

Coherence of the Translation of li (禮) in Lun Yü — A Case Study of James Legge's and Ku Hung-ming's Renditions

Huifang Xuan^{1*}, Qingxin Chen²

¹*School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Changji University, Changji, China*

²*Ordos Institute of Technology, Ordos, China*

**Corresponding Author. Email: xuanhuifang07@163.com*

Abstract. The Analects (Lun Yü), as a classic work of ancient Chinese Confucian philosophy, enjoys a high reputation both in China and abroad. The translation of The Analects can better promote exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations. In cross-lingual presentation, the coherence of topics can reduce the misunderstanding of targeted readers, make the whole text coherent and cohesive, and contributes to the transmission of Chinese culture. Therefore, based on Halliday and Hasan's Cohesion theory, the present study contrasts the usage of the coherence of James Legge's and Ku Hung-ming's renditions of The Analects. The study finds that Legge's version is more coherent and cohesive, while in Ku's version the coherence of li is to some degree affected by the fact that one Chinese word li is translated into various English words.

Keywords: Lun Yü (the Analects), Cohesion theory, discourse topic, coherence, li (rites)

1. Introduction

Lun Yü, generally known as the Analects of Confucius, is one of the classics of Confucianism, and occupies a central place in Chinese intellectual history. It contains profound traditional Chinese cultural and philosophical ideas. The knowledge of Lun Yü covers diverse fields, like philosophy, politics, military, education, religion, ethics, literature, etc. For centuries it has exerted a lasting and broad influence on the thoughts and conduct of the Chinese people. Its influence has gone across East Asian contexts beyond China.

1.1. The translation history of Analects (Lun Yü)

At end of the sixteenth century, the Analects was translated into Latin, and since then the translations covered a range of western languages. In the English-speaking world the translation of Analects has been lasted for two centuries and produced more than a hundred versions. Among these translations, some have drawn sustained scholarly attention both domestically and internationally, and the translators gained great reputation and popularity, such as James Legge, Arthur Waley, D. C. Lau, the mindfulness-informed renditions of Slingerland, Ku Hung-ming, Watson, and Ames & Rosemont, to name only a few. Each of these translations has not only made great contribution to

transmitting unique and profound traditional Chinese culture, but also made great contribution to the communication between Chinese and Western cultures.

The present discussion intended to contrast Legge's and Ku Hung-ming's rendition. Legge, who is a missionary and sinologist, occupies a singular historical position as the first translator to translate the Confucian classics systematically. Legge's version has achieved broad acceptance and has been widely imitated in subsequent English-language scholarship. Ku Hung-ming, the first Chinese scholar to translate Lun Yü into English, whose purpose was to make the western to understand Chinese philosophy of Chinese Confucianism. Each translator's work has aroused considerable praise as well as critique, reflecting divergent methodological commitments and aims. However, due to the two translators' social standing, educational formation, life experience, and translational objectives are so different that they have yielded divergent style of translation. Nevertheless, both have dramatically prompted the circulation and reception of Chinese classics in global literary and intellectual circuits. It is of great importance to recognize that there have been well over one hundred English renditions of Lun Yü, making it impractical to analyze exhaustively within a single study.

1.2. The linguistic characteristic of Lun Yü from the Cohesion Theory

Confucius (also known as Kongzi) has been considered the “patron sage of education and patron god of culture and civilization” [1], and Lun Yü mainly contains such contents as his conversations with his disciples and contemporaries, his monologues, narration, description or assessment of some actions, events or rites, and so on. The book was compiled over 2000 years ago by Confucius's disciples and his disciples' disciples after his death. Therefore, the book is actually a collection of sayings and events concerning Confucius. Quotations and dialogues are common, beginning with *zi yue* 子曰 (Confucius says) or “someone says”. So, most contents are discrete, without specific context, and the Chinese words are polysemic, therefore, commentaries, annotations, explanations and disputes of Lun Yü have existed since its compilation.

2. The core concepts of Lun Yü-- ‘li’ and ‘ren’

The focus of arguments is the discourse topic or the gist of Lun Yü. Although there is no consensus among intellectuals, most disputes center around the notions of *li* 礼 (rites or propriety) and *ren* 仁 (virtue or moral). Both notions are integral to Confucian thought, but it is hard to say which one is more important or more central. Some scholars hold that *ren* is more important than *li*, for instance, according to Wu [2], such notions as *zhong* 忠 (loyal), *shu* 恕 (benevolent), *xiao* 孝 (filial), *ti* 悌 (fraternal), *gong* 恭 (respectful), *jing* 敬 (reverent), *li* 礼, *zhi* 知 (understanding) and *xin* 信 (trustworthy) are all parts of and manifestations of *ren*. Li and Luo [3] note that *ren* consists of the notions *zhi* 知、*shu* 恕、*li* 礼、*xin* 信、*min* 敏 (diligent)、*hui* 惠 (generous)、*zhong* 忠、*yong* 勇 (brave)、*gang yi shen yan* 刚毅慎言 (have a strong character and be cautious when speaking)、*xiao ti* 孝悌 (filial and fraternal)、*bao min* 保民 (protect the ordinary people), etc. Liang argues that Confucianism centering around the Way and governance, is rooted in *ren*. Other scholars propose that *li* is of greater significance, for example, Cai [4] notes that it is *li* that plays a major and determinant role in the Confucian thought. Still other scholars proposes that *li* and *ren* are equal and interdependent. Take Fung Yu-lan [5] as an example, he argues that the true *li* must contain *ren* and vice versa. So, a complete virtue is the integration of *li* and *ren* and a complete personality is the manifestation of this unity.

2.1. The linguistic features of Lun Yü from the Cohesion Theory

Halliday and Hasan published a book *Cohesion* in English in 1976, symbolizing the establishment of Cohesion Theory. In the book cohesion was defined as semantic relations, referring to the semantic relationships between language components that enable the discourse to exist [6]. According to Cohesion Theory when interpreting the meaning of a certain component in a discourse relies on the interpretation of another component, cohesion is formed, which means that only with the help of the other component can it be effectively explained, and the connection relationship is established. To ensure coherence and cohesion in scholarly writing, a text typically presents a central discourse topic accompanied by auxiliary subtopics. The discourse topic may be stated explicitly or inferred implicitly; in the latter case, readers have to interpret the topic from contextual clues, which means the understanding of some certain segment relies on the other part of the text. The function of subtopics is to illuminate, corroborate, or elaborate the central topic, and together they make the discourse logically connected and rhetorically unified. In other words, the notions in Lun Yü are not isolated ideas but rather interweave with one another to convey and transmission the multidimensional Confucian concepts and thought. This paper holds that both li and ren are the core concepts, or the discourse topics of Lun Yü, while other notions like xiao, ti, zhong, shu, zhi, xin, etc. are all subtopics. Due to the cohesion devices are different in English and Chinese, it is an important aspect to evaluate a translation quality from the cohesion perspective. The main purpose of the present study is to investigate of Legge's and Ku's English translations of Lun Yü, whether the two renditions achieve internal coherence and textual cohesion. Specifically, the study focuses on the translation of 'li' in the two renditions. By a close reading of key passages, careful analysis of terminological choices, and examination of how each translator situates ritual propriety within broader ethical and social claims, this study assesses the degree to which Legge and Ku render a stable, intelligible, and mutually reinforcing portrayal of Confucian doctrine concerning li. However the English and Chinese belonging to different language system, it is difficult to achieve complete equivalence between the source text and the target text. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt appropriate translation strategies to produce a target text conforming to Chinese expressions.

2.2. The meanings of 'li' in Chinese

In Chinese li 礼 is also written as 禮. According to Xu [7] from Han Dynasty, “禮，履也，所以事神致福也。从示从豐，豐亦声”。The sentence means that li refers to “the courses or ways to be trodden by men”, whereby spiritual beings can be served and sacrificed and then happiness and good luck can be obtained. The Chinese character 禮 is a combination of 示 and 豐. The right side 豐 is phonetic. It is a vessel made of jade that is used in sacrificial occasions; to put it another way, it represents some kind of sacrificial ceremonies to the gods and ancestors, etc. The radical on the left side 示 means things related to Heaven, God or spiritual being (示神事也), and appears in many relevant Chinese characters like ji 祀 (sacrifice), shen 神 (God or spirits), fu 福 (lucky), hu 禍 (disaster), xiang 祥 (auspicious), ci 祠 (ancestral temple), zu 祖 (ancestor), qi 祈 (pray), and so on. All these words mean something related to God or spiritual being. It may be added to 豐 later to emphasize the role of the rites. In modern times, li is often used in the compound words like hun li 婚礼 (wedding ceremony), dian li 典礼 (ceremony), li mao 礼貌 (politeness), zhi shu da li 知书达礼 (knowledgeable and polite), li wu 礼物 (gifts), etc., which usually contain the meaning of ceremony, politeness and respect, and so on.

The subject of li is mainly discussed in another Chinese classic called Li Ji 礼记 (the Book of Rites). However, li also appears in Lun Yü for 74 times, and there are a few chapters describing

certain rites without reference to the character li, as illustrated in Chapter Ten. This chapter just lists how to observe li and lots of detailed requirements are narrated, both in everyday life and on ceremonial occasions, including how to make sacrifice, what kind/color/size of clothes to wear on different occasions, what to eat and not to eat, how to behave when faced with people of different ranks on diverse occasions, what kind of dances and sacrifices to observe based on the social status, and so on. In a word, Confucius shows his complete deference, obedience, respect and strict adherence towards his ancestors and the ruling class. Such cases appear in other chapters too. For instance, When Yen Yuan died (颜渊死) the disciples wished to give him a great funeral (门人欲厚葬之), and the Master said(子曰), “You may not do so.” (不可) The disciples did bury him in great style. (门人厚葬之) The Master said(子曰), “Hui behaved towards me as his father. (回也视予犹父也) I have not been able to treat him as my son. (予不得视犹子也) The fault is not mine (非我也); it belongs to you, O disciples.” (夫二三子也) The above example translated by Legge describes the funeral of Yen Yuan, Confucius favorite disciple. Although he is in great sorrow, he still asks other disciples to follow the rules of conduct and not to give Yen Yuan a grand funeral. In most cases Confucius exchanges his ideas about li with his disciples and contemporaries, and provides specific answers with their personalities, interests, social status, etc. under consideration. The following is another example: Mang I asked what filial piety was. (孟懿子问孝) The Master said(子曰), “It is not being disobedient.” (“无违。”) “That parents, when alive(生), should be served according to propriety(事之以礼); that, when dead (死), they should be buried according to propriety(葬之以礼); and that they should be sacrificed to according to propriety.” (祭之以礼) In this example, Mang I is one of Confucius’ disciples and also an official in close relation with several noble families who don’t observe li or propriety and sometimes usurp the power of kings or princes, so here Confucius wants to warn Mang I to enhance his ritual cultivation and not to follow suit. In other cases, Confucius or one of his disciples just narrates something relevant to li in monologue, for example (2.5), Confucius remarked, “If a man is without moral character, (人而不仁) what good can the use of the fine arts do him? (如礼何?) If a man is without moral character, (人而不仁) what good can the use of music do him?” (如乐何?) [8] Here Confucius emphasizes the importance of li and yue (music). It is through li and yue that people can obtain virtue or morality.

Through the analysis of the above-mentioned examples, we can summarize that li has several meanings. First, li refers to the practice of certain ceremonies or rites, such as wedding, funeral and sacrificial ceremonies, etc. Second, li refers to politeness in social interaction, or the polite and acceptable social behaviors. Third, li means the rules of rites. In a word, li is a set of practices including rules, ceremonies and behavioral conventions in daily life and on specific occasions. According to Confucius, the behaviors and relations between people can be regulated and the nation can be in a better governance by observation of li, and everyone will have his own role to play, that is, “Let the prince be a prince, and the public servant be a public servant. Let the father be a father, and let the son be son.”

In other words, li is polysemic in Chinese, and its translation into English has been discussed a great deal. Legge notes in 1.12 that li cannot be accurately captured by a single English term, because its scope extends beyond mere ritual labels to a notion of propriety—the fitness or rightness of a thing within social life. It governs the proper behaviors of people to one another, and it unites ethical conduct with ceremonial form. The English term ‘ceremony’ may convey one aspect meaning of 礼. In short, li resists a single fixed English word. Its meaning includes propriety, fitness, ritual practice, and social ethics. Due to this different translator’s default to different term. Some translator conveys it to art, others ceremonies or propriety—reflecting differing interpretive

priorities rather than a concerted translation. What's important is not merely lexical accuracy but how one interpreted li. Whether regard it as an aesthetic cultivation, as a system of ritualized behavior, or as a principle of proper conduct in hierarchical human relations. Accordingly, one can choose the words, e.g. “art,” “ceremonies,” “propriety,” or “etiquette”, revealing the translator's interpretation of li. The translator may regard 礼 as either primarily an artistic virtue, a ceremonial code, or a moral-social norm. According to Ku [9], Dr. Legge's translation of 礼 as “art” underscores the challenge of rendering the term into another language. Interestingly, Chamberlain, in *Things Japanese*, stated that Japanese don not exist a true native term for “art” even though it shares the same writing system with China. That is the reason why the two translators have chosen completely different words for li.

The Chinese character li carries rich connotations and cannot be rendered by a single English word. It governs the performance of duties toward superiors and toward equals—the appropriateness or justness of things within social life. Consequently, the translators emphasize the different dimensions of this concept. Accordingly, translators' choices reflect divergent interpretive priorities and contextual emphases. This divergence highlights the broader challenge of translating a deeply normative and culturally situated concept into English.

3. The translation of ‘li’

The table below lists the frequency of the chosen terms (counts shown as ordinary numerals). A detailed comparison will be undertaken in the following sections, with the goal of deriving generalizations.

Table 1. Legge's and Ku's translation of li

Legge: li	71	Ku Hung-ming: li	67
the rules of propriety	32	art(s)	11
propriety	20	polite/fine art(s)	2
the rites of propriety	1	the practice of art	1
ceremonies	13	the strict principle of art	1
the rules of ceremony	2	the arts and the principles of art	1
the regulations	2	the arts and usages of life	1
what is proper	1	the state of the arts and civilization	2
		the arts and institutions of civilization	2
		the arts and institutions of the civilized world	1
		judgment and (good) taste/sense	6
		judgment	4
		judgment and manners/modesty	2
		the ideal(s) of decency and good sense	7
		the correct form(s)	4
		education in higher things	3
		education and good manners	1
		courteous/courtesy	2
		real courtesy and good manners	2
		the usage/rites prescribed by propriety	2
		a man of propriety	2
		a man of taste	2
		good taste	1
		the regulations	2
		honor	1
		all the honors	1
		rules of etiquette and formality	1

Table 1. (continued)

the principle of the rite	1
religion	1

3.1. Legge's translation of 'li.'

From the table we can see that Legge has rendered li into “propriety” and the relevant phrases for 53 times, “ceremony” and the relevant phrases for 15 times, with only 4 exceptions:

The philosopher Yu said(有子曰), “When agreements are made according to what is right (信近於义), what is spoken can be made good (言可复也). When respect is shown according to what is proper(恭近於礼), one keeps far from shame and disgrace (远耻辱也). When the parties upon whom a man leans are proper persons to be intimate with(因不失其亲), he can make them his guides and masters.” (亦可宗也。)

Another two exceptions are the following example: Tsze-chang asked(子张问) whether the affairs of ten ages after could be known. (“十世可知也?”) Confucius said(子曰), “The Yin dynasty followed the regulations of the Hsia (殷因于夏礼): wherein it took from of added to them may be known (所损益可知也). The Chau dynasty has followed the regulations of the Yin (周因于殷礼): wherein it took from of added to them may be known (所损益可知也). Some other may follow the Chau(其或继周者), but though it should be at the distance of a hundred ages(虽百世), its affairs may be known.”(可知也。)

“In presenting the presents with which he was charged, he wore a placid appearance.” (“.....享礼, 有容色.....”)

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, “propriety” means “Moral and social behavior that is considered to be correct and acceptable”, Wang [10] deems this translation as proper, because “propriety” can not only refer to the specific regulations and rites, but can also represent the observation of inner and implicit politeness.

“Ceremony” refers to “a public or religious occasion that includes a series of formal or traditional actions” and “formal behavior; traditional actions and words used on particular formal occasions”, which are parts of the connotations of li.

“Regulation” means “an official rule made by a government or some other authority”, which can represent a part of li. So, it is proper to translate li as the above-mentioned words in particular situations.

“What is proper” seems to emphasize the fitness or appropriacy of things.

Legge finds it not easy to translate li into the same term, so he chooses the above-mentioned words and phrases, which have contributed to the coherence of the text. In fact, his translation is based on the varied contexts, and reflects his careful reading and thinking of the source text and other classical works in China, which are interrelated with each other. He favors to translate literally without adding cohesive devices and explanations in the text, but provides sufficient explanations and commentaries in the footnotes. As a result, the scope of footnotes is much bigger than that of the text.

3.2. Ku Hung-ming's translation of 'li.'

Ku translates Lun Yü as “The Discourses and Sayings of Confucius: A New Special Translation, Illustrated with Quotations from Goethe and Other Writers”, a really long title, from which we can see his method of translation and will presuppose the comparison between the people in the book and Goethe and other writers. So the title may attract those readers who are unfamiliar with the Chinese culture but are curious and eager to learn something. That's why this version is popular.

Ku also translates *li* into different terms based on various contexts. He has chosen “art” and relevant phrases for 22 times, “judgment” for 12 times and a diverse range of other renditions. In order to understand why his translation is so diverse, we have to consider Ku’s object of the rendition which is clearly stated in the preface: he hopes that “educated and thoughtful English readers who will take the trouble to read this translation of ours may, after reading it, be led to reexamine their long-held preconceptions about the Chinese people, and in so doing and in so doing may find themselves not only able to revise those preconceptions but also to alter the tone of their personal and national relations with Chinese people as individuals and as a nation.” With this aim in mind, his rendition is much different from Legge’s in that he almost paraphrases the whole text, omits most proper names of people, places and titles, makes comparisons between the persons in *Lun Yü* and the famous persons from English cultures, provides additional context or conversational environments, teases out implications, trying to “render Confucius and his followers so that their expressions are conveyed in the manner an educated Englishman would use to articulate the same thoughts put forward by the Chinese worthies.”

As noted above, Ku, following Legge, also encounters a substantive difficulty in rendering *li* into English, and as a result he elects to adopt the term “art.” This choice is accompanied by a detailed justification articulated in a footnote: “The English word ‘art’ is used in several senses, including the fifth sense—the strict principle of art—which, in this sense, embodies the idea of what is proper and fitting in all relations.” In practical terms, the term remains inherently ambiguous, since a substantial portion of readers will interpret it as referring to “a work of art” or to “the practice of art,” thereby risking a drift away from the precise Chinese semantic field that the translator aims to convey. In fact, this term is ambiguous, for most readers will regard it as “a work of art” or “the practice of art,” etc. It’s hard for the targeted readers to connect “art” to the Chinese word *li*. In addition, *wen* 文 in the following example is rendered into “arts” too, which will surely bewilder the targeted readers.

Confucius remarked (子曰), “The civilization of the present Chou dynasty is founded on the civilization of the two preceding dynasties. (周监于二代) How splendidly rich it is in all the arts! (郁郁乎文哉!) I prefer the present Chou civilization.” (吾从周。)

The word “judgment” and related expressions are used for 12 times. It denotes both the ability to make prudent decisions after careful consideration of the most appropriate course of action and the opinion formed through such deliberation; including the act of communicating this opinion to others. It is mainly related to the ability and the opinion, which seems unsuitable for *li*.

The phrase “the ideal of decency and good sense” appears for 7 times, six of which can be found in 12.1. The emphasis is “decency”, so it seems redundant to translated *li* with so long a phrase. A disciple of Confucius, the favorite Yen Hui(颜渊), enquired what constituted a moral life (问仁). Confucius answered, “Renounce yourself and conform to the ideal of decency and good sense.” (“克己复礼为仁”) “If one could only,” Confucius went on to say, “live a moral life, renouncing himself and conforming to the ideal of decency and good sense for one single day, (一日克己复礼) the world would become moral.(天下归仁焉) To be moral, a man depends entirely upon himself and not upon others.” (为仁由己，而由人乎哉?) The disciple then asked for practical rules to be observed in living a moral life.(“请问其目。”) Confucius answered, “Whatsoever things are contrary to the ideal of decency and good sense(非礼), do not look upon them(勿视). Whatsoever things are contrary to the ideal of decency and good sense e(非礼), do not listen to them (勿听). Whatsoever things are contrary to the ideal of decency and good sense(非礼), do not utter them with your mouth(勿言). Lastly, let nothing in whatsoever things you do, act or move, be contrary to the ideal of decency and good sense.” (非礼勿动)

“The correct form” seems to attach importance to what is correct, but does “correct” mean “proper” or “fit”? The scope of “education” is much broader than li, for the disciples not only learn li from Confucius, but also learn related knowledge, which is stated in Lun Yü: “Confucius through his life and teaching taught only four things: knowledge of literature and the arts, conduct, conscientiousness and truthfulness”. Ku also chooses “propriety” and relevant phrases only on four occasions, a sharp contrast with Legge’s rendition. The word “religion” seems unfit, because it will easily remind the targeted readers of Christianity or other religions, which are different from Confucianism.

In a word, it doesn’t benefit the coherence of the text when translating li into so many words. Later Ku reflected on his own rendition and translated li as “ceremony” “the performance of Sacrifices” “the performance of ceremonies” and “the laws and usages of social life”, etc. when rendering another Chinese classic Zhong Yong 中庸(the Universal Order or Conduct of life).

4. Conclusion

To sum up, Confucius adheres to the principle: “transmit the old truth and do not originate any new theory”, so he has never made clear explanations of the key notions in Lun Yü, but has elaborated extensively on the specific actions and behaviors and put them into practice. As a result, the term li becomes ambiguous, polysemic and open to discuss. Thus one cannot translate 礼 with one definite words. The readers and translators can construe their own understanding, thus making translation much more difficult and the versions harder to be assessed. To put it another way, li could contain many different meanings in English. However, in order to make the text cohesive and coherent, continuum of the term is necessary. In this respect, Legge has done better because most of his renditions have employed the same or similar terms, which make the target reader better understand the text. In contrast, Ku’s rendition of li is too diverse. It is a little hard for the readers to grasp the connotation of li, and the coherence of the text is affected to some degree. Anyway, the unity of the thought is easily disrupted if the same word li is rendered into too many English words.

Acknowledgement

The 14th Five-Year Plan for Educational Science of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region: Research on College English Teaching in Application-oriented Universities under the Vision of “Telling China’s Stories Well” (NGJGH2024633)

References

- [1] Xinzhong, Yao. 2003. Confucianism[A]. Xinzhong Yao. The Encyclopedia of Confucianism[C]. London and New York: Routledge: 1-11.
- [2] Xiaoming, Wu. 2003. My Doctrine is that of an All-pervading Unity: Rereading Confucius[M]. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- [3] Yuliang, Li and Gongli, Luo. 2009. Translation and Transmission of Confucian Thought in the West[M]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- [4] Shangsi, Cai. 2013. Confucian Thought[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House.
- [5] Yu-lan, Feng. 1998. A History of Chinese Philosophy[M]. Beijing: People’s Publishing House.
- [6] M. A. K. Halliday, and R. Hasan, 1976. Cohesion in English. London: Longman Group Ltd. , 142.
- [7] Shen, Xu. 2015. Shuo Wen Jie Zi (Interpretation of Chinese Characters with Pinyin) [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [8] Legge, James. 1893. The Chinese Classics: with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes, Vol. I. (second edition, revised) [M]. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.

- [9] Hung-Ming, Ku. 1898. The Discourses and Sayings of Confucius: A New Special Translation, Illustrated with Quotations from Goethe and Other Writers[M]. Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, Ltd.
- [10] Hui, Wang. 2001(5). On the Translation of Key Concept Words in Confucian Analects[J]. Journal of Shenzhen University (Humanities & Social Sciences), 116-121.