In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* there is an interesting conversation between Stephen and the English dean of studies where the latter is amused to find that the Irish call a funnel a tundish.\(^1\) Thereupon Stephen reflects: “The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master* on his lips and on mine!”

This episode shows that whereas there is community of understanding without which communication would be impossible, there is divergence at the same time which is perhaps more vital because it often involves much deeper and more fundamental issues, cultural, religious, political.

Joyce is thinking of English as a common language used by two closely related yet different peoples. In the interpretation of discourse in one language by a speaker of a different language, the divergence cannot but be greater. Close as are the English and German languages, a recent critic finds the famous Schlegel-Tieck translation of Shakespeare aesthetically unsatisfactory, complaining that the German translation fails in that it caters to cultivated taste and misses the corporeal and physical element in certain aspects of Shakespeare’s language that are native to folk literature.\(^2\) He gives as an instance the rendering of “I’ll lug the guts into the neighbour room” (*Hamlet*, III, iv) into “Ich will den Wanst ins nächste Zimmer schleppen,” and comments that the German translation lacks the *gestus* of the original owing to the reversed syntax, choice of word, tense-form, and feminine ending. And he offers what he thinks to be a closer and better translation: “Ich schlepp die Kuddeln in den Nachbarraum.” With languages as widely different as English and Chinese, absolute fidelity must not be expected. What one normally finds is its opposite.

The reverse is also true. How close or how different, for instance, is Li Bo in English to the original Li Bo? As an extreme case, one calls to mind Ezra Pound’s rendering of Chinese poetry, and in one instance he literally stands Justice Dao-Yao on his head (*Canto LIII*).

The present paper is an attempt at investigating some key notions in one of Shakespeare’s major plays as they are translated or omitted (by necessity) in two Chinese versions, in order to show how far translation may mislead and the causes thereof, and to provide some specific examples of the difficulty of communication across language and cultural barriers and the concomitant difficulty of interpretation.

To begin with, *King Lear* has for its subject-matter the parent-child relationship, and this relationship is built round one of the key notions of the play—nature. Nature here is conceived on two levels: as cosmic order and as human nature. The latter as a category of ethics finds correspondence with and is derivative from physical nature, as can be seen from Albany’s stricture on Goneril in Act IV, scene ii: “That nature which contemns its origin/ Cannot be bordered certain in itself./ [. . .] perforce must wither.” Of course *origin* here may refer to Lear but *wither*


\(^2\) Michael P. Hamburger, “*Gestus* and the Popular Theatre,” *Science and Society*, 41 (1977), 36-42; the suggested alternate wording is given on p. 40.
as a metaphor drawn from the vegetable world betrays the link between human nature and Nature with a capital N.

Human nature is either good or wicked. In both Western and Chinese moral philosophies there is no disagreement on this division. But differences arise when the ethical concept of nature is applied to the parent-child relationship. In King Lear, nature or the parent-child relationship is revealed chiefly in that aspect of the relationship which finds its expression in gratitude or ingratitude. A child who shows gratitude to the parent does so in accord with nature. Even among equals the same ethical code is expected to be observed. One can cite Sir Thomas Elyot's Governour: "The most damnable vice and most against justice, in my opinion, is ingratitude, commonly called unkindness." For a child to be ungrateful to his or her parent is to be "unkind," even more so than among equals. Hence the enraged Lear's damming epithets for his two elder daughters: "degenerate bastard," "you unnatural hags"; and his remark to Edgar: "nothing could have subdued nature/To such a lowness but his unkind daughters."

There is also in the parent-child relation an element of authority on the part of the parent and obedience on the part of the child. This may be traced back to Aristotle who considers a son as the father's property just as a slave is property. The father can do anything to the son without incurring the censure of being unjust. "A father can repudiate his son if he is wicked, but the son cannot repudiate his father, because he owes him more than he can possibly repay, especially existence."4

But the parental authority is modified by the Christian doctrine of universal love as embodied in Christ5 and by the egalitarian position of all men as sinners facing the same Last Judgment. And the ideal parent-child relationship is one based on love. Lear begins with a fallacious notion of love and ends with full but tragically belated realization.

In the 40-odd instances where the word nature and its cognates and equivalents occur, it is variously rendered in the standard Chinese translation by Zhu Sheng-hao according to context: tian-di (heaven and earth), zao-hua (the Creator), ben-xing (inherent character), sheng-xing (inborn character), ren (man), sheng-ming (life), jing-sheng (spirit), shen-ti (body), shen-xin (body and mind), ren-ci or ci-bei (mercy with strong Buddhistic undertone), ren-lun (codified human relationship) or tian-dao ren-lun (the way of heaven and human relationship) and most importantly xiao (usually rendered filial piety). The antonyms are even more varied.

In this heterogeneous conglomerate, what chiefly concerns us here is the rendering of nature into xiao. One will find some striking similarities between Confucian and Aristotelian ethical ideals concerning the parent-child relationship. Like Aristotle who considers the child as the parent's property, Confucius in a dialogue with his disciple Zeng-zi affirms that a son's "body, skin and hair are received from father and mother, and he dares not harm them or destroy them." While Aristotle

3 Cf. also Sir Thomas Browne, Christian Morals (published 1716), Part III, section xvii, where he defines "ingratitude" as "degenerate vice," and calls "gratitude" the "generous course of things." Browne offers, too, an interesting description of the psychological process leading to "ingratitude."


5 Cf. Milton, Paradise Lost, III, where "filial obedience" (line 269) is described as a means of the realization of God the Father's "immortal love/To mortals" (line 266 f.).
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claims precedence for the parent by laying down that the inferior should love the superior more than the superior loves the inferior, and that wives, children and subjects should have more love for husbands, parents and monarchs than the latter have for them. Confucius in answer to questions on xiao declares laconically, "No deviation"; that is, no deviation from what is prescribed by rites or the customary code of conduct. And on another occasion he asserts that a son should not only provide for parents but revere them because parents are not mere dogs and horses. What is more, Aristotle considers ethics as a branch of politics and his "magnanimous man" is quite obviously a pattern of the king. Confucius also sets up xiao as the prototype of the socio-political superior-inferior relationship: "A sage king governs the state on the principle of xiao." But here the parallelism stops.

The Confucian ethical code governing the parent-child relationship is far more stringent than that in the West. Filial obedience is as absolute as paternal authority. This may be due to the fact that the social and political structure in the feudal West was much more loosely strung together than in China. The Holy Roman Empire itself was but an empty frame, while within each feudal state, local nobilities enjoyed considerable independence, and allegiance of vassal to overlord was conditional. In China, centralized feudal rule was absolute; the power of the superior over the inferior was also absolute. Filial conduct is codified in the Confucian dialogue mentioned above, the Xiao-jing, where the principle governing the parent-child relationship is manifestly extended to the sovereign-subject relationship. Filial obedience was encouraged in various ways. In China's dynastic histories, for instance, from the late Han downwards, there are special sections devoted to the lives of virtuous women, devoted sons, and loyal ministers. Legendary figures are legion. To cite two of them: Cao E, the daughter of a wizard who was drowned while going out on the river to meet the spirits, cried for seventeen days before she drowned herself in order to recover her father's corpse. A later version tells how eventually her own body surfaced with her father in her embrace. Another celebrated hero is Guo Ju, who decided to bury his three-year-old son because his wages together with his wife's were barely enough to keep his mother alive; rather than to starve his mother, he made the gruesome decision. But while he was digging he found a pot of gold. This latter story has been subject to scathing ridicule by Lu Xun as a pure hoax.

In spite of the powerful exposure of xiao as synonymous with subservience in the name of democracy and equality since the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the notion of xiao persists, though in a modified form. Admittedly there is a good side to it. For society to operate smoothly, there needs to be some sort of code governing behavior, including respect and care for the elderly, which is often associated with the ancient concept of xiao.

Nature as cosmos is closely linked with the vicissitudes of human affairs. A correspondence exists between the universal order and sublunary order. A discordant cosmos manifests itself in omens and signs on earth to alert men, because it causes "in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked between son and father." In one breath Edgar charges Edmund as a traitor "false to thy gods, thy brother and thy father." In Lear's view, at any rate at the initial stage, Cordelia's behavior bears cosmic significance. That is at bottom the reason why Lear flies into a rage, and later in his madness he complains: "I am a man/More sinned against than sinning." Lear realizes that his sin is but that of superbia while his ungrateful daughters have sinned against the cosmic principle itself.

6 Russell, A History of Western Philosophy, p. 176.
The concept of a correspondence between the cosmos and the sublunary world is not alien to Chinese philosophy (e.g., it is proposed by Dong Zhong-shu). The cosmic principle subsumed in the parent-child relationship is of course not immediately apparent in the original text of *King Lear*, and still less so in the translation. But it more easily escapes notice in the translation than in the original.

There is yet a second aspect of the parent-child relationship, the legal aspect. The maintenance of aged parents by their children was, and still is, a practical social problem. To ensure that aged parents were properly looked after when social amenities were scant, some form of legal guarantee had to be provided, as Professor Stephen Greenblatt in his “The Cultivation of Anxiety: King Lear and His Heirs” quotes from Alan Macfarlane (*The Origins of English Individualism*): “contemporaries seem to have been well aware that without legal guarantees, parents had no rights whatsoever.” And he further quotes from a thirteenth-century lawsuit in which a widower called Anseline, having agreed to give his daughter in marriage to one Hugh, with half of his land, was to live with the married couple in one house. “And the same Anseline went out of the house and handed over to them the door by the hasp, and at once begged lodging out of charity.” The father then became legally a “sojourner.”

Bearing in mind this legal aspect of parent-child relationship, one would better understand a series of epithets in the play which are not there accidentally. When Lear pleads with Regan against Goneril, he says “Ask her forgiveness? Do you but mark how this becomes the house: ‘Dear daughter, I confess that I am old;/Age is unnecessary: on my knees I beg/That you’ll vouchsafe me raiment, bed and food.’” Lear calls his two elder daughters “guardians” and “depositaries.” Regan, referring to the news that Lear with his retinue is coming, says “if they come to sojourn at my house, / I’ll not be there.” Again she repeats the word “sojourn” on receiving Lear at Gloucester’s house: “I pray you, father, being weak, seem so./ If, till the expiration of your month, / You will return and sojourn with my sister, / Dismissing half your train, then come to me.” At the early stage of the play, Gloucester comments on Lear’s action: “Kent banished thus: and France in choler parted? / And the king gone tonight? Subscribed his power, / Confined to exhibition?/” When Lear has gone mad, he shouts to the winds “You owe me no subscription.” Of course, the division of the kingdom itself is a legal action, and Cordelia’s answer, “I love your majesty!/ According to my bond; nor more nor less,” has a distinct legal ring. But the answer is unfortunate. Apart from being a jarring note from the mouth of Cordelia, it is a slant on the whole business of division. Remembering Shakespeare’s customary distrust of the law (“the law’s delay,” “the bloody book of law,” “old father antic, the law,” the law that “wicked prize buys out,” “handy-dandy, which is justice, which is thief?,” “gilded sin breaks the strong lance of justice,” the inhumanity of Shylock’s bond, “I crave the

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8 Cf. *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, I, iii, where Antonio, sending his son Proteus to the emperor’s court in the wake of Valentine, tells him: “What maintenance he from his friend receives./Like exhibition thou shalt have of me.” Or Ben Jonson, *Silent Woman*, III, i, where Mistress Otter says to her husband: “Is this according to the instrument, when I married you? that I would be princess, and reign in mine own house; and you would be my subject, and obey me? [...]” Who gives you maintenance, I pray you?” And later on: “Go to, behave yourself distinctly, and with good morality; or, I protest, I’ll take away your exhibition.”
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law.” Angelo’s scarecrow law, etc.), one tends to think that Cordelia’s use of the legal term must be a piece of dramatic strategy, because it does not tally with her character, her voice being “ever soft, gentle and low.” In dramatic terms, Cordelia’s role is much less important than that of her sisters until towards the end of the play. Even Bradley has to admit that she is “not a masterpiece of invention,” as her initial strongheadedness and innate gentleness can hardly reconcile with each other.

For the purely legal terms, the Chinese translations do not bear out the technicality of the transaction. Thus for sojourn, one finds zhu which belongs to everyday speech, or liu-zhu which emphasizes the dignity of the personage who is making a temporary stop on a progress. Exhibition is variously rendered yi-kao . . . guo-huo, to depend on somebody for a living, or zhi-ying a term which occurs in the Xi You Ji (Journey to the West) where it means a supply of food. To subscribe is translated either as jiao chu, an ambivalent word which means to hand over, or rang which means to yield, mostly as a gesture of generosity. In all cases the legality of the transaction is hardly borne out. The law in China was binding on the children only when they committed crimes. Thus in the Penal Law section of the History of Sui is a list of ten major crimes, one of which is “unfiliality” (bu xiao). But in the majority of cases, unfilial deed or behavior which does not constitute crime falls within the domain of morality. Further, Confucian ethics looks askance at the effects of punishment and believes in the efficacy of proper education, as the sage himself asserts: “Guiding the people by means of correction and regulating them by means of punishment may result in their not committing crimes but will not teach them the sense of shame. Guiding them by means of virtue and regulating them with the code of proper conduct will result in their having the sense of shame and winning their allegiance besides.” Not until today would a Chinese conceive of the maintenance of parents as a purely legal obligation.

The quibbling over Nothing and All which runs all through the play lends it a metaphysical undertone. It is a curious linguistic fact that while “all” is translatable by yi-qie in modern Chinese, there is no equivalent for “nothing.” Therefore the varying meanings of “nothing” have to be rendered in accordance with the context in which it occurs, with the result that the word itself vanishes completely out of sight, or hearing.

In King Lear, “all” on the whole is a positive notion while “nothing” is negative. Superficially “all” means land and means of subsistence, and this is the sense when the Fool says, “If I gave them all my living, I’d keep my coxcomb myself” (I, iv, 120-21). But when Lear addresses his two absent daughters, “O Regan, Goneril!/ Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all” (III, iv, 19-20), “all” will include authority as well as paternal love. Instances of the play on the antitheses of all and nothing can be multiplied: Lear asking Edgar, “Didst thou give all to thy two daughters?”; and a little later, Lear repeating, “What! have his daughters brought him to this pass?/ Couldst thou save nothing? Didst thou give them all?” (III, iv, 64-65).

Nothing is much more complicated. When contrary to Lear’s expectation of a more pleasing declaration of love, Cordelia answers, “Nothing,” it brings out the surprised Lear’s immediate retort: “Nothing will come of nothing.” Literally, Lear of course means that if Cordelia refuses to say anything, she will get no land. But the word is pregnant with meanings.9 Cordelia’s “nothing” as Lear un-
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stands it means no profession of love and therefore disobedience, but on Cordelia’s part and as the reader understands it, it reflects her candor and truthfulness even to the extent of being strong-headed. New meanings accrue from it as the action goes on. In Act I, scene iv, the Fool sings a ditty conveying a lesson of prudence as a piece of home truth. Kent comments: “This is nothing, fool.” And the Fool turns to Lear: “Can you make use of nothing, nuncle?” To which Lear answers: “Why, no, boy; nothing can be made out of nothing.”

The second nothing is equivalent to prudence or worldly wisdom. Further, the Fool’s last comment before Goneril appears is: “thou has pared thy wit o’ both sides, and left nothing in the middle: there comes one of the parings.” This must be associated with a later reprise of the Fool’s to Lear’s comment on Goneril’s frowning: “now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now: I am a fool, thou art nothing.” Nothing here means, among other things, the absence of wit. Wit in the Elizabethan sense of mental power or ratio is the natural endowment peculiar to man as distinguished from the lower orders of being. The word assumes a further meaning of non-entity in the pursued Edgar’s soliloquy, when he compares himself as a sham Bedlamite with a real one. “Poor Turlygood! poor Tom! / That’s something yet: Edgar I nothing am.” But when Gloucester on sensing the presence of Lear cries, “O ruined piece of nature! This great world/Shall so wear out to naught” (IV, vi, 138-39), the word assumes the ultimate meaning of the total annihilation of the cosmic order.

Now to render the meaning-charged word nothing into Chinese, the translator has to resort to a variety of strategies. One of them is to restrict the word to one facet only of its meaning so as to fall in with Chinese idiom and to be made intelligible to the Chinese reader. Kent’s “This is nothing” is translated into “These words have not a jot of sense”; and in a different version, “Your cartload of words has not expressed anything.” For the Fool’s question, “Can you make use of nothing?” one finds “Cannot you find out some sense in the midst of no sense?” A closer rendering is “Has ‘have not anything’ not any use?” which however, sounds very un-Chinese. One Chinese translation of Lear’s answer, “Why, no, boy; nothing can be made of nothing,” becomes surprisingly, “Gold cannot be panned out from rubbish.” It sounds like a Chinese proverb but it is not. Apparently the idea of “rubbish” is suggested by the Fool’s next speech (to Kent): “Prithee, tell him, so much the rent of his land comes to: he will not believe a fool.” This becomes “he has so much land, and now it becomes a heap of rubbish,” which is in itself a very free rendering. The cause of this aberration can be sought only in the translator’s idiosyncrasy. As the Chinese idiom requires that the negative be attached to other parts of speech than a noun, the translator has to get around this difficulty by splitting “nothing” into two separate elements. Thus for the Fool’s “thou hast . . . left nothing in the middle,” and “thou art nothing,” the Chinese approximation is “you downright are not a thing.” Now this latter rendering smacks incidentally of abuse in Chinese, which the original does not suggest at all.

The different translations of “thou art an O without a figure” are most interesting. One rendering reads “you have become a lone circllet.” The image this translation conjures up has nothing to do with the original and is quite meaningless. Another, rather happy translation matches the original in word-play: “you are now the character zhu (朱) minus wang (王)”—i.e., you have become a mere dot.

that nothing is substantive and that there is an ultimate immediacy between word and act, does not elaborate on the various contextual meanings of nothing.

10 Empson in Seven Types of Ambiguity (London, 1947), pp. 45-46, points out the verbal irony of this speech when read with Cordelia’s previous answer in mind.
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because that is what is left of the subtraction. This may perhaps be called in
Chinese critical jargon “similitude in spirit,” not in exterior form. Clever as this
translation is, the vital notion of “nothingness” disappears entirely. One version of
Edgar’s soliloquy reads “Poor mad beggar! Poor Tom! Somewhat alike; I now
am no longer Edgar,” with “nothing” entirely left out. Another version is more
enigmatic, for it reads: “Now still is he: I Edgar am no longer.” In the note, the
translator states that he has adopted Ritson’s reading which suggests that Edgar
is here convinced that it is all over with him. Finally for Lear’s ominous tone-
setting rejoinder to Cordelia in the opening scene, “Nothing will come of nothing,”
one translator tries to localize the meaning to the practical business at hand of
sharing out the land: “If you have no word to say, then you will not have any-
thing.” Another translator tries to convey the universal significance by rendering
it into “One can exchange ‘have not’ only with ‘have not,’” which again is hardly
idiomatic Chinese.

Though nothing can in certain contexts have a positive connotation, it repre-
sents on the whole the negation of positive qualities, while its cognate form naught
and the derivative naughty are definitely derogatory. No trace of its link with the
original nothing is detectable in translation. When the Fool advises Lear not to go
out into the foul weather, he says “‘tis a naughty night to swim in” (III, iv, 114).
Gloucester stamps Regan with this damning epithet “naughty lady” (III, vii, 37).
When Lear pleads with Regan, he says “Beloved Regan, Thy sister’s naught”
(II, iv, 135-36). The blinded Gloucester hearing and recognizing Lear’s voice on
the heath exclaims, “O ruined piece of nature! This great world/Shall so wear out
to naught” (IV, vi, 138-39).

For “naughty night” one translation reads “awkward night”; and, realizing
that the rendering is not quite apt, the translator suggests in a note a closer render-
ing, “to bad a night.” Another translation reads “dangerous night.” For “naughty
lady,” one has “vicious woman.” For “thy sister’s naught,” one version reads “a
bad one!” and another “your sister is too unfilial.” For the world wearing
naught, the translations are competent but fail to convey the finality of the mono-
syllable. One reads, “a heap of ruins,”11 and another reads, “so shattered.”

The dialectic of nothing and all is central to the play, Lear begins with believing
himself to be all and ends with realizing that he is not all: “They told me I was
everything; ‘tis a lie!” (IV, vi, 107). The turning point occurs when in the midst
of afflictions he declares, “I will be the pattern of all patience; I will say nothing”
(III, ii, 37-38). Lear is now identified with Cordelia, echoing the very words
Cordelia said. Having gone through life’s purgatory Lear reaches a state of ac-
ceptance, which is voiced in Edgar’s words: “Men must endure/Their going
even as their coming hither:/Ripeness is all” (V, ii, 9-11). Like Hamlet
(“The readiness is all”), Lear is spiritually mature. This final note reminds one of
Montaigne’s “philosopher, c’est apprendre à mourir,” and lends the play its philo-
osophic undertone.

King Lear is a good test-case whereby to settle certain principles of interpreta-
tion across cultural and linguistic barriers. Sun Dayu, whose translation of King
Lear is most meticulously done, acknowledges the insurmountable difficulty of
translating this masterpiece into Chinese, saying that nothing short of a miracle
could produce a perfect version. He mentions the Schlegel-Tieck translation which,
good as it is, is superseded by subsequent translations, concluding that a perfect
translation will always remain an ideal. He has the perspicacity to avoid confus-

11 This would be an appropriate rendering of Milton’s “and ruin seems/ Of
ancient pile” (Paradise Lost, II, 590 f.).

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ing Chinese and Western ethics. Throughout his translation, there are only two instances where he employs the word *xiao* (I, iv, 257; II, iv, 51), because, as he remarks in the note to the second appearance, it becomes inevitable there, though even here he offers an alternative which he abandons on account of rhyme. As a rule, he translates *loves* into *ai*, not *xiao*, lest, he says, this “great heaven-embracing tragedy, translated into Chinese, be misunderstood for a Confucian moral treatise or a Buddhist book of retribution, and produce the impression that Confucianism prevailed also in the West.” Sun further distinguishes two major meanings of the word “nature” and renders it differently according to context. But in spite of all this, it appears inevitable to have to employ words like *ni-lun* (unethical), *en-qing* (loving-kindness), *fu-cn* ( ingratitude) and the like which in Chinese at once involves the reader in the Confucian ethical network. Nor is the legal aspect of the transference of property made apparent in the translation.

Comparing the two Chinese versions of King Lear, Sun Dayu’s translation is far superior to that by Zhu Shenghao because the former demonstrates a profounder understanding of the play. The difference in quality is due, in large measure, to this understanding but also to the superior command of the Chinese language. (Both are dated; Zhu’s translation was done in the late 1930s and early 40s, and Sun’s in 1941.) But despite their difference in interpretation and style, it is interesting to note the similarities of the two versions. Though Sun is fully aware of the non-Confucian character of Western ethics and has succeeded in avoiding the employment of *xiao*, he has had to use it on at least two occasions and on others to use words with a strong Confucian moral connotation. On the other hand, Zhu does not seem to be aware of or, in any event, to bother about the difference. Further, both translators seem to be unaware of the legal aspect of transference of property. And owing to linguistic peculiarities, justice is not done to the dialectic of *nothing* and *all*. Our survey seems to prove the validity of the observation that interpretation is historically and culturally constrained, though there is community of interpretation. For both Chinese translators share the same cultural and linguistic heritage. The differences are personal while the similarities belong to the community and to shared culture. Shakespeare, and for that matter any text in translation, is at once the result of a twofold simultaneous process, that of alienation from the native ground and of naturalization in an adopted culture.

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