

# A Comparative Study of the Translation of “Li” in The Analects from the Perspective of Translator’s Subjectivity

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## Abstract

This paper analyzed the English translations of the key term “Li” in The Analects, comparing the versions by James Legge, Arthur Waley, Ku Hung-Ming and LAU Din Cheuk to explore differences in translation strategies and styles from the perspective of translator’s subjectivity. While Arthur Waley and LAU Din Cheuk tended to favor literal translation, uniformly rendering “Li” as “ritual” or “rites”, James Legge and Ku Hung-Ming adopted a more interpretive approach. However, James Legge didn’t distinguish the different meaning of “Li” and preferred to use words and phrases related to “propriety”. Ku Hung-Ming, in contrast, flexibly used terms like “art”, “civilization”, “courtesy”, etc. based on context to accurately convey the multidimensional meanings of “Li” in The Analects. Waley’s and LAU’s translations were closer to the syntactic form of the original texts, while Legge’s and Ku’s translations were closer to the semantic meaning of the original text, considering cultural disparities and contextual meanings, conveying the essence of Confucian thought. Overall, both translations contributed to the spread of Confucian philosophy, enriching global readers’ understanding of Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** The Analects, “Li”, translator’s subjectivity.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 The Analects

The Analects, or Lun-Yü (论语), is said to be a collection of the teachings of Kong Zi (孔子), or the Latinization “Confucius”, and his disciples (Mou, 2008). Confucius is a philosopher and educator from the Spring and Autumn period. The book was completed in the early Warring States period. It consists of 20 chapters and 492 sections, primarily in the form of sayings with some narrative elements. The Analects reflect the political views, ethical thoughts, moral concepts, and educational principles of Confucius and the Confucian school. The work is characterized by concise and rich language, with some sentences and passages being vivid and expressive. Its main features include a simple and understandable style with profound meaning, an elegant and harmonious tone, and a nuanced and implicit approach that effectively portrays characters through simple dialogues and actions (夏 et al., 2000). Since the Song dynasty, The Analects has

been classified as one of the “Four Books”, becoming an official textbook in ancient schools and a required reading for the imperial examinations (游 et al., 1963).

The Analects has a profound influence on Chinese culture, primarily in the following four aspects: thought and philosophy, education, politics and society, and language and literature. As for thought and philosophy, The Analects established core values of traditional Chinese culture, including benevolence (Ren, “仁”), righteousness (Yi, “义”), propriety (Li, “礼”), wisdom (Zhi, “智”), and trust (Xin, “信”). These values deeply influence the moral standards and behavioral norms of Chinese society. In the aspect of education, The Analects reflected the educational thoughts and methods of Confucius, who emphasize individualized teaching and lifelong learning, and significantly impact both ancient and modern Chinese education systems. In regard to politics and society, concepts from The Analects regarding the governance of the state and society, such as “governing by virtue” (以德治国) and “benevolent governance” (仁政), have greatly influenced the ruling strategies of Chinese leaders throughout history. As for language and literature, the concise and accessible language style of The Analects has made it an important model in Chinese literature and language, greatly affecting subsequent literary creation and the ways of expression in the Chinese language. Overall, The Analects, as the core classic of Confucian thought, has had a profound and lasting impact on various aspects of Chinese culture, society, politics, and education. It is a treasure of our China.

## 1.2 Translators of The Analects

Throughout history, many translators, both Chinese and foreign, have dedicated themselves to translating The Analects, aiming to spread this great work and Chinese culture worldwide. Since the 16th century, The Analects, as a classic of Confucianism, has been translated and disseminated in many Western countries. According to incomplete statistics, there are more than ten English translations, with translators including L. A. Lyall, Ezra Pound, Arthur Waley, Thomas Cleary, James Legge, Ku Hung-Ming, Wang Fulin, and Lin Yutang. To conduct a more detailed comparative study of the English translations, this article selected the translations by James Legge (1861), Arthur Waley (1999), Ku Hung-Ming (1898) and LAU Din Cheuk (2000) for comparative analysis.

James Legge was a 19th-century Christian missionary in Hong Kong and a prominent Scottish sinologist. He was the first to systematically study and translate ancient Chinese classics. Legge's multi-volume works, such as “The Chinese Classics,” “A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms” (Fa-Hien's Travels), “The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism Described and Compared with Christianity,” and “The Chinese Chronicle,” hold significant importance in Western sinology. His translation of The Analects mainly has three main characteristics (刘, 2007): 1) Literal Translation: Legge aimed to adhere closely to the original text's thought patterns and syntactic structures, resulting in a direct translation. 2) Utilization of 19th-century Literary English: Legge's translation employs a formal literary style typical of the 19th century,

characterized by archaic language and expressions. 3) Varied Translation Methods: Legge employed different renderings for certain phrases and expressions, offering multiple interpretations for readers to consider.

Arthur Waley, a noted English Orientalist and Sinologist, was considered one of the world's great Asian scholars. During the first half of the twentieth century, his translations introduced the best of Chinese and Japanese literature and poetry to English-reading audiences. His translations of the classics, *The Analects of Confucius* and *The Way and its Power* (*Tao Te Ching*) introduced Asian philosophical concepts to European and American thinkers. His translation of *The Analects*, though limited in semantic reasonability, has advantages in syntactic reasonability (何, 2005).

Ku Hung-Ming, known as an “eccentric genius of the late Qing dynasty,” was a scholar proficient in both Chinese and Western knowledge. He mastered nine languages, including English, French, German, Latin, Greek, Malay, and Russian. Ku was the first Chinese scholar of the Qing era to be well-versed in Western sciences and languages while also being deeply knowledgeable in Chinese studies. He dedicated himself to promoting Chinese culture, particularly Confucianism, to Western society. He strongly criticized the materialistic civilization and social disorder of Western society, while simultaneously striving to promote the merits of Chinese culture (Jin, 2009). His translation of *The Analects* has the following three main characteristics (董, 2020; 张 & 雷, 2024): 1) Creative Translation: Instead of a strictly faithful rendition of the original text, Ku's translation is characterized by a more creative approach. 2) Emphasis on Coherence and Elegance: Ku prioritized coherence between sentences and employed elegant language patterns in his English rendition. 3) Incorporation of Western References: Ku included quotations from famous Western writers and thinkers such as Goethe, Carlyle, Arnold, and Shakespeare to elucidate certain passages. Additionally, he compared Chinese figures and dynasties mentioned in the text with similar figures and periods in Western history, aiding Western readers with limited knowledge of Chinese culture in better understanding the content of the Confucian classic.

LAU Din Cheuk, a Chinese sinologist and author of the widely read translations of *Tao Te Ching*, *Mencius* and *The Analects*, contributed to the Proper Cantonese pronunciation movement (Baker, 2010). The main approach he used in translation of *The Analects* is literal translation, word by word and sentence by sentence, with some flexibility in certain areas, such as appropriately adjusting word order, providing detailed explanations through paraphrasing, changing sentence structures, altering rhetorical devices, translating in reverse, transliterating, applying literal translations, adding annotations, naturalizing, and softening the tone, among other translation techniques or methods (魏, 2013).

### 1.3 Translator's Subjectivity

The concept of “subjectivity” has been widely debated, particularly in Chinese philosophical

circles during the 1980s, and this discussion has influenced translation studies. In general, subjectivity refers to the traits a subject exhibit when interacting with or acting upon an object, reflecting both initiative and constraints. When applied to translation, subjectivity implies that the translator, regarded as the subject, has the freedom to assert their initiative but is also limited by objective factors, such as the source texts and external circumstances.

There is no single definition of the translator's subjectivity, and different scholars offered various interpretations. This study adopts the definition by 查 & 田 (2003), who described translator's subjectivity as the translator's ability to exercise initiative in the translation process to achieve the purpose of translation while respecting the original text. Subjectivity is manifested not only in the translator's linguistic understanding, interpretation, and creativity, but also in decisions regarding the selection of texts, translation strategies, and methods.

查 & 田 (2003) further argued that, following a philosophical view, the subject is always constrained by the object, meaning that the translator is influenced by both internal and external factors such as social background, cultural differences, and personal ideology. They identified three key aspects of translator's subjectivity: initiative, passivity, and purposiveness. Initiative is the most prominent feature, while passivity forms the foundation for initiative, ensuring that the translation process avoids arbitrariness and maintains objectivity. Purposiveness guides the translator's subjective actions, giving directions and meaning to their initiative. Thus, the expression of subjectivity in translation depends on the passivity and purpose of the source text.

## 1.4 Purpose and Significance of Research

The Analects primarily embodies Confucianism's core ideas of "Ren" (仁) and "Li" (礼), or benevolence and propriety (张, 2015). The former focuses on the ethical ideal while the latter on traditional norms which govern people's behaviors (Shun, 1993). Faced with a society in moral decline where proper rituals and social harmony were crumbling, Confucius believed that restoring the rituals and adhering to them was essential to rectify the situation. Throughout various chapters, he expounded on the multifaceted meanings of "Li" and extensively discussed its significance, emphasizing the importance of ritual in restoring social order and moral integrity (常 & 韩, 2021). Therefore, "Li" in The Analects embodies Chinese traditional culture to certain extent. Exploring the different English translation of "Li" could help us to realize the comprehension of translators when they translating words which contain certain Chinese culture, as well as help us to explore the spread of our Chinese culture all over the world.

This study will focus on the translation of "Li" in The Analects, comparing the four English versions of The Analects by James Legge, Arthur Waley, Ku Hung-Ming and LAU Din Cheuk to find differences between these four translators. The research questions are twofold:

What are the differences in the translations of "Li" in The Analects among four versions?

How translator's subjectivity shaped their translations and affected strategies they adopted in The Analects?

In order to answer the research questions, this study will utilize three methods. Firstly, this article will collect all the translations of "Li" in four versions and analyze the data. Secondly, using contrastive method to compare the four versions of the translation of "Li" in The Analects from the perspective of translator's subjectivity. Thirdly, this study will conduct text analysis, and some examples will demonstrate for detailed comparison.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Studies on the Translation of "Li" in The Analects

As one of the core concepts in The Analects, the translation of "Li" has been studied by numerous scholars domestic and overseas. They utilized different methods from different perspectives, as well as focused on different English versions of The Analects. Some scholars took "Li" as one of the key concepts or culture-loaded terms to discuss, which just regarded the translation of "Li" as part of their research objects (Yang, 2014; 杨, 2017; 孙&许, 2017; Tao, 2018; 姜, 2022; Jie, 2022; Yan & Hu, 2024), while the others focused on the single character "Li", regarding it as their research object, and used different method such as comparison between or among different versions (刘, 2011; 李, 2021; 邓&张, 2022; 沈, 2024), in the perspective of hermeneutics (何, 2015; 孙, 2017; Wang, 2024), and in Eco-translatology (姜, 2022). However, these studies still have some limitations, such as just comparing two or three English versions of The Analects, only choosing parts of sentences that contain the character "Li", and didn't compare the translations of "Li" from the perspective of translator's subjectivity.

### 2.2 Studies on the Translator's Subjectivity in The Analects

Previous research on the translation of The Analects also has concentrated on how the translator's subjectivity is expressed in the translation or examined The Analects through the lens of the translator's subjectivity. For instance, 张 (2023) explored the differences of the translation of culture-loaded terms in The Analects between the version of Ku and Arthur Waley. 杨 (2020) focused on domestication and foreignization strategies to compare the different versions of The Analects from Ku and Roger T. Ames. 杨 (2017) compared two English translations of The Analects to examine how the translator's subjectivity shapes the translation, particularly in terms of the translator's personal background and translation goals. 何 (2015) explored how Arthur Waley's translation of The Analects reflects the translator's subjectivity from a hermeneutic perspective. 姚 (2008) from the connotations of translator's subjectivity, that is translator's passivity and initiative to compare Ku's and Waley's translation of The Analects.

倪 (2005) compared five English versions of The Analects from the comprehension and the expression of the translation process, concluding that the translator's subjectivity is a main reason for the variety of different English versions of The Analects.

However, these studies tended to approach the translator's subjectivity from a broad perspective, without using it as a focused theoretical framework to address specific research questions related to The Analects. As a result, this study aimed to narrow the scope and explore the translation of "Li" in The Analects through the lens of translator's subjectivity, hoping to offer new insights for scholars researching the translation of this text.

### 3 Contrastive Analysis of English Translation of "Li" in The Analects

#### 3.1 The Meaning of "Li" in The Analects

Most scholars believed that the character "礼" (Li) originated from the oracle bone script character "豊". The lower part of the character represents a vessel, while the upper part symbolizes a string of precious jade, signifying "offering beautiful things to the gods." Therefore, the character "礼" was initially closely associated with sacrificial activities, symbolizing the rituals and ceremonies of worship. Over time, with the changes in dynasties and historical evolution, "礼" also came to encompass meanings such as institutional regulations, ceremonial etiquette, and moral cultivation. This article will primarily discuss "礼" in The Analects in terms of external institutional rites and internal moral principles (黄, 2019).

##### 3.1.1 "Li" as Institutional Rites

"Li (礼)", as an external system (commonly referred to as "ritual system"), typically refers to the various regulations and systems within state institutions and social organizations from a macro and holistic perspective. "礼之用，和为贵。"(《论语·学而》)"殷因于夏礼，所损益，可知也；周因于殷礼，所损益，可知也。其或继周者，虽百世，可知也。"(《论语·为政》)The character "礼" in these two sentences possesses the meaning of institutional rites and a kind of system.

##### 3.1.2 "Li" as Moral Principles

"Li (礼)", as an internal concept (often referred to as "moral principles" by later generations), generally pertains to the hierarchical relationships between people in society and the behavioral norms associated with these hierarchies. "君子博学于文，约之以礼，亦可以弗畔矣夫！"(《论语·雍也》)"兴于《诗》，立于礼，成于乐。"(《论语·泰伯》)The character "礼" in these

two sentences means a kind of moral and virtue of a person, referring to self-cultivation of people.

### 3.2 The Translation of “Li” in The Analects

There are 38 sentences from The Analects containing the term “Li” (禮) in total, including 3 sentences from the “Xue’er” Book, 3 sentences from the “Weizheng” Book, 10 sentences from the “Bayi” Book, 1 sentence from the “Liren” Book, 1 sentence from the “Yongye” Book, 1 sentence from the “Shuer” Book, 2 sentences from the “Taibo” Book, 2 sentences from the “Zihan” Book, 2 sentences from the “Xianjin” Book, 1 sentence from the “Yanyuan” Book, 2 sentences from the “Zilu” Book, 1 sentence from the “Xianwen” Book, 2 sentences from the “Weilinggong” Book, 3 sentences from the “Jishi” Book, 3 sentences from the “Yanghuo” Book, and 1 sentence from the “Yaori” Book. All the translations of “Li” in these 38 sentences by four translators were shown in Appendix 1. Table 1, 2, 3 and 4 counted the different translations of “Li” in The Analects in the version of James Legge, Arthur Waley, Ku Hung-Ming and LAU Din Cheuk separately, and the proportion of different translations of “Li” in The Analects from four versions were illustrated in Figure 1, 2, 3, and 4 separately.

<b>Table 1. All the translations of “Li” in The Analects in James Legge’s version.</b>	
Translations of “Li”	Number
(the/a) rule(s) of propriety/proprieties	17
propriety/proprieties	9
ceremony/ceremonies	8
the rules of ceremony	1
the rites of propriety	1
regulations	1
proper	1
total	38

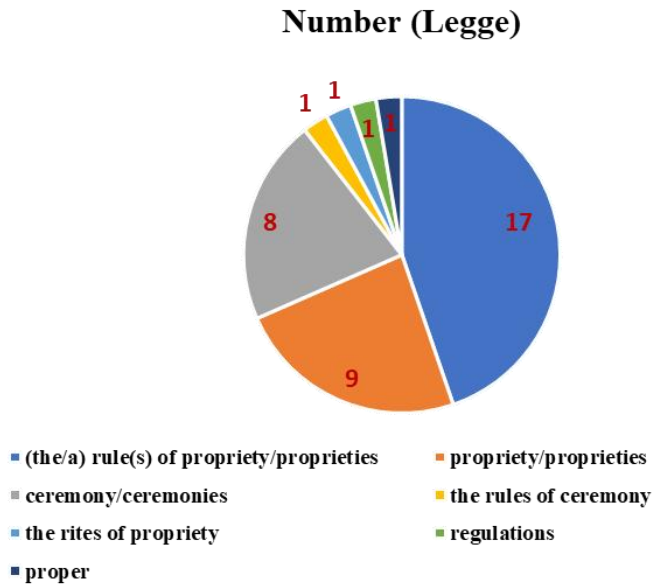


Figure 2. Proportion of different translations of “Li” in The Analects  
in the version of James Legge.

Table 2. All the translations of “Li” in The Analects in Arthur Waley’s version.	
Translations of “Li”	Number
ritual	32
rite(s)	4

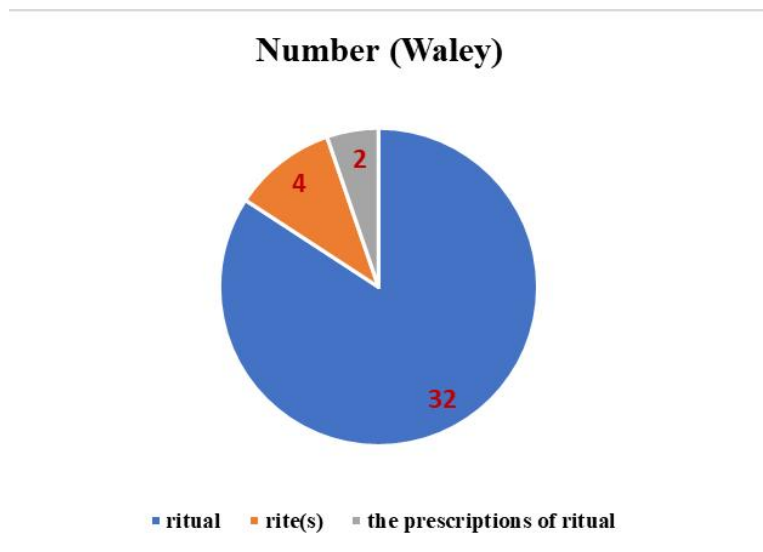


Figure 1. Proportion of different translations of “Li” in The  
Analects in the version of Arthur Waley.



the prescriptions of ritual	2
total	38

<b>Table 3. All the translations of “Li” in The Analects in Ku Hung-Ming’s version.</b>	
Translations of “Li”	Number
(polite/fine) art(s)	14
judgment and (good) taste/sense/modesty/manners	7
courteous/courtesy	2
honor(s)	2
a man of (good) taste/ correct form	2
the ideal of decency and good sense	2
order	1
the usage/rites prescribed by propriety	1
civilization	1
the correct form	1
the principle of the rite	1
real courtesy and good manners/rules of etiquette	1
propriety	1
education and good manners	1
religion	1
total	38

<b>Table 4. All the translations of “Li” in The Analects in LAU Din Cheuk’s version.</b>	
Translations of “Li”	Number
rite(s)	37

the practice of rite	1
total	38

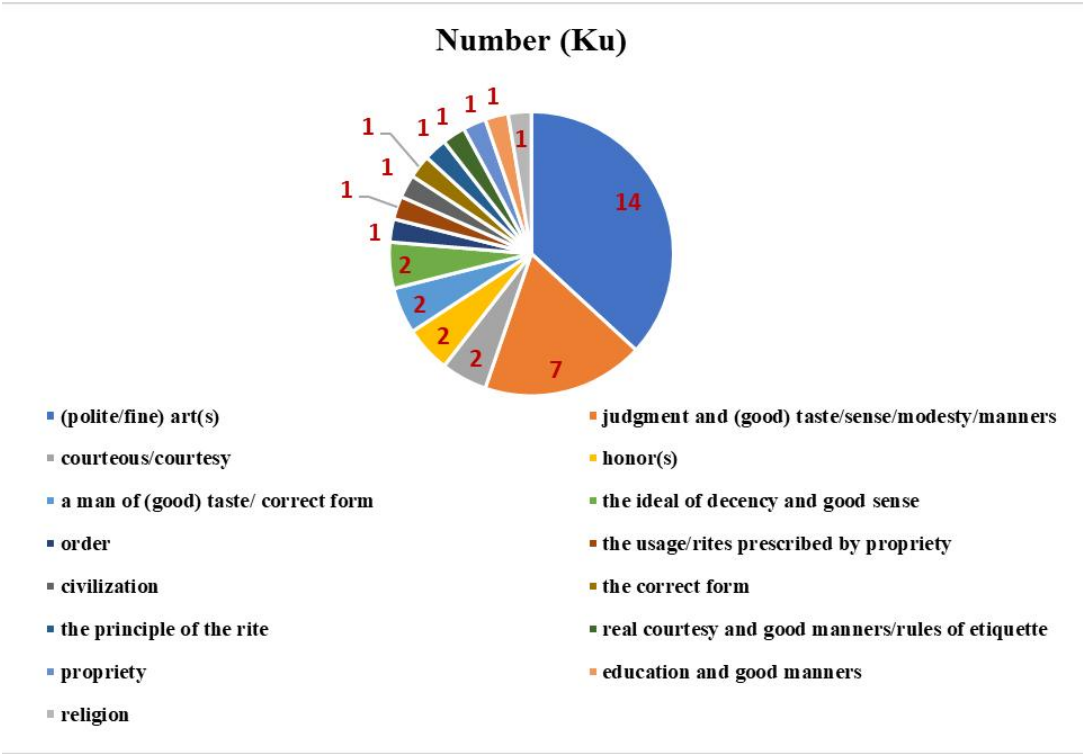


Figure 3. Proportion of different translations of “Li” in The Analects in the version of Ku Hung-Ming.

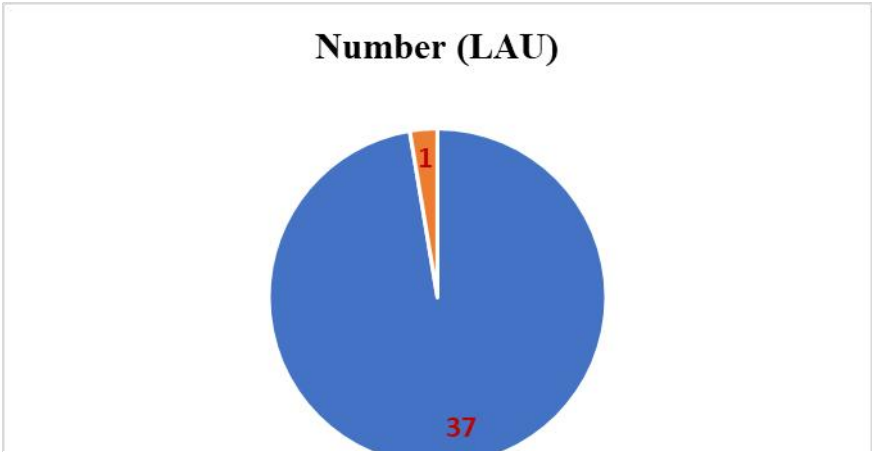


Figure 4. Proportion of different translations of “Li” in The Analects in the version of LAU Din Cheuk.

From these four tables and four figures showed and illustrated above, we can clearly see that compared with Waley's version and LAU's version, Legge and Ku used more diverse English words in translating "Li" in The Analects. In Legge's version, "[the/a] rule(s) of propriety/proprieties" comprised 79% of the total translations; in Waley's version, "ritual" accounted for 84%; in Ku's version, "art(s)" comprised 37% of the total translations, and in LAU's version, "rite(s)" accounted for 97%. These data denoted that significant differences were existed in the four versions of The Analects, meaning that different translators applied different strategies and methods in their translations, showing that the translator's subjectivity played a significant role in the process of translating The Analects.

In order to analyze the details of their different translation strategies and how translator's subjectivity influences their choices, this study then selected 8 sentences and categorized them into the two types mentioned earlier: those representing institutional rituals of "Li" and those representing internal moral cultivation of "Li". Each sentence was then analyzed and compared between the four translators, Legge, Waley, Ku and LAU, in order to demonstrate their different translation strategies and styles.

### 3.2.1 "Li" as Institutional Rites

#### Example 1:

Original text: 礼之用，和为贵。(《论语·学而》)

Legge: In practicing the rules of propriety, a natural ease is to be prized.

Waley: In the usages of ritual it is harmony that is prized.

Ku: In the practice of art, what is valuable is natural spontaneity.

LAU: Of the things brought about by the rites, harmony is the most valuable.

The discussion revolved around the external constraints imposed by "Li" (礼), while its internal purpose is "harmony". According to Confucius, the purpose of implementing "Li" is to pursue social harmony. In this sentence, the meaning of "Li" is a kind of social system.

#### Example 2:

Original text: 人而不仁，如礼何？人而不仁，如乐何？(《论语·八佾》)

Legge: If a man be without the virtues proper to humanity, what has he to do with the rites of propriety? If a man be without the virtues proper to humanity, what has he to do with music?

Waley: A man who is not Good, what can he have to do with ritual? A man who is not Good, what can he have to do with music?

Ku: If a man is without moral character, what good can the use of the fine arts do him? If a man is without moral character, what good can the use of music do him?

LAU: What can a man do with the rites who is not benevolent? What can a man do with music who is not benevolent?

In original text, “Li” (礼) and “Yue” (乐) both represent institutional civilization, whereas “Ren” (仁) embodies the moral standards within people’s hearts, serving as the foundation of humanity. “Yue” is a form of expressing people’s thoughts and emotions, and in ancient times, it was also a part of “Li”. “Li” and “Yue” were both external manifestations. Here, Confucius pointed out that the core and essence of “Li” and “Yue” lie in “Ren”.

From Example 1 and 2 we can find that Legge used “(the rites of) propriety” to translate “Li”, Waley, “ritual”, Ku, “(the fine) art(s)”, and LAU, “rites”. Ku’s translation was a new form and idea in translation of *The Analects*. In explaining and expanding the connotation of “Li”, he regarded “Li” as the “art of conduct” and the “art of activities”. He believed that morality and culture should arise from within rather than from external appearances. The phrase “贤贤易色” (esteeming the virtuous rather than valuing appearance) reflected this idea, emphasizing that true appreciation of virtue should be based on genuine recognition of goodness, not on outward appearances (沈乘风:74). However, Legge’s, Waley’s and LAU’s translation of “Li” were much simpler than Ku.

Legge’s translation was quite formal and maintained a traditional approach, translating “Li” as “propriety”, which kept the focus on formal ritual and outward practices. His translation reflected a more Westernized, systematic view of propriety—where cultural practices were seen as rules to follow for social harmony. Legge did not question or expand the concept but presents it in a straightforward manner. His passivity here was the alignment with the classical Confucian view, where rituals were understood as external rules for maintaining harmony. Legge’s translation aimed at a Western audience, in order to make Confucian principles understandable to a Western audience.

Waley took a more interpretive approach, using “ritual” instead of “propriety”, which brought the concept closer to the idea of ceremonial actions rather than formal rules. He emphasized “harmony”, which aligned with Confucian ideals but in a way that appealed to a broader, perhaps more philosophical understanding of social balance. Waley was less passive than Legge in his interpretation. While still respecting the original meaning, he introduced a more flexible view, suggesting that rituals should promote harmony rather than strict adherence to formal structures. Waley’s choice of “harmony” as the central value points to a purpose beyond mere external

conformity—rituals should lead to an internal sense of peace and balance.

Ku's translation of "Li" as "art" marked a significant shift from traditional interpretations. He elevated "Li" from ritual practice to a broader cultural and moral concept. By using "natural spontaneity", Ku suggested that true propriety is not about following set rules but about expressing inner virtue in a natural way. However, Ku's approach challenged passivity by questioning the rigid, outward forms of ritual. His translation reflected an active rethinking of "Li", moving beyond just the "rules" of behavior to the inner cultivation of virtue that informs external actions. Ku's translation was driven by the purpose of emphasizing self-cultivation and the natural flow of ethical behavior. His understanding of "Li" was much more philosophical, and his translation suggested that ritual and propriety are not merely social obligations but expressions of deeper moral spontaneity.

LAU's translation maintained a balance between the traditional and the interpretive. By using "rites", he kept the focus on the ritualistic aspects of "Li", but his phrase "the things brought about by the rites" suggested that he is aware of the deeper purpose of rituals—promoting harmony and moral values. What's more, LAU's translation was somewhat passive in its alignment with traditional Confucian values, though his emphasis on "harmony" suggested that he views the purpose of rituals as promoting internal moral values rather than simply observing external forms. LAU's translation aimed to clarify the deeper meaning of ritual. He emphasized harmony as the ultimate goal, reflecting a purposeful understanding of "Li" as something that should cultivate both inner and outer balance.

### **Example 3:**

Original text: 道之以德，齐之以礼，有耻且格。（《论语·为政》）

Legge: if they led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good.

Waley: Govern them by moral force, keep order among them by ritual and they will keep their self-respect and come to you of their own accord.

Ku: in government you depend upon the moral sentiment, and maintain order by encouraging education and good manners, the people will have a sense of shame for wrong-doing and moreover, will emulate what is good.

LAU: Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and the will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves.

In the original text, "Li" refers to social norms, the various rules regulating people's behavior and their interactions. Therefore, this statement can be interpreted to mean that when governing a

country, if one uses ritual and moral norms to regulate people's words and actions, the populace will willingly submit to the rulers' governance without harboring dissent. Legge used "the rules of propriety" to represent "social norms" while Waley, "ritual", Ku, "order" and LAU, "rites".

Legge's choice of the term "propriety" emphasized the external and formal aspects of "Li", which aligned with Western understandings of ceremonial norms and etiquette. His translation was quite traditional and simple, reflecting a passive adherence to the Confucian tradition. However, his translation could be a more surface-level translation that mainly focused on "Li" as an outward set of norms, a set of external behavioral norms that shaped people's actions and did not explore the deeper philosophical or emotional connotations of "Li".

Waley's choice shifted the focus from a set of external rules to the broader concept of ritual practices as part of maintaining order and moral behavior. His translation was more interpretive and active, emphasizing "Li" as a practice that not only maintains order but also cultivates internal moral respect and self-restraint.

Ku's translation broadened the scope of "Li" from mere ritual or propriety to a wider set of socially acceptable behaviors and ethical manners. His translation was less passive than Legge's because it associated "Li" with education and moral development, where the people actively cultivate virtue through manners and social behavior rather than just adhering to external rituals. His translation suggested that good governance is about nurturing the moral character of the people through social manners and education, leading to a self-directed pursuit of goodness.

As for LAU, he was similar to Waley, for which he used a term that focuses on ritual practices, but his translation maintained a more formal tone that aligned closely with traditional Confucian thought. His purpose is to highlight how virtue and ritual guide individuals toward moral reform. His translation suggested that while external rituals (rites) play an important role, their ultimate aim is to foster internal moral transformation and self-reformation.

#### **Example 4:**

Original text: 殷因于夏礼，所损益，可知也；周因于殷礼，所损益，可知也。（《论语·为政》）

Legge: The Yin dynasty followed the regulations of the Xia: wherein it took from or added to them may be known. The Zhou dynasty has followed the regulations of Yin: wherein it took from or added to them may be known.

Waley: We know in what ways the Yin modified ritual when they followed upon the Xia. We know in what ways the Zhou modified ritual when they followed upon the Yin.

Ku: The House of Yin adopted the civilization of the Hsia dynasty; what modifications they

made is known. The present Chou dynasty adopted the civilization of the House of Yin.

LAU: The Yin built on the rites of the Hsia. The additions and the abridgements can be known. The Chou built on the rites of the Yin. The additions and the abridgements can be known.

In the original text, “Li” refers to a dynasty’s law and discipline rite. This sentence emphasizes the continuity and evolution of ritual systems, indicating that although the rites may undergo modifications over time and through dynastic changes, their fundamental spirit and principles can be understood through study and inference. As Waley’s and LAU’s translations were the same to the former, this paper will mainly analyze Legge’s and Ku’s translations

Legge used “regulations” to translate “Li”, which highlighted the structured and rule-based nature of “Li”. His translation was relatively neutral, emphasizing the regulatory aspect of “Li” as a set of rules passed down from one dynasty to another. There was little initiative or personal agency in this rendering; the focus was on the continuation and modification of rules. However, by using “regulations”, Legge portrayed “Li” as a static system that is simply adopted or modified by successive dynasties, which did not emphasize the dynamic, adaptive nature of ritual practices.

Ku translated “Li” as “civilization”, a much broader term than “ritual” or “regulations”. This translation suggested that “Li” encompasses not just ritual, but the entire cultural framework of governance and social behavior. This translation presented the dynasties as actively adopting and adapting “Li” in a more comprehensive way. His purpose seemed to be to present “Li” as part of a larger cultural and civilizational framework. The translation implied that adopting and modifying “Li” was a conscious, purposeful decision that impacted the identity of the dynasty as a whole.

In conclusion, Legge used “regulations”, emphasizing “Li” as a formalized system of rules passed down from dynasty to dynasty. This translation highlighted the stability and structure of ceremonial practices; Waley chose “ritual”, emphasizing the performative, adaptable nature of “Li”, with a focus on the modification of ritual practices by each dynasty. His translation conveyed “Li” as a dynamic and evolving tradition; Ku expanded the concept by translating “Li” as “civilization”, highlighting the broader cultural and societal aspects of “Li”. This reflected an understanding of “Li” as not just ritual but as part of a larger civilizational framework; LAU used “rites”, similar to Waley, but focused more on the continuity of ceremonial practices, emphasizing the modifications made by each dynasty to adapt them to their own needs.

From those 4 examples we can find that when translate “Li” as institutional rites, Waley and LAU mainly used “ritual” and “rites” to accord with the same character “Li” in original texts. Legge basically used “(the rules of) propriety” and “regulation”, while Ku had more choices include “(the fine) art(s)”, “order”, and “civilization”. Those differences could display that when translate “Li” in *The Analects*, Waley and LAU tended to be more literal, aiming to closely follow the

original text and reflecting a precise adherence to the original meaning of formal regulations and state ceremonies. However, Legge's and Ku's translation was more interpretive, aiming to capture the essence and spirit of the text and emphasizing the cultural and ceremonial aspects.

### 3.2.2 “Li” as Moral Principles

#### Example 5:

Original text: 居上不宽，为礼不敬，临丧不哀，吾何以观之哉！（《论语·八佾》）

Legge: High station filled without generosity; ceremonies performed without reverence; mourning conducted without sorrow; —wherewith should I contemplate such ways?

Waley: High office filled by men of narrow views, ritual performed without reverence, the forms of mourning observed without grief—these are things I cannot bear to see!

Ku: Possession of power without generosity; courtesy without seriousness, mourning without grief, —I have no desire to look at such a state of things.”

LAU: What can I find worthy of note in a man who is lacking in tolerance when in high position, in reverence when performing the rites and in sorrow when in mourning?

In Example 5, “Li” means politeness and humble attitude. It refers to moral principles rather than regulations or principles.

#### Example 6:

Original text: 君使臣以礼，臣事君以忠。（《论语·八佾》）

Legge: A prince should employ his minister according to the rules of propriety; ministers should serve their prince with faithfulness.

Waley: A ruler in employing his ministers should be guided solely by the prescriptions of ritual. Ministers in serving their ruler, solely by devotion to his cause.

Ku: Let the prince treat his public servant with honor. The public servant must serve the prince, his master, with loyalty.

LAU: The ruler should employ the services of his subjects in accordance with the rites. A subject should serve his ruler by doing his utmost.

The original text of Example 6 emphasizes the mutual relationship and proper conduct between a ruler and his ministers. In this relationship, the ruler should treat his ministers with propriety, showing them respect and courtesy, and granting them the honor and status they deserve.



Meanwhile, the ministers should serve the ruler with loyalty, demonstrating a dedicated and faithful attitude, working diligently for the benefit of the state and the ruler.

In Example 5 and 6, Waley and LAU still used “ritual” and “rite” to translate “Li”, while Legge, “ceremonies” and “the rules of propriety”, Ku, “courtesy” and “honor”. As the article focused on the different translation of “Li”, the following part will analyze Legge’s and Ku’s translation.

In Example 5, Legge translated “Li” as “ceremonies”, which placed emphasis on the external, ritualistic aspects of “Li”. His translation emphasized that merely performing rituals without the underlying sentiment (e.g., reverence) makes them empty and ineffective. However, a certain passivity was existed in this interpretation, as it presented “Li” as something that must be done correctly but did not delve into the internal transformation required for it to be meaningful. “Ceremonies performed without reverence” suggested a passive and mechanical adherence to ritual without understanding or feeling. What’s more, his translation appeared to emphasize the failure of the ceremonies (and thus governance and mourning) because they lacked the sincerity necessary for them to be effective, which focusing on the outward actions that miss the internal purpose, reflecting a critique of superficial ritualism. Meanwhile, Ku translated “Li” as “courtesy”, which highlighted personal initiative in the practice of “Li”. “Courtesy” suggests that “Li” is not just a formal ritual but a means to cultivate respect, seriousness, and ethical behavior in social interactions, and the phrase “I have no desire to look at such a state of things” implies a rejection of superficial behaviors that lack true meaning. For him, “Li” is about genuine engagement with others and one’s own emotions, rather than simply going through the motions of social rituals. This reflected a more internalized, personal understanding of Confucianism.

In Example 6, Ku translated “Li” as “honor”, which emphasized the moral and respectful treatment in the relationship between ruler and subject. The word “honor” shifted the focus slightly away from ritualized rules to a more interpersonal and ethical concept, which involved mutual respect and moral dignity. Ku’s translation was less about following formal rituals and more about the expectation that both parties act according to the moral principles of honor and loyalty. This interpretation of “Li” leaned more toward moral reciprocity and ethical principles than on adherence to external rituals.

### **Example 7:**

Original text: 君子博学于文，约之以礼，亦可以弗畔矣夫！（《论语·雍也》）

Legge: The superior man, extensively studying all learning, and keeping himself under the restraint of the rules of propriety, may thus likewise not overstep what is right.

Waley: A gentle man who is widely versed in letters and at the same time knows how to submit his learning to the restraints of ritual is not likely, I think, to go far wrong.

Ku: A good man who studies extensively into the arts and literature, and directs his studies with judgment and taste, is not likely to get into a wrong track.

LAU: The gentleman widely versed in culture but brought back to essentials by the rites can, I suppose, be relied upon not to turn against what he stood for.

This original text focuses on the relationship between scholarly learning and the moral restraint provided by “Li”, with a particular emphasis on the role of the Junzi (gentleman or superior man). In Ku’s translation, he used “judgment and taste”, which emphasized the initiative of the scholar, suggesting that intellectual pursuit is guided by personal judgment and taste. Besides, the passivity in this translation was minimal, as Ku interpreted “Li” instead of translating the character “Li”. The purpose of his translation was more centered around individual responsibility and personal discernment than adherence to a set of external rules or rituals.

### **Example 8:**

Original text: 非礼勿视，非礼勿听，非礼勿言，非礼勿动。(《论语·颜渊》)

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.

Waley: To look at nothing in defiance of ritual, to listen to nothing in defiance of ritual, to speak of nothing in defiance of ritual, never to stir hand or foot in defiance of ritual.

Ku: Whatsoever things are contrary to the ideal of decency and good sense, do not look upon them. Whatsoever things are contrary to the ideal of decency and good sense, do not listen to them. Whatsoever things are contrary to the ideal of decency and good sense, do not utter them with your mouth. Lastly, let nothing in whatsoever things you do, act or move, be contrary to the ideal of decency and good sense.

LAU: Do not look unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not listen unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not speak unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not move unless it is in accordance with the rites.

The original text of Example 8 stresses the importance of adhering to “Li” in all aspects of one’s behavior—seeing, hearing, speaking, and acting. Ku used the phrase “the ideal of decency and good sense”, which was a departure from the more formal “propriety” or “ritual”. This translation reflected a more general moral and ethical understanding of “Li”, focusing on decency and reasonableness rather than rigid ceremonial rules.

In conclusion, from those 4 examples we can find that Waley and LAU used “ritual” and “rites” almost all the time, while Legge and Ku utilized more flexible and diverse translation. However,

when translated “Li” in *The Analects*, Legge did not distinguish the different meaning of “Li”, just regarded “Li” as code of conduct or etiquette standard. Ku’s version, in contrast, could be seen as an interpretation of the original texts rather than translated them word by word. He considered the whole meaning of the sentence, choosing different words in order to expand or narrow down the meaning of “Li” to help readers comprehend better.

From the 8 examples presented above, we could find that Waley and LAU had a more rigid and formal view of “Li”, focusing on conformity to established rules, while Legge introduced a slight degree of flexibility. However, he did not distinguish the different meaning of “Li” in the original texts. Ku offered the most various and flexible translation of “Li”. He had a deeper understanding of “Li” in different original texts and translated them into English in a clearer way, helping the targeted readers realize the true meaning in *The Analects*.

## 4 Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Analects of Confucius*, a cornerstone of Chinese philosophy and culture, offers profound insights into ethics, education, politics, and society. Translating *The Analects* presented challenges due to the nuanced meanings of key terms such as “Li” (禮). Through a comparative analysis of translations by James Legge, Waley, Ku Hung-Ming and LAU Din Cheuk, it was evident that the four translators had very different versions. That’s because the translator’s subjectivity has influenced their translation process. This was obvious in their cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, creativity, and ability to make judgments.

Waley and LAU tended to maintain a literal approach, translating “Li” as “ritual” and “rites” consistently throughout the text, which was in accordance with the same character “Li” in the original texts, maintaining the same syntactic form as the source texts. Legge and Ku, however, adopted more flexible translation. For Legge, he translated “Li” into “propriety”, “ceremony”, “regulations”, etc. This may because Legge’s main purpose of translation was to introduce Chinese culture and Eastern philosophy and to assist Western missionaries arriving in China in gaining a deeper comprehension of *The Analects*, thereby advancing their noble mission (Yang, 2014). However, he did not distinguish the different meaning of “Li”. In contrast, Ku adopted a more interpretive stance, employing various terms such as “art”, “civilization”, “courtesy”, etc. depending on the context to capture the multifaceted nature of “Li.” Ku’s translation reflected a deeper understanding of *The Analects*, incorporating cultural nuances and contextual meanings to convey the essence of Confucian thought more effectively. Ultimately, both translations contributed to the dissemination of Confucian philosophy and enriched our appreciation of Chinese culture for a global audience.

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## Appendix

Appendix 1. The translations of “Li” in The Analects in four versions.				
Chapter	Legge’s version	Waley’s version	Ku’s version	LAU’s version
Book 1, chapter 12	propriety	ritual	art	rites
Book 1, chapter 13	proper	ritual	judgment and good taste	rite
Book 1, chapter 15	the rules of propriety	ritual	courteous	rites
Book 2, chapter 3	the rules of propriety	ritual	order	rites
Book 2, chapter 5	propriety	ritual	the usage/rites prescribed by propriety	rites
Book 2, chapter 23	regulations	ritual	civilization	rites
Book 3, chapter 3	the rites of propriety	ritual	the fine arts	rites
Book 3, chapter 4	ceremonies	ritual	art	rites
Book 3, chapter 8	ceremonies	ritual	art	the practice of rite
Book 3, chapter 9	ceremonies	ritual	arts	rite
Book 3, chapter 15	a rule of propriety	ritual	the correct form	rite
Book 3, chapter 17	ceremony	ritual	the principle of the rite	rite

Book 3, chapter 18	rules of propriety	ritual	honors	rite
Book 3, chapter 19	the rules of propriety	ritual	honor	rites
Book 3, chapter 22	the rules of propriety	ritual	a man of taste/ correct form	rites
Book 3, chapter 26	ceremonies	ritual	courtesy	rites
Book 4, chapter 13	the rules of propriety	ritual	real courtesy and good manners/rules of etiquette	rites
Book 6, chapter 27	the rules of propriety	ritual	judgment and taste	rites
Book 7, chapter 31	propriety	rites	propriety	rites
Book 8, chapter 2	the rules of propriety	the prescription s of ritual	judgement	rites
Book 8, chapter 8	the rules of propriety	ritual	arts	rites
Book 9, chapter 3	the rules of ceremony	ritual	good taste/correct form	rites
Book 9, chapter 11	propriety	ritual	judgment and taste	rites
Book 11, chapter 1	ceremonies	ritual	arts	rites
Book 11, chapter 26	the rules of propriety	ritual	judgment and modesty	rites
Book 12, chapter 1	propriety	ritual	the ideal of decency and good sense	rites
Book 13, chapter 3	proprieties	rites	arts	rites
Book 13, chapter 4	propriety	ritual	education and	rites



			good manners	
Book 14, chapter 12	rules of propriety	ritual	arts	rites
Book 15, chapter 18	the rules of propriety	ritual	judgment and good sense	rites
Book 15, chapter 33	the rules of propriety	the prescription s of ritual	the ideal of decency and good sense	rites
Book 16, chapter 2	ceremonies	ritual	religion	rites
Book 16, chapter 5	ceremonies	ritual	polite arts	rites
Book 16, chapter 13	the rules of propriety	ritual	arts	rites
Book 17, chapter 11	the rules of propriety	ritual	art	rites
Book 17, chapter 21	propriety	rites	arts	rites
Book 17, chapter 24	propriety	ritual	judgment and manners	rites
Book 20, chapter 3	the rules of propriety	rites	arts	rites