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Language Commentary #1

Language Commentary #1: 福 in Chinese Culture

With the recent passing of Chinese New Year, I was inspired to do a language commentary on a word central to the Chinese holiday—the character 福 (pronounced as “foo” with an upwards inflection). 福 is a character that is seen as simple to understand in English, but it in fact represents a very layered concept in Chinese. In this paper, I will discuss the significance of this word in Chinese culture and clarify its meaning in Chinese in terms of methods we have used in class, such as word frequency and examining how the word is used.

The character and idea of 福 is a very important concept in Chinese culture. It has existed for around 3,700 years (“福字”) and is often used during culturally significant holidays such as Chinese New Year. It also is the 689th most common word in the Chinese language (Zein). Studies have shown that understanding 3,000 of the most common characters in Chinese correlate with a 99.2% understanding of the language. According to this same study, comprehending the meaning of 福 correlates to almost 80% understanding of the language, and by extension, culture (Zein). Thus, it is important to begin comprehending the word 福 to understand a deeper level of Chinese culture.

According to English to Chinese dictionaries, 福 is translated as blessing, good fortune, luck, and happiness (“MDBG”, Zein). These English translations indicate that the meaning of 福 is similar to good luck in that it revolves around the concept of a positive and unlikely event occurring to an individual. However, the inconsistent translations of the word indicate that the concept of 福 is much more complex than “good fortune”.

As discussed in this class, cultural concepts are very difficult to translate in the nonnative languages of the culture. Thus, I examined how Chinese dictionaries described 福 to clarify its meaning. One dictionary I examined defined 福 as “一切顺利, 幸运” (“福”), which translated, approximately means “always goes smoothly, luckily.” The two definitions of 福 differ in that the Chinese definition describes a continuous stream good luck, while the English definition only encapsulates discrete instances of good fortune.

However, comparing these definitions only clarifies the continuous quality of 福. Another question remains: what situations constitute having 福? To understand this, I dissected the word into its fundamental components. Chinese characters were created to mimic the concept or object it represented. Although the characters have evolved over thousands of years, the pictographic nature of the language remains. Thus, understanding the composition of any character is foundational to understanding its meaning. Chinese characters are separated into two main parts: its radical, which represents what the character is related to, and its phonetic component, which indicates pronunciation. In the case of 福, its radical is located on the left, while its phonetic component is located on the right.

I will perform two different versions of analysis for 福. One will be a more traditional interpretation of the word in terms of the radical and phonetic component system. The other will be an unconventional analysis based off components smaller than its radical and phonetic components. For the more traditional analysis, the radical of 福, 示, is linked with animism and being auspicious and heaven-sent (“Good Luck”, “Radical 113”). Its phonetic component is derived from the character for wealth, 富 (pronounced as “foo” with a downwards inflection). 富 contains three sections: 宀, 一 and 口 stacked on each other, and 田. 宀 symbolizes a roof, while the stacked 一 and 口 represent an abbreviated form of the character for high (高). The final component, 田, represents a field. With the three components in consideration, 富 represents “storing produce piled high from a good harvest” (“Good Luck”), an ancient indicator of wealth. With this taken in conjunction with its radical, 福’s version of good fortune may be seen as an animate entity that provides wealth from a higher power.

For the contemporary interpretation of 福, I will examine the character in terms of three main components: its radical, the stacked 一 and 口, and the 田. Its radical, 示, is known colloquially as 单衣旁, translates to “singular shirt radical” and represents clothing. In Chinese, 一 represents one. 口 means mouth, but is also a quantifying term for people; thus, the stacked 一 and 口 represent a person. 田 relates to food, occupation, and house because fields provide many resources to humans. These three components combined indicate that the good fortune defined by 福 is not necessarily wealth-related. Rather, good fortune is determined by living with a family with necessities, such as occupation, food, and clothing, fulfilled.

The character analysis has revealed general guidelines for the good fortune represented by 福. However, it is important to note that this reveals the ideals of 福 from thousands of years ago, when the word was created. To better understand the roots of 福, I will examine how it was defined historically. In ancient China, there were two books named 书经 and 洪范 that outlined 五福, which are the five kinds of 福. These are: 长寿, 富贵, 康宁, 好德, and 善终 (“五福”). These translated are longevity, wealth, good physical and mental health, virtuous behavior, and painless death respectively. These types of 福 complement the findings from the character analysis; 福 is defined by ancient Chinese values rather than self-imposed expectations as to what constitutes a “good life.” Many of these values are marked by achieving certain milestones, having a certain status, and maintaining mental, physical, and spiritual wellness.

Although the five types of 福 are valid forms of 福, the definition of 福 has since expanded beyond these categories over the course of thousands of years. For instance, my parents considered instances such as picking up a penny off the street or entering a competitive major as having 福. My mother said that she had 福 by my sister and I attending schools close to home. These instances of 福 do not fall within the five categories of 福; the situations that 福 brings is less defined, which indicates that whether someone has 福 is more subjective than it was in the past. Rather than focusing on specific situations, the new way of viewing 福 is whether it causes situations that bring fulfilment and satisfaction to someone’s life. Furthermore, the definition of 福 has expanded such that entities who may have 福 is not limited to just humans; according to my parents, other entities, such as organizations, nations, and animals may have 福.

To understand more about how 福 is interpreted currently, I also examined how the word could create other terms in Chinese. One of the most popular 福-related terms in Chinese was 福气, which was another way to express good fortune. However, 福气 differs from 福 in that it describes 福 as having 气 (pronounced “chi” with a descending tone). 气 is often mentioned in mainstream movies depicting Chinese culture, especially relating to kung fu. 气 is very important to Chinese philosophy and dictates the way Chinese people view the world; it fills objects with an energy, making them animate and in motion. Thus, by 福 having the quality of 气, 福 is conceptualized as being a flow in motion. This was also reflected in the meaning of its

radical, 示, which means animism. For instance, Chinese people may approach people who they believe to have 福 in hopes that the proximity will allow them to feel 福 and transfer 福 to them. Additionally, during Chinese New Year, large 福 signs are hung upside down around the house to show that 福 has arrived to the house. This is because the character for turning over (倒) is phonetically and physically similar to the character for arrival (到). This illustrates the animate nature of 福, and how it may physically flow to individuals.

In summary, 福 is an entity that causes beneficial situations to another entity that bring them a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction. 福 is a natural and continuous flow of good fortune and may be transferred to and from different entities. For this reason, this word has an extremely positive connotation in Chinese, and it is a concept that Chinese people strive to have in their life. 福 is much more layered than the notion of “good fortune”, as most English to Chinese dictionaries describe it. By understanding the meaning of this word, a significant portion of Chinese culture is revealed.

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