CONCISE WORDS, RICH MEANING: A STUDY OF ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF *JUNZI* IN THE *LUNYU*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the English translations and interpretations of the Confucian concept junzi *君子 in the* Lunyu *論語 (Analects of Confucius), focusing on six prominent translations by scholars such as James Legge, Ku Hung-ming, D.C. Lau, Huang Chi-Chung, Edward Slingerland, and Ames & Rosemont. The study highlights the challenges of translating junzi, a term with rich and evolving meanings, into English. Legge's diverse translations, including "the superior man" and "the scholar," are analyzed for their strengths and weaknesses. The widely accepted translation of* junzi *as "gentleman" is discussed, along with its cultural implications. Ames and Rosemont's innovative use of "exemplary person" is noted for its gender-neutral approach and philosophical depth. The paper concludes that while each translation has its own strengths and weaknesses, they collectively offer valuable insights into conveying Confucian thought to Western readers.*

KEYWORDS:

Confucianism, *Junzi*, *Lunyu*, translation.

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INTRODUCTION

The *Lunyu* 論語 is an ancient Chinese philosophical work comprising a collection of sayings and concepts attributed to the eminent Chinese philosopher Confucius and his contemporaries.[2] It is considered one of the cornerstones of Confucianism and has had a profound influence on Chinese and East Asian culture for centuries. As one of the most extensively read and studied books in China, the *Lunyu* has attracted the attention of numerous translators at home and abroad who have sought to translate it into English since the 17th century.

In the Analects, Confucius and his contemporaries discuss many key concepts, such as *ren* 仁, *yi* 義, *li* 禮, *de* 德, and *xiao* 孝, to convey the ethical and moral ideas, political views, and educational principles of Confucianism. These concise terms have rich meanings and diverse implications. Their accurate translation and interpretation are crucial for understanding the *Lunyu*, reflecting how translators understand the original text and the Confucian thought underlying it, subsequently influencing their target readers' reception and perception of Confucianism in the English-speaking world.

Many scholars, mainly Chinese scholars such as Wang Hui, Zhang Jiwen, and Tao Youlan, have studied the translation of concept words into different English versions. However, they typically focus on numerous examples without delving deeply into a specific word or translation. These scholars often emphasize translation itself, rarely analyzing the translators' explanations of concept words. To help readers better understand the terms' rich meanings, many translators include interpretations in prefaces, footnotes, annotations, and appendixes, which should not be overlooked. As Yang Ping argues, it is unreasonable to translate the concise but profound *Lunyu* without interpretation (2009, 21). Therefore, to conduct a detailed analysis, this paper will focus on English translations and interpretations of the word *junzi* 君子 in six translators' versions for comparative study:

[2] [1] This paper will only provide the Chinese characters for the first occurrence of book titles, disciples' names, Confucian concepts, and other terms. All Chinese characters in this paper are in traditional Chinese script.

Ames, Roger T., and Henry Rosemont, Jr. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*. New York: Ballantine, 1998.

Huang, Chi-Chung. *The Analects of Confucius*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Ku, Hung-ming. *The Analects*. Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh Press, 1898.

Lau, D.C. *Confucius: The Analects*. Second ed., Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1992.

Legge, James. *Confucian Analects*. Shanghai: Chinese Book Company, 1861.

Slingerland, Edward. *Confucius Analects*. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003.

Junzi is a key Confucian concept in the *Lunyu*, whose meaning has evolved over time. Originally meaning "a ruler's son', it refers to men of authority during the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 1045–771 BC) (Lau 1992, xiv). By the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BC), the term had gained a moral dimension, denoting a man of talent and virtue (Huang 1997, 33). In Confucianism, *junzi* represents a moral exemplar adhering to principles like *ren*, *yi*, and *xiao* (Connolly 2013, 270) while still implying high status. Appearing about 107 times in the *Lunyu*, the meaning of *junzi* varies with context, posing challenges for translators.[3]

Of the selected English renditions, two are from the late 19th century (James Legge and Ku Hung-Ming), and four were published in the 1990s and after. Legge and Ku were pioneering Confucian translators in the West and China, respectively, significantly influencing subsequent translations. The modern versions include D. C. Lau's faithful translation, Huang Chichung and Edward Slingerland's versions with alternative explanations, and Ames and Rosemont's "philosophical translation", which reflects their unique understanding of Confucianism and Chinese philosophy. Each translator offers distinct interpretations of *junzi*.

This paper examines how various translators interpret *junzi* and handle its contextual nuances, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of different

[3] Depending on the version of the *Lunyu*, the frequency of *junzi* may vary.

approaches. Chapter One focuses on Legge's version, Chapter Two explores four renditions that translate *junzi* as "gentleman", and the final chapter discusses the innovative translation by Ames and Rosemont.

Legge's Diverse Translations

James Legge's translation of *junzi* stands out as distinctive. He translated this term in over ten ways, such as "man of complete virtue", "the superior man", "the accomplished scholar", and "the person in authority". Among these translations, the most frequent is "the/a superior man", which appears over 60 times. Furthermore, this expression is used in some key passages that define *junzi* from different perspectives. For example:

> Zi Gong asked what constituted the superior man. The Master said, "He acts before he speaks, and afterwards speaks according to his actions."
> (Legge 1861, 2:13)
> 子貢問君子。子曰："先行其言，而後從之。"
> (*Lunyu* 2:13)

Additionally, in passages where Confucius' students, Sima Niu 司馬牛 and Zilu 子路, ask him what constitutes *junzi* (Legge 1861, 12:4, 14:42), Legge also uses the phrase, "the superior man". The disciples inquire about Confucius' understanding of *junzi* without clear contexts, so the translation of this term here may represent the translator's view of the broadest and most compatible definition.

In the *Lunyu*, many passages contrast *junzi* and *xiaoren* 小人, the antonym of *junzi*, providing readers with a more comprehensive understanding of the moral norms and behavioural standards to which *junzi* should adhere. Legge often employs "the/a superior man" to translate *junzi* in these crucial passages, which embody its core definition.[4] For instance:

[4] Even if Legge used the same word to refer to *junzi* in these passages, *xiaoren* would be translated into different expressions, such as "the mean man" (Legge 1861, 15:2), "the small man" (ibid., 15:34) and "the lower people" (ibid., 17:23), which may also reflect Legge's relatively complex translation style when it comes to key concepts.

> The Master said, “The superior man is catholic and not partisan. The mean man is partisan and not catholic.”
> (Legge 1861, 2:14)
> 子曰: “君子周而不比，小人比而不周。”
> (*Lunyu* 2:14)

Where Confucius discusses the inextricable link between the behavior and morality of a *junzi* and his learning, Legge chose “the scholar” to highlight his superior talent and knowledge. Similarly, Legge selected diverse expressions to reflect the variations in *junzi*‘s connotations, which roughly fall into four categories, excluding “the/a superior man”. The first involves using the word “scholar” to suggest the intellectual aspects of *junzi*; the second implies that *junzi* refers to a virtuous person, including “a man of complete virtue”, “a man of superior virtue”, “a virtuous man”, and even “a good man”; the third focuses on the original meaning of *junzi* (an individual of high status, such as “those who in high stations” and “the person in authority”). The final category includes all other expressions that are difficult to classify.

While the distinctions among these categories are clear, Legge’s translations can be confusing. Firstly, Legge's criteria for choosing one category of translations over another are unclear. Specifically, in contexts where specific terms like “the scholar” or “a man in high status” could be used, Legge often chose the vague expression “the superior man”. Another example is that Legge chose the pronunciation of junzi "Chun-tsu" (Legge 1861, 3:7) as the translation only once, which appears in a passage discussing the etiquette of archery competitions. The reason for the choice is puzzling and understanding the pronunciation without explanation would be challenging to those who unfamiliar with Chinese. Secondly, within each category, it is unclear why Legge used subtly different translations for the same term. Phrases like “men with complete virtue” (Legge 1861, 1:1), “men of superior virtue” (ibid., 3:24), “a virtuous man” (ibid., 5:3), and “the man of virtue” (ibid., 6:18) are so similar that distinguishing them seems unnecessary.

Chinese scholar Bian Lihong argues that Legge’s varying translations make it difficult for unfamiliar readers to understand that these expressions correspond to the same Chinese word, *junzi*, preventing them from forming a clear concept of its meaning (2006, 99). While Bian overlooks the fact that

Legge provided annotations and notes to explain the specific meaning of *junzi* and his translation choices, readers not versed in classical Chinese still struggle to match *junzi* with Legge's diverse translations. Additionally, Legge's explanations are inconsistent; for instance, he translated *junzi* as "a student" in his notes but used "the scholar" and "the superior man" in the text (1861, 1:8; 6:25).

Using different expressions to translate *junzi* may hinder readers' comprehensive understanding of the term. However, it is unreasonable to assume readers would not grasp the concept when it is elaborated in further annotations. Legge's version does have limitations still need to be addressed, including the vague criteria for translation choices and occasional inconsistency and inaccuracy, but having limitations does not make Legge any less of a pioneering role in translating the *Lunyu* into English.

"GENTLEMAN": A WIDELY ACCEPTED TRANSLATION

Unlike Legge's complex and varied translations, translators Ku, Lau, Huang, and Slingerland generally use a consistent and uniform translation – "gentleman" – throughout their works. This translation has been widely accepted amongst scholars. William Edward Soothill, a leading sinologist, argued that *junzi* "has much the same meaning as gentleman in the best sense" (1910, 11). Wang Hui claims that "gentleman" is a good translation because both terms underwent similar development of meanings (2001, 119). Etymologically, "gentleman" originated from the Old French "gentilz homme", meaning a noble or well-born man. Over time, it expanded to denote a person of courteous and honorable behavior, regardless of social status. Thus, both *junzi* and gentleman evolved from signifying nobility to emphasizing moral character, which may imply that in different cultures, there are similar social values that highlight the insufficiency of noble status alone for earning admiration; good moral character is essential. The *Lunyu* is dedicated to exploring the moral standards and behavioral norms, illustrating that not all nobles can become *junzi*. Similarly, the apocryphal reply of King James II of England to a lady's petition to elevate her son to the rank of gentleman resonates with this idea: "I could make him a

nobleman, but God Almighty could not make him a gentleman (Philips 1911, 604)."

While "gentleman" is rooted in Western culture and not a perfect equivalent of *junzi*, its use exemplifies effective domestication (Zhang 2009, 48), which means employing a familiar term to explain an unfamiliar concept to target readers. Although a uniform translation is more conducive to helping readers understand key concepts, translators must consider how to address the need to adapt terms to context. In Ku's rendition, despite frequently translating *junzi* as "gentleman", he introduces other words to express *junzi* in about ten passages, emphasising its specific connotation based on particular contexts. For example, when *junzi* retains its original meaning, Ku employs "ruler" as the translation:

> The Duke of Chou, of the reigning house of Confucius's native state, Lu, in his advice to his son and successor, the Duke of Lu, said, "A ruler should not abandon his near relations. He should never give his great ministers cause to complain that they have been deprived of their positions."
> (Ku 1898, 18:10)
>
> 周公謂魯公曰："君子不施其親，不使大臣怨乎不以。"
> (Lunyu 18:10)

In this passage, the Duke of Chou instructs his son, the Duke of Lu, on the methods of governing a country and managing officials. *Junzi* here is the opposite term to *dachen* 大臣, which means "minister". It is not tightly related to virtues or knowledge but is used to mean "ruler". Ku's translation method ensures that his readers accurately understand the specific passage.

However, without annotations or a glossary, Ku's readers cannot discern that "ruler" and "gentleman" refer to the same Chinese concept. Beginners would also struggle to understand the contextual variations of "gentleman" without further interpretation. Therefore, Ku's version falls short of conveying the full semantic range of *junzi* to non-experts.

The modern translators Lau, Huang, and Slingerland all translate junzi as "gentleman", and each addresses the variations in *junzi*'s connotations

differently. Lau's version, while lacking detailed annotations, includes an introduction that briefly explains *junzi* and its development, indicating that it can refer to both moral exemplars and individuals of high status. Readers must discern the specific meaning in context, which can be difficult for those unfamiliar with Chinese. As David Schaberg notes, Lau's work is more suitable for readers with some knowledge of Chinese language and Confucian culture, such as undergraduate Chinese majors (2001, 116).

Huang and Slingerland both include notes at the end of each passage, in which they cite alternative explanations based on ancient Chinese commentaries of the *Lunyu* to help their audience understand the meaning of each chapter. Huang pays particular attention to the changing connotations of the key concepts in different contexts. One such example is the following passage:

> Master Kong replied: "… The gentleman's moral character is wind and the small man's moral character, grass."
> (Huang 1997, 12:19)
>
> 孔子對曰："……君子之德風，小人之德草。"
> (*Lunyu* 12:19)

Huang's annotation reads, "gentleman here refers to the ruler and the small man [to] the common people" (1997, 12:19). Unlike other modern translators, Huang clearly signals the specific meaning of *junzi* (gentleman) in numerous passages. For instance, Lau's version has no annotations, while Slingerland provides a commentary on the meaning of the original text as a whole rather than focusing on key concepts.

Huang and Slingerland both include appendices dedicated to key terms, which are particularly helpful for amateur readers. Slingerland simplifies *junzi*'s meaning, sketching its evolution from "a member of the aristocracy" to "anyone capable of becoming a moral aristocrat" (2003, 238). Huang provides a detailed explanation, categorising *junzi* according to four connotations (1997, 33): "a man of talent and virtue" (15:18), "a member of the nobility or officialdom" (19:10), "the emperor or the prince of a state" (18:10), and "Master Kong" (19:9). Both translators make a great effort to translate and interpret Confucian

key concepts. Their glossaries and notes are helpful tools for understanding the concept words and their varied meanings.

AMES AND ROSEMONT'S VERSION: AN INNOVATIVE TRANSLATION

Ames and Rosemont introduced the innovative term "exemplary persons" in their translation, which is notable for its gender-neutral quality. Traditional renderings like "gentleman" and "the superior man" imply that only males can embody *junzi*, excluding women from its semantic scope and reflecting gender bias. Yet, it is crucial to acknowledge that Confucius and his followers lived in a patriarchal society where women lacked agency, education, and official roles. Thus, while previous translations may not align with modern principles of gender inclusivity, they faithfully reflect the social norms of their historical context.

Ames and Rosemont chose a gender-neutral term to translate *junzi* due to pervasive gender discrimination in Chinese culture, which was reinforced by Confucian traditions (1998, 40). Their intention extends beyond reflecting historical norms; they aim to adapt Confucianism into a cultural resource that can address modern societal issues, including gender prejudice (Ames 2002, 15). They argue that replacing sexist translations can revitalize Confucianism as a living tradition rather than a stagnant doctrine (1998, 40). While somewhat idealistic, this approach may resonate with modern readers and foster greater interest in Confucian ideas.

Ames and Rosemont's translation, subtitled "A philosophical translation", reflects Chinese classical philosophy's profound influence on their translating style, particularly in rendering *junzi*. In their introduction, they discuss their views on the Chinese language and philosophy, contrasting English as a thingful/essential language with Chinese as an eventful/relational language (Ames and Rosemont 1998, 20; Li 2022, 65). They argue that classical Chinese excels in portraying historically specific relationships between things rather than describing the essential nature of things, which is crucial for understanding Confucian concepts – which center on the study of processes and changes – in the *Lunyu* (Ames 2002, 81).

Ames and Rosemont assert that *junzi*, its definition, and criteria evolve with changing relationships and events. They chose "exemplary persons" as a suitable translation for *junzi* because it is a broad and adaptable term without strict standards of "exemplary". This choice accommodates various contexts and encompasses the diverse connotations of *junzi*, aligning with their view of Chinese philosophy. Unlike "gentleman", which carries pre-existing meanings rooted in Western culture, this fresh expression allows readers to develop a new concept of *junzi*.

Ames and Rosemont's translation of key concepts in the *Lunyu* is influenced by their focus on Chinese characters. As Schaberg notes, they argue that classical Chinese functions not just as a spoken language but also as a visual medium (2001, 118). They suggest that Chinese characters, like "the good little boy", are meant to be seen as well as heard (1998, 38). For instance, in Ames and Rosemont's introduction, they analyze the Chinese character jun 君 by its components, defining *junzi* 君子 as one who "oversees" (yin 尹) a community through effective "communication" (kou 口) (1998, 62). However, Schaberg argues that Ames and Rosemont confuse graphic analysis with etymology, which can be unreliable and even misleading (2001, 122). In many cases, such analysis is based on an inference derived from the visual information of the Chinese characters, to the neglect of etymological evidence.

Although Ames' and Rosemont's analysis of Chinese characters is not necessarily convincing, readers benefit from the way they translate *junzi*, inserting Chinese characters and pronunciation in brackets next to the English translation, which makes it easy to search key concept words in the passages and compare English translations with the Chinese original texts.

Ames and Rosemont's version also includes detailed endnotes and a glossary to clarify the diverse meanings of terms. Unlike Huang and Slingerland's footnotes, Ames and Rosemont use endnotes, which may inconvenience readers seeking specific explanations of concept words provided by the translators. Nonetheless, this innovative rendition has been deeply influenced by the translators' unique philosophical and cultural ideas.

CONCLUSION

This paper compares English translations of *junzi* in the *Lunyu* to explore how they use different methods to convey the core of Confucian thought to modern Western readers. Classic Chinese is known for its conciseness, conveying rich meanings with only a few words. The *Lunyu*, a widely studied Confucian classic, shares this characteristic. Explaining Confucian concepts in English is challenging due to their depth.

Legge uses over ten expressions to translate *junzi* according to different contexts. However, his criteria for choosing a particular translation are confusing. Moreover, his inconsistent translations hinder readers from forming a stable concept of *junzi* despite his rich annotations.

"Gentleman" is a widely used translation of *junzi*, with both terms evolving from denoting nobility to moral character. Ku often translates *junzi* as "gentleman" and uses "ruler" when the term refers to individuals of high status. However, this approach fails to clarify that these expressions are all translations of *junzi.* Modern translators Lau, Huang, and Slingerland all employ "gentleman". To address the variation of *junzi*'s meaning, Lau wrote an introduction to explain the development of *junzi*'s connotations. Slingerland's version has footnotes and a glossary to inform readers of *junzi*'s many meanings, while Huang added a detailed appendix dedicated to concept words that offer alternative interpretations.

However, Ames and Rosemont reject the choice of "gentleman" due to its sexist connotations. They aim to adapt Confucianism to contemporary needs and transform Western society. Therefore, they translate *junzi* as "exemplary person", providing Chinese characters and pronunciation, along with further explanations in endnotes, the introduction, and a glossary. Their translation reflects their unique perspective on Chinese philosophy, emphasizing the study of relationships over the nature of the world and highlighting the significance of Chinese characters.

Various translations of *junzi* exhibit unique characteristics, offering imperfect yet insightful interpretations. As a Chinese person immersed in this text, analyzing it through different languages has unexpectedly enriched my

understanding and provided new perspectives. For example, the evolution of the terms "gentleman" and *junzi* reveals to me that Eastern and Western cultures share similar values. Additionally, Ames and Rosemont's translation also makes me consider how Confucian thought, born in a traditional patriarchal society, seeks new paths in the context of modern values advocating equality. Let me conclude with the opening sentence of the *Lunyu*:

> The Master said, "Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals?"
> (Lau 1992, 1:1)

> 子曰："學而時習之，不亦說乎？"
> (*Lunyu* 1:1)

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