

# ***The English Translation of Confucian Classics from the Perspective of Knowledge Translation Studies: A Study of Roger T. Ames' Translation Practice***

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**Abstract:** Confucian classics embody the essence of Chinese culture and serve as a crucial medium for its transmission. With their profound ideas, these works have attracted global attention. As an emerging bridge for cross-cultural communication, Knowledge Translation Studies (KTS) focuses on the translation of key concepts, which is an essential issue for the international dissemination of Confucian classics. Roger T. Ames offers a unique and innovative perspective on Confucian studies, making significant contributions to the English translation of Confucian classics by interpreting Confucian thought from a comparative philosophy viewpoint, taking into account the historical and cultural contexts of both the East and the West. This paper uses the lens of KTS to explore Ames' English translation practice of Confucian classics, examining the overseas spread of Confucianism while providing a case reference for the practice of translation studies in China.

**Keywords:** Confucian classics, Roger T. Ames, Knowledge Translation Studies, English translation of key concepts

## **1. Introduction**

Confucian classics, as the crystallization of Chinese cultural wisdom, have long been the cornerstone of understanding East Asian philosophy internationally. However, their translation is far from a mere linguistic exercise; it requires transforming knowledge rooted deeply in the cultural soil into universally accessible insights. In this context, Roger T. Ames' English translation practice of Confucian classics, based on a comparative philosophical perspective, offers a paradigm for the interaction between localized knowledge and global discourse. Knowledge Translation Studies (KTS), an emerging theoretical framework proposed by Professor Yang Feng, views translation as a dynamic process of knowledge reconstruction and cross-cultural negotiation. This paper focuses on Ames' strategies for translating core Confucian concepts (such as "ren" and "yi") into English, revealing how his "retail-style analogy method" bridges cognitive gaps while preserving the deep philosophical meaning. By analyzing Ames' annotation system, conceptual reconstruction, and cultural adjustment, this study aims to elucidate the theoretical contributions of KTS to the global dissemination of Confucianism and offer insights for translation practices in China.

## 2. Overview of Ames' English Translation of Confucian Classics

“Confucian classics are the treasures of China's five-thousand-year-old culture, and their profound ideas have drawn the attention of the world. Since the 17th century, representative Confucian works, such as the Four Books and Five Classics, have been introduced to foreign language communities through translation, compilation, or direct translation, marking the beginning of overseas awareness of Chinese Confucian culture.[1]” With the global spread of Confucian culture, the way it is disseminated has shifted from the earlier phase of acceptance by foreign audiences to the current phase of active promotion. From the perspective of Knowledge Translation Studies, Confucian classics achieve cross-linguistic dissemination through translation, facilitating the inheritance and development of their ideas.

Roger T. Ames, a renowned American philosopher and sinologist, has made significant contributions to the English translation of Chinese philosophy and Confucian classics. As an outstanding scholar, his work spans the translation and interpretation of numerous Confucian classics, providing an important resource for Western readers to understand Chinese philosophy.

The cultural references in Confucian texts are localized ancient Chinese classics. To present the distinctive characteristics of Chinese culture and highlight the essence of Confucianism in translation, translators must engage in profound reflection on Confucian culture and possess high literary skills, being familiar with Confucian literary classics and their historical context. Moreover, they must compare Chinese cultural knowledge with foreign cultural knowledge. Due to the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, translating Confucian classics is a challenging task. However, Ames did not give up; he compared the pragmatic thought of American philosopher John Dewey with the associative thinking in ancient Chinese philosophy, as well as Whitehead's process philosophy with the "process-oriented thinking" in Chinese thought. Drawing on the research of David Hall, Ames sought similar ideas in Western philosophy to interpret ancient Chinese cultural knowledge, forming his unique "retail-style analogy method" in Confucian translation. This is similar to the principles of Knowledge Translation Studies, where two forms of localized knowledge engage in dialogue, interaction, and transformation. The driving force behind translation lies in the tension between local and global knowledge. Ames' "retail-style analogy method" effectively conveys Confucian ideas to Western readers using familiar philosophical viewpoints, helping them form an understanding of Chinese ancient culture.

In addition to his translation work, Ames has also made important contributions to the interpretation and elucidation of Confucian classics. By delving into the connotations and historical background of Confucian thought, he provides profound insights that help people better understand and appreciate the essence of Confucian philosophy. His English translations of Chinese Confucian classics have provided Western readers with a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Chinese philosophy, allowing Confucian ideas and the essence of Chinese culture to gain wider recognition in the international academic community.

Today, in the emerging academic framework of Knowledge Translation Studies, we have a comprehensive and multifaceted analytical framework to examine Ames' translation practices and research achievements. As technology rapidly advances and international exchanges deepen, cross-cultural communication has become more frequent. In this context, the ability to translate cultural knowledge accurately and efficiently is of paramount importance. This issue is not only crucial for individual and societal development but also an integral part of a country's soft power and international influence. Under the guidance of Knowledge Translation Studies, our in-depth exploration of Ames' translation of Confucian classics—its objectives, strategies, and research outcomes—holds immeasurable significance for promoting the international dissemination of Chinese culture, deepening cross-cultural understanding, advancing the progress of KTS, and

enhancing our understanding of translation processes, strategies, cultural exchange, and addressing the challenges posed by globalization.

### 3. Overview of Knowledge Translation Studies

The concept of knowledge translation was first proposed by Professor Yang Feng from Shanghai Jiao Tong University as a new theory within translation studies. He views knowledge as an essential factor in translation, exploring the relationship and actions between translation as knowledge and the knowledge generated through translation [2]. This theory emphasizes principles of knowledge decoding, reprocessing, and transfer in translation production, marking the transition of knowledge from the realm of ancient epistemology into the theoretical framework of translation studies [3]. Within the scope of translation studies, culture is inevitably tied to culture itself, suggesting that the cultural essence involved in translation should also be seen as knowledge [4]. From the perspective of knowledge translation theory, Confucianism, as a form of local knowledge, can be processed, shared, and transformed into knowledge with universal significance. In the specific context of translation studies, translation history is equivalent to the history of knowledge translation, as no discipline or field can be spread without the process of knowledge translation, further highlighting its importance in translation studies. "Cross-linguistic knowledge transfer is not just a particular academic issue, but a universal real-world problem." From the viewpoint of knowledge translation theory, the study of translation seeks to uncover the general mechanisms and methods of cross-linguistic knowledge transfer, aiming to address the asymmetry of knowledge that exists universally in human society [5]. Translation can transform local knowledge into universal knowledge, facilitating dialogue between the local and the global. Ames, in translating Confucian classics, approaches it through aspects such as discourse shaping, language transformation, and knowledge construction, positioning Confucian texts within different historical and communal contexts. His aim is to present Chinese philosophy to Western readers in a novel and familiar manner.

"Translation across languages, cultures, and time and space is not merely a structural transfer of knowledge but more of a reconstructive transformation.[6]" At the same time, the process of Confucian classics becoming global knowledge aids the spread of Chinese culture, promotes its inheritance and development, and contributes positively to the diversity of world cultures.

### 4. The English Translation of Core Concepts from Confucian Texts in the Context of Knowledge Translation Studies

In the process of translating and disseminating Chinese Confucian texts to the world, translators often overlook the cultural and cognitive differences between Chinese culture and the local cultures of the target audience. Taking the spread of Confucian culture to Europe after the 16th century as an example, many translators have resorted to replacing Chinese terms with seemingly similar theological or philosophical words in Western languages. For instance, the term “仁” (Ren) is often translated as “benevolence” and “义” (Yi) as “righteousness.” However, many key terms in Confucianism carry deep cultural significance in China, encompassing not only philosophy but also the moral, ritual, and fundamental cultural principles that have existed for thousands of years. Therefore, translating Confucian keywords requires the translator to have a profound understanding of the content, as well as the ability to handle Western vocabulary in a flexible manner. In this context, Ames’s approach to translating Confucian texts differs from that of previous translators and can be considered a form of intellectual reconstruction. Below are some examples:

“仁” (Ren) is the most fundamental concept in Confucian thought, originally referring to the mutual love between individuals and emphasizing human-centeredness [7]. Confucius regarded “ren” (仁) as the highest moral principle, moral standard, and the ultimate moral state. The term “ren”

appears 109 times in the Analects, and its essence can be understood as "love for others; a person of ren is a human being; a person of ren has compassion." In their translation of "ren," Ames and Luo Siwen did not opt for conventional translations such as "benevolence" or "humanity," but instead translated it as "authoritative conduct." They believed that "ren" represented exemplary behavior within a community, and as such, it carries connotations of influence and authority. This translation choice breaks with previous sinologists' interpretations and can be seen as a knowledge-based reconstruction of the term "ren."

In The Analects, Chapter 15 of the Book of Wei Ling Gong states: "The Master said, 'Is it not the essence of empathy? Do not impose on others what you do not desire for yourself.'" One important aspect of "ren" is "shu" (恕), which is outwardly manifested through "li" (礼), or ritual propriety. For the translation of "shu," James Legge rendered it as "Be true to the principles of our nature and benevolent exercise of them to others." In contrast, Ames and Luo Siwen, based on their understanding, creatively reconstructed it as "putting oneself in the other's place," which is clearer and more concise compared to other scholars' translations.

Confucius also stated that "yi" (义) is "the virtue of Heaven," representing divine will or conscience manifested in the world. In The Doctrine of the Mean (Li Ren), he said, "A gentleman's relation to the world is one of no personal preference or aversion, always with righteousness." Based on specific contextual interpretations, An and Luo translated "yi" as "appropriate/appropriateness," differing from James Legge's translation of "righteousness." An and Luo viewed "yi" as aligning with the standards and expectations within Confucian culture, emphasizing that the foundation for this value is rooted within the framework of Confucianism, making their translation more consistent with the original meaning and better aligned with the processes of knowledge decoding, reprocessing, and transfer in knowledge translation theory.

In Confucian culture, the concept of "junzi" (君子) is crucial, often used to describe an ideal moral character, one who possesses noble personal virtues and the ability to set a positive example for others. The junzi not only excels in personal morality but also plays an influential role in society by guiding others. Ames, in his translation, may aim to convey the junzi's noble morality, leadership capabilities, and societal importance. From the perspective of knowledge translation theory, we can select the most appropriate term based on the context and translation purpose. In the English translations of classical texts within the scope of knowledge translation, several different terms have been used: Exemplary persons: This translation emphasizes the junzi as a moral role model, highlighting their noble character and the importance of setting an example for others; Ruler: This term underscores the junzi's position and influence in society, suggesting they not only excel in personal virtue but also may bear leadership responsibilities; Prince: This translation focuses more on the junzi's nobility and high status, implying their position as moral aristocrats; Lord: Here, the emphasis is on the junzi's societal position and prestige, suggesting their leadership role and influence over others.

As for the concept of "cheng" (诚), it is a moral term that can be translated as "sincerity" in English. James Legge and others translate it as "honesty," interpreting it as a human virtue, which is an essentialist and direct translation. However, in the Zhongyong (Doctrine of the Mean), "cheng" goes beyond mere honesty. It is described as "the way of Heaven" and "the principle of Heaven," achieving an ontological level. It is about fulfilling one's inherent nature and striving to bring out one's "Heaven-given nature" in daily life [8]. Ames, in his creative interpretation of "cheng," draws on Chapter 26 of the Zhongyong, where it says "the utmost sincerity is without cessation," and he combines Tang Junyi's understanding of "cheng" with the idea of "active power" in honesty, as discussed by Chen Rongjie. Moreover, Ames incorporates XU Zhongche's dynamic view of sincerity in Song Dynasty thought, translating "cheng" as "creativity". He interprets human subjective spontaneity in participating in "Heaven's natural creation" as "co-creation," presenting a process from "becoming an

individual" to "becoming a whole." This translation helps Western readers better understand the distinctive features of ancient Chinese thought.

Regarding "de" (德), it refers to moral quality, virtue, and personal cultivation in Confucian philosophy. It highlights an individual's excellent performance in character, behavior, and dealings with others—essentially, a morally elevated state. In his work *Core Concepts of Classical Confucianism*, Ames translates "de" in several ways: "moral virtuosity", "excelling morally", and "virtuality". These translations emphasize different aspects of "de" as the pursuit of moral excellence in individuals, communities, and society at large. They highlight "de" as a state of moral superiority, stressing the excellent performance of virtue in one's character. Through these various translations, Ames underscores "de" as an ideal that transcends individual and extends to collective, societal, and even national aspirations for moral greatness.

The development of Confucian classics like the *Zhongyong* has undergone multiple changes, shaped by the specific historical, social, and political contexts of ancient China. The concise nature of Classical Chinese further complicates the process of translation, posing significant challenges for Western translators in terms of reading, understanding, and translating the text. While Chinese readers often require annotations to fully grasp the *Zhongyong*, this becomes an even greater difficulty for Western audiences, who may lack the cultural background of traditional Chinese thought. In response, Ames's translation of the *Zhongyong* maintains the integrity of the original work while providing extensive conceptual explanations and intertextual references, offering Western readers pathways to a deeper understanding of its core ideas. These diverse supporting texts serve as a valuable resource, helping to enhance the accessibility and readability of the *Zhongyong*. This approach not only aids in preserving the text's original meaning but also bridges the gap between Chinese philosophical traditions and the Western understanding of them. By offering such a comprehensive translation, Ames significantly contributes to the Western appreciation of this important Confucian classic.

In Ames's translation of the *Zhongyong*, each passage of Classical Chinese is accompanied by a detailed explanation of its historical context, allowing readers to gain a deeper understanding of the background and significance of the text. The annotations offer in-depth analysis of the core concepts and knowledge points discussed in the text. Additionally, separate chapters are dedicated to a thorough introduction of these key concepts, helping readers to fully grasp the main ideas of the *Zhongyong* and its close connection with Confucian thought and traditional Chinese culture. This approach provides a comprehensive framework for readers, enabling them to refer to the conceptual explanations as they continue to study the text, thereby deepening their understanding. A notable feature of Ames's English translation is its consistency with his previous works in explaining these core concepts, ensuring a coherent presentation of the material. Furthermore, the translation includes a special section introducing the translator, allowing readers to understand his identity, academic background, and authority, which is crucial for the credibility and acceptance of the translation. The preface provides a historical and cultural overview of Confucius and his philosophy, helping Western readers to go beyond the limitations of Classical Chinese and to grasp the underlying knowledge embedded in the text. The appendix further enriches the work by offering a systematic review of the historical development and the trajectory of the poets' creations. In addition to the *Analects of Confucius*, other classical Chinese texts, such as the *Shuowen Jiezi* (a dictionary of characters), are frequently referenced, reflecting the depth and richness of Chinese culture [9].

In Ames's English translation of the *Zhongyong*, he employs intertextual annotations within the main body of the text, aiming to further elucidate core concepts and assist readers in understanding the original work within specific contexts. This method of using abundant auxiliary texts and intertextual annotations is a key feature of deep translation. Through this approach, Ames successfully transforms localized knowledge into knowledge that is global or universal, facilitating its acceptance in the international community and contributing to the advancement of global philosophy. This

method not only provides a fresh perspective for the study of Chinese culture in the realm of international dissemination but also paves new paths for the exploration of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural translation activities. By making these core Chinese philosophical concepts accessible to a broader audience, Ames's translation bridges the gap between cultures, enabling more nuanced and informed discussions in global philosophical discourse.

## 5. Conclusion

The globalization of knowledge is the journey of local ideas, and the theory of "the localization of knowledge in knowledge translation studies determines the process of understanding and transforming knowledge. Starting from epistemology, it confines subjectivity within the bounds of rationality through the action and spirit of seeking knowledge [10]." In this process, knowledge is understood, evaluated, and interpreted through the translator's actions. Ames's translation of Confucian classics does not aim to express all the meanings of the original text. He hopes that the ideas and viewpoints expressed by Confucius in that political environment, social conditions, and historical context can be understood by Western readers. Therefore, in his translation, he uses many analogies in the annotations, employs a lot of focal and field-specific language in the text, and avoids causal language. The purpose of these methods is to highlight the uniqueness of Chinese philosophy. Such a translation may lose some of the original meaning, but the exclusive meaning of the Confucian philosophical system in the original text is fully embodied. Ames is keenly aware that in the process of understanding and transforming knowledge, translation should start from epistemology, while maintaining a scientific and objective research spirit throughout. This allows Chinese philosophy to engage with the world in its own way.

Looking at Ames's English translation of Confucian classics from the perspective of knowledge translation studies, An has a comprehensive understanding and grasp of both languages and cultures. In the translation process, he is not just converting languages, but also conveying the rich connotations of Chinese philosophy. By using reasonable and effective translation methods, drawing on diverse literary knowledge, and combining multimodal communication methods, he reshapes classical knowledge into the target language. This achieves the transformation of global knowledge.

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