

A comparative study of the two English versions of the *Analects* from the perspective of the Reception Aesthetics

Xueqian Jiang

Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, School of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Chongqing Normal University, Chong Qing city, 401331, China

Abstract: *"The Analects,"* as a compilation of the words and deeds of Confucius and his disciples during the Spring and Autumn Period, stands as one of the classic works of the Confucian school of thought. This work is not only one of China's "four Books", but also occupies an important position in the global culture. The popularity of its numerous English translations reflects its profound influence worldwide. Based on the theory of Reception Aesthetics, this paper analyzes how the English translations by James Legge and Xu Yuanchong meet the expectations of readers in different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, it points out that translation practices grounded in Reception Aesthetics not only enrich the expressive forms of literary works but also provide new perspectives for promoting cross-cultural communication and understanding.

Keywords: *The Analects*; the Reception Aesthetics; readers' expectations; English translation.

1. Introduction

"The Analects," compiled during the early Warring States period, records the words and deeds of Confucius and his disciples. There are 20 articles and 492 chapters in the book, mainly in quotation style, supplemented by narrative style, which succinctly reflect political principles, ethical thoughts, moral concepts, and educational principles of Confucius and Confucianism. Characterized by its concise language and profound meanings, the work is known for its elegant and restrained style, which vividly portrays the characters through simple dialogues and actions. There are numerous English translations of *"The Analects,"* with notable translators including Lin Yutang, Xu Yuanchong, Gu Hongming from China, and James Legge, Arthur Waley from abroad. Among the many English versions, Xu Yuanchong and James Legge are highly esteemed for their unique translation styles and academic values. Xu Yuanchong's translation is renowned for its concise language and its profound understanding. He emphasizes not only linguistic conversion but also the transmission of culture and philosophy, aiming to convey the profound meanings and cultural charm of *"The Analects"* to English readers. Loved by both Chinese and English readers, his translation serves as an important reference for the study of *"The Analects."* James Legge, a British sinologist of the 19th century, aimed for literal and faithful translation, preserving the accuracy and integrity of the original text. Legge's translation concept is to compare with the original word for word, although sometimes there is a deviation in meaning, but this faithful translation method provides valuable research materials for later scholars. Therefore, this paper selects the English versions of Xu Yuanchong, a famous domestic translator, and James Legge, a famous foreign translator, to explore how the two translations meet the readers' expectation.

2. The Reception Aesthetics:

Aesthetic reception, also known as reception theory, originated in the 1960s, spearheaded by German scholar Hans

Robert Jauss. This theory considers the educational and entertainment functions of literary works as part of the reader's reading experience, asserting that the vitality and ultimate completion of literary works depend on reader engagement. Under this theoretical framework, readers are no longer passive recipients of information but active participants in the process of constructing meaning in literary works. The core tenet of aesthetic of reception is that the meaning of literary works is not solely determined by the properties of the works themselves but is realized and manifested through the reader's expectations, experiences, and cultural background during their reading experience.

Reception aesthetic places the reader's reading experience and interpretation at the forefront of literary studies, and emphasizes the reader's role in the creation and generation of meaning in literature. Through this perspective, literary works are no longer viewed as closed, static texts but as open, dynamic communication processes, with their meaning constantly reshaped and completed through reader reception and interpretation. The introduction of this theory provides a new perspective for literary criticism and research, offering profound insights into understanding the interactive relationship between literary works and readers.

3. A comparative study of the two English versions of the *Analects* from the perspective of the Reception Aesthetics:

As a masterpiece of Confucianism, *"the Analects"* is extensive and profound, covering many fields such as ethics, social politics, epistemology and so on. In the ethical and moral level, it takes "ren" (仁) as the core; in the social and political field, it takes "li" (礼) as the criterion; in the epistemology, it advocates the "Doctrine of the Mean" (中庸). *"The Analects"* not only shows Confucius' educational concept, but also embodies his educational method of teaching students in accordance with their aptitude. Based on the reader-centered translation concept of reception aesthetics,

this paper analyzes the sentences about philosophical ideas in "the *Analects*" and compares the translation strategies of the two translators. Take the chapter one as an example:

子曰：学而时习之，不亦说乎？有朋自远方来，不亦乐乎？人不知，而不愠，不亦君子乎？

Is it not a delight, said the Master, to acquire knowledge and put it into practice? Is it not a pleasure to meet friends coming from afar? Is he not an intelligent man, who is carelessly alike of being known or unknown? (Xu Yuanchong, 2011)

The whole work and achievement of the learner, first perfecting his knowledge, then attracting by his fame like-minded individuals, and finally complete in himself.

1. The Master said, "Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?"

2. "Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distant quarters?"

3. "Is he not a man of complete virtue, who feels no discomposure though men may take no note of him?" (James Legge, 1893)

From the translations of the two translators, Mr. Xu Yuanchong's translation closely follows the original text, striving to convey its direct meaning. In comparison, Legge's translation not only faithfully translates the original text but also provides further in-depth background information. Legge elaborates on three stages of successful learning: perfecting one's body of knowledge, attracting others with personal charm, and ultimately achieving self-fulfillment. For Chinese readers, a direct translation is sufficient as they usually have some understanding of the cultural and philosophical background of "The *Analects*." However, for foreign readers unfamiliar with Confucian classics, a simple direct translation may struggle to convey the deeper meanings. Therefore, Legge effectively bridges the cultural gap by adding background information, helping foreign readers gain a deeper understanding of Confucius's teachings. Translation is not just a conversion of language but also a transmission of culture and thought. Legge's translation, through the addition of background information, helps foreign readers better understand Confucius's thoughts and the cultural background of "The *Analects*."

In translating the phrase "学而时习之" from "The *Analects*," Xu Yuanchong and James Legge demonstrate their unique styles and profound understanding of the phrase. Xu Yuanchong translates it as "to acquire knowledge and put it into practice," a direct and concise translation that clearly conveys the act of learning and applying knowledge. It emphasizes that learning is not just about acquiring knowledge but also about putting it into practice. On the other hand, James Legge translates it as "a constant perseverance and application," adding the sense of "持之以恆," meaning "constant perseverance." By adding "a constant perseverance," Legge's translation not only conveys the act of learning but also emphasizes the importance of perseverance and effort in the learning process. This translation is more in line with Western readers' understanding of the learning process, which is seen as a long-term endeavor requiring continuous dedication and effort. Both translators' translations have their merits. Xu Yuanchong's translation is clear and straightforward, while James Legge's translation is more elaborate and profound. Both provide valuable

perspectives for understanding the phrase "学而时习之" in "The *Analects*."

"The *Analects*," as a classic of Confucianism, is profound and rich in philosophical ideas and moral concepts. In the process of cross-cultural communication, accurately conveying its richness and depth of thought is indeed a challenging task. Different translators adopt different translation strategies based on their understanding and the characteristics of their target readership. Xu Yuanchong tends to be faithful to the original content when translating "The *Analects*," striving to maintain the accuracy and integrity of the original meaning. His translation style emphasizes the directness and clarity of the text, allowing readers to intuitively feel the flavor and ideas of the original text. On the other hand, James Legge focuses more on the readers' reading experience and understanding during the translation process. He not only translates the text but also provides rich background knowledge and cultural annotations to help readers better understand the deeper meanings of "The *Analects*." Legge's translation work is not just a conversion of language but also a bridge of culture and thought, allowing Western readers to gain a deeper cultural experience and perspective in their reading. The translation strategies of the two translators have their own emphases, but both reflect a profound respect and understanding of "The *Analects*." Xu's translation allows readers to access the most authentic Confucian thoughts, while Legge's translation provides readers with a broader cultural perspective and richer angles of thought. Through their efforts, we are able to appreciate the charm of "The *Analects*" from different perspectives and understand its timeless wisdom across time and space. For example, in chapter two:

哀公问曰：“何为则民服？”孔子对曰：“举直错诸枉，则民服；举枉错诸直，则民不服。”

When Duke Ai asked how to win the support of the people, the Master replied, "If honest men are employed and dishonest ones discarded, then people will support you. If dishonest men replace the honest, you will lose the support of the people." (Xu Yuanchong, 2011)

How a prince by the right employment of his officers may secure the real submission of his subjects.

The Duke Ai asked, saying, "What should be done in order to secure the submission of the people?" Confucius replied, "Advance the upright and set aside the crooked, then the people will submit. Advance the crooked and set aside the upright, then the people will not submit." (James Legge, 1893)

In this passage, Duke Ai of Lu asks Confucius how to make the people obey, to which Confucius replies wisely. This dialogue not only reflects Confucius's political philosophy but also reveals the fundamental principles of governance. Xu Yuanchong's translation style is concise and clear. He directly translates Confucius's response into modern language, allowing readers to quickly grasp its core ideas. This direct and easy-to-understand translation approach is advantageous for its accessibility, particularly suitable for readers who wish to quickly understand the original meaning. In contrast, James Legge's translation goes beyond literal translation by adding background information about "Duke Ai," the historical figure, and the specific context in which this dialogue occurs. Legge's translation method provides readers with a richer historical and cultural background, helping them better understand the deeper meanings of the dialogue and the social

environment of that time. Through Legge's translation, readers not only learn who Duke Ai was but also understand the historical background in which this dialogue took place. This translation method undoubtedly enhances the depth and readability of the text, allowing readers to gain insights into the social conditions of the time while reading.

When translating classical literary works into English, it's essential to consider the receptiveness and comprehension abilities of readers from different cultural backgrounds. Since these works often contain rich historical and cultural information, direct translation may struggle to convey their profound meanings and cultural essence fully. Therefore, in the process of English translation, considering the readers' level of understanding, it's beneficial to add appropriate background or contextual information to aid better comprehension. By incorporating background or contextual information, readers can gain insights into the historical era, cultural context, and relevant social background of the literary work. This supplementary information helps readers better grasp the cultural elements and deeper meanings embedded in the work. Additionally, annotations or explanations can be provided to clarify any challenging vocabulary, phrases, or cultural metaphors, assisting readers in accurately understanding the work's significance. In summary, considering the readers' comprehension level, adding background or contextual information appropriately during the translation of classical literary works into English is crucial. This practice enhances the readability and comprehension of the work, enabling readers to appreciate its profound cultural significance.

4. Conclusion

"*The Analects*" undoubtedly stands as a gem in classical Chinese literature, holding significant implications for cross-cultural communication in its dissemination abroad. When comparing the translations by Xu Yuanchong and James Legge, we can observe their unique translation styles and focal points. Xu Yuanchong's rendition tends to be direct and concise, making it easier for readers already familiar with the background of "*The Analects*" to grasp its essence and philosophical ideas. His translation allows readers to quickly access the core ideas of it while maintaining a high literary value and academic rigor. In contrast, James Legge's translation places more emphasis on providing comprehensive cultural and historical background information for ordinary Western readers. His translation work goes beyond mere language conversion, incorporating

explanations of the deep cultural meanings of the original text, enabling readers without prior knowledge of "*The Analects*" to understand and appreciate this classic literature smoothly. Therefore, Legge's translation can be seen as a bridge, conveying the philosophical ideas and cultural significance of "*The Analects*" to a wider readers. His translation strategy, through the addition of annotations and background introductions, reduces cultural barriers, enhances the acceptability and accessibility of the literary work. In conclusion, Xu Yuanchong's translation is more suitable for readers seeking a deep understanding of the original intent of "*The Analects*," while James Legge's translation provides valuable introductory resources for Western readers encountering this classic for the first time. Both translations have their merits, contributing to the international dissemination and understanding of "*The Analects*."

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