

The Evolution of the English Translation of the Core Concept "Tian" in the *Analects* and an Analysis of Translator Motivation

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Abstract: Confucianism is an important part of Chinese culture, and the *Analects*, as a Confucian classic, is central to understanding it. The evolution of the English translation of the core concept "Tian" (Heaven) in the *Analects* reflects the changing Western understanding of Confucian culture. Taking the English translations of the *Analects* by seven translators, including James Legge, Ku Hung-ming, and Arthur Waley, as the research subject, this paper analyzes the evolution of the English translation of "Tian," a core Confucian concept, from religious interpretation to de-religious and philosophical interpretation. The study finds that translator motivation and national orientation influence translators' translation strategies, and that the evolution of the English translation of "Tian" reflects a paradigm shift in Western Sinological research and the interplay of translator subjectivity. These findings offer implications for the cross-cultural dissemination of the Confucian classics in the context of the contemporary "going global" of Chinese culture.

Keywords: The *Analects*; Tian (Heaven); English translation; Translator motivation

1. Introduction

Confucianism is an important part of Chinese culture. As the guiding ideology adopted by successive feudal rulers for more than two thousand years, it has left a deep imprint on the Chinese mind, and Confucianism has long been closely bound to the Chinese nation. Whether in response to the current strategy of promoting Chinese culture to "go global" or in the Western world's desire to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture, Confucianism is a landmark that cannot be bypassed; to understand Chinese culture in depth, one must understand Confucian culture.

Throughout China's long history, Confucian culture has continuously enriched and transformed itself with the development of the times, demonstrating its vigorous vitality. This vitality is manifested not only in the adaptability of Confucian thought to the changes of the times but also in the continuous enrichment of its translated versions. The translation and dissemination of the Confucian classics have a long history. As early as more than four hundred years ago, during the translation boom of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, missionaries in China used the *Analects* and other Confucian classics as reference books for learning Chinese culture and understanding the Chinese spirit, and translated them into foreign languages. Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) was the first to translate the *Four Books* into Latin, opening a four-hundred-year history of translating the *Analects* into foreign languages, although his translation was unfortunately not published at the time (Liu, 2020, p. 15).

The translation and dissemination of the Confucian classics constitute not only cross-cultural exchange but also a window through which Eastern and Western peoples understand each other. With the continuous exchanges between East and West, the Western world's understanding of Confucian thought has been changing, and this change is manifested in the understanding of the core concepts of Confucian thought. For instance, new English translations of the *Analects*, a classic of Confucian thought, have kept appearing, and its core concepts have been interpreted and reconstructed differently in different English versions.

This paper selects English translations of the *Analects* by different translators at home and abroad since the Opium War, examines the evolution of the core Confucian concept "Tian" across different translations of the *Analects*, and analyzes the causes of this evolution from the perspective of translator subjectivity.

2. The Core Concept "Tian" in the *Analects* and Its English Translation

2.1 The Meaning of "Tian" in the *Analects*

In the *Analects*, the character "Tian" (天) appears 49 times in total: 19 times on its own and 30 times as part of compound words. Specifically, "Tianxia" (天下, "all under Heaven") appears 23 times, "Tianming" (天命, "the Mandate of Heaven") 3 times, "Tianzi" (天子, "the Son of Heaven") 2 times, and "Tiandao" (天道, "the Way of Heaven") and "Tianlu" (天禄, "Heavenly blessings") once each (Yang, 1980, p. 233).

The interpretation of "Tian" in the *Analects* must proceed from its cultural status, historical evolution, and internal classification within the text. As the core concept of the Confucian "learning of Heaven and humanity," "Tian" runs through the fields of philosophy, religion, and ethics, and its connotations are complex and multidimensional. Etymologically, the *Shuowen Jiezi* (*Explanation of Script and Elucidation of Characters*) glosses "Tian" as "the top, the highest above," formed by combining "one" (一) and "great" (大) to symbolize the supreme existence above one's head, and it is the key to understanding Confucianism.

The intellectual origins of "Tian" can be traced back to high antiquity. The *Canon of Yao* and the *Canon of Shun* record that ancient rulers offered sacrifices to Heaven in the name of the "Son of Heaven," borrowing the authority of the celestial deity to consolidate their rule. In the *Book of Documents*, the phrase "the august Heaven cherishes and commands" reflects the "theory of the Mandate of Heaven," which regards "Tian" as the supreme lord of nature and society. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the Daoist *Daodejing* declared that "Heaven and Earth are not benevolent; they treat the myriad things as straw dogs," treating "Tian" as a personal subject endowed with will. Confucius, by contrast, inherited the Western Zhou conception of the Mandate of Heaven and regarded "Tian" as the "sovereign Heaven," as in "he who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray," emphasizing its ultimate determining power over society and history, while the *Doctrine of the Mean* viewed "Tian" as the source of ethics and morality. From the Han and Tang dynasties to the Song and Ming periods, Dong Zhongshu of the Western Han proposed the theory of the "interaction between Heaven and humanity," using theology to strengthen the Mandate of Heaven's justification of royal authority. In Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi philosophized "Tian" into "principle" (*li*), stating that "principle is the substance of Heaven," highlighting its significance as both the law of the cosmos and the source of morality.

Within the text of the *Analects*, the core expressions of "Tian" can be divided into three categories. The natural Heaven (*ziran zhi tian*) refers to the natural space or phenomena opposed to "Earth," as in "Does Heaven speak? The four seasons proceed and the myriad things are born," symbolizing the natural order. The sovereign Heaven (*zhuzai zhi tian*) possesses an independent personality and will and governs the fate of all things, as in "Heaven is about to use the Master as a wooden-tongued bell," reflecting the religious coloring of Heaven's bestowal of a mission. The moral Heaven (*yili zhi tian*) serves as the source of ethics and morality, as in "at fifty, I knew the Mandate of Heaven," pointing to the moral principles that human life should follow.

2.2 English Translations of "Tian" in Different Versions of the *Analects*

This paper selects representative English translations of the *Analects* from different periods since the Opium War, summarizes the translation strategies adopted and the respective translation features of different translators, and analyzes the translators' translation behavior in subsequent sections. Altogether, seven scholars' translations are examined: those of James Legge (1861), Ku Hung-ming (1898), Arthur Waley (1938), Chan Wing-tsit (1963), D. C. Lau (1979), Roger T. Ames (1998), and Annping Chin (2014). Each of these translations has its own distinctive features and is highly representative. According to the translators' understanding of the meaning of "Tian" in different eras, the English translation of "Tian" in the *Analects* can be roughly divided into three stages:

1. The Legge Period: The Establishment of Theological Equivalence (the 19th Century)

Legge's translation (1861) tends to preserve the style of the original text, making frequent use of literal translation and attaching importance to retaining the original sentence structure. In translating "Tian," however, Legge rendered it as "Heaven," a word imbued with Christian culture, and associated it with the Christian "God" through his translation notes. This rendering was subsequently followed by many later translations and is a very typical domestication strategy. For example, in rendering "he who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray," Legge translated "Tian" as "Heaven" and, in his notes, cited Zhu Xi's statement that "Heaven is principle," while emphasizing the sovereign nature of "Tian" as "the One on high," thus hinting at its affinity with the Christian "God." This is inseparable from his background as a missionary, and his translation is accordingly characterized by religious interpretation.

2. The Post-Legge Era: De-Christianization and Pluralistic Interpretation (the 20th Century)

Ku Hung-ming's translation (1898): Ku Hung-ming was well versed in both Chinese and Western learning and possessed a profound command of English, and his translations exerted a tremendous influence in the Western world. He was strongly dissatisfied with the translations of the *Analects* by Western missionaries and Sinologists such as Legge, believing that they had distorted the original meaning of the Chinese classics and thus created Western prejudice against Chinese culture (Dai, 2022, p. 54). Aiming to "enable Western readers to understand the essence of Confucianism," Ku adopted a highly domesticating translation strategy. He deliberately connected Confucian concepts with Western religious and philosophical systems and translated "Tian" as "God," attempting to help Western readers understand the sovereign nature of "Tian" and its significance as the source of morality through Christian cultural imagery.

Arthur Waley's translation (1938): Compared with the translations of Legge and Ku Hung-ming, Waley's translation pays greater attention to the receptivity of its target readers and has been acclaimed as "the standard translation in the English-speaking world," combining scholarly rigor with readability. He followed Legge in using "Heaven" but invested it with connotations of "ancestor worship," emphasizing the polytheistic attributes of "Tian" and thereby weakening the monotheistic tendency of Legge's rendering.

Chan Wing-tsit's translation (1963): Chan Wing-tsit was a Chinese-American Sinologist who specialized in the study of Confucian thought and Zhu Xi's philosophy and had a profound understanding of "Tian" in Confucian thought. He interpreted "Tian" philosophically, rendering "Tianming" as "the Mandate of Heaven" and emphasizing its universality as the fundamental law of the cosmos. He also translated "Tian" as "Heaven (Nature)," stressing the connotations of "Tian" as "the Heaven of law" and "the Heaven of nature."

D. C. Lau's translation (1979): D. C. Lau was a renowned Hong Kong translator. His translation emphasizes being "text-centered" and attends to the coordination of context and cultural differences. For example, he distinguishes between the "Heaven of virtue" and the "Heaven of fate," interpreting them as "Heaven" and "Destiny" respectively, and through the associative interpretation of "Tian-ming-tianming" highlights the duality of "Tian" as both the source of morality and the master of fate.

3. Defamiliarization and Cultural Subjectivity (from the Late 20th Century to the Present)

Roger T. Ames's translation (1998): Roger T. Ames is a renowned contemporary Sinologist and philosopher. Together with Henry Rosemont Jr., he translated the *Analects* into English. His translation interprets the concepts of the *Analects* from the perspective of Western philosophy, correcting the religious interpretations left by Legge's translation, and adopts the combination of transliteration plus the Chinese character "Tian 天," resisting associations with Western Christianity.

Annping Chin's translation (2014): Annping Chin is a Chinese-American historian. Her translation, published in 2014, takes historical interpretation as its main approach, attaches importance to returning to the intra-lingual interpretive tradition of the *Analects*, and strives to restore "the authentic Confucius." She continues the mainstream rendering of "Tian" as "Heaven" but weakens its religious connotations through annotation.

3. The Evolution of the English Translation of the Core Concept "Tian"

In the history of translating the *Analects* into English, different translators' interpretations of the concept of "Tian" each have their own distinctive features, reflecting differences in their historical backgrounds, cultural positions, and academic ideas. These interpretations have played an important role in promoting the dissemination and understanding of the *Analects* in the English-speaking world and have built a bridge for Sino-Western cultural exchange. The following is a detailed account of how these seven translations interpret the concept of "Tian" in the *Analects*.

3.1 Religious Interpretation

James Legge's translation: As an important early translator, Legge translated "Tian" as "Heaven" and frequently cited the commentaries of Zhu Xi and other exegetes of successive dynasties in his notes, seeking common ground between Confucianism and Christianity. He sometimes interpreted "Tian" as a willful sovereign similar to the Christian "God," holding that "Tian" in Chinese culture and the Western "God" bear similarities in conceptual connotation and cultural status, both possessing connotations of sovereignty and origin, thereby realizing a Confucian-Christian dialogue. To a certain extent, this approach helped Western readers understand the important position of "Tian" in Confucian culture and exerted a far-reaching influence on later translators, but it also gave rise to controversies concerning cultural colonization because of its excessive association with Christian ideas.

Ku Hung-ming's translation: Ku adopted a highly domesticating strategy, rendering "Tian" as "God" on a large scale in order to enable Western readers to understand Confucian thought through familiar Christian concepts. Although this approach helped Western readers quickly establish a cognition of the concept of "Tian" and promoted the dissemination of the *Analects* in the West, it sacrificed the pluralistic connotations of "Tian" in Chinese culture: meanings such as the natural Heaven and the moral Heaven were weakened, and the uniqueness of Chinese culture was to some extent lost in translation.

3.2 De-religious Interpretation

Arthur Waley's translation: Waley's translation reflects a tendency toward the de-religious interpretation of "Tian." He mainly used "Heaven" to translate "Tian." Through tracing the etymology of the term and studying early Chinese classics, he pointed out that "Tian" has similarities across different civilizations while also emphasizing its differences across cultures, thereby both preserving its connection with Chinese culture and, to a certain extent, conforming to the cognitive habits of Western readers, thus providing Western readers with a richer perspective for understanding the concept of "Tian."

Chan Wing-tsit's translation: As a scholar with a deep understanding of Chinese philosophy, especially Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, Chan followed the use of "Heaven" in translation, but in some passages he added pinyin romanization and English glosses, such as "Heaven (Tian, Nature)," to display the multiple connotations of "Tian." Chan's rendering indirectly confirms the continuous enrichment of the concept of "Tian" in the Western world, which was no longer simply equated with Christian culture. This interpretation helps Western readers understand

the concept of "Tian" at the philosophical level and has also influenced the subsequent practice of Sinologists in translating the *Analects* into English.

D. C. Lau's translation: Lau's translation likewise enriched Western readers' understanding of "Tian" as a core Confucian concept. With the development of translation theory and in-depth research on the text of the *Analects*, the English translation of "Tian" has also shown an increasingly rich and diverse trend (Wang, 2024, p. 107). This trend has persisted for a long time and has influenced later translators to keep exploring the philosophical connotations of Confucian thought.

3.3 The Philosophical Interpretation of "Tian"

Roger T. Ames's translation: In the English translation jointly produced by Ames and Rosemont, "Tian" is rendered as "tian 天," in the form of transliteration plus the Chinese character. The greatest difference between the Ames–Rosemont translation and earlier translations lies in the fact that the translators interpreted and translated the text from a philosophical perspective and with philosophical methods. They regarded the *Analects* as a philosophical text different from Western philosophy and strove to penetrate its literal meaning to unearth the profound philosophical significance embedded therein—that is, to interpret and translate the text in a philosophical manner (Yang, 2020, p. 141). They held that the conventional rendering "Heaven" carries strong Christian imagery and cannot accurately convey the original philosophical connotations of "Tian." In their view, "Tian" in Chinese philosophy has unique connotations: it is both the creator and the basis of existence of the world, and also the existential field and existence itself of what is created—an existence in which "the one and the many are not separated."

Annping Chin's translation: In her English translation of the *Analects*, Chin's interpretation of the concept of "Tian" has a distinctive perspective and significance. Aiming to return to the intra-lingual interpretive tradition of the *Analects*, she presents an understanding different from that of other translators through her translation of and annotation on content related to "Tian." Chin interprets "Tian" as the master of fate. In her view, the "Tian" of the *Analects* determines individual fate and even the fortunes of history, and "Tianming" is the arrangement of fate that an individual must accept after having done his or her utmost. She points out in her notes that the connotations of "Tianming" vary across eras and schools, and that the "Tianming" of the *Analects* is "the fate bestowed by Heaven."

4. Analysis of Translator Motivation

From the analysis of the seven translations above, it can be seen that the English translation of "Tian" in the *Analects* has undergone a long evolutionary process: from Legge and Ku Hung-ming, who began by domestically rendering "Tian" with the Christian cultural terms "Heaven" and "God," through Waley, Chan, and Lau, who continuously enriched the connotations of "Tian" and reduced its religious referents, to Ames and Chin, who analyzed and studied this core concept of Confucian thought from a philosophical perspective. It can be seen that the connotations of "Tian" in the *Analects* have been continuously enriched, and that there has been a marked shift of perspective in its understanding and interpretation—from the initial religious reading to the present philosophical study—and the Western world's understanding of "Tian" and even of Confucian thought has been deepening. This shift of perspective has been influenced by multiple factors, and below the author explores its causes from two aspects: the translator and the state.

4.1 Translator Subjectivity

In the process of translating the classics into English, translators usually choose appropriate translation methods and strategies according to their translation motivation and their own cultural identity, giving creative play to their subjectivity so as to better achieve their translation purposes (Yang, 2020, p. 142). The translators of the seven versions selected in this paper have different identities—missionaries, Chinese scholars, and Sinologists—and their translations also date from different periods, the earliest going back to the Opium War era and the most recent being published in 2014. The different identity backgrounds of these translators influenced them to produce

different translation motivations. These seven translators can be roughly divided into two motivational types: those attracted by Chinese culture and spontaneously driven by interest to translate the Confucian classics, such as the missionary Legge and the Sinologists Waley, Ames, and Chin; and those who hoped to disseminate Chinese culture to the Western world and change Western views of China, such as the scholars Ku Hung-ming, Chan Wing-tsit, and Lau.

To a certain extent, this division sketches the motivational spectrum of the translator community, yet it also implies more complex cultural contestation and identity tensions. The missionary Legge, for instance, although bearing the mission of religious propagation, was by no means driven toward Chinese culture purely for instrumental purposes—in the course of administering Ying Wa College in Hong Kong and systematically translating the *Four Books* and *Five Classics*, he gradually shifted from the "superiority of Christian civilization" to a deep empathy with Confucian ethics. His translation practice, driven by such interest, in fact concealed an academic curiosity about a heterogeneous civilization beneath its religious mantle. The Sinologists Arthur Waley and Roger T. Ames exhibited a purer scholarly interest: Waley, taking "the pursuit of truth" as his goal, stripped "Tian" of its theological coloring through textual research on the evidential-scholarship (*pu xue*) literature of the Qing dynasty and restored it to "a composite of natural order and ancestor worship," a motivation deeply rooted in early twentieth-century European Sinology's pursuit of "de-ideologization." Ames, as an adherent of process philosophy, was motivated to translate the *Analects* by his exploration of the possibility of dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophy, and his deliberate adoption of the transliteration "Tian 天" is precisely an interest-driven ontological tribute to the "correlative thinking" of Chinese philosophy.

The translation practices of Ku Hung-ming, Chan Wing-tsit, and Lau, by contrast, carried a weightier mission of cultural dissemination. Amid the cultural upheavals of the late Qing and early Republican periods, Ku used his English translation of the *Analects* as a defense of "the spirit of the Chinese people," and his radical domesticating strategy of rendering "Tian" as "God" was essentially aimed at enabling the West to understand the universality of the Confucian "Mandate of Heaven" through the Christian discourse system—behind this dissemination motive lay anxiety about, and a defense of, the subjectivity of Chinese culture. Chan Wing-tsit, as a representative figure in overseas studies of Neo-Confucianism, deliberately strengthened the "moral law" attribute of "Tian" in his translation, implanting the "Heavenly principle" (*tianli*) of Zhu Xi's philosophy into his interpretation of "Heaven"—an act that implied the deeper intention of incorporating Confucian philosophy into the Western discourse framework of "humanism" and, through conceptual translation, of breaking the Western academy's stereotyped perception of Confucianism as "ethical dogma." It is worth noting that the two motivations often appear in an interwoven state in individual translators: Legge's religious interest and scholarly dissemination, Ku's defense of culture and the influence of missionary translations, and Ames's philosophical exploration and reflection on Orientalism all show that the history of translating the *Analects* into English is by no means a linear narrative of a single motivation. This very complexity constitutes the vitality of cross-cultural interpretation—when interest-driven translators deconstruct cultural prejudice through academic curiosity, and when dissemination-oriented translators reconstruct cognitive frameworks through strategic translation, the English translation of core concepts such as "Tian" in effect becomes a microcosmic battlefield on which Chinese and Western civilizations probe, contest, and merge with each other at the conceptual level, ultimately transforming the *Analects* from an Eastern classic into a text of dialogue common to human civilization.

4.2 National Orientation

The influence of the state on translator motivation is mainly manifested in political strategy, academic policy, and cultural dissemination. Taking the four translations after Arthur Waley as examples, during the Cold War the United States incorporated Sinology into "area studies" to serve its Far East strategy, neglected the translation of classics such as the *Analects*, and even interpreted Confucianism within a Christian framework. Consequently,

although the English translation of the *Analects* in this period was shifting from religious to de-religious interpretation, most translations still followed the rendering of "Tian" as "Heaven."

Influenced by contemporary trends in Western Sinological research, contemporary English translations of the *Analects* appeared mainly after the 1990s, and their translation methods and features also differ to some extent from earlier versions (Wang, 2010, p. 24). With the shift in academic policy, the United States promoted the institutionalization of Sinology as an academic discipline and set up special funds to support the translation of the *Analects*. Lau's translation, for example, served research and teaching in higher education, while Ames's translation responded to the academic turn of "de-Western-centrism." At the same time, the state regarded the English translation of the *Analects* as a means of cultural soft-power competition, funding cross-cultural dialogue projects and prompting translators to explore the modern value of Confucianism.

Furthermore, state ideology constrains translation strategies: in the early postwar period, translators, influenced by the "tradition – modernity" dichotomy, regarded Confucian thought as a factor hindering modernization, whereas in the post-Cold War era, China's image was reconstructed through translation, as exemplified by Ames's use of transliteration to highlight the uniqueness of Chinese philosophy. The United States also integrated Sinological resources by funding transnational projects, promoted dialogue between translators and Chinese academia, and competed for the right to interpret the *Analects*.

It can thus be seen that state-level orientation affects the English translation of the classics. Under the call for Chinese culture to "go global" in the new era, the strategy of preserving the original cultural connotations of the classics and promoting mutual learning between Eastern and Western civilizations has become the mainstream, and an increasing number of translations of the *Analects* render "Tian" directly by transliteration, preserving the unique charm of Chinese culture.

5. Conclusion

The translation and introduction of the Confucian classics is in essence a dynamic history of cross-cultural interpretation, and the evolution of the English translation of the core concept "Tian" in the *Analects* is precisely a microcosm of this process. From the religious interpretation of the Legge period to the flowering of diverse contemporary translations, the concept of "Tian" has, across the English versions of different eras, undergone a complex metamorphosis from religious conceptual equivalence to de-religious reconstruction, and from structural dichotomy (such as Lau's distinction between the "Heaven of fate" and the "Heaven of virtue") to philosophical innovation (such as Ames's transliteration "tian 天"). This evolution reflects not only the paradigm shift in Western Sinology from "area studies" to a "China-centered perspective" but also the multiple negotiations of translator subjectivity amid national strategy, academic currents, and cultural identity. In the strategic context of the contemporary "going global" of Chinese culture, the translation of "Tian" is no longer confined to the conversion of linguistic signs but carries the deeper mission of civilizational dialogue.

The history of translating the *Analects* into English testifies to the vigorous vitality of Confucian thought—it can be reinterpreted within heterogeneous cultures while always retaining its own cultural subjectivity. In the future, the translation and introduction of the Confucian classics must further break the shackles of the "othering" imagination, preserve the subjectivity of its own culture, and construct a more inclusive paradigm of cross-cultural interpretation in the interaction between translator motivation and national orientation.

Competing Interests Statement

All authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing

No use AI tools in my article.

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