

How Do you Say “Unitarian Universalism” in Chinese?

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5/26/2009

Introduction

Unitarian Universalism is virtually unknown in China but it has a great potential to be accepted and appreciated by the Chinese people. UU materials in Chinese were non-existent until 2005 when a few Chinese started the first Unitarian Universalist community in Hong Kong. Presently the only Unitarian Universalist resources available in Chinese are online translations of some basic UU texts on the website of the Unitarian Universalists Hong Kong, aka Spiritual Seekers Society¹. However, the name, Unitarian Universalism, is still left not translated since no consensus about its name in Chinese has been reached. Some suggested we might just use UU as it is without translating it into Chinese. This is not a desirable alternative. Convention tells us that all foreign religions, be it Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or more recently, Baha’i, all have their names in Chinese. Secondly, a religion without a Chinese name may sound “cultish” or too “foreign” to the Chinese ear.

Religion in China has been characterized by pluralism since the beginning of Chinese history except during the time from 1949 to 1976 when religion was officially taboo². Being a non-creedal and liberal religion that embraces world wisdom traditions, Unitarian Universalism (UUism) should find a fertile ground in China especially among the well educated. However, there has not been concerted effort in translating Unitarian Universalism in Chinese. In contrast, many other religions, for example, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, as well as some lesser - known religions such as Baha’i faith and Mormonism , have their names and texts translated into Chinese and are gaining popularity in China.

¹ Unitarian Universalist Resources in Chinese, www.uuhk.com

² All religions were criticized and suppressed in China during the Mao era, 1949-1976.

An appropriate Chinese name for Unitarian Universalism is extremely important. Over two thousand years ago, Confucius wrote in his *Analects* about the importance of “rectification of names”: “if language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what must be done remains undone”.³ This article explores some pros and cons of various ways to translate Unitarian Universalism into Chinese and begins the analysis of opportunities and challenges of introducing UUism to China. As the Chinese saying goes, the initial effort is meant to “cast the brick in order to attract jade”, in other words, it serves as a magnet to attract better ideas and more support for this project.

Translating Unitarian Universalism in Chinese

In translating UU materials into Chinese, the first problem we encountered was how to translate the name “Unitarian Universalism” into Chinese. There is no agreed upon term for translating “Unitarian” into Chinese. One common translation of the term is 上帝一位论⁴, which means “Theory of God in One” as opposed to the concept of Trinity or Trinitarian. Another translation of the term is “一神论者⁵, which means believers of One God as opposed to many Gods. Neither translation captures the richness of Unitarianism. The term “Universalism” has been translated into Chinese as “普救教”⁶ which means “universal salvation” - a good match between its English source and the Chinese translation.

No Chinese translation of Unitarian Universalism can be found either in print or online resources⁷. With input from the members of the Unitarian Universalists Hong

³ Confucius’ Rectification of Names, http://www.analects-ink.com/mission/Confucius_Rectification.html

⁴ *Dictionary Hong Kong*, www.dictionaryhk.com

⁵ *Dictionary.com Translator*, www.dictionary.reference.com/translate/

⁶ . This translation is offered by most bilingual dictionaries, including www.dictionaryhk.com and www.dictionary.reference.com/translate

⁷ After failure to find a Chinese equivalent of “Unitarian Universalism”, I called the Andover-Harvard Library since Harvard Divinity School is known for its Unitarian Universalist collections. I contacted Gloria Korsman, a senior librarian at the library about any references on UU materials in Chinese. Ms. Korsman informed me that “ there is nothing about UU works in Chinese at the Andover-Harvard Library since UU doesn’t do

Kong and scholars from China and the United States, we have come up with fifteen Chinese translations for Unitarian Universalism. Furthermore, the Chinese translations of UUism are divided into two parts: the first part indicating what Unitarian Universalism means, the second part indicating the nature of Unitarian Universalism, that is, if it is a religion or a school of thought or a social movement etc..

There are three common strategies used to translate English names into Chinese: 1) translate the meaning of the original source directly; 2) use transliteration, that is, by capturing the pronunciation of the original source; or 3) use a combination of both the meaning and the sound. The table lists the proposed Chinese translations of Unitarian Universalism grouped into these three categories: by meaning, sound, and a combination of the meaning and the sound. The table lists the translations first in Mandarin; next in Pinyin (a standard Romanization system used in China and increasingly adopted by the international community); followed by the English translations and an explanation of a strength and weakness for each proposed term.

Category 1: Meaning Centered Translation of Unitarian Universalism

Chinese	Pinyin	English translation	Comments
开明	<i>kaiming</i>	liberal	Strength: it indicates being progressive and open minded Weakness: It sounds rather general
灵友	<i>lingyou</i>	spiritual friend	Strength: it captures the spiritual and communal support dimension of UU Weakness: it narrows the scope of UU
普救	<i>pujiou</i>	universal salvation	Strength: it indicates the original meaning of Universalism Weakness: it sounds too “Christian” and ignores the “Unitarian” aspect of UU
普爱	<i>puai</i>	universal love	Strength: it captures Universalist notion of a loving God Weakness: it sounds rather shallow or even promiscuous to some Chinese
普世	<i>pushi</i>	universal values	Strength: it reflects a universalist ideal cherished by both UU and the Chinese traditions Weakness: it may be too general, high-sounding and “pretentious”
大同	<i>datong</i>	great unity	Strength: it reflects Unitarian idea of unity cherished by both UU and the Chinese traditions Weakness: it is already used by Bahá’í

普世大同	<i>pushi datong</i>	universal great unity	Strength: it reflects ideas of unity and universal love cherished by both UU and the Chinese traditions Weakness: it may be too high-sounding, “pretentious” and sounds too Chinese
归一	<i>guiyi</i>	returning to source	Strength: This term is used for UU in Japanese has a Taoist flavor Weakness: It sounds “too Chinese” and narrows the scope of UU
圆融	<i>yuanrong</i>	peace and harmony	Strength: it highlights the positive values of UU that are also dear to the Chinese Weakness: It sounds “too Chinese” and narrows the scope of UU
人道修炼	<i>Rendao xiu</i>	cultivating humanity	Strength: it calls to action by cultivating self to a better person Weakness: It sounds “too Chinese” and it may be misinterpreted as being “cultish”

Category 2: Sound Centered Translation

Chinese	Pinyin	English translation	Comments
悠悠	<i>youyou</i>	Transliteration – see comments for details	Just for the sound and it carries the meaning “leisure”
友友	<i>youyou</i>	Transliteration – see comments for details	Just for the sound and it carries the meaning “friend, friend”

Category 3: Combinations of Meaning and the Sound

Chines	Pinyin	English translatio	Comments
佑由	<i>youyou</i>	Protecting freedom	Strength: it sounds close to UU and convey meaning of freedom Weakness: it narrows the definition of UU a sounds “too political”
友爱	<i>Youai</i>	Friendship and love	Strength: the first part sounds similar to UU it conveys the meaning of love and friendsh Weakness: it narrows the definition of UU a sounds “too low level”
UU寻道会	<i>UU xundao</i>	UU Spiritual Seeker’s Society	Strength: the first part keeps the original na UU, and the second part conveys the idea of seeking truth Weakness: It sounds exotic and a hint of Ta

Religion/Teachings/Schools of thought and more

Chinese	Pinyin	English translation	Comments
教	<i>jiao</i>	Religion or a teaching	Strength: most religions in Chinese, such as Christianity and Buddhism, all end with this character. Weakness: It indicates UU is a religion like any other.
宗教	<i>zongjiao</i>	Religion or denomination religion	Strength: This is a generic word for religion in general. Weakness: the word is used to describe religion in a general sense.
主义	<i>zhuyi</i>	-ism	Strength: It conveys the idea of a school of thought. Weakness: It is often associated with political movement, such as in "Marxism"
学	<i>xue</i>	-ology, learning	Strength: It implies a strong intellectual tradition. Weakness: it is usually reserved for secular subjects
说	<i>shuo</i>	hypothesis, theory	Strength: it implies a serious academic inquiry. Weakness: it is usually reserved for scientific subjects
论	<i>lun</i>	theory	Strength: it implies a systematic theory of an academic subject Weakness: it is usually reserved for secular subjects
运动	<i>yundong</i>	movement	Strength: It is in line with the term, "UU movement" in the US. Weakness: the word is often associated with political movement in Chinese.

信仰	<i>xinyang</i>	faith	Strength: It can be used to refer to either a secular or religious belief system Weakness: it is usually associated with a well-defined/closed belief system.
会	<i>hui</i>	fellowship/society	Strength: It can be used for both secular and religious gatherings. Weakness: it focuses more on social gatherings than religious activities
社	<i>she</i>	society	Strength: It implies an organization with a common interest. Weakness: It is usually used for secular organizations

Because of the linguistic and cultural differences, it is extremely difficult to translate religious terms into Chinese. Early Christian missionaries wrestled with how to translate (Christian) God into Chinese⁸. The problem of translating Unitarian Universalism into Chinese is compounded by its multiplicity of theological sources and a wide range of beliefs and practices. As shown above, each proposed Chinese term for UUism has its unique strength and weakness. An ideal translation of UUism should be able to keep the essence of the original source while making sense to the Chinese ear.

After examining all the proposed terms, I consider UU 寻道会 / UU Spiritual Seeker's Society best fulfills these two requirements: it keeps the original name "UU" with a beautiful Chinese name *Xun Dao Hui*. *Xun* means "to search", "*Dao*" means "way" or "path" as in Daoism, and *Hui* means "society". Together *Xun Dao* is the equivalent of the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism⁹, "free and responsible search for truth and meaning". In fact, this is the name adopted by the UU group in Hong Kong – its Chinese name is "寻道会 / Spiritual Seekers Society", and its English

⁸ Translation of the Bible in China, <http://www.bjreview.cn/EN/06-22-e/china-2.htm>

⁹ The Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism

name is “Unitarian Universalists Hong Kong”¹⁰. The limitation of this translation as stated above is that “it sounds exotic and with a hint of Daoism”. Since UUism is completely new to the Chinese, it is hardly avoidable being “exotic”. A touch of Daoism may be justified in many ways, one of which being that both share a philosophical view of seeing the world as a metaphysical reality with change and dynamism. Furthermore, both also share their deep respect for living in harmony with nature, and both recognize “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part”.

As for the second part of the translation, that is, if it should be translated as a religion or a school of thought or a social movement, we may leave it open depending on the context in which it is being used. For example, it may be called UU 寻道教 (UU Spiritual Seekers Religion) when it is referred to as a religion, or UU 寻道学 (UU Spiritual Seekers Learning Circle) when it is referred to as a school of thought, or UU 寻道会 (UU Spiritual Seekers Society) when it is used for a small fellowship. After all, UU organizations throughout the world call themselves in different ways: association, fellowship, congregation, council, church, society, and etc.

It is both a science and art to translate UU materials into Chinese in general and its name in particular. This preliminary study of translating Unitarian Universalism into Chinese illustrates the challenges of the cultural differences in translation. At the same time, it provides opportunities of strengthening Unitarian Universalist movement by engaging in dialogues with those who have vastly different cultural background.

Opportunities and Challenges of Introducing UUism to China

There is an acute awareness of spiritual vacuum and moral decline in China after decades of political struggles and recent dramatic economic development. The

¹⁰ UU Hong Kong has a bilingual website. This is how they describe themselves: Unitarian Universalists Hong Kong , The Spiritual Seekers Society 寻道會, is the first Unitarian Universalist community in Hong Kong. 寻道會是香港第一個建基於開明宗教 Unitarian Universalism (UU) 的宗教團體. From /www.uuhk.org.

problem is so worrisome that Lii Haibao, the editor of *Beijing Review*, wrote an editorial article, *Do We Need Religious Education?*

When the Chinese say religious education is a must, they are unlikely to mean that schools should teach Genesis or Buddhist Samsara or the latest concept of intelligent design. The education they want is an ethical one based on religious instructions. They try to employ religion as a beachhead to push back the jungle of something dishonest, vicious or pestilential. With the injection of the religious elements into the Chinese secular society, they hope relationships among neighbors, colleagues, villagers and different groups will become more harmonious and amicable¹¹.

Lii regards religious education as a tool to enhance moral values that would promote social harmony rather than advocating any denominational religion. This view of religion reflects the thinking of many Chinese, especially the highly educated who are skeptical of doctrinal religions but are receptive to religions they perceive to have the value of improving ethical behavior and build a harmonious society¹². In this regard, it should have a special appeal to many Chinese especially those who are weary of denominational religions but still yearn for spiritual enrichment.

Religion was often criticized in China for being superstitious and the opium of the people¹³. In the last 30 years, more and more people in China have realized that religion may have a positive role in spiritual development and in fostering a cohesive social bonding. As a liberal religion with a humanistic approach to world wisdom traditions, Unitarian Universalism should be compatible to the Chinese traditional approach to religion in general, and its commitment to live an ethical life in particular. Despite the opportunities in introducing UUism to China, there are many challenges as well.

The first challenge is awareness. Most Chinese have not heard about UU and there is very little information about UU in Chinese. Unlike many other religions that

¹¹ Lii Haibao, "Do we need religious education?". *Beijing Review*, Jan 12, 2006. The article is no longer available online.

¹² Of all the religions, the Chinese government tacitly supports Buddhism because it is regarded as beneficial for promoting peace and harmony. In 2006, the first World Buddhist Forum was held in Beijing, which received positive coverage in the Chinese official media. For example, *The Search for Peace and Harmony*, from http://www.bjreview.com.cn/background/txt/2006-12/20/content_51452.htm

¹³ Religion has been labeled as being superstitious by many radical reformers since the beginning of the 20th century, including by many Chinese Communist leaders influenced by the Marxist ideology.

consider missionary work an essential part of their faith, Unitarian Universalists are not engaged in any missionary work to spread its faith around the world. The UUA didn't have any international outreach programs until 1995 when the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU) was founded. The main mission of the ICUU is to "build relationships through communication and collaboration" rather than supporting missionary work in other countries¹⁴.

The second is bridging our distinct cultural perspectives. UUism is a liberal religion with no creed and dogma, it is difficult to explain what UU is to native English speakers, it is even harder to explain it to the Chinese whose language and culture are very different from the Western traditions. Even among the well educated, the cultural barrier between the Chinese and Western ways of thinking is still quite palpable. For example, when I explained UUism to a Chinese professor of philosophy, she was supportive of the UU principles and purposes because she saw the Seven Principles embodied "universal values" (e.g., affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person) and compatible with her "philosophy of harmony". However, she also thought UUism didn't sound like an authentic religion since it lacked a coherent theological foundation to support its ontology¹⁵. While most Americans are not likely to challenge the statement, "we affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations", a thoughtful Chinese who helped me proof read the translation of "The ABCs for UU Newcomers" asked "what does justice mean here? What's the difference between justice and fairness? Who is the arbitrator of justice?"¹⁶ These are valid questions and there are no easy answers. We are so used to the concepts of freedom and justice that we seldom question the implications of these concepts.

The third challenge to introduce UUism to China is how to make UUism accepted as one of the legitimate religions by the Chinese government. At present, the

¹⁴ The International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, <http://www.icuu.net/about/index.html>

¹⁵ I had some email exchanges about UUism with Professor Lihua Liu from People's University in Beijing, China. Professor Liu is writing a book about constructing a "Philosophy of Harmony". After a cursive reading of UU materials, she said she liked Unitarian Universalist's Seven Principles which should be conducive to "build a harmonious society". They seem to be compatible with her "Philosophy of Harmony" – a philosophy based on the premises that (1) there are universal human values in the world and that (2) the ultimate reality that supports these values can be conceptualized as "God" as well as "Tian Dao" which sustains life and the society. This philosophy offers the basis for all existence and for the ultimate meaning of human life. Private communication with Professor Liu, from June 2008 to present.

¹⁶ Private email communications with Joe Pan, a freelance, part - time counselor in Mental Health Education Center of Jinan University in Guangzhou, China.

Chinese government only recognizes five religions as being legitimate: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestant. Those religions that are outside of these five categories are considered “illegitimate”. There are different ways to address this challenge: UU may be interpreted as a branch of Christianity. The other alternative is to engage in an intellectual dialogue about UUism with scholars of religion and philosophy in Chinese higher learning institutions. Since UUism is often called “a thinking person’s religion”, I think it is preferable to adopt the second approach, “to build relationships through communication and collaboration” with the Chinese.

Conclusion

China, officially remains an atheist country, has witnessed a surge of interest in religion since it started to open up and reform in the last thirty years. The Chinese official statistics states that “according to incomplete statistics, there are over 100 million followers of various religious faiths, more than 85,000 sites for religious activities, some 300,000 clergy and over 3,000 religious organizations throughout China”¹⁷. A survey taken by Shanghai University found that 31.4% of people above the age of 16, or about 300 million people, considered themselves religious. The survey also found that the major religions are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and Christianity, accounting for 67.4 percent of believers¹⁸.

Compared with many other religions, UU has virtually no presence in China. As a Chinese American UU, I am acutely aware of the lack of UU literature in Chinese and started to translate *The ABC’s for UU Newcomers* by William Cleary in 2006¹⁹. In 2005, a small Chinese UU group, Spiritual Seekers Society (寻道会 in Chinese), emerged in Hong Kong, China. They started to translate some basic UU texts into Chinese and have made the bilingual materials available on their website. I contacted Alex Szeto, President of the Unitarian Universalists Hong Kong, in the spring of 2008. Both of us feel strongly that there is a need to translate more UU materials into

¹⁷ White Paper – Freedom of Religious Belief, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/zjxy/t36492.htm>

¹⁸ Survey finds 300m China believers, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6337627.stm>

¹⁹ The author, William Cleary, has endorsed the translation. The bilingual version of *The ABC’s for UU Newcomers*, is still a draft and remains to be published.

Chinese and to let more Chinese people know about UUism. It is not our intention to “preach, forming groups and building churches” in China, but rather to let the Chinese know about what Unitarian Universalism stands for and to provide resources for a religious education that is grounded in inclusivity and humanism.²⁰

My hope, through this article, is to spark an interest among UU scholars and those who are bilingual in English and Chinese to support our work in translation and publication of UU materials in Chinese, with a goal of forging direct dialogues and collaborations with the people in China. Having UU materials in Chinese will not only pave the way to introduce UU to China, but also enrich our Unitarian Universalist movement by incorporating wisdom traditions from other cultures. The road for introducing UU to China maybe long and laborious, but “a long march starts from the very first step”.

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²⁰ Private email communications with Alex Szeto, the President of the Unitarian Universalist Hong Kong.