

## Translation of *Ren* and *Li* in *Lunyu*

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### Abstract

*Lunyu* (《论语》), a record of Confucius' sayings and deeds compiled by his disciples, had great influence not only on the Chinese but also on the whole world. It was translated into many languages, among which there are more than 50 English versions. In *Lunyu*, Confucius employed a good number of terms to express his ideas on what good ethics and politics were, such as *ren* (“仁”) and *li* (“礼”). Due to cultural differences, it is a great challenge for translators to find English equivalents of these culture-specific items. The paper will discuss the translation of two main concepts in *Lunyu*—*ren* and *li* through the comparison of five English versions and try to find out the proper method to translate the Chinese culture-specific items in the book.

**Keywords:** *ren*, *li*, *Lunyu*, translation, culture-specific items

### 1. Introduction

*Lunyu*, known as the main text of Confucianism, is the “Bible of China”, and also one of the world's classic writings. It expresses Confucius' ideas of politics, education, etc. The core of the book is *ren*, which Confucius thought was loving people or having loyalty and consideration. To achieve it one had to use *li* as a norm because “to subdue one's self and return to propriety” (Legge, 2009) is *ren*.

For more than two thousand years, *Lunyu* and Confucianism were regarded as the foundation of Chinese social-cultural life. It not only cultivates individual's morality but also tells people how to run a country. Sometimes even a word or two can benefit a person for a lifetime.

Its influence has extended abroad and Confucianism has held a leading position in the East Asian cultural circles. It might be said that East Asian civilization would not come into being without Confucianism. What is more, its influence on the whole world is apparent since Confucius is considered as one of the greatest thinkers who have changed the world. Thus, it is of great significance to study the translation of *Lunyu*.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1 Translation History of *Lunyu*

The circulation of *Lunyu* in the whole world follows such a process—from the near to the distant, and first in East Asia and then in Europe and America. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the translation of *Lunyu* into Western languages had begun.

Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), an early Italian missionary, had translated *The Four Books* from Chinese into a western language and sent them to his homeland. When his countrymen read them, they felt enjoyable; they came to know that the Chinese classics might lead people to the true origin. The so-called Western language refers to Latin. Matteo Ricci started with the translation of *The Four Books* in 1591, the nineteenth year of Wan Li Reign of the Ming, and he finished his translation in 1594. Unfortunately his translation was scattered and lost before publication in the first years of the Qing dynasty.

Almost a century later, Prosper Intercetta (1625-1696), an Italian Jesuit and Ignatius da Casta (1599-1666), a Portuguese Jesuit, jointly translated *Lunyu* into Latin. Philippus Couplet (1624-1692), a Belgian Jesuit, published

their translation in Paris in 1687. This is the first publication of *Lunyu* in Europe. The abridged French and English versions were separately published in France and England in 1688 and 1691. So the ordinary people might come into contact with the Confucian thought, and this aroused a praise of Confucius in the whole Western Europe.

Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century or at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *The Four Books*, including *Lunyu*, spread to America, and there were translations of English, French, Latin and other languages. In 1809, J. Marshman (1768-1837), an English missionary, published his translation of *Lunyu* that includes the first ten chapters. This is the first version where Chinese was directly rendered into English. In the recent two centuries, there are some other people who translated *Lunyu* into English. For example, there are David Collie, an English missionary, James Legge, Sir T. F. Wade, William Jennings and Gu Hongming. James Legge (1815-1897) is a Scottish missionary. In 1861 his translation of Chinese classics including *Lunyu* was published in Hong Kong. Dissatisfied with Legge's version, Gu Hongming published *The Discourses and Sayings of Confucius* in 1898. He translated *Lunyu* with the aim of transmitting Confucian values to the whole world. He is the first Chinese who put *Lunyu* into English and before him it was all translated by westerners.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many scholars, such as Lionel Giles, Leonard A. Lyall, William E. Soothill, Arthur Waley, & Lin Yutang, translated *Lunyu* into English. Fascinated by ancient Chinese civilization, apart from *Lunyu*, Arthur Waley (1889-1996) translated seven or eight books of Chinese culture.

And since then, with China's opening-up, Confucianism is popular in the world and more than 40 English versions appeared with this trend. Pan Fuen & Wen Shaoxia issued their version in 1993 and Lin Wusun absorbed the latest research materials and published his "new translation" in 2010. And some translators published more than one version, such as, D. C. Lau, & Ding Wangdao. D. C. Lau, a professor in Hong Kong Chinese University, has already translated seven books including *Lunyu*. Until now, the English translation of *Lunyu* has experienced more than two centuries and there are more than 50 English versions.

## 2.2 Translation Studies of *Lunyu*

### 2.2.1 Translation Studies Abroad of *Lunyu*

There is a long history in translation studies abroad of *Lunyu* and it is mainly by translators and sinologists, such as Matteo Ricci, Joshua Marshman, David Collie, James Legge, Ezra Pound, & Edward Slingerland, who were intoxicated by Chinese culture. They commented on the previous versions in the preface or appendix and illustrated why they retranslated *Lunyu*, which is an important part of translation studies of *Lunyu*. For example, Roger T. Ames & Henry Rosemont pointed in their version that the method of using western philosophical and religious words to replace the key words in Confucianism could not express the philosophy specific to China (Ames & Rosemont, 1998). Moreover, there are book reviews in some journals of sinology and philosophy, such as, *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, *The Journal of Asian Studies* and *Philosophy East and West*. And in recent years, the book reviews involve more aspects and the analyses are more elaborate.

The person who analyzed translations of *Lunyu* most is David Schaberg, whose comments involved many perspectives of language, philosophy, history and style. Cheuk-Woon Tamm (1953) had a brief comment on all English versions before WWII. And Alice W. Cheang (2000), Stephen W. Durrant (1981), John Henderson (1999), Edward Slingerland (2000), Lauren Pfister (1990, 2004) and Norman J. Girardot (2002) all expressed their opinions on different versions.

### 2.2.2 Translation Studies of *Lunyu* in China

Translation studies of *Lunyu* in China started in 1990s, which can be classified into five types according to the study topics: the study of translation version, including the study of one version and the comparative analysis of several versions, the study of translators, the statements in prefaces of their translations, the transmission history of the translation and the study of the key words in the book.

Judging from the study perspective, most of them belong to the linguistic level and scholars mainly focused on the equivalence in translation, some of whom discussed its translation methods on the basis of different theories such as Li Shuang (2004) and Ni Jihua (2007) and some focused on appreciations, such as Yuan Jinxiang (1990), Liu Zhongde (2001), He Gangqiang (2005).

In addition, because of the profound connotations of the key words in *Lunyu*, which is a difficult point in translation, it becomes one of the research orientations. For example, Wang Hui (2001) put forward the combination of accuracy and unity of translation. Yang Ping (2008b) said that when *ren* was translated, transliteration should be adopted.

With the cultural turn in translation, some scholars began to reflect on the extratextual factors. Yang Ping (2008a) and Wang Hui (2007)'s studies well represent the tendency who concentrated on the Christian ideology in missionary translations.

Furthermore, some translation studies took the integrated perspective. Yan Zhenying's book (1971) about Legge's translation is a case in point, which systematically studied Legge's translation and briefly introduced all the other versions. And the integrated perspective can also be found in some articles. For instance, Wang Yong (2007) introduced Edward Slingerland's 2003 version.

From the above, it can be seen that Confucian classic *Lunyu* attracts numerous scholars at home and abroad and its translation studies have obtained many achievements. However, the study angles are still limited to a certain extent and some key words that carry Confucianism always arouse misunderstandings of target readers and need deeper analysis.

### 3. Confucius and *Lunyu*

Confucius (511-479BC) is a great philosopher and educator of ancient China who lived in the Spring and Autumn period, which was a transition period from slavery to feudalism. Vassals annexed territories from each other; wars broke out frequently and there was a decline in social morality. To reform society, Confucius established a grand system of thinking, which was mainly contained in *Lunyu*.

*Lunyu* is a Confucian classic which appeared in book form in the early years of the Warring States Period. There are 20 chapters, which are broken down into 492 passages. It is a record of the words and deed of Confucius and of his disciples, as well as the discussions they held, expressing Confucius' profound thought.

For thousands of years, Confucianism has exerted a far-reaching influence on Chinese society, culture and psychology. The position of *Lunyu* in Chinese culture is just like that of the Bible in western culture. Han Wudi rejected other schools of thoughts but held Confucianism in esteem and so its leading position in Chinese history was established. *Lunyu* was worshipped as a classic in the period of the feudal society and every scholar was required to read it. Its influence was so extensive in China that *Lunyu* is indispensable even now, either for studies on Confucius himself or for studies in Chinese history. *Lunyu* is a sound textbook on ethics and politics. Quotations from it are common in China, being used as guidelines for the people's everyday lives, as they are gems of wisdom and philosophical thought.

With China's rapid development of economy, there is a widespread interest in *Lunyu* and Confucianism around the world. Actually, when it was first introduced to the western world, it was already highly praised by some scholars. R. W. Emerson (1803-1882) and H. D. Thoreau (1817-1862) are two representatives of American transcendentalism. The moment they saw these books they both took a fancy to them and would not let them go. V. Lindsay (1879-1931), a poet, sang heartily to express his ardent love of Confucius: May we be students of the Confucian times. Today, the general impression of *Lunyu* is higher than any other best sellers; it is only next to the Bible. Alongside the spreading of the classics of the Confucian school headed by *Lunyu*, Confucianism has already become a hot spot of the humanities in this world.

### 4. Translation of *Ren* and *Li* in *Lunyu*

There are numerous culture-specific items in *Lunyu* that reflect Confucianism, such as “仁”, “义”, “礼”, “智”, “信”, “忠”, “孝”, “温”, “良”, “恭”, “俭”, “让”, etc. Many of these terms appeared in earlier classics, like *The Book of Songs*, *Yi Ching* and *Spring and Autumn*, but Confucius endowed them with new meanings. However, since Confucius only described but never defined them and since he gave different answers to the same terms depending on his disciples' individual characters and level of understanding, it is very difficult to find their exact definitions. Besides, as classical Chinese is very concise and leads to different interpretations, there are no English equivalents of these terms.

As for the fundamental thought of *Lunyu*, people have invariably insisted that there are two points of view. One is *ren* (“仁”). The other is *li* (“礼”). Then the paper will discuss the translation of the two main concepts in *Lunyu* through the comparison of five English versions by foreign and Chinese scholars in different periods of history: *The Analects of Confucius* by James Legge (hereafter referred as Legge), *The Discourses and Sayings of Confucius* by Gu Hongming (hereafter referred as Gu), *The Analects* by Arthur Waley (hereafter referred as Waley), *The Analects of Confucius* by Pan Fuen and Wen Shaoxia (hereafter referred as Pan & Wen) and *Getting to Know Confucius—A New Translation of The Analects* by Lin Wusun (hereafter referred as Lin) and tries to make a comparison between them.

#### 4.1 Translation of Ren

According to the author's statistics, the word “仁” (*ren*) appears for 109 times in *Lunyu*. It is the most frequently used word, which reveals its status in the book—*ren* is central to the Confucian system of thinking. In Chinese, this word means “kind”, “gentle”, “humane” and in *Lunyu* it means “good” in an extremely wide and general sense. Different translators understand this word in different ways that is clearly shown in the following table.

Table 1. Translation of *ren* in the five versions

Translators	Translations
Legge	(perfect) virtue, benevolence
Gu	a moral life, a moral man, the true moral character
Waley	(the) Good, Goodness
Pan & Wen	perfect virtue, human-heartedness
Lin	humaneness, humane

From Table 1, we can see that there are different interpretations of the word *ren*, which is the core of *Lunyu*. Then what is the true meaning of it? We have to go back to *Lunyu*. It can be found that Confucius explained *ren* to his disciples for many times, from which we can see Confucius' understanding of it.

Confucius, in answering his student Fan Chi's question, said *ren* is to love men and “in private life, courteous; in public life, diligent; in relationships, loyal...” (Waley, 1999) and “to restrain oneself and observe the rituals” (Lin, 2010). And in answering his student Zizhang's question, he also explained that in order to achieve *ren* one has to practice five things: “gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness” (Legge, 2009) and “if a man is firm, enduring, simple, and modest, then he is near to virtue” (Ibid.). Fulfilling one's filial and fraternal duties constitute the basics of *ren* and in order to achieve *ren*, one should not hesitate to sacrifice his all. Confucius' explanations evidently display that *ren* does not refer to only one thing. Extensively speaking, it means to apply a policy of benevolence in all lands under heaven. Intensively speaking, it means to love people. It refers to loyalty and consideration, and the fundamental way to be a real human being, namely, filial piety to one's parents and love and respect to one's elder brothers.

*Ren* is the highest goal and the most ideal state that man may reach. Righteousness, loyalty, forbearance, filial piety, and loving consideration are concrete items under the extensive concept of *ren*. If one may be able to “extensively confer the benefits on the people,” he is more than a “benevolent” person; he may be called a “sage” now. Maybe Yao and Shun were not able to accomplish so much. This tells us that sage contains *ren*, and *ren* is in accordance with sage. In *Lunyu*, Confucius was asked several times to make a comment on other people to say whether they can meet the standard of *ren*. Confucius gave us the answer. He thought that Zilu, Ran You, Gongxi Hua, Chen Wen and Minister Ziwen, did not achieve the state of *ren*, and what Yan Yuan reached is only “not contrary to the benevolence” (Waley, 1999). According to Confucius' standard, only the three men (Viscount Wei, Viscount Ji, & Bi Gan) in Yin dynasty and Guan Zhong can be called “man of virtue”. Guan Zhong helped the prince Huan to bring about a stable situation in the whole country for a rather long period so that people might recuperate and multiply, although Confucius thought that Guan Zhong was not parsimonious and did not know the rules of propriety. To be a man of *ren* in a true sense is very difficult, but everyone can do something to achieve it, that is to say, to do good, it is the practice of keeping the benevolent virtue. It may be accumulated bit by bit in everyday life and the way to carry it out is to put oneself in the place of another, and from the near to the distant.

From the above, it can be seen that actually there is no equivalent of *ren* in English. Every translator can just try their best to find the approximate meaning of *ren* on the basis of their own understanding.

James Legge chose the words “(perfect) virtue” and “benevolence”. Virtue means moral goodness of character and behavior (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2004), which is not as extensive as the meaning of *ren*. Just as what Lin Wusun rendered, it is more proper to be translated into *de* (“德”) instead of *ren*. And benevolence means kind and generous, which is little different from the meaning of *ren*, because Guan Zhong is a man of *ren*, but he is a man of narrow capacities, according to Confucius.

Gu Hongming preferred the word “moral” that concerns principles of right and wrong behavior, whose meaning is not as extensive as that of *ren*. It can be said that *ren* contains morality and has far more connotations than the word “moral”.

Waley translated *ren* into “Good” or “Goodness”, capitalizing the first letter. While translating *shan* (“善”), he

also used “good”. To show the distinction, the latter was not capitalized. Obviously, however, “good” is too general to reflect the connotation of *ren*, no matter whether it is capitalized or not.

Pan Fuen and Wen Shaoxia used “perfect virtue” and “human-heartedness”. They took James Legge, Leonard A. Layall, & Arthur Waley’s versions for reference. And they also found that due to cultural differences, it is hard to find equivalents in English for many important concepts of Confucius. Therefore, they had to retreat for a similar word and adopted the translation method that added Pinyin in brackets when the word first appeared and also made some notes.

Lin Wusun put *ren* into “humaneness” or “humane” that means treating people or animals in a way that is not cruel and causes them as little suffering as possible (Ibid.), which is inadequate to reflect the essence of *ren*. Furthermore, in western culture, humaneness is usually connected with the concept of democracy and equality, which is different from the connotation of *ren*. Thus, it may arouse misunderstandings of western readers. Being aware of the untranslatability of the culture-specific item, Mr. Lin added Pinyin in brackets when they first appeared and also some notes for better understanding, as what Pan and Wen did. Moreover, Chinese characters were supplemented in brackets together with Pinyin to transmit Chinese culture of language.

#### 4.2 Translation of *Li*

The word *li* (“礼”) is the second important term that carries Confucius’ thought. It appeared in *Lunyu* for 74 times, which is just next to *ren*. *Li* were norms and regulations guiding the behavior of the nobles and relations among them, and the conducting of certain ceremonies, formulated by the founders of the Zhou Dynasty. In Confucius’ day, *li* was generally ignored, and he wanted to revive it. According to Confucius, *ren* and *li* are inseparable from each other like content and form. Just like *ren*, it is also a difficult point in translation and different translators have different interpretations.

Table 2. Translation of *li* in the five versions

Translators	Translations
Legge	the rules of propriety, what is proper, ceremonies, the rites of propriety
Gu	(fine) art(s), courteous, good manners, propriety, civilization, honour, the arts and civilization, judgment, correct forms, a man of propriety, the principle of the rite, loyalty, courtesy, real courtesy and good manners, etc.
Waley	(the) rites, ritual
Pan & Wen	the rules of propriety
Lin	rituals, etiquette, rules, regulations

*Li* was rather broad in content. It included rituals, etiquette, regulations and rules of proper behavior. During Confucius’ time, there was no official law as we understand it today, but people would be punished when they violated the rules and regulations. Confucius paid great attention to *li* which was set down when the Zhou Dynasty was first established. He believed that the neglect of *li* was the cause of all troubles of his time. The ministers were neglecting it without any sense of shame, and their stewards and the society at large were following their example. Confucius therefore considered it his mission to advise the powers-to-be to correct their ways through following *ren* and restoring *li*. The two concepts are closely related; the former is the root, the latter the branch; the former is the “ins”, the latter the “outs”; the former is the content, the latter the form. *Ren* is the ultimate aim, *li* is a kind of binding force and norms and system which guarantees the achievement of the purpose. Ceremony, propriety, system, discipline and law all serve the aim—“all under heaven will converge at benevolence” (Waley, 1999).

From Table 2, it can be seen that most translators chose “rite”, “ritual” or “rules of propriety”. Rite means a ceremony that is always performed in the same way, usually for religious purposes, and ritual is similar to rite. And propriety means correctness of social or moral behavior (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2004). They all express one of the connotations of *li*, which has a wide range of meaning—not only refers to the regulations and norms from the country’s perspective but also the social behavior from the individual aspect. Only Gu Hongming used “art” and some other words in different contexts. Gu Hongming’s version has evident features, which receives a lot of praise and criticism too. Gu Hongming translated *Lunyu* because he thought that Legge was just a sinologist who lacked the training of literature and the ability of criticism and the sensation of literature. He severely criticized Legge’s version, holding that Legge could not get across the limitation of his stiff and narrow mind so his translation gave readers a strange feeling. Dissatisfied with Legge’s translation, Gu Hongming decided to translate it by himself 40 years after the publication of Legge’s version. And in order to get rid of the strange feeling of English readers, he removed the Chinese culture-specific items and added some

notes and quotations from famous European writers to make target readers understand it thoroughly. This is a feature of his translation. The above table clearly reveals his characteristics of translation. He admitted that *li* is a word not easily rendered in another language and adopted different words or phrases in different contexts. When *li* first appeared, he explained it in the notes of more than 300 words, holding the opinion that the word “art” can express the meaning of *li*. Just because of his obvious characteristics, his translation was studied by many scholars and was also severely criticized by some who think that some of his translations belong to mistranslation. Many scholars believe that his use of “art” may be misleading to target readers.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the above statement, it seems impossible for us to find an equivalent in English of the culture-specific items in *Lunyu*, since they all carry profound Chinese traditional culture. In this case, some translators had some nice tries to make them accepted by target readers. For example, Gu Hongming crossed out these culture-specific items and added some notes and quotations from famous European writers that western readers are familiar with. Pan Fuen and Wen Shaoxia also used some notes and when the word first appeared, they added Pinyin to it in brackets. Lin Wusun used Pinyin together with Chinese characters. Actually, with our increasing awareness of transmitting Chinese culture to the world, Pinyin is used more and more frequently than before. There are numerous examples, such as, *jiaozi* and *loong*. In the past, people tended to use dumpling and dragon, but now, realizing the cultural differences and the misunderstandings that may be roused, Pinyin is preferred. Additionally, when western readers come across Pinyin, they may realize that it is a culture-specific item and pay special attention to it. And to help target readers understand it, explanatory translation and the notes can be adopted too.

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