

Issues in the English Translation of the Analects of Confucius: A Cross-Cultural Translation Approach Concerning the Ideas of Filial Piety

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Abstract

Presently, global politics tend to apply Confucian philosophy, whose idea of *xiao* (filial piety) found in *The Analects* has been primary in uniting the Chinese citizens as a nation. This study investigates the English translation of *The Analects* by James Legge, focusing on how the idea of *xiao* (filial piety) has been interpreted. Employing the framework of Eco-translatology, a translation theory that describes the ecological adaptation and selection choices of a translator, the study qualitatively evaluates the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions Legge adaptively selected for translation. The data was collected by identifying and selecting discussions of *xiao* in *The Analects* in Chinese as the source text and in the translated version of Legge in English as the target text. The analysis found that the Legge version provides low semantic variation and high contextual variation that demarcates it from the source text, which helps the non-Chinese readers to reflect upon the teachings and apply them to their societal functions. Thus, the study has future implications for the translated text to be a reliable source for guiding the application of Confucian teachings appropriately into the different systems of Western society.

Keywords: Xiao (Filial Piety), Translation, Eco-Translatology, Confucian Philosophy, Three-Dimensional Transformation

Introduction

Chinese language and culture have shown incredible popularity in the recent upsurge for leading a humane life within the rise of global modernization and internationalization. Ideas and knowledge are being exchanged between the West and the East, which brought concepts like filial devotion to the forefront in the West where concepts like liberty and individualism oppose the concepts of the former (Radice, 2017). Recently, different world leaders have been found to quote from the *Linyu* or *Analects*, which provide knowledge about forming a government and running a nation, starting from the family (Lee, 2022). This was made possible by translating the original *Analects* into English. This study aims to investigate a central idea to the teachings of Confucius, *filial piety*, using Eco translatology. Eco translatology is a new translation approach that explores the process from an ecological perspective while addressing translation as a natural process in ecology and emphasizing the importance of "adaptation" and "selection" (Liu, 2023). Using this theory, the study evaluates the English translation of *The Analects* by James Legge. It compares the elements and translation process with the original Chinese version of the text. The study aims to conduct qualitative research to comment on the translation quality of the James Legge version by first identifying and selecting the data and later, providing a literal translation along with the translated version of James Legge. Thus, the study argues that the James Legge version has produced a faithful translation but opts for dynamic equivalence to express the idea. This emphasizes that the translated versions, which are mostly favored by the non-Chinese governments remain superficial about the knowledge of it. This study has implications for availing an integrated administration and management system that employs both Western and Eastern ideas to build a nation. This study is significant for the present administrative powers, who tend to inculcate Confucian philosophy to aid the functioning of nations.

Literature Review

Previous Studies on the Analects

The Analects have constructed the Chinese 'lifestyle', thus, becoming a classic representative of Chinese culture and philosophy to the world. Various scholars have studied the original text to interpret different traits and values like 'noble man', 'filial piety', 'ritual', 'benevolence', and 'humanness' that holds a civilization and enable a human to be called a "human" (Liang & Vladimirovna, 2020). Recent studies have adapted and applied the teachings in *The Analects* to other fields of study. *The Analects* have assisted the Chinese government whose central core is *filial piety* (*xiao*), which depicts how the functions of the familial level, affect the building of the government (Tao, 2018). This implies that *filial piety* was considered to be a sacrificial attempt to show respect and propriety towards parents and elders, which transcends into *patriotism* at the national level. Recent studies have emphasized comparing the translated versions of *The Analects*, mostly in English, and have deduced the differences and similarities of the ideas that seem to be available in the Western culture but are semantically different due to their situatedness in the Chinese culture (He, 2017; Min, 2021; Hu & Jia, 2021). Moreover, studies have also provided pieces of evidence for the employment of *The Analects* in the art and films of the West (Ruixi, 2023). This shows that although the English translation of *The Analects* and its application in different fields have been numerous, the quality of translation has been not studied in these studies. This is because the translation quality is significant for the appropriate interpretation and comprehension of the intended meaning of the source text. This implies that previous studies have not indulged in showing the division between the subjectivity and the readability of the

text. Thus, *The Analects* have been exhaustively studied here to pose arguments that demarcate Eastern and Western culture and tradition.

Previous Studies on Eco Translatology

Eco translatology has been built within ecology as a bridge between natural science and social science. Initiated by the translators of China, eco translatology gets its fundamentals from the ancient ecological wisdom of China and primarily focuses on life and its interpretation. Ecological wisdom is characterized as the “unity of heaven and man”, the “doctrine of the mean”, the principles of “people first” and “holistic integration”, along with the incorporation of critical Chinese thoughts and wisdom (Hu & Tao, 2016). This implies that the eco-translatology approach is a complete package for understanding Chinese texts within the context of Chinese culture and philosophy. Studies on eco translatology, especially to translate and understand Chinese texts became more prominent after 2010, with many scholars analyzing and exploring it from multiple perspectives (Yan & Zeng, 2021). Wang (2014) conducted a translation study by implementing the theory of eco translatology for English translation of Chinese internet catchphrases. Ma (2014) conducted a study to translate the public signs found in the city of Qingdao using the approach. Studies have also explored this new approach to translating Chinese texts, especially classical works. Wang (2022) conducted a case study for conducting a Chinese-English translation of the folklore *Tales of Hulan River* by applying eco translatology. Yan and Zeng (2021) conducted a comparative study of two translated texts of Chapter Two of *Tao Te Ching* by Lin Yutang and James Legge by employing eco translatology. These studies imply that eco-translatology is not a one-dimensional approach and holistically interprets any material that is lingual in nature and form. Moreover, this means that the translated text can be assessed from three paradigms that render subjectiveness to adapt and select. Thus, eco-translatology helps to explore the perspective and the environment of the translator to find those idiosyncratic modifications.

Research Questions

The target text of James Legge was analyzed to investigate the following research questions:

- 1) What are the differences in meanings that are found in between the English translation of *The Analects* of Confucius and the original text for the meanings of the word *filial piety*?
- 2) How do the meanings of *filial piety* in both versions of *The Analects* of Confucius show cultural foundations through their meanings described in the commentaries?

Framework & Methodology

Framework

Eco Translation as a theoretical framework

Eco-translation is one of the prevalent and applied theories for contemporary translation studies that acclaim to render a more efficient translation approach that is also holistic. First proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen in 2001, the theory of eco-translation entails to be the theory of adaptation and selection in translation and examines the process of translation from a holistic perspective (Wang, 2022). That is, it considers translation to be led by the translator and based on the text which purposefully depicts multi-cultural conversion, situating the process of translation as a choice to be adapted to the ecological

environment by the translator. Based on the Darwinian philosophy, eco translatology deals with three themes from an ecological perspective, which are the “ecology”, that is, “the ecological system and environment for translation, “life”, that is, the life of the text involved in the process of translation”, and “survival”, that is, “the living standards and the future developments of a translator” (Hu & Tao, 2016). This implies that eco-translation is a continuous process of adapting and selecting within the ecological system, where the translator is primary and plays a central role in associating the source language with the target language. This also implies that the approach of eco translation holds the target language to be as important to be examined as the source language. Thus, eco-translation provides a ground for the translators to be subjective and attend to the ecological factors that influence the text during translation.

Ideas of Adaption and Selection

The concepts of adaptation and selection in the ecological paradigm are not new and have been dealt with to study how a biological being survives within a certain ecological environment by evolving according to it. The theory of eco translation considers translation to be the activity of selection by the translator to adapt to the ecological environment where the process of translation is held, with the selection of the strategies for translation to be the outcome of the strive of the translator to adapt to the ecological environment of the translation (Jun, 2020). The ecological environment of translation refers to the surrounding conditions depicted by grossing of factors that interact with each other like authors, communication, language, society, culture, clients, and readers. According to the framework of eco translatology, translation practices are construed within a part of the natural ecological system, forming an ordered chain of associations sequenced from the translation world to the natural world and depicting internal logical link with the natural world and the cognitive extensions (Liu, 2023). This implies that the process of translation asks the translator to understand the nature of the source text and adapt and select elements throughout the translation process according to the requirements. This also implies that the translator must balance fidelity to the source text with the target audience's expectations, along with addressing the linguistic, social, and cultural factors. Thus, the decisions of the translator are important to ensure its relevance and coherence within the target ecological system.

Method

The paper incorporates the framework of eco translatology within the qualitative research method. The study uses a qualitative approach over quantitative research since the former can render the examination of debatable social issues and enable a particular topic or phenomenon to be attended to comprehend the different subjective views by querying deeply into the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This implies that the employment of a qualitative approach to eco-translation studies is obvious as the theory holds the perspective and choices of the translator to be primary in the process of translation. Thus, this study qualitatively examines the translation work of *The Analects* by James Legge and compares the context and meaning of the idea of *filial piety* between the translated and the original version.

Data Sample

Since the study deals with the idea of *filial piety* which transcends into patriotism on a larger scale, the data was constricted to the text available for *filial piety* or filial devotion.

The data was selected by finding the translated version of *The Analects* of Confucius by James Legge and identifying the chapters and sections that were concerned with the commentaries on *filial piety* (xiao) (Legge, 1966). The commentaries that were selected from *The Analects* and the James Legge version for this study were as follows: 1:2, 2:5, 2:6, 2:21, 4:20, 13:18, 17:9. These selected data were translated in English, first, by using literal translation to understand the denotative meaning of the Chinese text of *The Analects*. Thus, the literal translation will mark the divergence of the James Legge version from the original text.

Three-Dimensional Transformation Method and its Application

The concepts of adaptation and selection in eco-translation is based on deciphering the source text within the boundaries of three dimensions, which are fundamental to consider for conducting the process of translation. The Three-dimensional approach to analysis presents a holistic qualitative analysis of the source text as well as the target text for understanding the adaptive selection modifications implemented by translators in the dimensions of language, communication, and culture (Liu, 2023). This implies that the adaptations and selections of a translator while translating is based on a collective assessment of the action taken by the translator for the linguistic challenges, the socio-cultural differences and similarities between the two texts in a bilingual environment, and for the adaptive selection of components to create effective communication in creating the same essence like the source text. The study analyzed the selected discourses on *filial piety* from the James Legge version of *The Analects* of Confucius in three parts, divided according to the Three-dimensional transformation method. Analyzing linguistic dimension investigated the Chinese character, variations, and idiomatic expressions adapted for describing *filial piety* to align with the idea of the term in English. Analysis of the cultural dimension provided evidence on the cultural aspects adapted from Chinese cultural elements to describe *filial piety* and how they are adapted in English to make it interpretable to the people of the Western culture while maintaining authenticity. Lastly, analyzing on communicative dimension showed how the James Legge version maintained the effectiveness in communicating the idea of *filial piety* in the original text in his text by evaluating factors like tone, sarcasm, and irony in the selected data. Thus, these three dimensions provided a holistic and constructive approach to comparing the original and the translated version of *The Analects*.

Analysis & Discussion

Analysis

Book 1: CHAP. II.

ST: 有子曰、其为人也孝弟、而好犯上者鲜矣、不好犯上、而好作乱者、未之有也。

TT: The philosopher Yu said, 'They are few who, being filial and fraternal, are fond of offending against their superiors. There have been none, who, not liking to offend against their superiors, have been fond of stirring up confusion.'

LT: Some disciples said, "It is rare for a man to be filial to his younger brother, but he likes to offend his superiors. There is no such thing as someone who does not like to offend his superiors, but likes to cause trouble."

Linguistic Domain: The TT adopts formal language that shows the master and student setting and the authority the master possesses while clarifying nuances through grammatical expansions ("being filial and fraternal").

Cultural Domain: The TT emphasizes Confucian values like "filial piety" and "fraternity" in a way that aligns with Western philosophical discourse.

Communicative Domain: The TT shows that the expressions were moderated for audience comprehension, explicitly linking moral values to social harmony.

Book 2: CHAP. V.

ST: 孟懿子问孝、子曰、无违

TT: Meng I asked what filial piety was. The Master said, 'It is not being disobedient.'

LT: Meng Yizi asked about filial piety, and he said, "It's no violation."

ST: 樊迟御、子告之曰、孟孙问孝于我、我对曰、无违。

TT: Soon after, as Fan Ch'ih was driving him, the Master told him, saying, 'Meng-sun asked me what filial piety was, and I answered him— "not being disobedient."'

LT: Fan Chiyu and his disciples told him, Meng Sun asked if he was filial to me, and I replied, "It's no violation."

ST: 樊迟曰、何谓也、子曰、生事之以礼、死葬之以礼、祭之以礼。

TT: Fan Ch'ih said, 'What did you mean?' The Master replied, 'That parents, when alive, be served according to propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried according to propriety; and that they should be sacrificed to according to propriety.'

LT: Fan Chi said, "What do you mean?" Confucius said, "Property should be used in making things happen, in etiquette in death and burial, and in sacrifices."

Linguistic Domain: The texts show the most involvement of the word for filial piety '孝' (xiao) and the discourses that describe the word and portray it to be essential for forming a government in this chapter. Linguistically, the translator shows frequent indulgence in retaining the proper nouns and kinship terms as seen in '樊迟' for Fan Ch'ih and '孟孙' for Meng-sun.

Cultural Domain: Culturally, the TTs show an active role in providing semantically equivalent terms like 'propriety and filial' from the ST, which situates the translation more within the Chinese philosophy and Confucian teaching.

Communicative Domain: The TTs have used lots of hyphens and quotes to provide an online perspective for the readers.

Book 2: CHAP. VI.

ST: 孟武伯问孝、子曰、父母唯其疾之忧。

TT: Meng Wu asked what filial piety was. The Master said, 'Parents are anxious lest their children should be sick.'

LT: When Meng Wubo asked about filial piety, Confucius said, "Parents only worry about their illness."

Linguistic Domain and Cultural Domain: The phrase '父母' meaning 'father and mother' has been metonymically handled by Legge by replacing it with parents. This shows linguistic adeptness and creates a cultural transference for the phrase as English has a word for it that is situated in their culture.

Communicative Domain: The TT supplies again direct speech which interacts directly with the readers, creating better comprehension.

Book 2: CHAP. XXI.

ST: 子曰、书云孝乎、惟孝友于兄弟、施于有政、是亦为政、奚其为为政。

TT: 2. The Master said, 'What does the Shu-ching say of filial piety?— "You are filial, you discharge your brotherly duties. These qualities are displayed in government." This then also constitutes the exercise of government. Why must there be THAT— making one be in the government?'

LT: Confucius said, The book says that filial piety means only filial piety to friends and brothers, and giving to those who have government. This is also government, and ridicule of others is government.

Linguistic Domain: The TT provides the Chinese word for “book, or letter” by using “Shu-ching” for the literal translation of books, which provides the impression of the Chinese form and meaning of the word to Western readers.

Cultural Domain: The TT retains the words that are situated in Chinese culture by elaborating ‘孝’ (filial piety) and ‘施于有政’ (applied in governance) in a way that aligns with Western governance concepts. The LT, while more direct, risks misinterpretation of key Confucian ideas.

Communicative Domain: Finally, in the communicative domain, Legge has again elaborated and kept the whole commentary lengthy to be more effective in representing the message.

Book 4: CHAP. XX.

ST: 子曰、三年无改于父之道、可谓孝矣。

TT: The Master said, 'If the son for three years does not alter from the way of his father, he may be called filial.'

LT: The Master said, "If you have not changed your father's ways for three years, you can be called filial piety."

Linguistic Domain: The translation by Legge showed the use of an appropriate word for the term “孝” called xiao, which means “filial piety or obedience”. This shows linguistic clarification for the Western readers and what the topic is about.

Cultural Domain: From the perspective of the cultural domain, Legge does not change much of the meaning of the words, except the use of pronouns to situate the grammaticality in the target language.

Communicative Domain: Communicatively, Legge has adapted the reduction of terms and adjusted them according to the version of the original text. This provides a clear medium of exchange.

Book 13: CHAP. XVIII

ST: 孔子曰、吾党之直者异于是、父为子隐、子为父隐、直在其中矣。

TT: Confucius said, "Among us, in our part of the country, those who are upright are different from this. The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this."

LT: Son of Kong said, “The difference between the uprightness of our party is that the father conceals himself from the son, and the son conceals himself from the father. This is where uprightness lies.”

Linguistic Domain: The word “孔子” meaning “the son of Kong” (which was the surname of Confucius) has been culturally adapted by using the Latin name instead of maintaining the actual name, which shows the linguistic bias of Legge as a Westerner.

Cultural Domain: The TT shows cultural deviation from the source text as the word ‘直’ meaning “straight” to imply “fair or reasonable” has been culturally contextualized as “uprightness” again resorting to facilitate the Western readers.

Communicative Domain: Finally, the TT is effective in translating the idiom 父为子隐 thus increasing interactivity with the intended meaning.

Book 17: CHAP. IX

ST: 迩之事父、远之事君。

TT: "From them you learn the more immediate duty of serving one's father, and the remoter one of serving one's prince."

LT: What is near is my father, what is far away is my king.

Linguistic Domain: In the linguistic domain, the concise parallel structure of the source text (ST) was produced with a more overt explanatory structure in the target text (TT). These brought clarity and acquaintance with the main idea for the Western audience, who do not seek the idea of filial piety.

Cultural Domain: Legge maintains the cultural norm of ancient China to perceive elders more prominently by providing “one’s prince” for ‘君’.

Communicative Domain: The TT text shows that the word ‘君’ meaning “a person of nobility and royalty” has been synonymous and metonymical in its choice by Legge, which has elaborated the sentence to communicate the essence of filial devotion.

Discussion

The analysis of the English translation by James Legge of *The Analects* of Confucius as the target text by comparing with the original version as the source text found that:

RQ1) Low semantic variation for the word filial piety found between the TT and the ST

After implementing the framework of eco translatology, the analysis found that the word for *filial piety* although was not incorporated in its original form (xiao) was denoted with the word “filial piety”, which is distant from the concept of *filial piety* in Western culture. This is contrary to previous findings, which claimed that concepts like *filial piety* hold cultural meaning to Chinese people, although the words for both concepts may be connotative, holding multiple meanings (Hu & Jia, 2021). This implies that the translated version of *The Analects* by James Legge has focused on maintaining the Cultural essence of the text and emphasized expressing the concepts as original as possible to the world. Moreover, the low semantic variation provides an impetus to the collective Chinese effort to promote national dignity by depicting the historically situated meaning facts that represent the culture (Ruixi, 2023). This implies that the similarity in the representation of the intended meaning not only provides clarity to the message but also the cultural nuances of Chinese people. Thus, the analysis showed that the translation of *The Analects* by James Legge has provided a sincere and faithful platform for *filial piety* to be comprehended by the Western audience.

RQ 2) High contextual variation of meaning for the word filial piety found between the TT and the ST

Although the analysis found similarity in the representation of the intended meaning for ‘filial piety’, the target text, the translation by James Legge, did not include culturally situated linguistic elements like idioms and long phrases and shortened the word matter by

finding the equivalent of them in English. This aligns with the findings of Hu and Jia (2021), as he observed that cultural references are often ignored because of the complexity and variation in the Chinese language as a whole. This implies that the transference capability of the Chinese language is very limited to a less analytical language like English. This also indicates that the cultural differences in interpreting *filial piety* as Radice (2017) observed, there is a lack of knowledge about the concept of devotion to mother and father in the West, which according to the teachings of Confucius, if inculcated within oneself, can help him/her to be patriotic and love and care about nation. This is contradictory to the Western concepts, where the relationship between parents and child is based on materialistic attachments. This makes the comprehension of the translated version by the readers diverging from the essence of the concept of filial piety. Thus, the translated version by Legge is unable to provide new information about the ideas of parenting and alternatively how to be obedient and conduct proper responsibility towards parents.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the idea of filial piety, which is central to the teachings of Confucius, by using a new translation approach, Eco translatology. The study evaluated the English translation of *The Analects* by James Legge and compared the elements and process of translation with the original Chinese version of the text. The study aimed to conduct a qualitative study that showed how adept the translated version of James Legge is linguistically, culturally, and communicatively by first identifying and selecting the data and later, supplying each text with a literal translation along with the translated version of James Legge. The study argued that the James Legge version of *The Analects* has produced a translation that is faithful but opts for dynamic equivalence to express the idea. The analysis found that the English translation by James Legge has demonstrated low semantic variation in representing the core Confucian concept of “filial piety”. The result provides evidence for the translation to be faithful to the semanticity of the lexical items that have culturally distinct values. However, the analysis also demonstrated high contextual variation in how *filial piety* was conveyed. The result showed that the sections of text or phrases within the text that are culturally situated, such as idioms were omitted. Moreover, the analysis also showed that the lack of equivalent cultural concepts in the West limits the transference of meaning of Confucian ideas like *filial piety*. The results of this study have implications in the field of management and administration, as the understanding of *filial piety* is essential for incorporating the idea into the working of different systems. Thus, the study using eco-translatology, found that the Legge translation has subjective inclusion which shows the dynamic adaptiveness to select a translation.

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