)]. In his delineation, Luo argues that such notions as anben, qiuqin, shensi and huajing⁴ illustrate that there has been a “self-contained” system of translation theory in China (Luo 2009, 1–20). Of the four concepts, the latter two were mentioned by Chu, and qiuqin is a summary of what Yan Fu proposed. The first, anben [“ST-oriented textualisation,” in Zhu’s translation (2018, 6)], dates back to Buddhist sutra translators Zhi Qian and Shi Dao’an (314–385) and in essence emphasises faithfulness to the original (Luo 2009, 3).

The idea of faithfulness, first in terms of xin and later in zhongshi, continues to draw the attention of contemporary translation scholars. For example, Peng contends that “zhongshi [faithfulness] in translating means speaking the truth of the source text to the reader of the target text,” and he firmly believes such faithfulness is “the translator’s moral and legal obligation” (Peng 2007, 65). Zeng (2008) addresses the poly-positioning of translation ethics by analysing chronological changes in the concept of fidelity. A recent PhD thesis on zhongshi [fidelity] (Fang 2012) argues that with the prevalence of ethics of “difference” and postmodernism, the ethics of fidelity has reached a dead end; instead, the “moral values” of translation should be explored and employed as an alternative to “ethical norms” in translation ethics.

Despite Fang’s argument, the importance of faithfulness lingers on. As Lan Hongjun, a young theoretician, sees it, zhongshi [faithfulness] is a generally acknowledged principle, synonymous with cheng and xin (2017, 21). For Lan, zhongshi, as an ethical principle, requires the translator to transfer the meaning of the source text truly and completely to the reader of the target text (24). Xie Tianzhen (2018), a leading theorist in TS, holds that as Chinese culture and literature go global, Chinese stories should be told in a language and manner popular in the receiving context, i.e. it is acceptable for some translations to be rewritten or altered for better reception and communication (8). But opposing voices are quite loud: Liu, for example, illustrates her objection to Xie’s argument with the case of French translator Noël Dutrait, who, as she sees it, exemplifies faithfulness as a fundamental principle in his translation of contemporary Chinese novels (Liu Yunhong 2019, 108).
Recently, the author of a critical overview of faithfulness in translation argued that the concept of faithfulness holds sway among translators, despite the fact that academics still question its exact meaning (Feng 2019, 110). There have been attempts to deconstruct the notion of zhongshi [faithfulness] (e.g. Wang Dongfeng 2004), yet, according to Feng, as an ethical principle as opposed to a reality in translation, faithfulness is everlasting, and aiming for faithful translation has become part of a collective unconsciousness among translators and translation scholars in China (Feng 2019, 117).

Wang X. (2016) observes that the many diverse, contemporary Western ideas of translation ethics, which sometimes contradict each other, share a common difficulty: translator subjectivity. As a way out, she suggests resorting to the Chinese standard and character xin, which is made up of “man” and “say” (the radical and component of the Chinese word). The concept represents a relationship, the key word to define the Chinese reality, as she sees it, and she calls for an ethical agent of relationship.

According to Chang, “In brief, traditional translation studies in China is applied TS aimed at zhongshi [faithfulness]” (2004, 24). Even as MT and AI herald a future of authorless texts, voices arguing that the notion of zhongshi [faithfulness] should be a prerequisite for translation, and translators still hold sway (e.g. Ren 2019, 50).

3.2 Responsibility and morality

In the Chinese tradition, translation involves far more than fidelity (Xu 1997); in addition, a long line of thinking centres on translators’ responsibility and morality. Wang Hongyin, a renowned scholar of the Chinese tradition of translation, sums up five features of traditional Chinese translation theories. The first is that morality is essential, and translators’ morality and responsibility are paramount (2018, 119). As a matter of fact, stress on translators’ morality and responsibility dates back to the Buddhist Sutra monk translators, epitomised by Shi Yancong5 (557–610 CE) during the Sui Dynasty (598–617). As a perennial issue, it has drawn the attention of today’s Chinese TS scholars as well, as seen in works by Sun (2007), Chu (2009), Zhu (2010), Chen and Lü (2011) and Chen and Yi (2011).

Shi Yancong, who served as the emperor’s religious consultant, wrote about the “ba bei” [eight prerequisites] for translators in his seminal essay “Bianzheng lun” [“On the Right Way”]. It has been regarded as the first systematic disquisition of the translator’s professional qualifications and ethical demeanour in the Chinese tradition (see Luo and Chen 2009, 60–63). Translated by Diana Yue and Martha Cheung, the eight prerequisites are as follows (see Cheung 2006, 142):

First, a translator must love the truth sincerely and be devoted to spreading the Buddhist faith and wisdom to others. Second, to prepare himself for enlightenment, he should hold fast to the rules of abstinence and not arouse scorn or laughter in others. Third, he must be well read in the Buddhist canon and must understand both Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism, and he should not be deterred by the difficulties he encounters. Fourth, he must also study the Chinese classics and Chinese history and make himself well-versed in letters so that his translations will not be clumsy and awkward. Fifth, he must be compassionate, open-minded and keen to learn, and must not be biased or stubborn. Sixth, he must devote himself to practising the truth; he must think lightly of fame and riches and harbour no desire to show off. Seventh, he must study the Fàn language [Sanskrit] until he knows it thoroughly, and must learn the correct methods of translating so that he will not lose the meaning of the doctrines. Eighth, he must also acquaint himself with the lexicons in ancient
Translation ethics in Chinese tradition

Chinese writings and with the development of the Chinese script so that he will not misuse words in his translations.

For Yancong, these eight prerequisites make for an eligible translator (Cheung 2006, 142). Half of the eight prerequisites are about character or morality, and the rest are, in today’s academic parlance, about the translator’s competence in the languages and subjects involved.

In the twenty-first century, the translator’s responsibility and morality have received increased attention among translation scholars. Chu (2009, 10), as noted, holds that translation ethics are in a nutshell the translator’s responsibility to the parties involved in a translation project. Sun Zhili (2007), Zhu Chaowei (2010) and Chen and Yi (2011) also discuss the issue. Sun (2007) relies on Chesterman’s five models – ethics of representation, of service, of communication, ethics based on norm and ethics of commitment (Chesterman 2001) – to identify five translator responsibilities: representing the original, fulfilling client requirements, conforming to the sociocultural norms of the receiving country, satisfying the demands of the Target Language (TL) reader and abiding by professional ethics (see also Chapter 2 “Virtue ethics in translation” in this volume). Chen and Lü (2011) argue that Chesterman’s (2001) transference of ethical responsibilities to translators fails to free them from moral dilemmas. They provide translators and interpreters with four principles for prioritising virtual responsibilities within the limits of social contexts and the interests of the subjects: due consideration to the interests of all stakeholders, benefits maximised and harm minimised, priority to the interests of the weak party and prioritising the most pressing responsibility.

This emphasis on the requirements and responsibilities of translators and interpreters continues today in various professional codes of ethics. The latest development is the release of the Code of Professional Ethics for Translators and Interpreters in China by the Translators Association of China (TAC) on November 9, 2019, at the 2019 TAC Conference in Beijing (TAC 2019). The code explicitly specifies what is expected of professional translators and interpreters in terms of attitude, competence, fidelity and accuracy, impartiality, confidentiality, contract awareness, cooperation, technology literacy and self-improvement. It is also intended to serve as a guide for professional trainers and users or consumers of translation services in China (see also Chapter 20 “Ethics codes for interpreters and translators” in this volume).

3.3 Convergence of ethics and politics

The convergence of ethics and politics has manifested in various forms throughout the history of Chinese translation ethics. The convergence is based on three axioms: first, translation is for cultural enhancement. Second, translation is for national survival. And third, translation is for national image promotion.

For a long time, translation was seen as a way to strengthen the central status of the Han culture, and translators before the Song Dynasty did not enjoy high status (Xia 2017, 89). Translation gained more visibility through the translation between Han or Confucian classics and minor ethnicities in China (89). During the second wave of translation, besides the translation of science from Europe, translation within the country played a role in the integration of a multicultural country (89). In this period, ethics and politics converged in the sense that translation contributed to cultural enhancement.

Ethics and politics also converge in the use of translation as a cultural weapon for national survival, as identified by many Chinese translation scholars, including Liu Miqing (2005) and Gu Zhengkun (2008). In arguing that translation should function as a cultural strategy, Liu built on a long tradition of translators, such as Xu Guangqi, Ma Jianzhong (1844–1900), Yan
Xin Guangqin

Fu, Liang Qichao and Lin Shu, who all saw translation as a cultural strategy for the nation to survive various crises (Liu 2005, i). For Liu, this was the most essential “Chinese characteristic” of translation. Liu also appealed to contemporary translators in China to play a larger role in the rejuvenation of Chinese culture and the nation (Liu 2005, i–xxxii). Liu’s point was reaffirmed by Gu in his study of cultural translation in the late Qing and early Republic (1840–1919) (2008, 7–17) eras and by other translation scholars, such as Zhang and Xin (2016, 76–77). Translation ethics and politics are also linked in the Chinese context because China has a long history of hiring translators as government officials (Hung and Pollard 2009, 372; Tang 2007b, 361). China has often had a strong central government, run by a well-structured hierarchy of scholar-officials, despite political disorder from time to time.

Nevertheless, the use of translation as a cultural weapon has been held responsible for the under-exploration of translation ethics in China (Chu 2009). Chu argues that in twentieth-century China, translation was employed to realise various cultural purposes and primarily served the “self,” without a focus on “humanities,” which refers to how to treat the foreign, including strangers and enemies, properly (2009, 7).

Ethics and politics also converged in institutionalised translators after the founding of the People’s Republic of China and throughout the Cultural Revolution period (1966–1976). In this “national translation programme,” as termed by Ren and Zhang (2016), the ethical agents are characterised in three levels: the nation as nominal agent, state-level translation organisations as institutional agents and translator groups as actual agents. In such programmes, Ren and Zhang argue, ethics of patriotism prevail: national interests dominate translation decisions.

3.4 Ethics of difference

Influenced by Western ideas, like those of French philosopher Levinas and TS scholars Berman and Venuti, the so-called ethics of difference and its critiques have recently become influential in Chinese TS (see also Chapter 6 “Ethics in Berman and Meschonnic” and Chapter 10 “Venuti and the ethics of difference” in this volume). Xu H. (2012), Liu and Xu (2016) and Shen (2008) are firm believers in “ethics of difference,” while Liu Yameng (2005) and Zhang J. (2009) criticise the paradigm. Zhang in particular has developed new thinking about translation ethics.

Xu H. (2012), informed by the ideas of Berman, Venuti and Levinas, valorised difference in translation by studying how an ethics of difference was applied to render literature into Chinese. Liu and Xu (2016), following Berman’s earlier view rather than his later notion of translation ethics, also stress the importance of ethics of difference, particularly in the translating of Chinese literature and culture into other foreign languages. Of those Chinese scholars espousing “difference,” proponent Shen Lianyuan is particularly determined and consistent in his argument. In several essays (2008, 2010, 2014, 2016) and his monograph (2018), Shen argues that translation ethics boil down to the respect of “difference, nothing but difference.” He contends that only by respecting “difference” can translation be ethical and a world steeped in capitalist notions and ideologies be saved from selfishness, self-importance and other contemporary human malaises. In his most recent work (Shen 2018), he goes to great lengths to stress the philosophy of “other-regarding.”

Views on “difference” also appear in past Chinese discourses. For example, the great translator and thinker Lu Xun was a staunch supporter of respecting difference, linguistic in particular. His call to respect difference stems from his discontent with the Chinese nationalism of his time and his hope to revolutionise the Chinese way of thinking via reform of the Chinese language.

Ethics of difference has also been criticised. Liu Yameng (2005) put forth the first systematic criticism of Venuti’s “ethics of difference” (see Venuti 1998), followed by Jiang (2008) and
Translation ethics in Chinese tradition

Zhang J. (2009). Zhang J. (2009, 198–200) links this discussion to the convergence of ethics and politics noted earlier and sees translation ethics as often subject to the needs of politics. In his investigation of Venuti’s translation ethics, Zhang champions the idea that translation ethics feature national, political and epochal characteristics, thereby constituting a kind of “cultural soft power” (2009, iii). For Zhang, translation ethics is not only the translator’s pursuit of certain values but also part of the social institutions and social control systems of the country concerned (2009, 196). In his view, translation ethics as a cultural soft power is chiefly embodied in the ethical “collective unconsciousness,” or the collective cultural interests and standpoints, of a nation (2009, 196).

Xin Guangqin (2017, 76–78) also takes issue with “difference” as the foundation for ethics when he discusses Yang Zhenyuan’s (2013) model of shoujing-daquan. Yang (2013) borrows two important notions long practised in Chinese ethical tradition, shoujing and daquan (acting flexibly in concrete quan [tactics] while sticking to jing [principles] as strategies), to build a model. Yang’s model is significant, but his jing [principle] is pinpointed at “difference.” For Xin, difference is relative and cannot be granted an absolute value and thereby doesn’t constitute a value for ethical formulation (see also Weller 2006). Xin (2017) argues, “[a]lso related to difference regarding translation ethics is the issue of asymmetrical relations of power between different languages and cultures,” for which the identity of a minor language might be harmed (77).

Despite criticisms, difference is espoused by some scholars (e.g. Liu and Xu 2016) for a major reason: the “going global” initiative of Chinese literature and culture. As the flow of translation between Chinese and Western languages, English in particular, remains lopsided, many in China hope the country’s culture and literature will be translated with due respect for its “difference” instead of being misrepresented, misunderstood or improperly appropriated.

4 New debates and emerging issues

The heated discussion of translation ethics reflects the topic’s importance to translation scholars, but it also demonstrates that it is not easy for the field to come to consensus on complex ethical issues. With the rapid change of society and swift development of technology, new issues and topics in translation in the Chinese context have emerged. Three new issues in the Chinese context warrant particular attention.

4.1 Professionalisation of translation and challenges posed by MT and AI

Due to changes in such factors as source-text types, translating modes and translating tools and means, some scholars conclude that translation in China is entering an era of professionalisation (Xie 2014). More practical texts than literary works are being translated both into and out of Chinese, and translation is listed in the national document of professions and occupations (Mu 2018, 11). Meanwhile, a large number of universities offer master of translation and interpreting (MTI) programmes, and training issues and questions concerning the professionalism of future translators and interpreters will give rise to new issues in translation ethics. For example, where will the boundary of responsibility be drawn when many more participants are involved and more texts are produced collaboratively rather than individually? Clear copyright may give way to collective copyright (see also Chapter 21 “Ethics in the translation industry” in this volume).

Moreover, in this new context of professionalisation and digitisation, translation is part of the language service industry, which exists in the ecosystem of the cultural industry (Miao and Ning 2016). New problems such as underdeveloped policies and regulations for personnel, chaotic
market management and non-standardised quality control have been identified (Wang Huashu 2017, 87). Meanwhile, the use of open-access machine translation tools will further complicate ethical issues, including emerging needs for criteria and legislation (87).

Ethical issues related to translation in the digital age are nothing new (see Cronin 2013), but debates emerge all the time. For example, translation technology leads to conflicts between human and machine: what is the purpose of machine translation? Whom does it serve? Does it serve the interests of a small number or promote the harmony and development of humanity as a whole? Recently, such questions have been taken seriously, and an intersubjective understanding of the agents involved in and brought about by MT is suggested (Lan 2019, 13; see also Chapter 19 “Translation and posthumanism” in this volume).

On the one hand, translation seems to be professionalising swiftly. On the other hand, crowdsourced translation, cloud translating and MT point to the development of collaborative translation and collective wisdom, which have resulted in the scaling up and deprofessionalisation of translation (cf. McDonough Dolmaya 2011; see also Chapter 16 “Ethics of volunteering in translation and interpreting” in this volume). The resulting ethical issues are therefore more pressing and complex, as discussed by Hao (2016) and Wang, Li, and Li (2018, 81–82). In fact, the fast development of MT has given rise to a plethora of changes in translation types, text types, translation subjects and translatorial roles; in turn, these changes challenge basic ethical principles like faithfulness, responsibility, loyalty, impartiality and harmony, according to Ren Wen (2019, 48–50). While technology offers benefits such as speed and efficiency, the challenges and risks must not be neglected, Ren (2019) argues, and the aforementioned principles must be strengthened to meet the challenges.

The ethical issues arising from translation technology have much to do with translation knowledge protection and technology democracy, human alienation and linguistic ecology; translators and interpreters, translation users and the community at large may all be damaged in one way or another by technology, as illustrated by some translation scholars (e.g. Hao and Mo 2019). For example, Lan (2019) revealed and criticised a corporation specialising in AI and voice recognition for taking advantage of interpreters’ work in the advertising of their products. In sum, technological progress has not been matched by corresponding ethics and law, which lag far behind in present-day China.

4.2 Ethics of reciprocity and outgoing translation

According to statistics from the Translators Association of China, the translation volume from Chinese to other languages accounted for 54% of the total in 2011, outpacing the volume of incoming translation for the first time, and 60% of the total in 2014 (Huang 2018, 6). This changed translation flow has led to a reconsideration of the ethics of difference. Liu and Xu (2016), as noted earlier, stress the importance of “ethics of difference” and take issue with some foreign or Chinese translators’ practice of manipulating or rewriting contemporary Chinese literary works. They stress difference for another reason: in China quite a few TS scholars (e.g. Xie 2015, Hu 2018) are somewhat supportive of the “manipulation” or “rewriting” as epitomised by Howard Goldblatt, a noted American translator of contemporary Chinese literature. Xie is typical of those siding with Goldblatt. He (2018) contends that there is a gap in culture and time between the Chinese adoption of Western culture and the Western adoption of Chinese culture. For the imbalanced exchange and communication between the West and the East, China should exercise patience and acknowledge the reality that China is still weak in terms of cultural power, although it has been the second largest economic power in the world. In other words, Xie argues that respecting the “foreign” as “foreign” takes time.
The kind of ethics that works best for the outgoing translation of Chinese culture and literature is still under dispute. Li (2016) draws on ethics in general to define the translation ethics for today’s English translation of Chinese classics.

Xin (2017) supplies an ethics of reciprocity. Translation ethics involves issues of texts, languages and cultures as well as individuals, collectives and larger communities like nations, to which good and evil can be done by translation and translators, and Xin strives to formulate a more comprehensive, dynamic, integrated and multi-layered model, called the “ethics of reciprocity in translation,” by drawing on Ricœurian and Confucian concepts of reciprocity (see also Chapter 7 “The ethics of linguistic hospitality and untranslatability in Derrida and Ricœur” in this volume). The Ricœurian model stresses reciprocity between equal parties, while the Confucian model emphasises reciprocity between unequal parties, and translation tends to involve both equal and unequal participants. Reciprocity presupposes pairs of entities and parties, and any translation project involves such pairs. The ethics of reciprocity in translation was thus developed by combining virtue ethics and principle ethics to cover a wide scope of whether to, what to and how to translate. The paradigm centres on translation projects, whereby active parties, such as individual persons, collectives and nations, and passive entities, including texts, languages and cultures, ought not to be harmed but should rather mutually benefit. To achieve such reciprocity, translators and other agents are faced with three general alternatives: no translation, “equivalent” translation and manipulated translation, depending on the text type and quality, as well as the value the translation project aims to establish. This model supersedes the ethics of difference and sameness at once and promotes linguistic, cultural and national harmony.

### 4.3 Ethics of translation variation

Translation variation is a concept put forward by Chinese translation scholar Huang Zhonglian in 1998 (see Zhou 2012). As developed by Huang, the theory discusses the adding, altering, cutting, adapting and rewriting in translation practice, in contrast to the notion of linguistic equivalence in most codes and the idea of “faithfulness” in many traditional conceptions of translation. Two recent publications have given rise to the latest discussion of translation variation: an essay entitled “The Ethics of Translation Variation: A Tentative Examination” (Fang 2019) and a dissertation entitled “Towards the System of Trans-variation Ethics” defended at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in November 2019. In the dissertation, researcher Yang Rongguang develops a system of ethics concerning translation variation. The theory of translation variation has been around for two decades, but its ethics will undoubtedly continue to trigger heated discussions.

### 5 Conclusion

To conclude, the emphasis on xin [faithfulness], translator responsibility and the convergence of ethics and politics will continue to occupy centre stage in the discussion of translation ethics among translators and TS scholars in China. The dispute over whether to respect difference will not be settled anytime soon, as the Chinese people hold enormous hope that their culture and literature can be received by others just as in China. For translators, translation scholars and all other parties concerned, there are also other imposing issues in translation ethics: how to effectively engage with the ethical notions from the West, including those embodied in the functional, feminist, postcolonial and postmodern discourses; how to tap into and develop the rich and profound ethical tradition of China; and how to meet the challenges posed by the advancement in AI and MT.
Chu (2009) argues that translation ethics in China is underdeveloped largely because of the persistent influence of Confucian ethics. But other scholars think otherwise, such as Wu (2008, 2011), Zhang J. (2009), Yang (2013), Wang X. (2016) and Xin (2017), who resort to Confucian ethics or call on its long tradition to address translation ethics. As scholars continue to reconceptualise translation and notions of ethics, and as globalisation, globalisation and technology continue to change the landscape of translation, developments in translation ethics will emerge. Reciprocal engagement between the rich legacy of Chinese tradition and the profound insights of the West, from ancient Greece to today, will help speed up the emergence of new ethical paradigms.

About ten years ago, Moira Inghilleri in her entry for the second edition of Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies stated, “we have not yet by any means reached a clear understanding of or agreement about what an ‘ethical’ approach actually means in the context of translation theory or practice, or the construction of the field itself” (2009, 100). This situation will change. Chinese TS scholars are ready to critically and reciprocally engage with productive explorations in translation ethics to develop insights for better communication and exchanges between cultures and peoples. The result will be a shared human community, or telos (cf. Chesterman and Baker 2008), not just for translators and interpreters but also for anyone involved in cross-cultural communication.

Related topics in this volume
Virtue ethics; Venuti and ethics of difference; translator ethics; translation industry and ethics; codes of ethics.

Notes
1 All quotations from Chinese authors in this chapter are my translations unless otherwise noted. All Chinese names are romanised in Pinyin according to the practice in China – with the surname first, followed by the given name.
2 The English translations of these Chinese concepts are the most relevant but cannot in most cases convey the rich and profound meaning of the concept in question. For example, ren, an all-encompassing ethical concept in Confucianism, conveys not just “reason” or “sense” but something of both (Yu Yingshi 2004, 402). For more, see Xin (2017, 107, note 107).
3 These ideas are conveyed in the Confucian classics The Daxue [The Great Learning] and have been promoted by Confucius’s followers and practised by ordinary Chinese people for over 2,000 years. Maria Tymoczko, an American translation scholar, seems to have been influenced by these ideas when she says, “Thinking about responsibilities to self, family, community, nation, and the world open up wider and wider ethical issues for translators” (2007, 318, my emphasis).
4 Zhun Chunshen called these the “four pronouncements on translation.” Luo linked them to chart a conceptual evolution of Chinese TS tradition and Zhu translated them respectively as “ST-centred textualisation,” “ST-oriented fidelity-seeking,” “TT-oriented resemblance in spirit” and “TT-centred transformation” (Zhu 2018, 6).
5 Buddhist monks in ancient China usually give up their real name and adopt a two-character religious name like Yancong, Dao’an or Xuanzang. Shi is their uniform surname, after Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, whose name is transliterated into Chinese as Shi‘jiamouni. See also Tang Jun’s note 3 in her Target essay (2007b, 372).
6 253 in total in April 2019 (Mu 2020, 96).

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40
Translation ethics in Chinese tradition


Further reading


A short and indispensable guide to Confucianism/Ruism.


An anthology of ancient Chinese discourse on translation, which connects the past to the present in the Chinese context.


Unlike any other model of translation ethics, this volume attempts to develop a more sophisticated paradigm based on Chinese and Western ethical insights and the latest understandings of translation.


A lucid and sophisticated introduction to the Chinese tradition of translation studies.