

# Overview of English Translation Studies on The Analects of Confucius

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## Abstract

As a cornerstone of Confucianism, *The Analects of Confucius* encapsulates profound political, ethical, and educational insights, profoundly influencing subsequent generations. This paper delves into the English translation of *The Analects of Confucius*, examining its translation history, strategies, and cultural exchange impacts. The paper begins with a concise introduction to the book and its author, followed by a historical overview of its English translations, analyzing the evolution from early missionary attempts to contemporary scholars' diverse explorations. It then selects representative translations by James Legge, Thomson, Ku Hung-ming, and Roger T. Ames, comparing their approaches to translating words, sentences, and rhetorical devices. Regarding translation strategies, the paper discusses the blend of literal and free translations, the handling of culturally loaded words, and evaluates their fidelity to the original ideas. Ultimately, the paper analyzes and summarizes the positive contributions of the English translation of the book to Sino-Western cultural exchanges and the dissemination of Confucian thought.

## Keywords

**The Analects of Confucius, History of English Translation, Translation Strategies.**

## 1. Introduction

Confucius initiated the practice of private teaching, advocating the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness. In education, he emphasized principles such as "teaching without discrimination," "heuristic instruction," and "teaching according to the student's aptitude." The core of his political thought centered on "benevolence" (ren) and "propriety" (li), and he sought to restore the rites of the Zhou dynasty to achieve social harmony and stability. *The Analects of Confucius* is a work compiled by Confucius's disciples and their successors after his death, recording the dialogues and sayings of Confucius and his disciples.

During the Han dynasty, there were three versions of the Analects: *The Lu Analects*, *The Qi Analects*, and *The Ancient Script Analects*. These were later synthesized by Zhang Yu of the Western Han into *The Zhanghou Analects*, on which the Eastern Han scholar Zheng Xu drew, referencing the other two versions to produce the received text of *The Analects of Confucius*. The work is primarily composed in a dialogic and aphoristic style, comprising twenty chapters and 512 sections. Ranging across disciplines such as philosophy, politics, education, and ethics, *The Analects of Confucius* serves as a cornerstone for understanding the development of Chinese thought and societal values.

Due to linguistic and cultural differences, Western readers often face challenges in accessing the original text. Faithful and fluent English translations can help them overcome these barriers and gain an understanding of Confucian thought, thereby underscoring the significant cultural and social value of translating *The Analects of Confucius*. Since the arrival of European missionaries in China in the 16th century, the book has gradually attracted the attention of Western scholars. Numerous academics have since devoted themselves to its translation,

producing a rich variety of distinctive English versions that provide valuable resources for related research.

## 2. Overview of English Translations of The Analects of Confucius

The transmission and translation of *The Analects of Confucius* began in the late 16th century during the initial phase of cultural exchange between China and the West. The arrival of Jesuit missionaries laid the groundwork for the introduction of Chinese classics to the world. In 1582, the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci arrived in Macau, facilitating the westward dissemination of Chinese classical texts. In 1687, The Belgian missionary Philippe Couplet published *Confucius, Sinarum Philosophus* in Paris, which included Latin translations of *The Analects of Confucius*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean*. This marked the formal entry of *The Analects of Confucius* into Western academic discourse. An English version of the work, titled *The Morals of Confucius, a Chinese Philosopher*, was published in London in 1691, becoming the first English translation of *The Analects of Confucius*. Early translations primarily focused on religious and philosophical domains, aiming to introduce Confucian philosophical thought.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the arrival of Protestant missionaries on a large scale spurred a second wave of Sino-Western cultural exchange. In 1809, the British missionary Joshua Marshman published *The Work of Confucius*, a translation of selected sections from the first half of *The Analects of Confucius*, which became the first relatively complete English translation [1]. Subsequently, missionaries such as David Collie and James Legge dedicated themselves to translating the Analects. Among them, James Legge's translation gained widespread acclaim for its accuracy, extensive annotations, and rigorous style, establishing itself as a model of scholarly translation. The bilingual format and detailed commentary provided readers with rich contextual knowledge. However, its heavy reliance on literal translation sometimes resulted in stiffness and obscurity, and its annotations—influenced by Catholic thought—imbued terms like "heaven" (tian) with religious connotations, which became a primary point of criticism for Legge's version.

Since the 20th century, with advancements in translation technology and increased cross-cultural exchanges, English translations of *The Analects of Confucius* have diversified and become more accessible. In addition to missionary translations, versions by sinologists, philosophers, and other scholars have emerged, including those by William Jennings, Arthur Waley, Lionel Giles, Leonard A. Lyall, William Edward Soothill, Ku Hung-ming, and Roger T. Ames. These translations vary in strategy and linguistic style, encompassing approaches such as literal translation, paraphrasing, and interpretations that incorporate Western philosophical thought.

Dissatisfied with Western sinologists' translations of Confucian classics—particularly James Legge's—Ku Hung-ming devoted himself to translating the Analects. His goal was to "make the ordinary English reader understand this little book which contains the wisdom of the Chinese people" [2]. Adopting a paraphrasing approach, he translated culture-loaded terms with broad, general vocabulary, infused his own understanding of Confucian philosophy, and referenced the language of notable Western writers to explain concepts in the original text. His translations were smooth and fluent, well-received by native English speakers, though they were criticized for excessive liberal translation and unwarranted additions to the original content [3].

The contemporary American sinologist Roger T. Ames [4] aimed to interpret the classics from the perspective of Chinese philosophy itself. Arthur Waley's translation of *The Analects of Confucius* is known for its accessibility, concise language, and fidelity to the original style. It successfully captures the conversational characteristics of the source text [5] and was included in the *Library of Chinese Classics* in 1999, gaining widespread recognition among readers and scholars.

During this period, English translations of *The Analects of Confucius* gradually shifted from purely academic circles to broader public audiences. Translations trended toward greater accessibility and comprehensibility, meeting the needs of Western readers eager to understand the essence of Chinese culture. These efforts not only showcased the charm of Chinese culture but also fostered cultural exchange and integration between China and the West.

### 3. Overview of Translation Studies on The Analects of Confucius

The research on the English translation of *The Analects of Confucius* in foreign countries can be traced back more than 200 years, starting from the period when missionaries entered China and maturing in the second half of the 20th century, covering various aspects such as translation and comprehensive evaluation [6]. Research on the translation of *The Analects of Confucius* outside China is characterized by diversity, focusing on the interpretation of its philosophical content and the analysis of translation strategies. In the preface and appendices to their collaborative translation, Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. pointed out the tendency toward Western cultural centrism in previous translations. They criticized the frequent use of Western philosophical and religious vocabulary to translate core Confucian concepts, arguing that this approach fails to convey the unique philosophical thought of China. The French scholar Kathérine has explored in depth the influence of Confucius's thought on Voltaire. American scholars like Moss Roberts and Philip J. Ivanhoe have provided detailed interpretations of the book's philosophical content through introductory literature. Researchers in the Asia-Pacific region have also conducted in-depth analyses from perspectives such as education, ren (benevolence), and loyalty and filial piety.

In terms of translation strategy research, Edward Slingerland reviewed the translation by the Bays, noting that its political interpretive angle and verbose style could pose obstacles for readers. Early English translations of the book were mostly produced by missionaries or sinologists. Influenced by their cultural backgrounds and religious perspectives, these translations often lacked accuracy and fluency. Nevertheless, these research efforts collectively laid the foundation for translation studies on *The Analects of Confucius*, enriched its academic dimensions, and provided support for cultural exchange between China and the West.

### 4. Case Analysis

According to statistics, there are over 40 English translations of *The Analects of Confucius* (including complete and partial versions), with significant variations among them [7]. Translating it is not merely a linguistic conversion but also a process of cultural transmission and interpretation. Translators must adopt various strategies to ensure the accuracy, readability, and cultural adaptability of their translations. The following analysis compares the translation approaches of James Legge, Gu Hongming, and Roger T. Ames in terms of keyword translation, sentence translation, and rhetorical device translation.

#### 4.1. Translation of Keywords

As a Confucian classic, the language of *The Analects of Confucius* is concise yet profound, with every word permeated with the essence of Confucian thought and culture. In Confucian doctrine, these terms carry specific philosophical meanings and practical implications. However, finding precise equivalents in the English language poses a significant challenge. Translating these keywords is one of the major difficulties in rendering *The Analects of Confucius* into English. To bridge this cultural gap, translators must employ diverse translation strategies.

Example 1:

子曰：“巧言令色，鲜矣仁！”[8]

Legge's translation:

The Master said, "Fine words and an insinuating appearance are seldom associated with true virtue." [9]

Gu's translation:

Confucius remarked, "With plausible speech and fine manners will seldom be found moral character."

Ames's translation:

The Master said, "It is a rare thing for glib speech and an insinuating appearance to accompany authoritative conduct (ren 仁)." [10]

When translating the term “仁”, which carries profound cultural connotations in Chinese, James Legge adopted a literal translation strategy, rendering it as "true virtue." He attempted to find an English word that could convey the multifaceted dimensions of ren, encompassing benevolence, morality, and humanity. While "true virtue" corresponds to ren to some extent, the concept of ren in Confucian culture is complex and profound. For Western readers unfamiliar with Chinese cultural background, Legge's literal translation, supplemented with contextual explanations, helps them grasp the basic meaning of “仁” as a noble moral quality.

In *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, Roger T. Ames notes: "Admittedly, 'benevolence' and 'goodness' might be the best choices for translating ren, but after careful consideration, we decided to adopt the less elegant 'authoritative person.' This is because “仁” is not only reflected spiritually but also has material dimensions, such as a person's demeanor, attitude, gestures, and body language." He argues that terms like "benevolence," "virtue," and "moral" fail to convey the rich connotations of it and only capture its superficial meaning. Using "authoritative person" to translate “仁” is somewhat novel and may prompt readers to seek clarification of its deeper implications. In translating the term, Legge approached it from a Western philosophical perspective, while Ames sought to interpret it purely from the standpoint of Chinese philosophy.

Therefore, when translating keywords, it is essential to preserve the original characteristics while conveying their deeper meanings. For instance, the concept of “仁” in Confucian thought is exceptionally rich in meaning, and no single translation can fully encompass its entirety. Thus, translators must provide explanations and contextual clarifications in their translations to help readers better understand its connotations and usage.

#### 4.2. Translation of Sentences

As a classic work of ancient Chinese Confucianism, *The Analects of Confucius* carries rich cultural connotations and a unique grammatical structure. Classical Chinese is highly concise and multifunctional in expressing meaning, with each character embodying its full semantic range in every occurrence. This distinctive mode of expression renders the style of the Analects extremely succinct and vivid, capable of conveying profound implications with few words. The text extensively employs special syntactic structures such as subjectless sentences and inverted sentences, further enhancing its depth and literary appeal. Below, specific examples are used to elaborate on the different translation strategies adopted by the three translators in rendering these special sentence structures.

Example 2:

子曰：“语之而不惰者，其回也与！”

Legge's translation:

The Master said, "Never flagging when I set forth anything to him; – ahi that is Hui."

Gu's translation:

Confucius remarked, "He was the only one who was never tired and inattentive while I talked with him."

Ames's translation:

The Master said, "If there was anyone who listened with full attention to what I had to say, it was surely Yan Hui."

In translating inverted sentences, Gu Hongming tended to restructure them into a word order more aligned with English syntactic conventions, resulting in smooth and fluent reading. English sentences typically place the subject at the beginning, whereas inverted sentences are common in classical Chinese. Therefore, Gu adjusted the original word order appropriately to make the translation natural and fluid. Roger T. Ames largely retained sentence structures close to the Chinese original, significantly preserving the form and style of the source text and presenting ancient Chinese syntactic habits to English readers as they are. Notably, Ames did not compromise the fluency or grammatical correctness of the translation in his effort to maintain Chinese sentence structures, carefully balancing the formal features of the original with English grammar. In this regard, Legge's translation contains grammatical inaccuracies inconsistent with English usage. As Fan Peixu [11] observed, Legge's literary training was insufficient, lacking both critical judgment and literary sensibility. In translating special syntactic structures, Gu's version aligns more closely with the principles of communicative translation—smooth, simple, clear, direct, and more consistent with target-language conventions, employing a register that matches the original. In contrast, Ames's translation leans toward semantic translation, striving to preserve the linguistic features and unique expressive style of the original while fulfilling the expressive function of language [12].

### 4.3. Translation of Rhetorical Devices

*The Analects of Confucius*, as a Confucian classic, skillfully incorporates various rhetorical devices such as parallelism, antithesis, rhetorical questions, metaphors, hyperbole, and even unique techniques like anadiplosis. These rich and diverse rhetorical techniques endow the Analects with its distinctive charm. Below, specific examples of translating repetitive rhetorical devices are analyzed to compare the translation strategies of the three translators.

Example 3:

子曰：“视其所以，观其所由，察其所安，人焉廋哉？人焉廋哉？”

Legge's translation:

The Master said, "See what a man does. Mark his motives. Examine in what things he rests. How can a man conceal his character? How can a man conceal his character?"

Gu's translation:

Confucius remarked, "You look at how a man acts; consider his motives; find out his tastes. How can a man hide himself; how can he hide himself from you?"

Ames's translation:

The Master said, "Watch their actions, observe their motives, examine wherein they dwell content; won't you know what kind of person they are? Won't you know what kind of person they are?"

In the original text, the repetitive rhetorical device, "人焉廋哉？人焉廋哉？", not only reinforces the argument but also creates a powerful and thought-provoking effect through the combination of parallelism and rhetorical questioning. In Legge's English translation, "How can a man conceal his character?" is repeated twice, which does emphasize Confucius's point. However, the rhetorical effect appears somewhat monotonous, failing to fully capture the nuanced interplay of parallelism and rhetorical questioning in the original. Gu Hongming's translation skillfully adapts the structure: "How can a man hide himself; how can he hide himself from you?" This approach not only preserves the repetitive nature of the original but

also ensures the translation reads smoothly and naturally, making it more accessible to English readers while retaining the depth of the original meaning. Ames's translation "won't you know what kind of person they are? Won't you know what kind of person they are?" adheres more closely to the original structure, maintaining both content integrity and formal consistency.

All three translators accounted for the repetitive rhetorical device in the original text. However, Legge merely replicated the structural form, lacking some subtlety in detail and failing to fully convey the depth of the original. Gu Hongming prioritized the fluency of the translation and the conventions of the target language, catering more to the sensibilities of English readers through paraphrasing or communicative translation methods, making the translation smooth and easily understandable. Ames, on the other hand, emphasized fidelity to the original form and content, achieving a balance between structural preservation and expressive clarity.

## 5. Conclusion

The English translation of *The Analects of Confucius* serves as a crucial medium for cultural exchange between China and the West, with its historical development marked by remarkable diversity and period-specific characteristics. Early missionary translations, such as those by James Legge, primarily employed literal translation strategies driven by the goal of religious dissemination, striving to faithfully reproduce the literal meaning of the original text. As cross-cultural communication deepened, translators like Gu Hongming and Roger T. Ames placed greater emphasis on paraphrasing and domestication strategies, preserving the core spirit of the original while adapting it to the reading habits and aesthetic expectations of Western audiences.

The English translation of *The Analects of Confucius* faces dual challenges. On the one hand, the profound cultural depth and complex philosophical system of Confucian thought make accurate and comprehensive translation inherently difficult. On the other hand, how to maintain the uniqueness of Confucian thought while fostering effective dialogue and integration with other cultures remains a critical research topic. With advancements in translation theory and technology, tools and methods such as computer-assisted translation and corpus linguistics provide valuable support for enhancing translation quality.

The history of translating *The Analects of Confucius* into English not only reflects the development of Sino-Western cultural exchange but also promotes the global dissemination and acceptance of Confucian thought. In the future, research on the English translation of *The Analects of Confucius* must be further deepened and expanded. Continuous exploration and optimization of translation strategies and methods are essential, alongside strengthened interdisciplinary integration. Combining translation studies with fields such as philosophy, history, and comparative literature will contribute to the international dissemination of Confucian culture and facilitate mutual learning between Chinese and Western civilizations.

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