Between Literature and Philosophy: On Translating Confucius into English

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With the exception of the *Tao Te Ching*, the Confucian *Lunyu* or *Analects* has been translated into English more often than any other classical Chinese text. Among its translators are eminent sinologists, poets, writers, and comparative philosophers. Most of them have been driven at least partly by dissatisfaction with the work of their predecessors, and have justified their retranslations by claiming to bring something new to the interpretative scene. Yet for all their scholarship and literary sensibilities, Confucius still largely remains a vague, distant, unattractive, and at times confusing figure for the Western reader. In this article, I aim to show how this is so and argue that it is both necessary and possible to change the situation. I will argue that a better-translated Confucius could help the contemporary Western reader to absorb his message. Second, I will discuss the limited progress made so far by English translations of the *LY* in presenting Confucius as a personality, and examine their attendant failings. Last I will look at the persistent problems and suggest some possible solutions.

This attempt assumes, first, that a single, unified 'Confucius' is present throughout the *LY*, even though the book was compiled by different hands. Those who see the *Analects* as a more or less philosophically coherent whole, like most modern *LY* scholars and translators, would readily accept this assumption.[1] But others might see the figure of

[1] For a detailed discussion of the 'philosophically coherent' approach see Tongdong Bai, 'How to Read Early Confucian Texts Philosophically', in *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case* (Princeton, NJ, 2020), pp. 13–19. Modern scholars and translators who express preference

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Confucius as more elusive, stressing the development of his recorded teachings from one period to another.[2] Second, it assumes that the *LY* has something to offer the contemporary Western reader, a belief obviously shared by many contemporary *LY* translators and scholars, and that one of the most productive ways of translating the *LY* is to bring out and convey this contemporary relevance.[3] It is not the only way to approach and translate the book, of course.[4] Nor should this approach be used to justify arbitrary interpretations which at the extreme might reduce the Chinese text to a mere 'congeries of Rohrschach blots'.[5] On the contrary, such an approach should and could be grounded in philological, intertextual, and exegetical evidence.

I'd like to start by discussing the necessity of a 'better' Confucius in English. By a 'better' Confucius I do not mean a Confucius made more appealing than he really is; I simply refer to the Confucius (or a Confucius) portrayed and described in the *LY*, represented more satisfactorily. Such a Confucius is necessary not just because translators have not done a good enough job in this respect, as the next two sections aim to show, but also because it would better attract contemporary Western readers.

First, the unique voice and powerful personality of Confucius, if translated well, could serve as a thread that binds the pieces of the *LY* together. The *LY* is not a 'book' in the modern sense, but a collection of fragments connected only by the fact that they all deal with Confucius and his teachings.[6] On a first reading, it seems to be less than a coherent whole, especially to the 'modern Western reader who is used to a linear, sequential text'.[7] In China, where the work has been canonical since the Han Dynasty 2,000 years ago, generations of scholars have looked upon

for it include Simon Leys, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York, 1997), pp. xix-xx; Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York, 1998), p. 10; Edward Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis, IN, 2003), p. xxi; Burton Watson, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York, 2007), p. 6.

[2] This view is that of, for example, E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, *The Original Analects: Saying of Confucius and His Successors* (New York, 1998).

[3] For some scholars' and translators' accounts of Confucius' contemporary relevance see Wei-ming Tu, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany, NY, 1985), pp. 81–92; Leys, pp. xvi-xvii; Slingerland, p. xxv; Ames and Rosemont, p. 19; Watson, pp. 12–13; Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Reflections* (New York, 2013), pp. 85–7; Annping Chin, *The Analects (Lunyu)* (New York, 2014), pp. xv, xvi.

[4] For more discussion on this topic, see Xiao Qiang and Andrew Lambert, 'Translating Junzi in the *Lunyu* as Gentleman: Underlying Norms and Deviances', *Translation Review*, 106.1 (2020), 69–88 (pp. 76, 80).

[5] Henry Rosemont Jr, *A Reader's Companion to the Confucian Analects* (New York, 2013), p. x.

[6] Burton Watson, *Early Chinese Literature* (New York, 1962), p. 125.

[7] Ames and Rosemont, p. 9.

the book as a collection of sayings from 'the great sage'. They learned the precepts by heart, studying and contemplating them over and over again as they grew older and gained more life experience. This method helped them to see the coherence of the book gradually, as the text took on deeper and deeper meaning. Or, to use Ames and Rosemont's words, 'the architecture of the text emerges as readers make it their own'.[8]

For Western readers, however, Confucius does not have such an established status, or a position that naturally commands respect, attention, and lifelong practice. They want to know quite early on what is in the work for them. This makes conveying the personality of Confucius in translation all the more important, since it could help them see the coherence of a seemingly incoherent text. Some might argue that as long as we accompany each passage of the translated *Analects* with detailed notes from traditional Chinese commentaries, explaining how passages are related to one another and clustered around certain themes, as Slingerland, Chin, and Ni have done, we can bring out the unity of the text in an explicit way. I do agree with this point, but that doesn't mean that the personality of Confucius should not, at the same time, be conveyed accurately and vividly. Moreover, we have reason to believe that the personality embodied in what are supposedly Confucius' own words serves as a more direct and intuitive 'glue' in unifying the work than the analyses of others when printed in smaller fonts in a running commentary.

Second, to better listen to Confucius, the Western reader also needs to understand a fundamental difference between Chinese and Western philosophy. For the Chinese, philosophy is not simply something to be known, but also something to be experienced. As the famous modern Chinese philosopher Y. L. Chin pointed out, 'Chinese philosophers were all of them different grades of Socrates. This was so because ethics, politics, reflective thinking, and knowledge were unified in the philosopher … His philosophy required that he live it; he was himself its vehicle.'[9] Seen in this light, the personality of Confucius deserves to be known to the Western reader not only for its own sake, but also as a living embodiment of his philosophy. A more real and tangible Confucius could help the reader better grasp his teachings. Depicting him as a solemn, proper, and slightly boring figure, as many English translations have done, prevents the reader from understanding the subtle flexibility and joyful liveliness of his philosophy.

[8] Ames and Rosemont, p. 10.
[9] Youlan Feng, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (Nanjin, 2012), p. 342.

The English translations quoted and discussed in what follows are usually referred to by translator's name only. Some have already been cited, but this is a full reference list:

Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York, 1998)
Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ, 1963)
Annping Chin, *The Analects (Lunyu)* (New York, 2014)
Raymond Dawson, *The Analects* (Oxford, 1993)
Lionel Giles, *The Sayings of Confucius* (London, 1907)
Chichung Huang, *The Analects of Confucius: A Literal Translation* (New York, 1997)
D. C. Lau, *The Analects* (London, 1979)
James Legge, 'Confucian Analects', in *The Chinese Classics with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes* (Hong Kong, 1861)
Simon Leys, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York, 1997)
Yutang Lin, *The Wisdom of Confucius* (New York, 1938)
Peimin Ni, *The Analects of Confucius: A New Translation of Lunyu* (Albany, NY, 2017)
Ezra Pound, *Confucius: The Unwobbling Pivot/The Great Digest/The Analects* (New York, 1969)
Edward Slingerland, Confucius: *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis, IN, 2003)
Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (London, 1938)
James R. Ware, *The Sayings of Confucius* (New York, 1955)
Burton Watson, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York, 2007)

Admittedly, some progress has been made already in translating the Confucian personality. In the following section I propose to look at examples that fall into two categories: where translators aim for a pithier style, and where they strive for a more 'voiced' style. As *LY* 11:16 has it, 'to go beyond is as wrong as to fall short (过犹不及)'.[10] In each category, I will also discuss instances where translators have gone too far, so that their strengths become their weaknesses.

[10] All passages from the *Analects* are quoted and numbered from *Lunyu Yizhu*, edited by Yang Bojun, 3rd edn (Beijing, 2009).

As Lionel Giles points out, the sayings of Confucius have a 'crisp, concise and epigrammatic style' that is often lost in a translation (Giles, p. 19). However, in some cases the translators have managed to some extent to preserve the brevity and compactness of the original (the bold is mine):

LY 4:8 子曰：'朝闻道，夕死可矣。'

Waley, Chan, Leys: The Master said, In the morning, hear the Way; in the evening, die content! (pp. 103, 26, 16)

Lau: The Master said, '**He** has not lived in vain who dies the day he is told about the Way.' (p. 73)

Slingerland: The Master said, 'Having in the morning heard that the Way was being put into practice, **I** could die that evening without regret.' (p. 32)

Simon Leys, who hoped to stand on the shoulders of his 'mighty predecessors' and produce a translation that could 'reconcile learning with literature' (pp. xi–xii), simply reproduced Waley's rendering of this passage, for he did not see 'how one could improve upon it' (p. 132). The Chinese sentence is without any subject, a characteristic of classical Chinese which leaves the reader unsure whether its verbs ('hear', 'die') are being used in the first, second, or third person, and whether they are in the indicative or the imperative mood. Such built-in ambiguity is not a problem when the reader can infer the grammatical subject from the context, but in this case, as in many other passages from the *LY*, context is seriously lacking, and cannot give the reader any clue about who the subject might be. It is better, therefore, to refrain from specifying the subject and to preserve the 'universal quality' of the original (Dawson, p. xvii). By following the word order of the original and not adding a subject, Waley's, Chan's, and Leys' version perhaps pushes English grammar a little. But not only does it achieve brevity; more importantly, it has retained the ambiguity of the original and avoided imposing an interpretation on the text as Lau and Slingerland have.

Of all the English translators of the *Analects*, Ezra Pound has most challenged the rules of English grammar by staying perilously close to the Chinese syntax. As a result, he sometimes produces fragmentary sentences that simply do not make sense. But he does on occasion reproduce what he called the 'flavor of laconism' that he aimed for (Pound, p. 194). For example,

LY 13:16 叶公问政。子曰：'近者说，远者来。'

Pound: The Duke of Sheh asked about government. He said: Those near, happy; those afar, attracted and come. (p. 251)

> Giles: The Duke of She asked about the conditions of good government. The Master said: Government is good when it makes happy those who live under it and attracts those who live far away. (p. 47)

In this case, Pound's second sentence is grammatically pared down, but its meaning is clear in the context. The compressed grammar is acceptable here because it does not affect the intelligibility of the text. In contrast, Giles' version uses complete and complex sentences connected to each other with distinct verbal markers. In using standard grammar and spelling out meaning, it has sacrificed the succinctness of the original passage, in which the reader is expected to connect the dots. If we compare the original (and Pound's version) to a Chinese landscape painting with only a few impressionist strokes and plenty of space, Giles' version is more like a Western oil painting that has tried to fill the space and add more details.

Like Pound, Burton Watson tried to 'follow the wording and word order of the Chinese' in his translation (Watson, p. 13). He does not say why he did so, but he does mention the 'aphoristic form' of the *LY* in his Introduction (p. 6). Sometimes this strategy works well in reproducing this 'aphoristic form', as in the following passage:

> LY 1:3 子曰：'巧言令色，鲜矣仁！'
>
> Watson: The Master said, Clever words and a pleasing countenance —little humaneness there! (p. 16)
>
> Chin: The Master said, 'A man of clever words and of a pleasing countenance is bound to be short on humanity.' (p. 3)

However, taken too far, this can, as has been shown elsewhere, lead to strained expression, and in the worst cases to fractured English.[11] Neither Pound nor Watson avoid this. For example:

> LY 6:3 不幸短命死矣。
>
> Pound: Not lucky, short life, died. (p. 214)
>
> Huang: Unfortunately, he died young. (p. 79)

> LY 17:7 不曰坚乎，磨而不磷；不曰白乎，涅而不缁。
>
> Watson: But don't people say, So hard, file it, but it never wears thin? And don't they say, So white, dirty it, but it never turns black? (p. 121)
>
> Ware: But isn't it also said, 'What is really hard cannot be made thin by rubbing; what is really white does not become black by dyeing'? (p. 110)

[11] See John Makeham, 'The Analects of Confucius. Translated by Burton Watson', *Journal of Chinese Studies*, 49 (2009), 454–61 (p. 457).

In both instances, not only does adherence to the original word order and the use of sentence fragments fail to produce a translation of fewer words, they also give the impression of a Confucius unable to speak in a coherent way. This is especially unfortunate given the existence of 'a joke type in which Confucius is made to speak pidgin truisms'.[12]

To analyse the second kind of progress and its accompanying pitfalls, I borrow the concept of voiced and unvoiced styles from Richard Lanham's well-known *Analyzing Prose*.[13] A voiced style has a personal voice and conveys feelings and personality; an unvoiced style is neutral and impersonal. When Pound writes of his aim to give 'the sense of the live man speaking' (p. 194), he is very plausibly referring to the voiced style. Similarly, Leys talks about the 'unique and inimitable voice' and the 'strong and complex individuality of the Master' that runs throughout the *LY*, which he believes is the very backbone of the work, defining its unity (p. xxi). Lin Yutang feels that the charm of the *LY* centres around the character of Confucius, like the charm of Boswell's *Johnson* (Lin, p. 155). He suggests that most of the precepts were conveyed by Confucius to his students in daily conversations in a private, informal setting, spontaneously, intimately, sometimes jokingly.[14] Van Norden further points to Confucius' 'charmingly dry and droll' sense of humour.[15]

Let us look at some examples for a contrast between the voiced and unvoiced styles.

LY 17:4 '二三子！偃之言是也。前言戏之耳。'

Lin: 'You fellows, what he says is right. I was only pulling his leg.' (p. 172)

Lau: 'My friends, what Yan says is right. My remark a moment ago was only made in jest.' (p. 143)

LY 5:10 宰予昼寝。子曰：'朽木不可雕也，粪土之墙不可圬也；于予与何诛？'

Lin: Tsai Yu slept in the daytime and Confucius remarked 'There is no use trying to carve on a piece of rotten wood, or to whitewash a wall made of earth from a dunghill. Why should I bother to scold him?' (p. 175).

Lau: As far as Yu is concerned what is the point in condemning him? (p. 77).

[12] David Schaberg, ''Sell it! Sell it!': Recent Translations of Lunyu', *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, 23 (2001), 115–39 (p. 126).

[13] Richard A. Lanham, *Analyzing Prose*, 2nd edn (Beijing, 2004), pp. 102–18.

[14] Yutang Lin, *The Humor of Confucius* (Beijing, 2011), p. 3. See also Christoph Harbsmeier's 'Confucius Ridens: Humor in The Analects', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 50.1 (1990), 131–61, an article inspired by an essay in Lin's book.

[15] Bryan W. Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis, IN, 2011), p. 27.

In the first example, where Lau uses the stiff and formal expresssion 'to make a remark', Lin's 'pulling his leg' better captures the lively and playful tone of the original. In the second, Confucius is very straightforward with his criticism, so much so that he even seems slightly rude. Lin's version of the last part, with 'I' as the subject, and 'bother to scold' as the predicate (an expression later adopted by David Hinton),[16] is a personal, angry rebuke directed toward the student, whereas in Lau's version, although the rebuke is still in the form of a rhetorical question, the voice is aloof and impersonal, the syntax not suggestive of a speaking voice.

However, the translator should not carry too far this familiarity of tone, as Pound does in the following example:

> LY 16:1 孔子曰：'求！无乃尔是过与？
>
> Ware: Confucius said, 'Ah Ch'iu, isn't this your fault? (p. 105)
>
> Lau: Confucius said, 'Qiu, surely it is you who are at fault? (p. 138)
>
> Pound: Kung-tze said: Ain't that your fault, Hook? (p. 269)

While Lau's Confucius sounds a little too distant, Pound's goes to the other extreme and may appear too casual and familiar; there is real oddity in giving Confucius the American drawl Pound often adopted. Ware's version seems to maintain a more appropriate interpersonal distance than either.

Translators who have emphasized the rudeness in Confucius' character, such as Lin and Leys, sometimes see it where it doesn't exist. For instance (bold mine):

> LY 3:13 王孙贾问曰：'与其媚于奥，宁媚于灶，何谓也？'子曰：'不然。获罪于天，无所祷也。'
>
> Lin: Wangsun Chia asked, 'Why do people say that it is better to get on good terms with the kitchen god than with the god of the southwestern corner of the house?' Confucius replied, '**Nonsense,** if you have committed sins against Heaven, you haven't got a god to pray to.' (p. 168)
>
> Leys: **Nonsense.** If you offend Heaven, prayer is useless.' (p. 12)
>
> Pound: **It simply isn't.** Who sins against heaven has nothing to pray to. (p. 203)

In this passage, Wangsun Jia, a commander in the army of the State of Wei, seems to be asking Confucius whose patronage it is best to seek. Confucius' response is that he would never stoop so low as

[16] See David Hinton, *The Analects* (Washington, DC, 1998), p. 45.

seeking office through private influence in whatever form. It is true that '不然', which literally means 'no so', shows a clear and direct refusal of Wangsun Jia's suggestion, but the Chinese expression is not as blunt as the English word 'nonsense' used as an expletive. Given that Wangsun Jia's suggestion was only implied in a question about the meaning of a popular saying at the time, such an exclamation seems like an over-reaction on Confucius' part. In this case, Pound's 'It simply isn't', which is forthright without being rude or offensive, is preferable.

Another danger in the pursuit of the voiced style is that translators might sacrifice the accuracy and 'alien-ness' of Confucius' ideas in choosing plain, colloquial expressions over ponderous nominalizations or awkward neologisms. It is true that in some cases the translator can achieve both a voiced style and accuracy, as Lin or Watson did in the following passage:

LY 18:8: 我则异于是，无可无不可。

Lin: I am different from these people; I decide according to the circumstances of the time, and act accordingly. (p. 161)

Watson: I myself differ from these men. I have no hard and fast dos and don'ts. (p. 131)

Lau: I, however, am different. I have no preconceptions about the permissible and the impermissible. (p. 151)

Ames and Rosemont: But I am different from all of these people in that I do not have presuppositions as to what may and may not be done. (p. 216)

But compare the two versions in the following example (bold mine):

LY 1:15 子贡曰：'贫而无谄，富而无骄，何如？'子曰：'可也；未若贫而**乐**，富而**好礼**者也。'

Leys: Zigong said: ''Poor without servility; rich without arrogance.' How is that?' The Master said: 'Not bad, but better still: 'Poor, yet **cheerful**; rich yet **considerate**.''(p. 5)

Ames and Rosemont: … The Master replied: 'Not bad, but not as good as: 'Poor but **enjoying the way (dao道)**; rich but **loving ritual propriety (li礼)**.' (p. 75)

The first Confucius is more familiar and accessible to the Western reader, and his words flow better, but the use of 'cheerful' and 'considerate' has impoverished the Confucian ideas of '乐' and '礼' , reducing two complex and uniquely Chinese concepts to mere cheerfulness and thoughtfulness. In comparison, Ames and Rosemont's version is more scrupulous. They have not resolved the problem either, but at least their translation signals it.

Having examined English translators' limited achievement with the personality of Confucius, let us now proceed by looking at examples where the majority of the translators have failed to do a satisfactory job with the sense itself, then discussing some possible solutions. For the sake of convenience, the examples will be grouped roughly according to the factors that I believe have directly contributed to the underperformance. These factors include contested readings, difficult terminology, repetition in the original, and the use of 'unit shift'. However, any attempt to explain why a certain translational decision has been made has a speculative element. Explaining what has happened will be a part, but not the focus, of my analysis. My main purpose is to show how different decisions, whatever might have driven them, actually affect the presentation of Confucius, and to reflect on how this could in future change for the better.

First, let's look at examples involving contested readings. Theoretically, even the smallest variations in interpretation of Confucius' teachings might influence the way he is perceived by the Western reader, no matter how subtly or indirectly. But I would like to limit my discussion to examples where a clash of interpretations is more obvious. First let's compare two different versions of *LY* 1:11 (bold mine):

> LY 1:11 子曰：'父在，观其志；父没，观其行；三年无改于父之道，可谓孝矣。'
>
> Lau: The Master said, 'Observe what a man has in mind to do when his father is living, and then observe what he does when his father is dead. If, for three years, he **makes no changes** to his father's ways, he can be said to be a good son.' (p. 51)
>
> Chin: The Master said, 'When your father is alive, observe what he would like to do. After your father is dead, reflect on what he has done. If for three years you **refrained from altering** your father's ways, you can be called filial [*xiao*].' (p. 8)

Notice how the phrase 'refrained from altering' implies a positive wish to change the father's ways. According to Kong Anguo and Liu Baonan, however, the assumption behind this passage is that 'when a filial son is in mourning and is still yearning for his departed parent, he feels as if his parent is still alive and he simply cannot bring himself to alter his father's way'.[17] At first sight, Lau's 'makes no changes' is a more accurate

[17] Chin, p. 8, citing the Han scholar Kong Anguo and the Qing Scholar Liu Baonan from Baonan Liu's collected commentaries on the *Analects*, *Lunyu Zhengyi* (Beijing,1990), p. 27.

rendering of '无改', because, strictly speaking, '无改' includes two possibilities: 1) The child does not see any reasons for change and does not change; 2) the child sees reasons for change but refrains from changing. While Lau's rendition covers both possibilities, Chin's excludes the first. But judging from the context, the second possibility is more plausible, because there is nothing commendable in not doing something that you do not want to do in the first place, unless conforming to your father's ways could be considered a merit in itself. Moreover, Lau's translation does not say what the child should do after the mourning period is over, while in Chin's there is an implied call to activity. Other passages in the *LY* support Chin's reading. Some indicate a general willingness to change where it is seen fit, such as *LY* 9:3, *LY* 9:4 and *LY* 18:8. Others more specifically encourage people to help improve the behaviour of their parents or their superiors by honest advice, gentle remonstration, or even direct confrontation, such as *LY* 4:18, *LY* 14:7, and *LY* 14:22.

The impressions of Confucius one gets from the two versions of '无改' differ considerably. The Confucius in Lau's version seems more conservative and conforming, and may even suggest blind loyalty on the part of the son and oppressive authority on the part of the father. The Confucius in Chin's version, in contrast, is delicately balanced between an affectionate and devoted child and a prudent reformer. However, almost all other *LY* translations adopt Lau's reading and/or wording, with the sole exception of Ames and Rosemont (pp. 279–81).

Another sentence that has puzzled and divided commentators is in *LY* 1:8:

> LY 1:8: 子曰：'君子不重，则不威；学则不固。主忠信，**无友不如己者**。过则勿惮改。'
>
> Lau: Do not accept as friend anyone who is not as good as you (p. 60)
>
> Ni: Do not seek friends from those who are not as good as you (p. 85)

The contrast between 'seek' and 'accept' is interesting, and Professor Ni must have had 'the pleasure of crossing swords'[18] with Lau. What is implied in his translation is that even though you do not actively seek to make friends with your moral inferiors, you could accept them as friends if they, committed to the Way and bent on self-cultivation, come to seek your friendship. This interpretation solves the inherent contradiction of Lau's reading, i.e. if no one accepts as a friend anyone not as good as

[18] An expression used by Brooks and Brooks (n. 2), p. viii, to describe the enjoyment they derived from disagreeing with Arthur Waley in their readings.

themself, then no one can end up being friends with those who are better than themselves. Ni's reading also agrees with other passages in the *LY*. In 1:14, a person who aims to become exemplary is encouraged to 'find improvement in the company of those who possess the Way' ('就有道而正焉'). In 15:10, Confucius more explicitly advised his disciple Zigong to 'seek the friendship of the most humane or human-hearted among the scholar-officials' ('友其士之仁者') .

Again, the two versions present us with two different Masters. In Lau's version, Confucius seems to possess a kind of 'ethical snobbery', judging and giving a cold shoulder to his moral inferiors. In Ni's version, Confucius is simply a teacher giving sensible and practical instructions to those eager to improve themselves morally. He sounds reasonable and down-to-earth but at the same time flexible and open. After one is beyond the initial stage of vulnerability to bad influences, one should be more than willing to help those who are not as good as oneself.[19] But again, most translators have read and rendered this sentence more or less like Lau.

Apart from interpretation, translators could also fall short because of the difficulty of finding an English equivalent for certain key terms. This difficulty is only to be expected considering the enormous gap they have to bridge between the source culture and the target culture. The difficulty also arises from the supreme succinctness of classical Chinese, which makes it almost impossible to preserve both the rich meaning of some terms and the pithy style of the *LY* at the same time.

> LY 15:24 子贡问曰：'有一言而可以终身行之者乎？'子曰：'其**'恕'**乎！己所不欲，勿施於人。'
>
> Lau: Zi-gong asked, 'Is there a single word which can be a guide to conduct throughout one's life?' The Master said, 'It is perhaps **the word 'shu'**. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.' (p. 135)
>
> Leys: Zigong asked: 'Is there any single word that could guide one's entire life?' The Master said: 'Should it not be **reciprocity**? What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others.' (p. 77)
>
> Huang: Zi-gong asked: 'Is there one single word that one can practice throughout one's life?' The Master said: 'It is perhaps '**like-hearted considerateness**'. 'What you do not wish for yourself, do not impose on others.' (p. 156)

Lau's use of the transliteration of the character '恕' shows how difficult it is to find a single-word English equivalent for the concept of '恕'. Unless in a purely academic setting, transliterating key terms in the *LY* is usually a last resort, almost a sign of failure in the task of translation (compare

[19] Ni, pp. 85–6.

Ames and Rosemont, p. 30 above). But in this particular case this method somehow works, for the term '恕' is immediately followed by an explanation of what it means. Ley's use of 'reciprocity' for '恕' was initiated by James Legge and favoured by many other *LY* translators including Dawson, Watson, and Ni. However, 'reciprocity' is a far from accurate rendering of '恕'. *Shu* means using oneself as a measure to gauge the likes and dislikes of the other person and then treating him/her accordingly, thereby 'reassuring both that person and myself of our common humanity'.[20] It is a purely self-originating act not motivated by prospects of receiving something in return. 'Reciprocity', on the other hand, is a mutually beneficial relationship, an exchange of help or advantages between two parties. This might give readers the wrong impression that the Master has a touch of calculation or self-interest.

If we have to find a single word for '恕', both Waley's 'consideration' and Pound's 'empathy' come closer to it than 'reciprocity'. But 'consideration' is too broad, failing to denote the specific sense of using oneself as a measure. 'Empathy' is more focused on the ability to *understand* another person's situation, while *shu* is more action-oriented, emphasizing the right way of *treating* others that comes as a result of this understanding. Huang's 'like-hearted considerateness', though not as succinct, is a more accurate rendition of '恕', and is unlikely to mislead the reader about Confucius.

Another concept notoriously difficult to translate is '礼' (*li*):

LY 12:1 子曰：'非礼勿视，非礼勿听，非礼勿言，非礼勿动。'

Legge: 'Look not at what is contrary to **propriety**; listen not to what is contrary to **propriety**; speak not what is contrary to **propriety**; make no movement which is contrary to **propriety**.' (p. 114)

Giles: Do not use your eyes, your ears, your power of speech or your faculty of movement without obeying **the inner law of self-control**. (p. 62)

Ames and Rosemont.: 'Do not look at anything that violates **the observance of ritual propriety**; do not listen to anything that violates **the observance of ritual propriety**; do not speak about anything that violates **the observance of ritual propriety**; do not do anything that violates **the observance of ritual propriety**.' (p. 152)

My translation: Whatever you look at, whatever you listen to, whatever you say, whatever you do—make sure they are of ritual propriety.

[20] David S. Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy* (Chicago, 1996), p. 76.

There is such a strong contrast between Legge's and Giles' translation for '礼' that one might even wonder whether they were translating the same concept. But Legge's 'propriety' – a rendering that had been vehemently criticized by Giles more than 100 years ago as 'absurd' and sounding like 'the headmistress of a young ladies' seminary' (Giles, p. 21) – is still widely in use today. In Legge's defence, he follows Zhu Xi's interpretation of '礼' and his 'propriety' is intended to convey the idea of '事之宜' ('the fitness of things'), but in most cases it comes out wrong. It is true that 'propriety' could mean 'the condition of being right, appropriate, or fitting', but in this sense it is usually followed by 'of' or preceded by a possessive pronoun. When used together with words like 'rules', 'observe', 'conform', or 'contrary to', however, it is easily understood as another common, related meaning: 'conventionally accepted standards of behaviour or morals'. When thus understood, 'propriety' suggests 'an artificial standard of what is correct in conduct or speech',[21] and therefore conflicts with passages in the *LY* that describe Confucius' hostility to any performance of the *li* that, although 'correct', involves a discrepancy between form and spirit.[22] Furthermore, it cannot capture the idea of an openness to justifiable change embodied in Confucius' concept of '礼'.[23] It might even conjure up 'quaint images of smiling Oriental gentlemen, bowing endlessly to each other' (Leys, p. xxv). Nor could it convey, as Ames and Rosemont hope, the process of making tradition one's own, or 'appropriating persisting values and making them appropriate to one's own situations' (p. 51). As a result, both Legge's version and the version by Ames and Rosemont may give the wrong impression that Confucius was advocating rigid conformism – an effect not at all intended by the translators.[24]

Giles' own rendering 'the inner law of self-control' is inaccurate too. In his eagerness to correct the false impression that Legge's 'rules of propriety' create, he has perhaps gone to the other extreme. Although the practice of *li* could result in a change of the 'inner' state of mind, arguably one of 'equably adjusted harmony and self-restraint' (Giles, p. 60), it is misleading to completely internalize and individualize a

[21] Mary W. Cornog, *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms* (Springfield, IL, 1992), p. 93.

[22] See LY 3:3, LY 17:11.

[23] See LY 9:3, LY 2:23, LY 4:10. See also Xiao Qiang, 'The Evolution of the Concept of Li in the Overseas English Translations of Lunyu: From James Legge to Annping Chin (1861–2014)', *Translation Quarterly*, 85 (2017), 25–50 (pp. 32–4).

[24] Ames and Rosemont's version is also too repetitive, although I do agree that a degree of repetition is needed here to convey the emphatic tone of the original (I thank Professor Peimin Ni for pointing it out to me). In my version I have deliberately repeated the 'whatever', but not the 'make sure' part, which I feel would be overdoing it.

concept that has concrete outward manifestations and relies heavily on tradition and the collective wisdom of the community. The Confucius Giles presents might serve to counteract the stiff image created by Legge, but his version seems to depict a Master who is primarily concerned with the inner life of individuals, while, in fact, Confucius attached great importance to customary patterns of behaviour, which he believed could, to use Schwartz's words, 'shape people in a crudely behavioristic fashion'.[25]

As well as contested readings and difficult terms, the use of repetition in the *Analects* has also created difficulties in translating Confucius' personality into English. First, the use of parallel structures is common, and naturally involves the repetition of certain words. For whatever reason, almost all English translations of the *LY* attempt to retain such repetitions. For instance:

> LY 17:8 子曰：'由也！女闻六言六蔽矣乎？'对曰：'未也。''居！吾语女。好仁不好学，其蔽也愚；好知不好学，其蔽也荡；好信不好学，其蔽也贼；好直不好学，其蔽也绞；好勇不好学，其蔽也乱；好刚不好学，其蔽也狂。'
>
> Lau: The Master said, 'You, have you heard about the six qualities and the six attendant faults?' 'No.' 'Be seated and I shall tell you. To love benevolence without loving learning is liable to lead to foolishness. To love cleverness without loving learning is liable to lead to deviation from the right path. To love trustworthiness in word without loving learning is liable to lead to harmful behaviour. To love forthrightness without loving learning is liable to lead to intolerance. To love courage without loving learning is liable to lead to insubordination. To love unbending strength without loving learning is liable to lead to indiscipline.' (pp. 144–5)
>
> Watson: The Master said, You (Zilu), have you heard of the six terms and the six flaws attending them? Zilu replied, No, not yet. Sit down, said the Master, and I will tell you. Love of humaneness without love of study invites the flaw of foolishness. Love of understanding without love of study invites the flaw of recklessness. Love of trustworthiness without love of study invites the flaw of injurious behavior. Love of uprightness without love of study invites the flaw of bluntness. Love of bravery without love of study invites the flaw of riotousness. Love of firmness without love of study invites the flaw of irrational action. (p. 122)
>
> My translation: The Master said: 'You, have you heard of the six faults that can accompany the six desirable qualities of character?'—'No.'—'sit down and I will tell you. Without an eagerness

[25] Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA, 1885), p. 72.

> to learn, the love for human-heartedness leads to foolishness, the love for cleverness to an unmoored life, the love for trustworthiness in word to harm, the love for forthrightness to rudeness, the love for courage to unruliness, and the love for unbending strength to wild behaviour.'

We can see that both '不好学' and '其弊' are repeated six times in the original. Because of the succinctness of the classical Chinese, this repetition does not become ponderous. However, once the two phrases are translated into English, they lose their original compactness and rhythm, their syllable-counts double, and the repetition becomes wordy and tiresome. Consequently, the Confucius who speaks with a lilting momentum in classical Chinese becomes nagging in modern English.

What further complicates the problem in this case is the repeated use of '好' in '好仁', '好知', '好信', etc., intended to create a sense of contrast with '好学'. As Lau writes elsewhere, the concept of '学' is close to 'learn', because in the process of 'learning' the focus is on the learner. A learner 'improves' either by acquiring a new skill (or becoming more proficient in an old one) or becoming a morally better person.[26] Watson's use of 'study' is inappropriate because in one's studies the focus is on the subject matter. One who studies acquires new knowledge, but this new knowledge need not make any difference to him as a practical person. But the tricky thing about the English word 'learn' is that once it is used after 'love', 'love of', or 'fond of' in its 'ing' form without an expressed object, it loses its verbal force and becomes a thing, meaning instead 'knowledge you get from reading and studying'. Being well aware of this, Lau has translated '好学' mostly into 'eager to learn' in other passages in the *LY*. However, he has used 'love learning' for '好学' in this passage, where book learning is obviously not the focus, very probably because he wanted to use the same word 'love' for the '好' in '好仁/知/信/直/勇/刚' and '好学' to preserve the sense of contrast in the original. As a consequence, his translation, like Watson's and those of almost all other translators, gives the wrong impression that Confucius wanted to produce 'the pedant who buries his nose in his books' instead of 'the ideal of the practical man given to moral action' – an impression that was definitely not intended by Lau (p. 58).

[26] D. C. Lau, 'Translating Philosophical Works in Classical Chinese – Some Difficulties', in *The Art and Profession of Translation*, edited by T. C. Lai (Hong Kong, 1976), pp. 52–60 (p. 56).

Sometimes repetition occurs without parallel structures. For instance:

LY 11:10 颜渊死，子哭之恸。从者曰：'子恸矣！'曰：'有恸乎？非夫人之为恸而谁为？'

Slingerland: When Yan Hui passed away, the Master cried for him excessively. The disciples reproved him, saying, 'Master, surely you are showing excessive grief!' The Master replied, 'Am I showing excessive grief? Well, for whom would I show excessive grief, if not for this man?' (p. 114)

Ni: When Yan Yuan [Yan Hui] died, the Master bewailed him exceedingly. Those who were around him said, 'Master, you are grieving exceedingly.' 'Am I?' said he. 'If I do not grieve exceedingly for this man, for whom else should I do so?' (p. 265)

Chin: When Yan Hui died, the Master wept with uncontrollable emotion. His followers said, 'Master, you have gone too far.' The Master said, 'Have I? If not for this man, for whom should I show so much sorrow?' (p. 164)

My translation: When Yan Yuan died, the Master was heartbroken and cried bitterly. His followers said, 'Master, you have gone too far.' The Master replied, 'Have I? But if I do not go too far for this person, for whom else should I ever do that?

The word '恸' is repeated four times in this short passage. In Slingerland's version, such repetition is preserved, but the original brevity of the one-syllable word is replaced by a four-to-six-syllable phrase. This 'semantic expansion'[27] has not only led to the impression of a wordier Master, but more importantly, it has somehow diluted the poignancy of the situation. Moreover, the use of 'show' has wrongly emphasized the *exhibition* of grief rather than the actual *experience* of grief. Ni's version is better in that he has avoided the repetition of the third '恸' and refrained from using the word 'show'. Chin's version has avoided any repetition at all, and her translations for both the first and second '恸' are excellent. Both 'uncontrollable emotion' and 'go too far' have wonderfully captured the unusualness of the Master's reactions and hence the depth and spontaneity of his feelings. And the use of 'gone too far' is especially ingenious because of its simplicity and naturalness. But her translation for the last '恸' is inappropriate. Confucius' 'show … sorrow' conflicts with the image of a Master lost in deep grief, and gives the impression that he has suddenly emerged from his grief to become an analytical observer of his own emotions.

[27] Andrew Chesterman, *Memes of Translation: The Spread of Ideas in Translation Theory* (Amsterdam, 2016), pp. 100–1.

Lastly, the use of ‘unit shift’ in the process of translation can also lead to subtle undesirable changes in the image of Confucius. While the Chinese language is paratactic, the English language is hypotactic. Therefore when we translate between the two languages, we often have to shift between different language units – a translation strategy termed ‘unit shift’ by Chesterman.[28] A sentence complete in itself in Chinese often becomes a clause or phrase in English. A series of short sentences heaped together without any connectives is very common in Chinese, and could have very pleasant rhythms. A succession of short loose sentences in English, however, often creates a choppy or, alternatively, monotonous effect.[29] Being aware of this, most *LY* translators have often used the strategy of unit shift. For instance:

> LY 15:17 子曰：‘群居终日，言不及义，好行小慧，难矣哉！’
>
> Lau: The Master said, ‘Men spending all day together merely to indulge themselves in acts of petty cleverness without ever touching on the subject of morality in their conversation are sure to be in difficulty!’[30]
>
> Leys: The Master said: ‘I cannot abide these people who are capable of spending a whole day together in a display of wits without ever hitting upon one single truth.’ (p. 76)
>
> My translation: The Master said: ‘Difficult indeed are those who are capable of spending a whole day together in a display of petty cleverness without ever touching upon what is right.’

Lau’s version, though demonstrating wonderful skills of unit shift, is too compact and periodic and thus too formal compared with the conversational style of the original. Moreover, because of this formality and the sense of interpersonal distance it entails, the force of the Master’s rebuke is also weakened to some extent. As already noted, Confucius in the *LY* is not always gentle and respectful. He can also be sharp-spoken and downright rude. Ley’s version, which also uses unit shift, is much more conversational, where the Master’s scolding is felt more directly. But his translation for ‘难’ is unnecessarily free when a literal version would have worked well, adding an impatient tone not present in the original. In addition, his use of ‘truth’ for ‘义’ is also misleading, making it sound as if Confucius’ focus is searching for what is true, when in fact his focus is on what is the right thing to do.[31]

[28] Chesterman, p. 93.
[29] William Strunk Jr and E. B. White, *Elements of Style* (New York, 2009), p. 25.
[30] D. C. Lau, *The Analects* (a later edition; Hong Kong, 1992), p. 153.
[31] I thank Professor Ni for calling my attention to this point.

The following is another example where unit shift could weaken the condemnatory tone of the Master:

> LY 14:43 原壤夷俟。子曰：‘幼而不孙弟，长而无述焉，老而不死，是为贼。’以杖叩其胫。
>
> Lau: Yuan Rang sat waiting with his legs spread wide. The Master said, ‘To be neither modest nor deferential when young, to have passed on nothing worthwhile when grown up, and to refuse to die when old, that is what I call a pest.’ So saying, the Master tapped him on the shin with his stick. (p. 131)
>
> Huang: Yuan Rang sat with his legs outstretched, waiting. The Master said: ‘When young, you were immodest and disobedient; when grown up, you had nothing to recommend you; when old, you refuse to die. You are indeed a pest!’ And, with his staff, he tapped him on the shank. (p. 150)
>
> My translation: Yuan Rang sat waiting with his legs spread wide. The Master said, ‘As a child, you were devoid of humility and respect for your elders; after you grew up, you did absolutely nothing to recommend yourself; now that you are old, you refuse to die! You are indeed a pest!’ With this, the Master lifted his stick and tapped him on the shin.

In this passage, the original consists of four short sentences comprising a direct and severe scolding of Yuan Rang, an old friend of Confucius’. Lau’s version has tightened these four sentences into one long English sentence, changing each of the first three parallel sentences into an infinitive. But the use of the infinitive here is a bit too formal for the situation, sounding more like an objective analysis rather than an emotionally-charged admonishment. It has not only weakened the directness of the Master’s condemnation, but also fails to convey the intimate tone of addressing an old friend. Huang is one of the few *LY* translators to have wisely refrained from unit shift in this case, and his version is much more effective than Lau’s in maintaining the force of the Master’s scolding, though it does have a slight touch of ‘mechanical symmetry’ that Strunk warns against.[32] I have therefore tried to improve on Huang’s version by varying the structure of the three ‘when’ clauses.

We may conclude by saying that translating Confucius is an extremely sophisticated task that requires the most delicate treatment, for in the *LY* not only is the style the man, but the man is his philosophy. It is a classic case where literature and philosophy meet, and where the translator has

[32] Strunk and White, p. 25.

to constantly juggle the demands of both. To do this, the translator has first of all to realize the necessity of representing Confucius as a personality as well as a thinker. Meanwhile, he or she should be equipped with literary sensibilities, philosophical insight, a deep and thorough understanding of the *Analects* and of Confucius, a grasp of the syntactical differences between English and classical Chinese, and a sensitivity to style and nuances of meaning.

More specifically, this analysis has suggested some principles for future translators. They should strive for a pithy style, but not to the point of being fragmented or unintelligible; they should bring out the voice of Confucius, but not go so far as to make him seem impudent or tactless, nor insist on a natural, conversational style at the cost of distortion of meaning. They should carefully sift through different interpretations to find what makes best sense and also makes the most sensible Confucius; this must be judged according to philological and philosophical evidence. Circumspection is required with difficult terms that seem to defy translation. They should avoid clumsy repetition and use 'unit shift' appropriately.

Apart from these suggestions, there is of course one overarching guideline, and that is to refer to the works of previous translators with both humility and a critical mind. Translators of the *LY* are already doing this, but they tend to borrow most from predecessors who have similar backgrounds and/or approaches to the book. Of the two discernible groups, the 'writer/poets', who are more committed to reproducing style and tone, tend to learn from each other within their small circle. The 'scholar' group, who are more serious about philological accuracy, also tend to refer mainly to each other. This invisible boundary between these two groups needs to be removed. Finally, in learning from our predecessors, blanket judgements should be avoided. For example, although Pound's translation of the *LY* is full of misunderstandings and inaccuracies, sometimes he gets passages right, and when he combines accuracy, concreteness, and economy, his rendering is simply beautiful. Similarly, Lau's translation often misses the original's 'hardy, concrete style',[33] but occasionally does a good job of reproducing the Master's tone as well as his message. In fact, it is precisely in these exceptions that Confucius seems to come truly alive in modern English. They not only confirm our belief that Confucius, in spite of everything, can be translated; they also set the benchmark for what we should aim for in the future.

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[33] Stephen W. Durrant, 'On Translating *Lun yu*', *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews,* 3 (1981), 109–19 (p. 114).