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A Study of Three English Translations of The Analects from the Perspective of Manipulation Theory: Taking the Translations by James Legge, D. C. Lau, and Roger Ames as Examples

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Abstract: This paper employs Lefevere's theory of manipulation to conduct a comparative study of three English translations of *The Analects* by James Legge, D. C. Lau, and Roger Ames. Starting from the three elements of ideology, poetics, and patronage, it explores how translators are constrained by different historical contexts and choose corresponding translation strategies. The research shows that translation is not only a language transformation but also a product of cultural power and historical context. These three translations are all reasonable rewritings under specific historical backgrounds.

Key words: theory of manipulation; *The Analects*; ideology; poetics; patronage

1. Introduction

As the core classic of Confucian thought, *The Analects* has had more than fifty English translations since the first fragmentary translation appeared in 1691. Its English translation history spans more than three hundred years and bears witness to profound changes in Sino-Western cultural exchange. Among the many translations, those by James Legge, D. C. Lau, and Roger Ames exhibit a historical shift in the translation of *The Analects* from the missionary era to contemporary academic research and further to philosophical dialogue in a postmodern context. They are not merely products of linguistic transfer but also mappings of discursive power and cognitive paradigms in different historical periods. Drawing on Lefevere's manipulation theory, this paper analyzes how the three factors of ideology, poetics, and patronage manipulate translators, interprets the complex constraining mechanisms behind translation activities. It thereby seeks to clarify the nature of translation and its important role in cross-cultural communication.

2. Theoretical Framework: Lefevere's Manipulation Theory

2.1 Core Tenets

The Belgian-American scholar André Lefevere, in his book *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, systematically expounds the core tenets of manipulation theory. Lefevere clearly points out that translation is not a transparent process of linguistic conversion, but an act of rewriting the source text, and this rewriting is invisibly constrained and manipulated by various power relations in the target culture. Manipulation theory consists of three core elements: ideology, poetics, and patronage. These three elements interact and jointly constrain the translator's translation choices. This theory transcends the traditional criterion of "faithfulness" and opens a new perspective for literary translation studies.¹

2.2 Ideology

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Ideology can be defined as “a network of ideas, including the views and opinions held by a certain social group at a particular historical stage, and these views and opinions influence the ways readers and translators approach texts”.²

In Lefevere’s theoretical framework, ideology is not treated as a pejorative term; it refers to the overall cognitive and value system of society, groups, or individuals regarding the world, society, and culture, covering politics, economy, religion, philosophy, and many other aspects. In the field of translation studies, its connotations are more complex, including the dominant social ideology, the translator’s individual ideology, and the patron’s ideology.¹

In the specific process of translation, ideology influences the translator’s understanding of the source text, the choice of translation strategies, and the handling of cultural information. Its influence often occurs imperceptibly, either because the translator’s own values approve of it or because the patron’s will is forcibly imposed. For example, when translating culturally loaded words, translators generally carry out selective interpretation or modification according to their own views or those of the patron, which demonstrates the formative effect of ideology on translation.

2.3 Poetics

In translation studies, poetics refers to the dominant literary concepts, norms, and conventions in the target culture. Its connotations include two main aspects: on the one hand, it is a collection of literary formal elements, such as genre, technique, theme, archetypal characters, situations, and symbols; on the other hand, it is the function of literature in the social system, that is, what role literature should or can play. According to Lefevere, once a poetic form takes shape, it restricts the development of the literary system and pushes it to gain social recognition.¹

Poetics determines which literary works count as good works and can gain recognition. Poetics also affects the functional positioning of literature. Poetics further influences translators in carrying out translation activities; it affects translators’ tendencies in choosing linguistic forms and narrative structures, thereby prompting translators to adjust the form and content of the source text so that it conforms to the existing poetic tradition and thus ensures the acceptability of the translation.¹

2.4 Patronage

Patronage refers to those power organizations or individuals that can promote or hinder translation operations, including religious groups, academic institutions, political parties, government agencies, commercial publishers, media organizations, and individual donors. As representatives of the dominant ideology of the time, they can influence the process of translation activities through economic support, social status, and ideology.¹

Patrons exert several critical influences on translation projects. First, the patron decides whether a translation project is initiated and selects the translator; second, the patron constrains the formulation of translation strategies and the circulation of the translation. By providing funding, resources, and market access, the patron supports translation activity, but may also exert pressure to make the translation conform to the patron’s ideological needs. Such intervention may take the form of explicit directives or imperceptible guidance, but it necessarily leaves traces on the translation.¹

2.5 The Application of Manipulation Theory to the Present Study

Manipulation theory can break through the limitations of traditional linguistic and stylistic comparison, placing the various translations of *The Analects* in their respective historical contexts and examining in detail how the translator’s socio-cultural background, personal

identity and ideology, together with publishing institutions and target readers, jointly influence the translation process and shape the resulting versions.

3. Literature Review: Research on English Translations of *The Analects*

3.1 Reviews and Interpretations of Individual Translations

Scholarship on the English translations of *The Analects* consists mainly of reviews and interpretations of individual translations, and specialized studies remain relatively few.³

Makeham discussed, from a hermeneutical perspective, the issue of hermeneutical orientation in translations and sorted out two core orientations in existing translation practice: orientation toward history and orientation toward the present.⁴ In addition, some studies focus specifically on the English translation of core concepts in *The Analects*, with many articles concentrating on the translation of single concepts such as *li*, *ren*, and *dao*, while the ultimate goal of such discussions remains the restoration of the original philosophical meaning of *The Analects*. Cheang studied the English translations by Huang Jizhong, Ames and Rosemont, Leys, and the Brooks couple and pointed out that each translation is merely the translator's personalized interpretation, bearing a strong personal stamp.⁵ Confucius's original voice is subjected to multiple filters in the process of translation, making truly faithful expression difficult to achieve. Henderson and Slingerland both reviewed the Brooks couple's translation. Henderson pointed out that the "accretion theory" proposed in that translation is innovative.⁶ Slingerland argued that the Brooks couple's interpretation of *The Analects* from a political rather than philosophical angle makes it difficult for readers to approach, and its only value is that it challenges the traditional view of *The Analects* as a work of intellectual synthesis.⁷

3.2 Comparative and Linguistic Approaches

Systematic research on the English translations of *The Analects* began in the 1990s and has accumulated rich results. Wang Yan systematically reviewed forty-three research papers related to *The Analects* and divided them into five categories according to research themes.³ In terms of research perspective, a large number of studies focus on the linguistic level, analyzing lexical choices, syntactic structures, and translation techniques among different translations. G. He analyzed the gains and losses of Arthur Waley's English translation of *The Analects* and discussed the "two rationalities" of translating classics.⁸ Wang Yong introduced and evaluated Richard Lynn's version in terms of the translator's background, translation intention, and the version's characteristics.⁹ Schaberg analyzed the largest number of translations. After studying the versions by Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, Simon Leys, Huang Jichun, D. C. Lau, E. Bruce and A. Taeko Brooks, Raymond Dawson, and David Hinton, he pointed out that the versions differ mostly in translation style, each being addressed to its own specific readership.¹⁰ H. Wang compared the versions of James Legge, Arthur Waley, and D. C. Lau and identified several problems in the Chinese publishing industry's selection of Western sinologists' translations.¹¹ D. Wang selected the translations by James Legge and Gu Hongming for comparative study and extracted the respective translation features of the two versions.¹²

3.3 Studies from Cultural and Extra-Textual Perspectives

In the continuous development of translation studies, a cultural turn has emerged, bringing extra-textual factors into the research field; some researchers have also begun to examine English translations of *The Analects* from external factors. Huang, through comparative textual and case analysis, pointed out that the translation of traditional classics such as *The Analects* generally undergoes two key steps: intralingual translation and interlingual translation.¹³ F. Wang, based on the "fusion of horizons" theory in hermeneutics, took the translator as the interpreting subject and analyzed three translations, noting that the influence of external factors

such as history and culture on translators is the main reason for differences in interpretation among translations.¹⁴ On the basis of analyzing the features of Gu Hongming's translation of *The Analects*, Meng et al. employed cultural adaptation theory to discuss the application of translation strategies.¹⁵

3.4 Research Gap

In terms of the application of manipulation theory, although studies have used this theory to analyze English translations of *The Analects*, they are concentrated on the analysis of a single translation and lack systematic diachronic research on translations from different historical periods. Current research fails to offer a comprehensive explanation of the deeper causes of the differences among the versions and has not uncovered the ideological motivations and cultural positions behind the English translations of *The Analects*.¹⁶

4. Analytical Approach

4.1 Text Selection

The corpus of the present study consists of three complete English translations of *The Analects*: James Legge's version, first published in 1861 as the opening volume of *The Chinese Classics*;¹⁷ D. C. Lau's version, issued by Penguin Books in 1979;¹⁸ and Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont's version, published in 1998 as a self-declared "philosophical translation".¹⁹ Produced respectively in the colonial nineteenth century, the postcolonial 1970s, and the era of globalization and postmodern thought, the three translations span the major stages in the English translation history of *The Analects*. Their translators likewise represent three distinct identities: missionary Sinologist, academic Sinologist, and comparative philosopher, which makes the three versions an appropriate sample for a diachronic comparison from the perspective of manipulation theory.

4.2 Analytical Framework

The analysis is structured around Lefevere's three core dimensions of manipulation: ideology, poetics, and patronage. For each dimension, the study compares how the three translations respond to their respective contextual constraints, and how these constraints manifest in specific translation choices regarding key concepts, stylistic features, and paratextual strategies. The analysis aims to demonstrate that translation differences are not merely individual preferences, but systematic outcomes shaped by overlapping ideological, poetic, and institutional forces.

5. Analysis of Three English Translations of *The Analects* from the Perspective of Manipulation Theory

5.1 The Manipulation of Ideology

(1) Legge: Christian Ideology and Missionary Translation

James Legge's translation was influenced by the Christian ideology of the nineteenth-century colonial period and displays a pronounced tendency to "interpret Confucianism through Christianity." He was a missionary of the London Missionary Society,¹¹ and his task was to spread Christianity. This religious mission necessarily led him to adopt a Christian interpretive strategy in translation. Legge translated *ren* as "virtue",¹⁷ a rendering saturated with Christian moral concepts, reducing the Confucian *ren* to an attainable virtue. This translation strategy stemmed from Legge's desire to prove that Confucianism could serve as an appendage to Christianity, thereby giving cultural legitimacy to his missionary work in China. Legge frequently engaged in comparisons between Chinese and Western religions in his notes, not

with the intention of presenting a complete image of Confucius, but rather treating *The Analects* as evidence for the universality of Christianity. This inevitably led Legge to misunderstand Confucian thought.

(2) Lau: Academic Neutrality and Cultural Equality

Lau's translation, published in 1979 amid growing Sino-Western academic exchange, was deeply influenced by the values of "cultural equality" and "objective neutrality" championed by the academic community, marking a fundamental difference from Legge's missionary stance. His target readers were general English readers and beginning students; therefore, his primary goal was to provide an accurate, fluent, and easily understandable text while maintaining an objectivist academic stance and trying hard to avoid excessive ideological coloring. The most notable example is his translation of *ren* as "benevolence".¹⁸ This rendering avoids the tendency toward religious domestication, is closer to the characteristics of Confucian thought, and can maintain the internal conceptual unity of the text. For some culture-loaded words that are difficult to find equivalents for in English, Lau retained the characteristics of the original culture in the translation while providing necessary background information through notes. This neutral treatment reflects the strategy of introducing Chinese culture to the West in a particular historical period, as well as the ideological constraints of the time.

(3) Ames: Postmodern Philosophy and Cultural Dialogue

Roger Ames's translation is an outstanding representative of philosophical research in the postmodern context. The ideological feature of the 1990s was opposition to Western-centrism, advocacy of cultural diversity, and promotion of cross-cultural dialogue. Ames advocates understanding Chinese thought from within Chinese thought itself and preserving the characteristics of heterogeneous cultures; therefore, he adopts a foreignizing translation strategy. For the translation of *ren*, Ames creatively renders it as "authoritative conduct," which thoroughly overturns the previous tradition of treating *ren* as a static virtue. Ames believes that "goodness" or "benevolence" would mislead Western readers into associating it with a universal moral quality detached from social relations. He emphasizes *ren* as a dynamic, inspiring process of practice and internalizes literary tradition into a non-coercive authority.¹⁶ Behind this rendering is a profound philosophical consideration, namely the refusal to incorporate Confucian thought into the framework of Western philosophy and instead treating it as a distinctive, contextualized Eastern wisdom. In addition, through paratextual strategies such as an introduction of about 60,000 Chinese characters, notes, and appendices, he constructs a framework to explain the uniqueness of Chinese philosophical thought. Ames's translation is, more than a linguistic transfer, a cultural dialogue and philosophical reflection, embodying the value orientation of the postmodern context.

5.2 The Manipulation of Poetics

(1) Legge: Biblical and Victorian Poetics

In terms of poetic norms, Legge's translation was shaped by the nineteenth-century Western tradition of religious texts. Western readers of the time approached Eastern classics in close association with religious texts and favored a solemn, elegant style. To meet such aesthetic expectations, Legge used formal written language and complex subordinate clause structures in his translation, giving *The Analects* a sublime atmosphere similar to the biblical style. Legge also referred to the scholarly conventions of biblical annotation, adding sectional headings to each chapter to summarize its content and providing extensive notes for explanation. However, this poetic norm also had limitations: the language was too obscure and difficult to understand, making the translation rather dull and deterring ordinary readers.

Overall, through poetic manipulation, Legge achieved the goal of incorporating *The Analects* into the Western classical hermeneutical system.¹⁷

(2) Lau: Modern Academic and Readable Poetics

D. C. Lau's translation embodies the poetic norms of twentieth-century academic texts, emphasizing concision and precision, in sharp contrast to Legge's Victorian style. The target readers of this translation are general English readers, so readability became the primary poetic goal. To achieve this goal, Lau adopted modern English expressions, tending to use plain and natural short sentence structures and avoiding elaborate modifications, so that the translation, while retaining the original meaning, better conforms to contemporary readers' comprehension habits. In terms of annotation strategy, Lau also displays a concise and practical tendency. He briefly explains only difficult points and necessary background information in the source text without extended discussion, thus directing readers' attention more toward the text itself. Lau's poetic choices satisfy the academic demand for accuracy while also taking into account general readers' acceptability, reflecting a translation view committed to balancing academic accuracy and public acceptance.⁸

(3) Ames: Postmodern Philosophical and Heterogeneous Poetics

Ames's translation reflects the poetic norms of postmodern philosophical writing, whose core characteristic is heterogeneity. His translation does not simply pursue linguistic equivalence; rather, it aims to conduct a philosophical dialogue through translation itself. He therefore coined new terms and made extensive use of paratext, together constituting a distinctive poetic practice. He translates *dao* as "way-making".¹⁹ The coined term breaks readers' dependence on Western philosophical concepts and allows them to think about the connotations of these core concepts from a completely new, Chinese-style perspective. Unlike Legge's solemnity and Lau's plainness, Ames's translation has a speculative character. His translation is not only a reading text but also creates a space for philosophical thinking for readers, elevating translation to the height of philosophical creation.

5.3 The Manipulation of Patronage

(1) Legge: Religious Patronage

The production and circulation of Legge's translation received financial support from the London Missionary Society, a key organization of nineteenth-century British overseas missions whose principal objective was the global spread of the Christian gospel.^{11, 17} By sponsoring Legge, the Society sought to enable Western missionaries to gain a deep understanding of Chinese culture and thought and thereby to find appropriate missionary methods. This religiously motivated sponsorship oriented Legge's translation toward clergy, requiring its language to be rigorous. The influence of the missionary society helped Legge's translation circulate in the Western world. His translation was included in *The Chinese Classics* series and became a pioneering work in Western Sinology. The patronage system not only provided material security but also steered the direction of his translation ideologically, making him an important constituent of nineteenth-century colonialist sinology.

(2) Lau: Commercial Publishing Patronage

D. C. Lau's translation reflected the characteristics of twentieth-century academic publishing. The fact that this translation achieved such great influence is inseparable from the support of Penguin Books. Penguin Books is known for publishing classics, and its intention was to popularize classic literature among the masses at affordable prices. Penguin Books' involvement gave Lau's translation a new market positioning and channels of circulation, so

he chose a concise and readable language style to cater to ordinary readers' preferences. Constrained by this commercial publishing context, Lau's translation was able to move beyond the academic circle and possessed strong market promotion power and circulation power.¹⁸

(3) Ames: Academic Institutional Patronage

Ames's translation was completed with the backing of professional academic institutions. Having taught for many years in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Hawaii, he carried out his translation work in an academic environment devoted to bringing Chinese philosophy into dialogue with Western philosophy.¹⁹ Unlike Legge's religious sponsorship and Lau's commercial publishing, Ames's translation originated in a relatively pure academic environment. This form of sponsorship freed Ames from having to accommodate market factors or religious constraints, allowing him to implement his philosophical views as he wished. His translation represents a new direction in the translation of Chinese classics: translation is not merely an exchange of languages but a cross-cultural interpretation.

6. Conclusion

The differences among the three English translations of *The Analects* are first caused by major changes in historical context. The nineteenth century was a period of Western colonial expansion, and Legge's translation inevitably carried the color of cultural hegemony. By the 1970s, with the collapse of the colonial system and the emergence of multicultural awareness, Lau's translation displayed a pronounced academic neutrality, indicating the desire at that time to achieve cultural equality and objectively interpret various cultures. From the 1990s onward, in the context of globalization and postmodern thought, Ames's translation placed greater emphasis on cultural self-awareness and philosophical exchange, aiming to integrate Confucian thought, as a living spiritual tradition, into the world philosophical system.

The translator's identity influences the translation strategy chosen. Legge was first a missionary and then a Sinologist; his religious mission determined his translation orientation. D. C. Lau was a pure scholar who took the pursuit of academic truth as his highest goal. Roger Ames is a cross-cultural philosopher focusing on dialogue between different intellectual traditions. These differences in identity cognition are directly reflected in the cultural stance and translation methods of the translations.

There is no sense in which one of these three translations is better or worse than the others; they are simply reasonable adaptations produced at different historical stages and under the influence of different discourses of power. Each translation is a cultural interpretation of *The Analects* carried out by a translator constrained by his own ideology, poetic norms, and patronage system.

Manipulation theory shows that translation does not exist in isolation but is embedded in complex power relations. An analysis of these translations reveals that translation is at once identity construction, cultural integration, and a contest of power. In translating, the translator must resolve not only linguistic problems but also various cultural differences and value conflicts. The study of translation should therefore not be confined to textual comparison; it should situate translation within a broader socio-cultural context and probe the mechanisms of manipulation at work, so as to appreciate the significance of translation in cross-cultural communication.

Translators should clearly recognize that complete objectivity or neutrality is impossible in translation; various translation choices are influenced by many factors, including historical background, personal identity, and academic environment. Therefore, translators should maintain self-awareness. Only in this way can they help promote equal exchange among different civilizations, enhance mutual understanding, and prevent deepening cultural stereotypes in the translation process.

The English translation history of *The Analects* is also a rich history of cultural exchange. Each translation is a key marker of a particular historical stage. Through systematic analysis using manipulation theory, one can not only understand more deeply the cultural connotations contained in these classic translations but also provide valuable guidance for the contemporary dissemination of Chinese culture abroad. In the new era, how to both preserve cultural self-awareness and carry out equal cross-cultural exchange, and how to make China's voice heard well in the tide of globalization, are historical tasks that translation studies must shoulder.

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