

The English Translation of Confucian Classics from the Perspective of Knowledge Translation Studies: A Study of Roger T. Ames' Translation Practice

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Abstract. This article examines how Roger T. Ames renders core Confucian concept terms for Anglophone readers and what trade-offs those choices entail. Working within a restrained Knowledge Translation Studies (KTS) framework, we operationalize the analysis in three steps: (i) identify the knowledge unit at stake (e.g., *ren*, *yi*, *junzi* as concept clusters rather than single glosses); (ii) record the operation performed by the translation (narrowing, broadening, or contextual anchoring through paraphrase and analogy); and (iii) track the role of paratext (prefaces, notes, and cross-references) in guiding interpretation. Drawing on representative passages from selected Confucian classics, we compare Ames's solutions with earlier English renderings to show when his strategy increases accessibility for non-Sinophone readers and when it compresses the semantic range. The study contributes a small, evidence-driven map of concept transfer, clarifying how annotation and explanatory definition function as scaffolds in the international reception of Confucian thought and offering a transparent procedure that can be replicated in other concept-heavy traditions.

Keywords: Confucian classics, Roger T. Ames, Knowledge Translation Studies, English translation of key concepts

1. Introduction

This study investigates how Roger T. Ames renders core Confucian concept terms for Anglophone readers and what trade-offs those choices entail. Rather than treating the translation of “Confucian classics” in the abstract, we delimit the corpus to representative passages in which conceptual load is concentrated (e.g., *Analects* and *Zhongyong* on *ren* 仁 and *yi* 义). Working within a restrained Knowledge Translation Studies (KTS) framework, we operationalize the analysis in three steps: (i) identify the knowledge unit targeted by a given choice (concept cluster vs. single gloss); (ii) label the operation performed—narrowing, broadening, or contextual anchoring through paraphrase, analogy, and role-based framing; and (iii) track how paratext (prefaces, notes, cross-references) steers reader interpretation. We compare Ames's solutions with earlier English renderings to mark both gains (e.g., accessibility and role-ethics clarity) and costs (e.g., compression of affective connotations). By shifting the focus from evaluative claims to procedure and evidence, the paper clarifies how annotation and explanatory definition function as scaffolds in concept transfer. The contribution is twofold: an empirical map of where Ames's strategy works best and where it narrows semantic range,

and a replicable KTS-based protocol that can be applied to other concept-heavy traditions without presupposing a single “correct” equivalence.

2. Overview of Ames' English translation of Confucian classics

“Confucian classics are the treasures of China's five-thousand-year-old culture, and their profound ideas have drawn the attention of the world. Since the 17th century, representative Confucian works, such as the Four Books and Five Classics, have been introduced to foreign language communities through translation, compilation, or direct translation, marking the beginning of overseas awareness of Chinese Confucian culture [1].” With the global spread of Confucian culture, the way it is disseminated has shifted from the earlier phase of acceptance by foreign audiences to the current phase of active promotion. From the perspective of Knowledge Translation Studies, Confucian classics achieve cross-linguistic dissemination through translation, facilitating the inheritance and development of their ideas.

Roger T. Ames has played a central role in bringing classical Chinese philosophy—especially Confucian thought—to Anglophone readers through a combination of translation and sustained interpretation. Rather than pursuing one-to-one lexical matches, Ames frames key concepts within a comparative philosophical vocabulary: his role-ethics reading invites parallels with John Dewey’s pragmatism, while his emphasis on process and relationality resonates with Whitehead’s process cosmology. In practice, this yields a “retail-style” use of analogy—small, locally justified comparisons that help non-Sinophone readers build conceptual grip without assuming a single definitive gloss.

The present study treats these analogies as operations on knowledge units in the sense of Knowledge Translation Studies (KTS). We (i) identify the unit at stake (*ren*, *yi*, *junzi*, etc.), (ii) label the operation performed by the translation choice—narrowing, broadening, or contextual anchoring via paraphrase, role framing, and cross-references—and (iii) examine how paratext (prefaces, notes, intertexts) guides interpretation. This procedure allows us to mark both the gains and the trade-offs in Ames’s approach: analogical scaffolding and explanatory notes tend to improve accessibility for general readers, yet the same moves can compress affective or normative connotations that earlier renderings kept more open.

By shifting the discussion from general claims about cultural transmission to a replicable analytic protocol, we clarify how Ames’s strategy functions in specific passages and where it is most effective. The analysis also shows how KTS can be applied to concept-heavy texts without presupposing a single “correct” equivalence, thereby offering practical guidance for translators working at the interface of local conceptual schemes and global academic discourse.

3. Overview of knowledge translation studies

The concept of knowledge translation was first proposed by Professor Yang Feng from Shanghai Jiao Tong University as a new theory within translation studies. He views knowledge as an essential factor in translation, exploring the relationship and actions between translation as knowledge and the knowledge generated through translation [2]. This theory emphasizes principles of knowledge decoding, reprocessing, and transfer in translation production, marking the transition of knowledge from the realm of ancient epistemology into the theoretical framework of translation studies [3]. Within the scope of translation studies, culture is inevitably tied to culture itself, suggesting that the cultural essence involved in translation should also be seen as knowledge [4]. From the perspective of knowledge translation theory, Confucianism, as a form of local knowledge, can be processed, shared, and transformed into knowledge with universal significance. In the specific context of translation studies, translation history is equivalent to the history of knowledge translation, as no

discipline or field can be spread without the process of knowledge translation, further highlighting its importance in translation studies. "Cross-linguistic knowledge transfer is not just a particular academic issue, but a universal real-world problem." From the viewpoint of knowledge translation theory, the study of translation seeks to uncover the general mechanisms and methods of cross-linguistic knowledge transfer, aiming to address the asymmetry of knowledge that exists universally in human society [5]. Translation can transform local knowledge into universal knowledge, facilitating dialogue between the local and the global. Ames, in translating Confucian classics, approaches it through aspects such as discourse shaping, language transformation, and knowledge construction, positioning Confucian texts within different historical and communal contexts. His aim is to present Chinese philosophy to Western readers in a novel and familiar manner.

"Translation across languages, cultures, and time and space is not merely a structural transfer of knowledge but more of a reconstructive transformation [6]." At the same time, the process of Confucian classics becoming global knowledge aids the spread of Chinese culture, promotes its inheritance and development, and contributes positively to the diversity of world cultures.

Knowledge Translation Studies (KTS), introduced by Yang Feng, treats translation not as the search for one-to-one lexical matches but as a set of operations performed on knowledge units embedded in texts and traditions. In this view, translators decode and recontextualize concepts, then transfer them across linguistic and cultural boundaries through procedures such as paraphrase, analogy, and genre-appropriate framing. To keep the framework empirical, we use a minimal, testable protocol: (i) specify the unit at stake (term, concept cluster, or argumentative move); (ii) classify the operation executed by the translation (narrowing, broadening, or contextual anchoring); and (iii) track how paratext (prefaces, notes, intertexts) steers reader interpretation.

KTS helps explain how "local" conceptual schemes become accessible to wider audiences, without assuming they thereby become universally equivalent. It also foregrounds the trade-offs of transfer: explanatory scaffolding can improve intelligibility while compressing affective or normative connotations.

We apply this procedural KTS lens to Roger T. Ames's work. In passages where he pairs role-ethics framing with targeted analogies and dense annotation, we treat those choices as knowledge operations and ask where they aid comprehension and where they risk over-assimilation. Framing Ames in KTS terms thus shifts the discussion from evaluative generalities about "cultural transmission" to replicable analyses of how specific translation moves reshape meaning across languages and communities

4. The English translation of core concepts from Confucian texts in the context of knowledge translation studies

Translating Confucian Key Terms: From Theological Equivalents to Role-Ethics Analogies: Early modern European renderings of Confucian texts often aligned Chinese terms with familiar theological or moral vocabulary—ren with "benevolence," yi with "righteousness"—to secure legibility for local readers. While effective as a first approximation, such pairings can mask the ritual, relational, and community-embedded dimensions that these terms carry in classical contexts.

Roger T. Ames approaches these concepts through comparative philosophy and role ethics. Rather than fixing a single lexical equivalent, he builds locally justified analogies and uses paratext (prefaces, notes, cross-references) to steer interpretation. His well-known rendering of ren as "authoritative conduct" shifts attention from inner affect to exemplary comportment within a community, foregrounding how influence and moral authority are enacted through ritual and roles. In our analysis, this counts as a knowledge operation in the KTS sense: a move of contextual anchoring (with partial narrowing) that increases accessibility for non-Sinophone readers while risking a loss of some affective overtones associated with "benevolence." [7]

We adopt a minimal KTS protocol—(i) specify the unit (ren/yi), (ii) label the operation (narrowing/broadening/anchoring), (iii) examine paratext—to assess where Ames's strategy helps comprehension and where it may over-assimilate concepts to Anglophone categories.

In *The Analects*, Chapter 15 of the *Book of Wei Ling Gong* states: "The Master said, 'Is it not the essence of empathy? Do not impose on others what you do not desire for yourself.'" One important aspect of "ren" is "shu" (恕), which is outwardly manifested through "li" (礼), or ritual propriety. For the translation of "shu," James Legge rendered it as "Be true to the principles of our nature and benevolent exercise of them to others." In contrast, Ames and Luo Siwen, based on their understanding, creatively reconstructed it as "putting oneself in the other's place," which is clearer and more concise compared to other scholars' translations.

Confucius also stated that "yi" (义) is "the virtue of Heaven," representing divine will or conscience manifested in the world. In *The Doctrine of the Mean* (Li Ren), he said, "A gentleman's relation to the world is one of no personal preference or aversion, always with righteousness." Based on specific contextual interpretations, An and Luo translated "yi" as "appropriate/appropriateness," differing from James Legge's translation of "righteousness." An and Luo viewed "yi" as aligning with the standards and expectations within Confucian culture, emphasizing that the foundation for this value is rooted within the framework of Confucianism, making their translation more consistent with the original meaning and better aligned with the processes of knowledge decoding, reprocessing, and transfer in knowledge translation theory.

Junzi (君子). In classical contexts, junzi denotes an exemplary agent whose authority is enacted through roles and ritual practice rather than through innate nobility. Early English renderings vary—exemplary person, ruler, prince, lord—each spotlighting a different facet (moral modeling vs. sociopolitical status). Ames's translations and commentaries tend to stabilize the role-ethical dimension, treating junzi as a figure who leads by enactment. In KTS terms, this is a move of contextual anchoring (foregrounding role and practice) with partial narrowing (downplaying hereditary or aristocratic overtones in some passages).

Cheng (诚). While many translators gloss cheng as sincerity or honesty, Zhongyong frames it as a world-constituting norm ("utmost sincerity is without cessation"), linking personal cultivation with a processual cosmology. Ames reads cheng through a dynamic lens—closer to creative efficacy—to capture how sincerity operates as ever-active realization rather than mere veridical candor. The KTS operation is primarily re-scoping (from moral trait → ontological/processual efficacy) plus analogical paraphrase. The gain is conceptual grip for non-Sinophone readers; the cost is potential drift from the term's affective register carried by sincerity [8].

De (德). De concerns efficacious virtue—the capacity to elicit order and cooperation through cultivated character. Ames's formulations such as "moral virtuosity" or "excelling morally" emphasize enacted excellence over static possession. KTS-wise, this is refining granularity (virtue as practiced skill) with anchoring in communal settings. It clarifies performative efficacy but may understate the breadth of connotations de accrues across genres (e.g., political, ritual, cosmological).

Taken together, the analysis shows how Ames's strategy—role-ethics framing + targeted analogy + paratext—improves intelligibility while introducing intelligible, measurable trade-offs.

Zhongyong and the Problem of Access: Paratext as Conceptual Scaffolding

The Zhongyong condenses doctrine into compact Classical Chinese, and its key terms are tightly coupled to ritual practice and historical usage. For readers without training in these contexts, legibility depends on paratext—explanatory notes, conceptual essays, and cross-references that situate terms inside a lived tradition [9].

Roger T. Ames structures his English presentation of the Zhongyong around this need for scaffolding. Each Classical passage is paired with commentary that (i) locates the line historically

and socially, (ii) unpacks concept clusters (e.g., cheng, de, junzi), and (iii) links the passage to nearby loci in allied texts. He also supplies framing materials (preface, translator's statement, concept overviews) so that readers can revisit definitions while moving through the main text. In effect, the translation reads as a guided study edition rather than a bare lexical transfer.

Using a minimal Knowledge Translation Studies (KTS) protocol, we treat these editorial moves as operations on knowledge units: contextual anchoring (placing a term in ritual and role-ethical settings), granularity refinement (shifting from abstract labels to enacted functions), and analogical paraphrase when warranted. The gains are concrete—clearer uptake for non-Sinophone readers and a more stable interpretive path—yet the same devices can narrow affective or cosmological overtones that less-intrusive renderings leave open. Our analysis maps where this scaffolding is most helpful and where it risks over-assimilation, passage by passage.

5. Conclusion

The globalization of knowledge is the journey of local ideas, and the theory of “the localization of knowledge in knowledge translation studies determines the process of understanding and transforming knowledge. Starting from epistemology, it confines subjectivity within the bounds of rationality through the action and spirit of seeking knowledge [10].” In this process, knowledge is understood, evaluated, and interpreted through the translator's actions. Ames's translation of Confucian classics does not aim to express all the meanings of the original text. He hopes that the ideas and viewpoints expressed by Confucius in that political environment, social conditions, and historical context can be understood by Western readers. Therefore, in his translation, he uses many analogies in the annotations, employs a lot of focal and field-specific language in the text, and avoids causal language. The purpose of these methods is to highlight the uniqueness of Chinese philosophy. Such a translation may lose some of the original meaning, but the exclusive meaning of the Confucian philosophical system in the original text is fully embodied. Ames is keenly aware that in the process of understanding and transforming knowledge, translation should start from epistemology, while maintaining a scientific and objective research spirit throughout. This allows Chinese philosophy to engage with the world in its own way.

Looking at Ames's English translation of Confucian classics from the perspective of knowledge translation studies, An has a comprehensive understanding and grasp of both languages and cultures. In the translation process, he is not just converting languages, but also conveying the rich connotations of Chinese philosophy. By using reasonable and effective translation methods, drawing on diverse literary knowledge, and combining multimodal communication methods, he reshapes classical knowledge into the target language. This achieves the transformation of global knowledge.

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