

## Translating the Concept of *Hua*: A Semiotic Approach in Exploring Identities

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**[Abstract]** While the concept of *Hua* has always been integrated with China and Chinese, *Huaren* and *Huaqiao* and the like have different identities, involving profound historical, social, cultural significance as well as the core values and attributes of Chineseness. Based on a semiotic approach, this paper explores into the special relations between *Hua* as a semiotic symbol and the connotations implied in relation to translation studies through typical case analyses and personal experience shared. Certain meaningful implications may be revealed from the three aspects, namely the connotations of *Hua* in the light of semiotic approach, Chinese identities and Chineseness, and the “signifier”, “signified” and their agreement.

**[Keywords]** concept of *Hua*; *Huaren*; Chineseness; semiotic translation; identity; attribute

*Hua*, a concept both ancient and modern, having profound connotations of Chinese culture, is closely related to China, the Chinese, Chinese blood lineage, Chinese ancestry, Chineseness and among many things Chinese. As an overseas Chinese, the author attempts in this paper to probe into the origin, evolvement and translations of the concept as well as the implications for identifying the Chinese in different social and cultural contexts, mainly from the point of view of semiotic approach.

### The Connotations of *Hua* in the Light of Semiotic Approach

Concerning the nature of translation, in view of many scholarly studies, semiotics has always been a significant theoretical and practical approach in terms of information transformation and code-switching (Bassnet-McGuire, 1991, p. 13). In the field of interdisciplinary studies, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce have applied semiotic theory into linguistic and the related studies. In syncretizing their ideas, the following two points are considered to be critical:

- Linguistic semiotics is not a natural, but cultural, product characterized by its ethnicities and national heritage;
- The true meaning of a semiotic symbol can only be discerned in relation to other systems.

In the light of this framework, *hua* and its profound implications may be explored. First of all, it is considered that *hua* (华) being intrinsically Chinese. According to Chinese *A Classic Dictionary of Radical Language*, *hua* originally was “flower” (花), and then extends to “splendid” or “glory” (光华). Gradually it integrated with a geographical element – *xia* (夏). As it is recorded in *Legend of Spring and Autumn Century* (By Zuo Qiuming): “裔不谋夏，夷不乱华”，of which “夏” (*xia*) and “华” (*hua*) could be translated as “Middle Kingdom”, and “裔” and “夷” as “border people”, the whole sentence may be put into “The border people could not strategize the Middle Kingdom, nor could the barbarians cause disturbance among the Chinese”.

It is highly desirable to read the annotations by Kong Yingda concerning the references: “中国有礼仪之大，故称夏；有服章之美，谓之华。华夏一也”。By its context, it may be translated as “With its profound ritual and etiquette, the Middle Kingdom is called ‘Xia’; with its delicate costumes, it is called ‘Hua’. That was the reason by which ‘Hua Xia’ derived”.

As mentioned above, the true meaning of a semiotic connotation is normally derived from a comparison between different discourses. In the case of *hua*, its actual implications can be fully revealed only in relation to non-*hua*, such as a comment by Yang Chun “亦以别华戎，异内外也” (*History of Post Wei*, 1999 edition), where “戎” (*rong*) is opposite to *hua*, and “内” (interiors) could be understood as the

Chinese and “外” (exteriors) as “the Western tribespeople”, the sentence may be rendered as: “Therefore, the rulers distinguished the Chinese from the Western tribespeople and separated the interiors from the exteriors”.

Another example, is Yuan Fan’s comment: “窃惟匈奴为患，其来久矣。...远夷荒杰，不识信顺” (qie wei xiong nu wei huan, qi lai jiu yi... yuan yi huan yi huang jie, bu shi xin shun) (*The History of Post Wei*, volume 48), and annotated by Qian Zhongshu as “夷”, “虏”等谓“柔然”也 (yi lu deng wei rou ran ye) (Qian, 1999, p. 1486) which could be translated as “What are so-called ‘yi’ and ‘lu’ mean ‘barbarian’ and ‘foreign enemy’, designating the Avar people who lived north of the Northern Wei.” Of which “barbarian” and “foreign enemy” do not appear in the original literally, however, by comparison, we may add in to complement its version; also for the words 夷 (yi) and “虏” (lu) we ought not so rigidly adhere to their linguistic meaning but to consider them in the context of non-*hua*, thus may all be rendered as “barbarians” instead. By the same token, Yuan Fan’s above comment as “I myself have realized that the crises caused by the ‘Xiongnu’ have a long history indeed.... These remote barbarians are uncivilized and cruel; they do not understand what can be trusted and what is obedient”.

Considering concepts such as “胡虏” (hu lu), “夷虏” (yi lu), “夷狄” (yi di), “夷” (yi) in the text are opposing *hua* therefore should be translated derogatorily and “华人” (hua ren) as a honorable word, the whole passage may be rendered as “The Han people called themselves ‘Chinese’ and regarded the Xianbei as ‘Northern Foreigners’. However, the Xianbei of the Northern Wei called themselves ‘Chinese’ and regarded the Avars ‘barbarians’. Consequently, the Xianbei of the Northern Qi, which arose first, regarded the Xianbei of the Northern Zhou, which arose afterwards, ‘barbarians’. Precisely, wasn’t this the way that hundreds years later when Southern Song looked upon the Jurchens of the Jin dynasty and the Jin Jurchens looked upon the Mongolians?” “As for the people of Northern Qi calling themselves ‘Chinese’ and considering the southern dynasties as ‘barbarian’, which was an approach that Jin, hundreds years later, never took with regard to the Southern Song. Therefore, the Northerners who used the language merely for the purpose of glorifying and enlightening themselves; in their minds, in fact, a different view persisted”.

Upon to the Song Dynasty, as Hong Hao recorded in his *Song Mo Journey*: “辽道宗...” (liao dao zong...). Based on the semiotic approach, an analysis of “intra-lingual translation” may be applied to differentiate between “中国” (*zhong guo*, middle kingdom) and “中华” (*zhong hua*, China in a cultural sense). Also, considering “夷” (yi) is used in a derogatory sense and being “华” (*hua*) in a commendatory sense, so the amplified words may be added in, such as “to take offense at being ‘yi’” and “we are honored to have reached the level of elegance as the Chinese” and so on, and the passage may be translated as: “Once Emperor Dao Zong of the Liao Dynasty ordered one of his Han ministers to lecture on the *Analects* for him, when the lecturer reached the sentence ‘The pole star receives the homage of the multitude of massive stars without moving its place’, the Emperor said, ‘I have heard that the land beneath the North Star is the ‘Middle Kingdom’, is it not precisely where we are residing now?’ While the Han lecturer arrived at the entry of ‘Barbarian tribes that have their rulers’, he was scared to read it aloud. But the emperor found out the reason and then said, ‘Our forefathers, the Xunyu and Xianyun tribes, had no rituals and rules whatsoever, that is why they were called “barbarians”. However, we have been cultivated culturally and have reached the level of elegance as the Chinese. Why should we take offense at that passage?’”

Similarly, in Zhang Lun’s narration: “遂令竖子... (sui ling shu zi...) (*History of the Post Wei Dynasty*, volume 21), where “中国” (*zhong guo*) and “夷狄” (*yi di*) are in completely opposite sense, the passage could therefore be translated as “Then the Emperor took charge of officials and sent his soul to ramble over his land. During the time when the Middle Kingdom was full of crises, the Emperor cared more about the Chinese and was relaxed in his attention to the barbarians... Previously, when the beacon fires were lit in our old capital, the foreign enemy’s envoy emerged in the city’s periphery.... Moreover, when the foreign enemies were inspired by our virtue, they came over here to observe us.... However, since it has been said that it would be difficult to be intimated with petty men and the barbarians rarely

have true friends.... Therefore, to be an envoy means to carry on our noble duty to a distant foreign enemy's courtyard."

Interestingly, there is a story illustrating what is to be true Chinese in relation to location and propriety: “江东复有一吴儿老翁萧衍者...” (jiang dong fu you yi wu er lao wong xiao yan zhe... (Qian, 1999, p.1487), of which “中原” (*zhong yuan*) originally was “in the center of China,” therefore it is inappropriate to simply render it as “Middle Kingdom” again but instead, as “Central China”. The passage may therefore be translated as “There was an old fellow living in a peripheral area – Wu named Xiao Yan, who devoted whole his life to proper dressing, court rituals and music. Gentlemen of the central China all paid respect to him and convinced that the dynastic legitimacy was resided in him”.

Concerning the differences between “Chinese”, “*hua qiao*” and “*hua ren*”, the key criterion lies in nationality: “Chinese” are undoubtedly “citizens of China”; *hua qiao* are Chinese living overseas; *hua ren* are Chinese descendants who have acquired foreign nationalities. There are in fact various terms referring the Chinese living overseas and are often confused, such as ethnic Chinese, Diaspora Chinese, the Chinese of Diaspora, American of Chinese Ancestry, Chinese American, Australian of Chinese Ancestry, Chinese Australians, Australian Chinese, a foreigner of Chinese Ancestry, November 1<sup>st</sup> Chinese and so on, depending on the context of location, timing and circumstances (Lin, 1997, p. 273). Most obviously, *hua ren* is a concept of ethnicity including the Chinese of Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and Chinese overseas, while “the Chinese” is in fact a concept exclusively defining the “mainland Chinese”, therefore it is highly political and sensitive in Chinese studies and in its related translations.

### Chinese Identities and Chineseness

As stated above, in semantics, “华” (*hua*), “华人” (*hua ren*), “中国” (*zhong guo*) “中国人” (*zhong guo ren*), “美籍华人” (*mei ji hua ren*), “澳籍华人” (*ao ji hua ren*) and so on have been manifested in various terms, however, those are in fact all symbols of the Chinese, the real question should then be how to reveal the true content of the semiotics?

Since ancient times, this has been an issue fascinating the searching minds. For example, in *A History of the Tang Dynasty* Huang Pushi says, “所以为中国者...” (*suo yi wei zhong guo zhe...*) (*A History of the Tang Dynasty*, volume 686), in which “礼仪” (*li yi*) is identical to “etiquettes and proprieties”; “夷礼” (*yi li*), as stated above (concerning *yi*) regrettably has to be “barbarian customs”; “子” (*zi*, gentleman), Confucius, symbolizing “Chinese civilization”, the passage could therefore be translated as “The quality that makes a people part of the Middle Kingdom is compliance of etiquettes and proprieties; and what makes a people ‘barbarian’ is their dearth of the same. How could people’s identities depend on their locations? In ancient times, when the state of Qi embraced barbarian customs, it consequently became a barbarian state. However, if Confucius had taken up residence among the nine barbarian tribes in remote area, they would no longer have been uncivilized (they would have been deeply influenced by Chinese civilization)”.

Also, as Chen An of the Tang Dynasty states in *The Chinese Mind*: “大中初年... (da zhong chu nian...)” (*A History of the Tang Dynasty*, volume 767), of which “教” (*jiao*) could be understood as “a person’s qualities and values”, and “华其心” (*hua qi xin*) is a “verb + object” structure, meaning “cultivate the heart” (the Chinese heart). It is believed that a Chinese heart has nothing to do with localities, the passage could therefore be translated as “In the first year of the Dazhong period (847), the lord of Fanyang, commander general of Daliang, gained a Tajik named Li Yansheng, whom he recommended to the throne. The Emperor summoned the officials to evaluate his capacity, and in the following year he passed the examination of *Jinshi*. Someone said, “In this way, haven’t we recruited officials from among the barbarians? Is it that we Chinese are unworthy of being distinguished?” I replied: “Speaking about territory, there is indeed a division between we Chinese and other barbarians.”

However, when we come to a person’s qualities and values, does the same distinction still hold or not? The criterion for differentiating a Chinese or a barbarian should be the person’s mind; you make your judgment by evaluating the propensity of the person’s mind. A person who was born in the central

part of the Middle Kingdom, if his conducts violate etiquettes and proprieties, he may just have a body of Chinese with a mind that is barbarian. On the contrary, a person who was born in barbarian lands, if his conducts confirm to the etiquettes and proprieties, he may have a barbarian body with a mind that is Chinese.... In the case of Li Yansheng, since he has a mind of a Chinese, we should not regard him as a barbarian simply because of the place he was born.

Similarly, Cheng Yan, a scholar of the Tang Dynasty had a unique insight of what is a true Chinese mind in his *Proclamation on Internal Barbarians*: “四夷之民...” (si yi zhi min...) (*Literature of the Tang Dynasty*, volume 812; Qian, 1999, p. 1489). Considering the social and cultural background, although “中国” (zhong guo) and “心于华” (xin yu hua) and “出于华” (chu yu hua) are all deemed as “China” or “Chinese culture”, there are differences between the body and the mind, which could belong to *hua* and *yi* separately, causing an ironic but interesting phenomenon:

“People of different barbarian tribes have frequently crossed over the regions of several languages to arrive at our borders, so much do they admire the benevolence, humaneness, loyalty and trustworthiness of the Chinese. Although those people originated from foreign lands, since their minds adore China, I thus do not call them barbarians... On the other hand, among the people of China, there are often those who instinctively defy the imperial rules and ignore afore-virtues. Despite their origins are in China, since they bury their mind among the barbarians, I thus would not consider them Chinese. ...Therefore, there are always people who are Chinese in name but barbarian in nature; vice versa. For those who are barbarians in name but do not act as barbarians, in fact should be more preferable to those who are merely Chinese in name”.

Wang Shiduo, a scholar of the Qing Dynasty, went even further: “‘夷狄’者、古人之私心而有激之言也。此‘夷’为贬义之说也” (yi di zhe, gu ren zhi six in er you ji zhi yan ye. Ci yi wei bian yi zhi shuo ye) and Li Shuchang annotated, “是知不用礼仪, 则中国可谓之‘夷’, 用礼仪, 则英吉利、米利坚不可谓之‘夷’” (shi zhi bu yong li yi, ze zhong guo ke wei zhi yi, yong li yi, z eying ji li, mi li jian bu ke wei zhi yi) (Qian, 1999, p. 1490), in which although there is no word mentioning “uncivilized”, the way “中国” (*zhong guo*) and “夷” (*yi*) put, especially with 英吉利 (England) and “米利坚” (the United States) produces some special contextual effect, therefore the terms mentioned above have to be altered to a certain degree in translation: “‘Barbarian’ is the term used by the ancients to convey their antipathy for people considered uncivilized. The key to understand this is that ‘barbarian’ had been a term of denigration”. “Therefore, for people who fail to practice etiquettes and proprieties may be called ‘barbarians’ even if they happen to live in the central prefecture, while for those who carry out these practices may avoid being labeled the same term, even if they are Englishmen or Americans”.

Clearly, the above statements, analyses and translations are deeply involved in their related historical, social and cultural backgrounds and structures; therefore the terms applied and translated are all highly contextual. According to semiotic theory, any structure is composed of at least two elements, known as terms, with at least one relation established between them and the true meaning of any semiotic symbols can be fully determined and interpreted only in relation to its related structures (Nida, 1984, p. 137). In terms of *hua* and its relevant terms may be truly explored only in relation to its internal and external structures.

In the meantime, similar surveys were carried out among the Japanese living in the nearby area. There are also some insightful comments, such as “挨拶によく「もうご飯は食べましたか？」と聞くが、これは日本では「こんにちは」「ご機嫌はいかがですか」程度の意味であるが、中国ではご飯が満足に食べられることが重要なことである証である” (a i sa tsu ni you ku, mou go han wa ta be ma shi ta ka? To ki ku ga, ko re wa ni hong de wa kon ni chi wa, go ki gen wa i ka ga de su ka tei do no i mi de a ru ga, chuu go ku de wa go han ga man soku ni ta be ra ru kou to ga juuyou na kou to de a ru shou de a ru) (The Chinese often greet you with “Have you eaten?” which in fact has nothing to do with eating, but words of “How are you?” “How have you been recently?” In a way, one may see the importance of eating in Chinese life).

“中国人にとって信用できるものは主に 2 つ。ひとつはお金で、もうひとつは家族

である。

その行動原理はあくまでも家族主義である。一生懸命働くのも自分のためよりも家族のためである”(Chuu goku jin ni totte shin you de ki ru wa shu ni ni tsu. Hi to tsu wa o kin de, mou hi to tsu wa kazoku de aru. Sono gyou dou genri wa a ku made mo kazoku shugi de aru. Isshou kenmei hataraku no mo ji fun no tame yori mo kazoku no tame de aru.) (For the Chinese, the most important are two things: money and family, with the family as the top priority; they work so hard, not for themselves as such but first of all for the family) (Itou, 1997, p. 217). Clearly, the Japanese view of Chineseness is very much hit the nail on the head, although there are subtle differences.

In conclusion, *hua* in traditional Chinese culture is a concept integrating elements of geography, history, sociology and culture, distinguishing it from other ethnicities; and in translating the idea, semiotics could be seen as one of effective approaches in terms of comprehensively incorporating different signs and revealing the nature of the issue.

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