

A Study on the Evolution of English Translations and Multidimensional Interpretations of 'Cheng', a Core Concept in the Doctrine of the Mean

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Abstract: This study focuses on the evolution of the concept of 'Cheng' in English translations of the Doctrine of the Mean, conducting a textual analysis and comparative study of seven representative translations from different periods. Using a four-dimensional analytical framework comprising ethics, ontology, cosmology and genesis, the study finds that, in the process of translation into English, the strategies employed for 'Cheng' have gradually shifted from an early, singularly moral dimension towards diverse expressions that take into account both its metaphysical connotations and its dynamic, generative significance, reflecting the translators' deepening understanding of the concept's multi-layered philosophical implications. The differentiated presentation and selection of connotations of the concept of in cross-cultural communication are the result of the interplay of multiple factors, including the translator's subjectivity, the purpose of translation, the needs of the target audience, and the socio-cultural environment, embodying the process of dynamic selection and reconstruction of Confucian philosophical concepts within cross-cultural contexts. This study has deepened our understanding of the core ideas of the Doctrine of the Mean and the comprehensive philosophical system of 'Cheng', providing a refined analytical paradigm for research into the translation of Confucian classics into English. It facilitates in-depth exchange between Chinese and Western philosophy and culture, whilst also offering valuable guidance for the translation of traditional Chinese classics into foreign languages.

Keywords: The Doctrine of the Mean; Cheng; Conceptual Evolution; Sincerity

1. Introduction

As a Confucian classic, the Doctrine of the Mean is counted among the 'Four Books' alongside the Great Learning, the Analects and the Mencius, and occupies a pivotal position within the Confucian philosophical system. Within this system, the concept of 'sincerity' is one of the core categories of Confucian philosophy and serves as a vital cornerstone of the Confucian worldview. In Confucian classics, 'Cheng' is imbued with profound significance; it represents both the highest realm of moral cultivation and the fundamental attribute of the existence of all things in the universe. As Feng Youlan pointed out in *A History of Chinese Philosophy*: '“Cheng” holds an extremely high philosophical status in Confucian thought, its implications permeating personal self-cultivation, social interaction, and the laws governing the operation of heaven, earth and all things.' [1] In today's world of increasingly frequent cross-cultural exchange, the emergence of English translations of The Doctrine of the Mean has opened a window for the world to understand Confucian culture, whilst the translation and evolution of the concept of 'sincerity' in these translations have become a significant manifestation of the collision and fusion of Chinese and Western

cultures. By examining how the four-dimensional connotations of 'Cheng' are presented, omitted or obscured in various English translations, we can gain deep insights into the dynamic changes in Confucian thought during cross-cultural transmission, as well as the multi-layered motivations behind translators' subjective choices in the process of cultural transformation. Consequently, conducting a comparative analysis of translations based on a four-dimensional analytical framework-comprising ethics, ontology, cosmology and genesis-holds significant academic value and practical relevance. With the aid of this multi-layered analytical framework, it is possible to interpret more comprehensively the agency of the translator during the translation process, as well as the multiple and complex constraining factors-such as the target audience and the socio-cultural context of the era-underlying the act of translation.

This study aims to explore in depth the evolution of the concept of 'Cheng' in English translations of *The Doctrine of the Mean*, analyzing its characteristics and the underlying factors driving this evolution. By analyzing various translations, this study reveals the process by which the multi-layered philosophical connotations of 'Cheng' are reconstructed in a cross-cultural context. This research is significant in several respects. Firstly, it contributes to a deeper understanding of *The Doctrine of the Mean* as a Confucian classic, unearthing the comprehensive and multifaceted philosophical implications of the concept of 'Cheng' within the Confucian philosophical system, and providing theoretical support for the transmission and development of Confucian culture. Secondly, by analyzing the evolution of the concept of 'Cheng' in English translations, it offers valuable insights for cultural exchange between China and the West, thereby promoting cross-cultural understanding and mutual learning. Furthermore, this paper evaluates translation phenomena using a four-dimensional framework, thereby enriching the analytical approach to the translation of classical texts into English and providing a viable analytical paradigm for similar research into the translation of Confucian classics. In terms of methodology, this study employs a combination of textual analysis and comparative analysis, selecting seven representative English translations of *The Doctrine of the Mean* for in-depth analysis. These include translations by Ku Hung-ming, James Legge, David Hall and Roger Ames, Pu An-di, Xiu Zhongcheng, Chen Rongjie, and Daniel Gardner. These translations span different historical periods and translation styles, and are of high research value.

2. The Essence of 'Cheng'

The term 'Cheng' appears 25 times in the text of *The Doctrine of the Mean*. Given that the text comprises fewer than 5,000 characters, this frequency of usage is exceptionally high. This single indicator alone demonstrates the importance of 'Cheng' in *The Doctrine of the Mean*[3]. A preliminary comparison of several English translations of the *Doctrine of the Mean* reveals marked differences in the rendering of the term 'Cheng'. These differences stem from variations in the translators' understanding of the concept's depth of meaning and their respective choices regarding what to include or omit in the translation. To explain such differences objectively and systematically, one must go beyond a superficial comparison of the translations and instead conduct a comprehensive analysis of the multi-layered philosophical implications of 'Cheng' and the historical context of its interpretations. To this end, this paper elucidates the full significance of 'Cheng' by distinguishing four dimensions: ethical, ontological, cosmological and generative. On the one hand, it restores the composite connotations inherent in the text of the *Doctrine of the Mean*-which encompasses practical virtue, metaphysical ontology, cosmic order and dynamic creation-and clearly traces the divergences in interpretation of this concept among Confucian scholars throughout history; on the other hand, it establishes a unified set of evaluation criteria, providing a basis for subsequently comparing and assessing the extent to which different translations preserve or obscure the various layers of meaning of 'Cheng', thereby freeing the subsequent analysis of translations from vague and subjective commentary and ensuring that the entire argument is grounded in a solid theoretical foundation.

2.1 The Ethical Dimension

The ethical dimension represents the most fundamental aspect of ‘sincerity’ -one that is closely aligned with people’s daily practices. Its core focus lies on authenticity and sincerity in the realm of personal self-cultivation and interpersonal relationships; it is also the level of meaning first expounded by pre-Qin Confucianism. The Mencius: Li Lou I states that ‘To strive for sincerity is the way of man’, defining ‘striving for sincerity’ as the moral duty that people ought to practise. It requires one to be truthful within one’s heart and to ensure consistency between words and deeds, to be applied across all aspects of human relations, including self-cultivation in solitude, interactions with others, and the governance of the state[4]. Zhu Xi, in his Collected Commentaries on the Four Books, expounds on this, arguing that ‘sincerity’ (Cheng), as a principle of human conduct, serves as the fundamental standard of cultivation for the gentleman in establishing his character, managing his household and governing the state; only through continuous self-discipline and self-cultivation can one preserve the virtue of utmost sincerity within the heart[5].

From the perspective of scholarly divisions, the school of Xunzi retained only the ethical connotations of ‘sincerity’, stripping it of its metaphysical content relating to heaven and earth, and viewing it purely as the psychological foundation for educating the people and adhering to rites and laws; the Lu-Wang School of Mind, likewise centring on the ethical dimension, maintained that ‘sincerity’ is rooted in one’s inner moral intuition, and that all the principles governing the transformations of heaven and earth arise from the manifestation of the human heart’s moral nature[6]. This dimension focuses on moral relations between people and was also the aspect of the concept that early Western translators found easiest to grasp and prioritized in their translations.

2.2 The Ontological Dimension

The ontological dimension constitutes the metaphysical core of ‘sincerity’ (Cheng), signifying that ‘sincerity’ is the objective and constant ultimate basis of existence for all things in the world, existing independently of human subjective consciousness. Zhou Dunyi, in his Tong Shu, states: ‘Sincerity is the foundation of the sage. ‘How great is the Primordial Force of the Creative! It is the source from which all things originate; it is the source of sincerity’ ”, thereby establishing “sincerity” for the first time as the fundamental ontological basis for the generation and continuation of all things in the universe, with all actual existence-be it heaven and earth, or human beings and things-rooted in “sincerity” [7].

Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism further refined this interpretation, equating ‘sincerity’ with objective Heavenly Principle, and holding that the reason all things are true and not illusory lies in ‘sincerity’ at the ontological level; In contrast, the Lu-Wang School of Mind downplayed the objective ontological nature of ‘sincerity’ and denied the existence of a cosmic principle independent of the human heart; these two schools thus formed a significant interpretative divergence within Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism[8]. This layer of meaning possesses purely metaphysical attributes; most translations aimed at the general reader deliberately simplify or obscure this dimension, resulting in a loss of philosophical depth.

2.3 The Cosmological Dimension

The cosmological dimension builds upon the ontological dimension, focusing on elucidating the objective order governing the stable operation of Heaven and Earth, Yin and Yang, the four seasons and all things under the guidance of ‘sincerity’, thereby establishing an intermediary link between ontological truth and human ethics. Zhou Dunyi proposed that ‘The Way of the Supreme Ultimate brings about change, establishing the true nature and destiny of all things; it is through sincerity that this is realized.’ The ontological ‘sincerity’ manifests externally to form a set of constant laws governing the operation of the cosmos; the cyclical interplay of Yin and Yang and the birth and growth of all things all adhere to the order established by ‘sincerity’ [7].

The passage in the Doctrine of the Mean- ‘Sincerity is the Way of Heaven’ - encompasses both ontological and cosmological dimensions: the ‘Way of Heaven’ refers not only to the origin of all things but also to the operational laws governing the cyclical interplay between Heaven and Earth and the communion between Heaven and humanity. Confucianism holds that humanity and the cosmos share the same order of ‘sincerity’ ; by cultivating oneself with utmost sincerity, one can align with the laws governing the operation of Heaven and Earth and realize this communion between Heaven and humanity[3]. Constrained by Christian ideas of creation, 19th-century missionary translators found it difficult to comprehend a cosmic order independent of the divine; most merely touched upon the concepts of Heaven and Earth at a superficial level, failing to fully convey the cosmological implications of ‘sincerity’ .

2.4 The Generative Dimension

The generative dimension highlights the dynamic nature of “sincerity,” distinguishing it from the static existence and order found at the ontological and cosmic levels. At its core, it explains the process of creation and transformation through which all things rely on “sincerity” to grow continuously and renew themselves ceaselessly. The Doctrine of the Mean states, “Sincerity is self-realization,” directly elucidating the essence of generation: the heavens, the earth, all things, and human virtue all rely on the power of inner utmost sincerity to perfect themselves and develop continuously; “sincerity” is an unceasing creative force[3].

The Commentary on the Changes states, “To renew oneself daily is called supreme virtue; to bring forth life ceaselessly is called the ‘Yi’ ,” providing the theoretical foundation for this dimension. Based on this, Zhang Dainian proposed that the core vitality of “sincerity” lies in ceaseless creation; the alternation of the old and the new, as well as the evolution of all things, are all the result of the force of supreme sincerity[8]. In modern and contemporary times, comparative philosophy scholars such as Roger Ames and David Hall have specifically explored this dimension, which had previously been overlooked by Western sinology. They have adopted “creativity” as the core translation to highlight the dynamic generative nature of “Cheng,” but in doing so, they have significantly reduced its ethical, ontological, and cosmological dimensions, resulting in a one-sided interpretation[9].

In summary, “sincerity” (Cheng) in the Doctrine of the Mean is a comprehensive and multi-layered philosophical category that can be broken down into four core principles: ethical self-cultivation, ontological existence, cosmic order, and the generation and transformation of all things. Through successive interpretations and evolutions—from pre-Qin Confucianism to Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism, and on to the context of modern and contemporary translation and exchange between Chinese and Western thought- “sincerity” has consistently upheld its original definition of authenticity and truthfulness, while also being imbued with the intrinsic qualities of dynamic evolution and ceaseless vitality. This concept is not only a key pillar of the Confucian system of thought on the relationship between Heaven and humanity, but also provides a solid theoretical foundation and intellectual depth for the translation of Confucian classics, cross-philosophical dialogue, and the construction of contemporary cultural values.

3. Factors Driving the Evolution of the Concept of 'Cheng'

As a core concept of Confucian thought, 'Cheng' has undergone constant evolution in its meaning through translation and interpretation in the context of Sino-Western cultural exchange. The following analysis examines the factors driving this evolution from three perspectives: the translator’s subjectivity, the purpose of translation and the target audience, and the cultural and social context.

3.1 Factors relating to the translator’s subjectivity

The translator’s intrinsic characteristics—such as their cultural stance, academic background, and long-held translation philosophy—directly determine how they balance the multiple connotations of “Cheng” and choose

the appropriate translation. From a young age, Ku Hung-ming was well-versed in both Eastern and Western cultures and deeply immersed himself in traditional Confucian scholarship; his underlying cultural stance always centered on indigenous Chinese Confucianism. In the preface to his 1906 translation of *The Universal Order or Conduct of Life*, he described his original motivation for the translation: to present the Confucian moral system in its entirety to Western readers, thereby revealing the intrinsic order of self-cultivation inherent in traditional Chinese civilization[10][11]. Rooted in his profound grounding in Chinese classical studies, Ku Hung-ming's understanding of "Cheng" centered on the cultivation of personal character within the context of human relationships. His intrinsic value orientation led him to deliberately emphasize its moral implications; he chose "true to himself" to interpret "Cheng," focusing on how inner morality constrains individual behavior. This translation choice stemmed entirely from his personal, culturally grounded philosophy of translation[3].

James Legge had long been educated by Western missionaries and in classical humanities; his personal academic framework was grounded in Christian virtue ethics, and this internal system of knowledge profoundly influenced his interpretation of Confucian concepts[12]. Constrained by his inherent Western moral framework, he found it difficult to comprehend the essence of the universe apart from the divine. His ingrained cognitive habits led him to adopt the Western moral term "sincerity" as the equivalent of "Cheng," retaining only the meanings related to human ethics. This translation stemmed from the inherent interpretive perspective shaped by his personal academic background[13].

Roger Ames and David Hall have long been deeply engaged in the study of comparative philosophy between China and the West, with process philosophy as their core area of research. This intrinsic academic framework has shaped their interpretive logic regarding Confucian concepts. In the preface to their translation, they state that the focus of their research lies in exploring the process-oriented thought unique to Chinese philosophy, which distinguishes it from Western static ontology[9]. Drawing on their academic background in comparative philosophy, the two scholars have captured the unique, dynamically generated connotations of "Cheng" and have chosen "creativity" as the translation, highlighting the generative and processual attributes of "Cheng" and reflecting the distinctive interpretive approach stemming from their personal academic perspectives[9].

Pu Andi's primary area of research is classical Chinese narrative literature. His long-standing literary research has shaped his reading and translation preferences, which prioritize textual aesthetics over purely metaphysical speculation[14]. Influenced by the intrinsic academic orientation of his own literary research, he does not employ a fixed, uniform translation for "Cheng"; instead, he flexibly adjusts the expression based on the literary context of the text, prioritizing the restoration of the text's literary texture while downplaying complex philosophical ontological interpretations. This diversity in translation methods is a direct reflection of his personal literary research orientation.

Xiu Zhongcheng possesses academic experience in both Chinese and Western traditions; his long-term cross-cultural studies have shaped a translation philosophy characterized by compromise and harmony. In the afterword to his translation, he describes his personal translation preference as balancing Chinese and Western perspectives to avoid excessive bias toward any single cultural system[15]. Based on a principle of compromise, he balances both the ethical dimension and the superficial ontological dimension, simplifying abstruse cosmological and generative concepts and opting for neutral terms such as "true and real" and "realness" to convey only two basic layers of meaning; this makes it difficult to fully capture the cosmological and generative ideas embodied in "Cheng."

Chen Rongjie devoted his entire life to the specialized study of Confucian philosophy. His personal translation philosophy centers on fully restoring the original meaning of ancient philosophical texts, and he advocates for the complete preservation of all the multi-layered connotations of Confucian terminology[16]. Drawing on a

well-established framework of Confucian scholarship, his translation simultaneously addresses the four layers of meaning—ethics, ontology, cosmology, and genesis—using “Cheng” and “sincerity” as the foundational terms, supplemented by numerous footnotes that provide layered explanations of these four philosophical dimensions. Among the seven translators, his version best preserves the full philosophical significance of “Cheng.” Daniel K. Gardner’s personal research focuses on the popularization and dissemination of Confucianism; he has long been explaining classical thought to general readers, and his translation philosophy leans toward accessible and simplified expression [17]. Constrained by this popularization-oriented approach, he retained only the easily understandable ethical dimension, directly omitting all abstract metaphysical content related to ontology, cosmology, and the theory of generation. He simplified the interpretation by using the colloquial term “truthfulness,” resulting in a translation that conveys only the basic moral meaning while losing the metaphysical and cosmogonic core of “Cheng.”

3.2 The Impact of Translational Intent and Readers

The translator’s tendencies to select or omit elements of the four-dimensional connotations of “Cheng” — which are shaped by their personal agency — are further constrained and regulated by two external factors: the purpose of the translation and the target audience. This section analyzes the logic of external influences by comparing the established characteristics of each translation’s target audience with the unified four-dimensional classification criteria outlined earlier, without repeating the discussion of the translator’s personal motivations, thereby avoiding overlap with the content of the previous subsection.

Ku Hung-ming's goal in translation was to promote the complete Confucian moral order to the Western intellectual class; his translations were intended for a group of Western elites with a certain level of humanistic literacy[3]. This audience was familiar with the Western moral discourse system but had no understanding whatsoever of Chinese ontological thought or theories of cosmic transformation. Constrained by these gaps in their understanding, even though Ku Hong-ming himself was well-versed in the four-tiered, comprehensive meaning of “Cheng,” in his translation practice he could only focus on the ethical dimension to complete the textual adaptation, thereby consciously omitting the three layers of abstract philosophical content: ontology, cosmology, and the theory of generation.

James Legge undertook the translation of classical texts through church-sponsored academic programs; his translations were intended for missionaries and early Western sinologists[12][13]. This audience had long interpreted the order of the world through the lens of the Christian divine system and could not accept the notion of a cosmic ontology existing independently of deities or the idea that all things arise spontaneously. Constrained by the audience’s established cognitive framework, James Legge could only translate “Cheng” by selecting ethical dimensions that could be compared with Christian virtues, while all other metaphysical dimensions were deliberately downplayed.

Roger Ames and David Hao adopted the principle of fostering an equal dialogue between Chinese and Western comparative philosophy as the guiding principle of their translation, targeting professional philosophy researchers both in China and abroad[9]. This group possesses theoretical knowledge of process philosophy and is capable of understanding philosophical concepts related to the dynamic evolution of things. Building on the audience’s theoretical foundation, the translators focused on exploring and highlighting the intrinsic value of the generative dimension, while correspondingly simplifying the textual interpretations of traditional ethics, ontology, and cosmology.

Pu Andi’s translation is rooted in his research on classical Chinese literature, and the target audience for his translation consists primarily of literary scholars and literature enthusiasts[14]. This audience places greater emphasis on the literary and aesthetic value of the text and has no need to delve into the metaphysical theories of

Neo-Confucianism; therefore, Pu Andi only selectively extracts the superficial ethical meaning of “Cheng” based on contextual clues, and ontology, cosmology, and the theory of generation are all excluded from the scope of the translation.

Xiu Zhongcheng’s intention was to lower the barrier to reading the Doctrine of the Mean by creating a translation aimed at beginner students of Sinology from cross-cultural backgrounds[15]. Beginner readers need only grasp the basic meaning of the concept of “Cheng” and are not expected to understand the obscure laws governing the workings of the universe or the logic of the creation of all things. To this end, the translator struck a balance by retaining the ethical dimension and accessible ontological meanings while significantly simplifying the cosmological and generative content, thereby balancing the readability of the translation with the preservation of the concepts’ essential form.

Chen Rongjie’s translation serves professional research on Confucianism both domestically and internationally, targeting scholars deeply engaged in the history of Confucian thought[16]. This audience has systematically studied the Song-Ming Neo-Confucian system and is capable of fully interpreting the four layers of content—ethical norms, the ontology of Heavenly Principle, cosmic order, and the cycle of generation and transformation — without encountering cognitive barriers. Consequently, the translator is able to fully restore the full connotations of all four layers and, through annotations, bridge the gaps in philosophical discourse between China and the West.

Daniel K. Gardner aimed to make Confucianism accessible to the general public through his translation, positioning it as a general-interest text for ordinary readers with no background in Eastern philosophy and for college students in general education courses[17]. To accommodate his audience’s level of understanding, the translator omitted all abstract concepts related to ontology, cosmology, and the theory of generation, using only accessible vocabulary to convey the most fundamental ethical meanings.

3.3 Cultural and Social Contextual Factors

The cultural landscapes and dominant social ideologies of China and the West at different historical stages form the overarching external backdrop against which the translator addressed the four philosophical dimensions of “Cheng.” The translator’s decisions regarding which ethical, ontological, cosmological, and generative concepts to include or exclude would inevitably align, even unconsciously, with the cultural and intellectual climate of the era. Modern Sino-Western exchanges took place during a period when Western culture held the dominant discourse. James Legge operated within a social context marked by the flourishing of missionary Sinology. At that time, Western academia generally relied on the Christian theological framework to interpret foreign Eastern thought, and society as a whole did not accept concepts of a cosmic ontology or natural generation that were detached from divine sovereignty. Swept up by the cultural environment of his era, James Legge could only anchor his translation of “Cheng” to the ethical dimension that aligned with Christian virtue, setting aside the ontological and cosmological philosophical implications inherent in the Doctrine of the Mean[12][13]. Later, against the backdrop of the cultural confrontation between China and the West during the modern era, indigenous scholars began to actively defend the values of traditional Chinese culture, and Ku Hong-ming’s translation practice was a concrete manifestation of this social trend. At that time, Western society generally disparaged the moral system of Chinese civilization; the historical context prompted Ku Hong-ming to deliberately emphasize the ethical and self-cultivating qualities of “Cheng,” relying on its moral dimension to convey the unique values of indigenous culture, without exporting the deeper metaphysical connotations of “Cheng” to the outside world[3][10]. As globalization deepened in the modern era, academic exchanges between China and the West gradually evolved into a dialogue of equals. Western scholars began to reflect on the one-sided interpretations of Confucian concepts found in traditional missionary translations. Roger Ames, David Hao, capitalizing on this more open cross-cultural research environment, broke free from the entrenched paradigm of a singular moral interpretation. They delved deeply into the generative

implications of “Cheng” and employed “creativity” in their translation, thereby seeking a point of dialogue between Chinese and Western process philosophy and rectifying the long-standing obscuring of its dynamic and creative dimensions in past translations[9].

The evolution of mainstream social values across different historical periods has also continuously influenced the emphasis translators place on the four dimensions of “Cheng.” In modern Western society, which championed individualistic moral principles, most mainstream translations at the time limited their interpretation of “Cheng” to the ethical dimension of individual conduct. As modern academia began to reflect on the limitations of individualistic values, greater attention was paid to the communal order and the concept of the harmonious coexistence of Heaven and humanity inherent in Confucianism. The academic environment in which Chen Rongjie operated emphasized the holistic social value and comprehensive philosophical system of Confucian thought. The prevailing trends in social research prompted him to incorporate all dimensions-ethics, ontology, cosmology, and genesis-into his translation, thereby fully elucidating the multi-layered value of “Cheng” for individual self-cultivation, cosmic order, and social stability[16]. From the perspective of the laws governing the cross-cultural transfer of knowledge, translation is essentially the reconstruction of philosophical knowledge within a heterogeneous context; translators inevitably project the overall understanding of Confucianism held by the society of their time onto the translation process. Daniel K. Gardner operates within a contemporary sociocultural environment characterized by pluralism and coexistence. Today, the general public’s exposure to traditional culture largely relies on popular general-interest books, and society places greater emphasis on the popular dissemination of Confucian thought. Consequently, this translation strips away the abstruse theories related to ontology, cosmology, and genesis, retaining only the easily understandable ethical implications, thereby aligning with the current characteristics of knowledge reception at the popular level[17].

In summary, the diverse forms of English translations for “Cheng” result from the interplay and combined influence of three factors: the translator’s intrinsic subjectivity, the translation’s purpose and the objective needs of the target audience, and the broader cultural and social context. These three layers of influence operate sequentially from the innermost to the outermost, leading to the selective retention, simplification, or obscuring of the four philosophical dimensions of “Cheng” across various translations, thereby continuously driving the interpretive renewal and dynamic evolution of this core Confucian concept within cross-cultural contexts.

4. Conclusion

This study conducts a systematic investigation into the patterns of evolution in the English translation of “Cheng” -a core concept of the Doctrine of the Mean-using a four-dimensional framework of philosophical connotations-namely, “ethics, ontology, cosmology, and genesis” -as its central evaluative framework, and performs a comparative analysis of seven representative English translations of the Doctrine of the Mean from different historical periods. The study systematically examines how the multiple philosophical dimensions of “Cheng” are presented, selected, or obscured in various translations, thereby clarifying the evolutionary characteristics and underlying patterns of its translation into English. Viewing the overall history of translation and interpretation, early translations largely confined their interpretation of “Cheng” to a single ethical dimension, employing common moral terminology to render the concept, thereby obscuring its core metaphysical dimensions-such as ontology, cosmology, and genesis; In contrast, modern and contemporary translations have gradually transcended the limitations of such narrow interpretations, beginning to explore the deeper values of “Cheng” -including its dynamic creativity, cosmic order, and ontological reality. Translation approaches have become increasingly diverse and multidimensional, vividly reflecting the deepening understanding and increasingly comprehensive interpretation of the Confucian concept of “Cheng” among Western scholars and translators.

Through a multi-level comparative analysis, it becomes evident that the varied renderings of the concept of “Cheng” in English translations are not attributable to a single factor, but rather result from the interplay of three factors: the translator’s subjectivity, the purpose of translation and audience needs, and the sociocultural context. Among these, subjective factors-such as the translator’s academic background, cultural stance, and translation philosophy-determine the translator’s core preferences regarding the four-dimensional connotations of “Cheng” and constitute the intrinsic root of differences in translation approaches; Translation objectives, combined with the cognitive characteristics and reading needs of the target audience, form significant external constraints that define the depth of presentation and the boundaries of dissemination regarding the philosophical connotations of “Cheng” in the translations; meanwhile, the cultural landscapes, social ideologies, and value orientations of both China and the West across different historical periods constitute the macro-historical context, driving the overall iteration and evolution of the paradigms for translating “Cheng” into English. These three factors, progressing from the internal to the external in successive layers, have collectively shaped the forms of English translation for the concept of “Cheng” across different periods. This has enabled the dynamic interpretation and adaptive development of this core Confucian concept in cross-cultural communication, preserving the essence of traditional philosophy while meeting the cross-cultural understanding needs of different eras and audiences.

This study holds both theoretical value and practical significance. On the theoretical level, it moves beyond the academic community’s previous vague categorization of the concept of “Cheng” by constructing a refined four-dimensional analytical framework, clarifying the multi-layered significance of “Cheng” in terms of ethical practice, ontological existence, cosmic order, and dynamic generation. It addresses the shortcomings of existing research-which tends to emphasize moral interpretations while neglecting metaphysical and cosmological interpretations-further deepening our understanding of the Doctrine of the Mean and the core Confucian ideological system, and enriching systematic research on the English translation of Confucian classics. At the practical level, this study clearly reveals the causes of conceptual loss and one-sided interpretations in the translation of classical texts. It identifies the combined influence of the translator’s subjective characteristics, the audience’s communication needs, and the contemporary cultural context on the translation and dissemination of classical works, providing concrete guidance for future translations of Confucian classics and concepts of traditional Chinese philosophy into English. It underscores that translators must balance the philosophical integrity of concepts with the appropriateness of cross-cultural communication, avoid the one-dimensionality of narrow interpretations, and ensure the accurate, comprehensive, and effective dissemination of traditional Chinese culture to the international community.

At the same time, this study has certain limitations. It selected only seven representative English translations of the Doctrine of the Mean as its research corpus, failing to cover all extant English translations. The sample size is thus limited, making it difficult to fully capture all translation characteristics across different translators and eras, which to some extent affects the comprehensiveness of the research findings. Furthermore, this paper primarily relies on textual comparison and qualitative analysis; it has not incorporated quantitative data to conduct more refined empirical research, leaving room for further exploration regarding the patterns of evolution in the translation of the concept of “Cheng.”

To address the above shortcomings, future research could further expand the research corpus by incorporating more translations of the Doctrine of the Mean from different historical periods, countries, and translation approaches, thereby broadening the coverage of the research sample and enhancing the generalizability and comprehensiveness of the research conclusions. At the same time, research methods such as quantitative statistical analysis and data comparison based on corpora could be employed to conduct quantitative analyses of the distribution of translations for “Cheng,” the degree to which its connotations are preserved, and the characteristics of its semantic evolution, thereby integrating qualitative and quantitative research. Furthermore, the scope of the

research could be expanded to focus on the evolution of English translations of other core Confucian philosophical concepts, exploring the patterns of cross-cultural transmission and the mechanisms of co-evolution among traditional philosophical concepts. This would provide a more comprehensive revelation of the complete trajectory of the translation, dissemination, and reconstruction of traditional Chinese thought overseas, thereby offering more robust theoretical support and practical insights for the international dissemination of China's outstanding traditional culture.

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