

Article

A Brief Discussion on Cultural Misreading and Translation Reconstruction in James Legge's English Translation of The Analects

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Abstract: As a representative figure of nineteenth-century Western missionary sinology, James Legge produced an English translation of the Analects that has long served as a core text through which Western academia engages with Confucian thought. His missionary subjectivity and Christian ethical presuppositions, however, engendered systematic cultural misreading in the translation. Drawing on translator habitus and cultural dissipation theory, and taking classic renderings such as *ren bu zhi er bu yun* ("not to feel resentful when one is not recognized by others") as entry points, this paper delineates the manifestations of misreading at three levels: surface-level lexical deviation, meso-level conceptual alienation, and deep-level systemic dissolution, and further probes the missionary stance and Western civilizational prejudices underlying them. The study finds that Legge frequently supplanted core Confucian categories with Christian virtue concepts, resulting in the dissipation and distortion of the conceptual substance of Confucianism. In response, this paper proposes a localized path for reconstructing translation strategies, comprising transliteration with annotations for fidelity, restoration of the internal logic of the source classic, and stratified contextual compensation. It advocates a dialectical approach to translations of Chinese classics and calls for preserving the foundational essence of Chinese thought in the outbound translation of Chinese classics.

Keywords: James Legge; English translation of the Analects; cultural misreading; translation of Chinese classics

1. Introduction

In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, as Protestant missionaries arrived in China in large numbers, the English translation of Confucian classics entered a phase of systematic development. The Chinese Classics, the series completed over more than a decade by James Legge, a missionary of the London Missionary Society, was the first complete English rendering of the Confucian classics produced in the West. Among them, the 1861 volume of the Analects was long regarded by Western sinological circles as the authoritative standard version and greatly advanced the spread of Confucian thought in the English-speaking world. Yuan Yanling et al.'s study of overseas book reviews shows that, owing to its detailed annotations, this translation became the principal channel through which general readers encountered Confucianism; yet its translation quality and cultural accuracy have long been subject to debate [1].

Existing studies have examined Legge's translation from multiple dimensions. Hu Zuoyou and He Jun introduce cultural dissipation theory to quantitatively assess cultural information loss in the translation. He Rui, from the perspective of translator habitus, explains the deep-seated causes behind differences in translating core concepts [2,3]. Yan Jinglan adopts descriptive translation studies as a framework to reconstruct the historical context in which the translation was produced [4]. Gao Shengbing and Ma Xiaoyi focus on the image of the *junzi* and compare variations in cultural construction across

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translators [5]. However, existing studies largely focus on a single analytical dimension, and a systematic hierarchical analysis of cultural misreading is still lacking.

This paper takes Legge's 1861 English translation of the *Analects* as its research object. Combining the source classic with a cross-cultural perspective, it systematically delineates the manifestations and causes of cultural misreading in the translation and proposes an optimized approach to localized translation. The paper adopts a dialectical stance: it acknowledges the historical value of the translation in disseminating Confucian thought while squarely confronting the limitations inherent in its cultural stance, with a view to providing a reference for preserving fidelity to Chinese thought in the outbound translation of Chinese classics.

2. The Root Cause of Cultural Misreading: The Presupposition of Christian Ethics in the Context of Translator Habitus

Legge's cultural misreading of the *Analects* was not an accidental linguistic slip but a systematic outcome of the interplay between his translator habitus and the translation field. The root causes can be analyzed along two dimensions: the cultural preconceptions embedded in his initial habitus and the missionary goals embedded in his professional habitus.

First, the utilitarian orientation of his professional habitus: the translational goal of using Confucianism to assist Christianity. As a missionary sent to China by the London Missionary Society, Legge approached the translation of Confucian classics not as a purely academic undertaking but as serving the missionary strategy of "using Confucianism to bear witness to Christianity" [4]. From the perspective of initial norms in descriptive translation studies, Legge's translational stance was consistently oriented toward missionary needs: he regarded Confucianism as an ancient Eastern ethic of sages preceding the arrival of Christianity, positioned Confucius as a saint-like moral teacher, and sought common ground between Confucianism and Christianity in order to alleviate Chinese resistance to Western religion. This translational purpose determined that his version would inevitably carry the projection of Christian doctrine, refashioning Confucianism into a form of "Eastern preparatory ethics" for Christianity.

Second, the limitations of his initial milieu: the cognitive framework of Western virtue. Raised in a Christian cultural context, Legge built his intellectual system upon Western metaphysics and religious ethics, which made it difficult for him to fully transcend his own civilizational perspective and grasp the conceptual logic of such Confucian ideas as "inner sageliness and outer kingliness" and "learning for oneself" [3]. This cultural preconception inclined him to render indigenous Confucian categories with readily available Western moral and philosophical concepts. What appeared to be a successful linguistic transference in fact resulted in the displacement and alienation of the conceptual core. As cultural dissipation theory reveals, when the target-language culture reconstructs source-language concepts within its own framework, varying degrees of cultural information loss are inevitably entailed [2].

3. Hierarchical Manifestations and Case Analysis of Cultural Misreading in the English Translation of the *Analects*

Combining textual comparison with intellectual genealogy, the cultural misreading in Legge's translation can be delineated along three progressive levels: surface-level lexical semantic deviation, meso-level alienation of core concepts, and deep-level dissolution of the intellectual system, with the corresponding degree of cultural dissipation escalating at each level.

3.1. Surface Level: Lexical Semantic Deviation and Low-Order Cultural Dissipation

Mistranslations at the lexical level mostly stem from misinterpretations of classical Chinese lexical meanings and function words. They constitute shallow errors in linguistic conversion, corresponding to the low-dissipation stratum of clothing and dietary categories in cultural dissipation theory, with relatively limited loss of overall cultural

information. According to statistics compiled by Hu Zuoyou and He Jun, the dissipation rate in Legge's translation stands at only 9.8% for dietary culture and 32.4% for clothing culture, both significantly lower than the dissipation level observed for core philosophical concepts [2].

For example, in the Xue Er chapter of the Analects, in the passage rendered by Legge as "It is rare for a man whose character is filial and fraternal to be fond of offending against his superiors," the final emphatic expression is translated as "it is seldom done." While the literal denotation largely corresponds, the rendering fails to convey the affirmative judgmental tone of "almost none" in the original, thereby weakening the argumentative force of the claim that filial piety and fraternal duty constitute the root of benevolence. In another example from the Wei Zheng chapter, Legge's rendering---"If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others"---adds "of others" to qualify "teacher," narrowing the broad connotation of "attaining the standard requisite of a teacher" to merely "instructing others," an unnecessary semantic contraction. Such errors and omissions largely reflect localized gaps in classical Chinese proficiency; though not without flaw, they do not penetrate the conceptual core and thus do not constitute the central problem of the translation.

3.2. Meso Level: Alienation of Core Concepts and Meso-Level Cultural Substitution

The Westernized grafting of core philosophical concepts constitutes the most prominent systematic misreading in Legge's translation and the principal source of cultural dissipation. The translator rendered core Confucian categories through Christian ethical and Western philosophical concepts. Although this appeared to achieve cross-cultural alignment, it in fact effaced the indigenous specificity of Confucian thought.

The celebrated opening aphorism---commonly paraphrased as "to remain unperturbed when unrecognized by others is the mark of a junzi"---epitomizes this problem. Legge's rendering reads: "Is he not a man of complete virtue, who feels no discomposure though men may take no note of him?" The deep-seated misreading manifests itself in three respects. First, junzi is translated as "a man of complete virtue," borrowing the Christian concept of "a saint of perfect virtue" and elevating the Confucian cultivation of everyday virtue into a religiously perfect personality, thereby deviating from Confucius's conception of the junzi as an ideal rather than a sacred personality. Statistics by Gao Shengbing and Ma Xiaoyi show that 79.24% of the occurrences of junzi in Legge's translation are rendered as "the superior man," which implicitly carries the hierarchical coloring of Western society and effaces Confucius's intellectual breakthrough of breaking through status barriers through virtue [5]. Second, the affective term for resentment is translated as "discomposure," weakening the original emotional connotation of "anger and resentment" and tacitly aligning with the Christian believer's character of "enduring without anger," thereby dissolving the Confucian self-cultivation logic of "seeking within oneself." Third, the semantic center of the entire sentence shifts toward the enduring disposition of "maintaining cultivation even when unnoticed," which fits the Christian mindset of "seeking not the recognition of the world but only the witness of God," diluting the essence of the Confucian "learning for oneself." What Confucius meant by "not feeling resentment" is, at its core, the self-directed awareness of moral cultivation, not passive endurance in the face of others' judgments.

The translation of ren constitutes another typical case of conceptual alienation. Legge predominantly rendered ren as "benevolence," a word that in English carries the semantic undertone of Christian universal fraternal love and top-down mercy. The Confucian ren, by contrast, is a differentiated love rooted in filial piety and fraternal duty and extended from close kin to distant others. It is grounded in patriarchal kinship ethics and encompasses multiple connotations of self-cultivation and state governance. He Rui points out that Legge, proceeding from a Western religious perspective, narrowed ren to a single moral sentiment, substituting Christian universal love for the complete Confucian doctrine of ren [3]. Quantitative data from Hu Zuoyou and He Jun show that the cultural dissipation rate for the ren dimension in Legge's translation reaches 24.7%, significantly

higher than the 16.0% recorded in Ku Hung-ming's translation, confirming the cultural loss entailed by conceptual substitution [2].

Moreover, the translation of tian also bears conspicuous traces of religious grafting. Legge uniformly rendered tian as "Heaven," imbuing it with the theological coloring of the Christian God and deviating from the complex connotation of the Confucian tian, which combines natural law and moral sovereignty. This approach essentially reconstructs the Confucian view of the Mandate of Heaven within the framework of Christian monotheism, entailing the alienation of a core cultural imagery.

3.3. Deep Level: Dissolution of the Thought System and High-Order Cultural Dissipation

More profound than the misreading of individual concepts is the holistic dissolution of the Confucian thought system. The Analects is not a scattered collection of moral aphorisms but a complete politico-ethical system grounded in the ritual and musical institutions of the Zhou dynasty, organized around the progression of "cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to all under heaven." In Legge's translation and interpretation, however, this systemic character was dismantled into a series of independent moral injunctions, producing high-order cultural dissipation.

From the perspective of operational norms in descriptive translation studies, although Legge fully preserved the chapter structure of the original text, he transformed the Confucian politico-ethical system into a collection of moral maxims familiar to Western readers through paratextual interpretation and lexical choices [4]. For example, in the Ba Yi chapter of the Analects, which contains extensive discussions of li (ritual propriety), Legge mostly translated the ritual norms literally without conveying the cultural logic that "ritual is the vehicle of ren," reducing li to rigid ceremonial rules and stripping it of its deep connotation as the core of social order. Statistics by Hu Zuoyou and He Jun show that the dissipation rate of Legge's translation in the communal-ethics dimension of human-relations culture reaches as high as 30.5%, precisely reflecting the holistic dissolution of the patriarchal ethical system [2].

This systemic dissolution also directly shaped the reception of the translation among overseas readers. Yuan Yanling et al., in a study based on Goodreads reviews, found that many readers consider the Analects "fragmented in content and lacking in coherence." [1]. This evaluation corresponds exactly to the translation's dismantling of the Confucian thought system: English-language readers encounter only fragmented moral advice and cannot grasp the underlying foundation of the civilization of ritual and music or the overarching thought framework.

4. Reconstructing a Localized Approach to the English Translation of Chinese Classics

In response to the cultural misreadings exposed in Legge's translation, and in light of cultural dissipation control and the demands of reader reception, a localized translation optimization path can be developed along three dimensions, balancing English readability with the originary essence of Chinese thought.

First, for core philosophical concepts, a principle of "transliteration with annotation as the priority" should be adopted to safeguard conceptual boundaries. For categories indigenous to Chinese philosophy such as ren, junzi, li, and dao, pinyin transliteration should be prioritized, accompanied by footnotes that elucidate their classical connotations and cultural background. Taking ren as an example, it may be rendered as ren (the core virtue of Confucianism, rooted in filial piety and extended outward in graduated degrees to social ethics). Research by Hu Zuoyou and He Jun shows that explanatory translation can effectively reduce cultural dissipation rates [2]. Transliteration with annotation not only avoids from the outset the semantic alienation imposed by Western lexical items, but also gradually fosters target-language readers' recognition of core Chinese concepts, thereby safeguarding the conceptual independence of Chinese thought.

Second, sentence-level translation should be anchored in the conceptual orientation of the source classic and restore its internal logic. Before translating, the translator must first return to the overall intellectual context of the original, accurately grasp the core logic

of the passage, and then formulate the English rendering, so as to avoid imposing Western cultural presuppositions on the original. Taking the aphorism about remaining unperturbed when others fail to recognize one as an example, a revised rendering could be: "He feels no resentment when others fail to understand him; is he not a junzi?" This rendering uses "resentment" to capture the original affective sense of resentment and employs the transliteration junzi to preserve the concept, thereby restoring the Confucian intellectual logic of inward self-cultivation and avoiding the projection of the Christian ethos of forbearance. For an entire chapter, the translator must attend to the logical connections between contextual passages, restoring the argumentative thread of the original rather than fragmenting it into isolated maxims.

Third, a layered annotation mechanism should be established to remedy the loss of cultural context. For deep-level cultural content such as the ritual and musical institutions and patriarchal ethics, layered supplementation may be adopted based on the translation's intended audience: popular editions for general readers should provide concise cultural background notes after the translated text to reduce the barrier to reading; scholarly editions for the sinological community should be accompanied by detailed annotations and commentaries to restore the complete system of Confucian thought. Reader feedback documented by Yuan Yanling et al. shows that detailed annotations are an essential aid for readers' understanding of classical texts [1]. Layered annotation preserves the fluency of the translation while effectively preventing the holistic dissolution of cultural connotations, thus accommodating the needs of different audiences.

5. Conclusion

Legge's English translation of the Analects is a landmark achievement in nineteenth-century Sino-Western cultural exchange, and its historical value is beyond dispute. As the first systematic English rendering of the Confucian classics, it broke down the linguistic barriers between Chinese and Western civilizations, introduced Confucian thought to Western intellectual circles in its entirety for the first time, and laid the groundwork for subsequent translations of Chinese classics. At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that, constrained by Legge's missionary identity and Christian cultural stance, the translation contains multi-level cultural misreadings spanning from lexical items to the intellectual system, and has subjected core Confucian concepts to varying degrees of Westernizing refashioning. It therefore cannot be regarded as an authoritative canonical version of Confucian thought.

The critical examination of classic translations constitutes the core mission of classical translation studies. The essence of the outbound translation of Chinese classics is cross-civilizational dissemination of thought, not mere linguistic conversion. A truly high-quality translation of Chinese classics should not only accommodate the expressive conventions of the target language and attend to reader reception, but also uphold the foundational essence of Chinese thought, realizing equal cross-civilizational dissemination through cultural dialogue rather than one-sided cultural adaptation and conceptual substitution. Only by seeking a dynamic balance between fidelity and dissemination can we truly advance the global spread of the fine traditional culture of China.

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