

# A Study of Xu Yuanchong's English Translation of the Analects of Confucius from the Perspective Eco-translatology

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**Abstract:** Chinese ancient prose culture has a long history and occupies an important place in the world civilization. Translation activities have played an important role in the process of cultural dissemination since ancient times. Xu Yuanchong, a Centennial translator in China, is an outstanding representative in the field of ancient prose translation. Eco-translation, as a theory of adaptation and transformation, is of great practical significance to the study of ancient Chinese translation in contemporary society, and has been fully applied in the English translation of *the Analects of Confucius*. Based on the three theories of ecological translation: translation ecological environment, adaptation and choice, and "three-dimensional" transformation, this paper studies Xu Yuanchong's English version of *the Analects of Confucius*, aiming at providing more research ideas for the English translation of *the Analects of Confucius* and making Confucianism better convey its value across ancient and modern times.

**Keywords:** Eco-translatology, Xu Yuanchong, The Analects of Confucius.

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## 1. Introduction

*The Analects of Confucius* is the authoritative record of the thinking of the Confucian school. It has profound and practical connotation, which not only highlights the noble values and ideals, but also has practical guidance for life, and it is the essence of ancient Chinese thought. In contemporary times, with the deepening development of globalization and cultural diversity, *the Analects of Confucius*, as one of the important representatives of China's excellent traditional culture, its trend of 'going out' is irresistible. The President of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping, said at an international symposium commemorating the 2,565th anniversary of Confucius' birth: "The study of Confucius and Confucianism is an important way to understand the national identity of the Chinese people and the spiritual world and historical origins of the Chinese people today." As a Confucian classic, *the Analects of Confucius* enjoys a high reputation in academia, communication and overseas cultural circles, which is the symbol of 'Chinese cultural classics dissemination'. Therefore, the role played in the process of cultural communication in translation activities is naturally very important.

Since the introduction of *the Analects of Confucius* into Europe in the 17th century, many Chinese and foreign translators have translated it, such as Lionel Giles, Edward Soothill, Arthur Waley, and so on. Through the study, the author finds that foreign scholars' language expression is closer to the target readers, but there are great differences in the understanding of some core concepts with local scholars, such as the lack of cultural interpretation of specific culture-loaded words. Chinese translators such as Gu Hongming, Lin Yutang, etc., have appropriate language expression and cultural implication. However, due to the existence of time span, some obscure ancient expressions are difficult for contemporary readers. Therefore, in order to achieve the effect of spreading Chinese classics abroad, the translation of *the Analects of Confucius* should also keep pace with the

times. In terms of literary attainments and linguistic skills, Mr. Xu Yuanchong, as an outstanding contemporary translator in China, his translation of *the Analects of Confucius* has been described as "new in its legalism, and exquisite in its boldness" (Cui Yiqing, 2018). That is to say, Xu's translation is unique because he can transform a new artistic conception from the general rules and show a profound truth from the unconstrained style. Therefore, Xu's translation of *the Analects of Confucius* has great research value.,

## 2. Overview of the Eco-translation

Eco-translatology, which forms a comprehensive perspective on the overall appearance of translation from an ecological perspective, is a holistic study of translation by using ecological rationality, it is an ecological paradigm and research field of "translation is a kind of adaptation and selection". (Hu Gengshen, 2004), it has a high application rate in English translation. Eco-translatology originates from the theory integration of ecology and translation. The researchers introduced the ecological concepts of adaptation and selection, survival of the fittest into translation studies, and constructed a translation theory focusing on the relationship between the translator and the translational eco-environment.

This theory of ecological translation specifies the explanatory function of "translation adaptation and selection theory" for translated texts, firstly, the translation process: the alternating cycle process of translator adaptation and translator selection; secondly, the translation principle: multidimensional selective adaptation and adaptive selection; thirdly, the translation methods of three-dimensional conversion, including linguistic dimension, communicative dimension and cultural dimension; fourth is the evaluation criteria, including the degree of multi-dimensional conversion, readers' feedback and translators' quality. At present, the theory involves nine major research focuses and theoretical perspectives, namely, ecological paradigm, correlation sequence chain, ecological rationality, translation with action, translational eco-environment, translator-centeredness,

adaptation and selection, three-dimensional conversion, and subsequent punishment.

### 3. Three Theories of Eco-translatology and Xu Yuanchong's Translation of the Analects of Confucius

Mr. Xu's translation is more of a "meaningful translation", focusing on the communication of the ideological and aesthetic values of the text. The English translation of *the Analects of Confucius* is not only an interpretation of the literary text, but more importantly, it conveys the cultural connotation and reflects Confucianism, which coincides with Mr. Xu's translation philosophy. Eco-translatology also shows that translation is a process of adaptation and selection, emphasizing the flexibility and applicability of translation to the environment. Therefore, for such expository ancient texts, the author believes that combining them with ecological translation can achieve better translation effects and make the obscure texts fully reveal their inner meanings. Based on this, this paper mainly studies Xu Yuanchong's translation practice of *the Analects of Confucius* by applying the three theories of translational eco-environment, adaptation and selection, and three-dimensional conversion in eco-translatology.

#### 3.1. Translational Eco-environment

Ecological environment refers to the overall external conditions that affect the survival and development of human beings and all kinds of organisms. Therefore, the translational eco-environment is the overall environment of the translator, the translation and their state of being, which has a wide range, including language, communication, culture, society, as well as the interconnected interaction of the author, the reader, and the commissioner. (Hu Gengshen, 2004: 174) In other words, it is a collection consisting of the text, cultural context, "translation community", and spiritual and material components. It can be said that everything other than the translator can be regarded as the translational eco-environment.

#### 3.2. Adaptation and Selection

Eco-translatology holds that the essence of translation process is 'adaptation' and 'selection', which is also the translator's instinct. Translators should not only adapt to the ecological environment, but also choose the translation as the 'identity' of the ecological environment. The purpose of adaptation is survival, the means of adaptation is selection; the rule of selection is 'survival of the fittest.' From this perspective, translation activity can be described as an alternating cycle of translator adaptation and selection.

##### 3.2.1. Adaptation and Selection towards Translator

Among the original text, the translation and the translator, only the translator is the subject and has creativity, and the translation is produced after the translator's adaptation and selection. Of course, there is no doubt about the master, Xu Yuanchong's bilingual ability. In addition, as a scholar who is proficient in Chinese ancient languages, Xu Yuanchong can translate *the Analects of Confucius* more accurately into English than Western Chinese scholars, and he can better adapt to the role of translator.

##### 3.2.2. Translator's Adaptation and Selection to Readers

In addition, readers are important participants in judging the level of the translation, the needs of readers such as aesthetic and informative needs, they are factors that

translators cannot ignore in the translation process, so translators need to select appropriate strategies according to different cultural backgrounds and different levels of readers in order to better convey the meaning of the text. In different translation text, readers and translators have to make different adaptation and selection, for example, if the reader learns something about Chinese culture, the translator can adopt the translation methods of domestication and foreignization; if the reader does not know much about Chinese culture, the translator can even apply the translation strategy of rewriting.

#### 3.3. Three-dimensional Conversion

Three-dimensional conversion refers to the conversion on language, culture and communication. Linguistic conversion refers to the translator's adaptation and selection of linguistic forms in the process of translation. Cultural conversion refers to the translator's attention to the transmission and interpretation of different cultural connotations in the two languages to avoid the cultural gap. Communicative conversion means that the translator should not only complete the transformation of linguistic information and the transmission of cultural connotation, but also focus on the communicative level to see whether the communicative meaning realized or not. It can be seen that the "three-dimensional conversion" of eco-translatology is based on translation practice, which has pragmatic significance for translation behavior.

##### 3.3.1. Linguistic Conversion

Linguistic conversion refers to the transformation of linguistic forms. When translating the source text, the translator should transform vocabulary, rhetoric, syntax and language style according to different conditions. Language is the most basic component of the translational eco-environment. Therefore, when selecting and adapting to the translational eco-environment, the translator should achieve the ecological balance at the linguistic level firstly, and the final translation version determined by the translator's adaptation to the translational eco-environment and its own ability. The following is an example of lexical, rhetoric and syntax in language.

###### (1) Lexical Conversion

*The Analects of Confucius* is a collection of ancient texts in vernacular, recording the words and thoughts of Confucius in a concise and meaningful language with distinctive colloquial features. Although it is in vernacular, there is still a huge difference compared to contemporary language because the ancient language follows the principle of simplicity and a single word can have multiple meanings. Some scholars have compiled a list of 110 occurrences of the word "仁" in this work. Therefore, Mr. Xu Yuanchong has provided different word to translate according to different contexts, such as "altruism" "virtue" "authoritative conduct" "benevolence" "charity" "character" "compassion" "good" "kernel" "generosity" "human-heartedness" "sensitive" "kindness" "love" "magnanimity" "perfect virtue" "true mankind, etc. *The Analects of Confucius* contains a large number of ancient Chinese words. Mr. Xu Yuanchong has profound ancient literary skills and has a deep and thorough understanding of the source text. Therefore, he can skillfully use the method of multi-translation of one word to interpret the words, and achieve the lexical conversion between the two languages.

(2) Rhetorical Conversion, such as metaphor, contrast, repetition, parallelism, etc.

#### Case 1:

Source text:子曰：“为政以德，譬如北辰，居其所而众星共之。”（《论语·为政篇》）

Translation: A prince, said the Master, should rule his state by virtue as the polar star which keeps its place among the stars turning around it.

This sentence means that if a state is governed by moral principles, it is like the North Star in a certain position and all the stars will surround it. In this translation, Mr. Xu Yuanchong uses the rhetorical technique of metaphor, following the original text, comparing "virtue" to the "North Star", respecting the ancient cultural imagery of China, and reflecting the noble meaning of "德" in the governance of the country.

(3) Syntactic Conversion, in terms of syntax, Mr. Xu Yuanchong also embodies his unique linguistic rhythm.

#### Case 2:

Source text:子曰：“知者乐水，仁者乐山。知者动，仁者静。知者乐，仁者寿。”《论语·雍也篇》

Translation: The wise, said the Master, delight in water while the good delight in mountains. The wise love mobility while the good love tranquility. The wise live happy while the good live long.

In this example, the combination of the original quatrain and triplet stanzas makes for a catchy reading. Xu's translation uses three short sentences that follow the original's rhyme and meter. The first sentence of the original is in four phrases, and the last two have three phrases, he gives refined translation correspondingly: "delay in" has one more preposition than "love" and "live". This artful combination of verb phrase and verb makes the translation has the same beauty of rhyme as the original version.

When Chinese people read *the Analects of Confucius*, they can feel relaxed and open-minded, but due to historical factors, there are still many words in it that are difficult to understand, let alone to translate completely and accurately. Therefore, in the process of translating this book, attention should be paid not only to grasping the understanding of words and phrases, but also to reflecting the linguistic characteristics of the original text, showing the charm of the language, and making the translation more authentic and easier to disseminate.

### 3.3.2. Cultural Conversion

Language is a carrier of culture, and they have a close relationship, so the importance of culture in translation is evident. The conversion of culture in eco-translatology requires the translator to accurately transmit and interpret cultural information on the basis of language expression, and without mistranslation, so that the reader can correctly understand the linguistic and cultural meaning of the original language. Translators should have a sense of identity and responsibility, avoid translation mismatch, follow the ecology of the translated language, and adopt translation strategies according to the readers' background, and convert the language and cultural meaning of the original language, so as to realize the cultural conversion.

#### Case 3:

Source text:子曰：“凤鸟不至，河不出图，吾已矣夫！”《论语·子罕篇》

Translation: No prodigious phoenix would appear, said the Master, nor would the picturesque portent emerge on the river.

#### What could I do?

The original meaning of Confucius means that the phoenix will not coming hence there is no beautiful scene will appear on the Yellow River, and his life will end!" In our ancient mythology, the phoenix is a divine bird, representing noble and peaceful, and the appearance of the phoenix indicates the peace of the world, signifying the prosperity of the times and the success of business. While in Western culture, it means "immortality and rebirth", which implies bad luck. When Confucius made this exclamation, he actually regarded the appearance of the phoenix and the river map as symbols of the appearance of a saintly emperor. In fact, the Confucius is expressing his hopeless for a clear and bright world at that time. In view of this cultural difference, Mr. Xu Yuanchong paid attention to the cultural ecology of the language when he translated the words, and used the positive word "prodigious" to make the "phoenix" have a positive image. If the word phoenix is used only literally, the lexical color is unclear and does not express Confucius' lament about the delay in the arrival of the saintly ruler"

#### Case 4:

Source text:子曰：“贤哉，回也！一簞食，一瓢饮，在陋巷，人不堪其忧，回也不改其乐。贤哉，回也！”《论语·雍也篇》

Translation: How good Yan Hui was, said the Master, living in a humble lane with only a handful of rice to eat and a gourdful of water to drink! Others could not bear such a wretched life, but Yan Hui was as happy as ever. How good Yan Hui was!

The original meaning is: "How virtuous Yan Hui is! With only a bamboo basket of rice and a scoop of water, and living in a small alley, which is unbearable and sorrow for others, Yan Hui was faithful to himself and did not want to change his own pleasure, he is really virtuous!" The word "簞" here refers to the round bamboo vessel used to serve rice in ancient times. The author notes that many translations have abbreviated and simplified the phrase "一簞食，一瓢饮" to "barely enough to eat and drink", which is indeed more convenient to understand. While Xu's translation has added a quantifier and an adjective as "a handful of rice to eat and a gourdful of water to drink", this expression looks more concrete towards the simplicity and hardship of Yan Hui's life, and such a practical translation also enables foreign readers to understand the ancient Chinese culture of food and tableware, and achieve the cultural transformation.

### 3.3.3. Communicative Conversion

The communicative conversion refers to that in eco-translatology, on the basis of the conversion on the linguistic and cultural dimensions, the translator also pays attention to the presentation effect of the translation, that is, whether the communicative intention in the ecology of the translation is reflected and whether the readers of the translation can accurately grasp and understand the implicit information of the original text and achieve a communicative purpose.

#### Case 5:

Source text:子在齐闻《韶》，三月不知肉味，曰：“不图为乐之至于斯也。”（《论语·述而篇》）

Translation: Hearing the music of succession in Qi, the Master did not know the taste of meat for three months, saying, "I did not realize that music could have been so delicious."

The original text means that Confucius fail to taste the flavour of meat for a long time after hearing the music of Shao in Qi, he said, "I never imagined that the beauty of Shao's music would be so enchanting." The word "韶" is the name of an ancient music and a musical dance of the Sun Dynasty, and as an adjective means "beautiful". Professor Xu Yuanchong does not stick to the name of the music itself, but translates "Shao" as "the music of succession". He skillfully uses the technique of synaesthesia, using the word "delicious" to describe the music, corresponding the phrase "not knowing the taste of meat in three months". The sensation brought by music is comparable to the taste of meat, which is really wonderful. Mr. Xu Yuanchong's brilliant writing makes the target and the local readers have almost the same emotional experience so as to achieve communicative purpose.

From above examples, we can see that *the Analects of Confucius* has concise language, and there are a lot of omitted implication, which need to be supplemented by the translator based on a deep understanding of the original thought, so as to add its connotation, that is, the meaning beyond the words of Confucius. In the translation of *the Analects of Confucius*, Mr. Xu Yuanchong fully grasped the translational ecological environment, and achieved the ecological balance based on the adaptation and selection to the translation environment

#### 4. Conclusion

Excellent translations of *the Analects of Confucius* can not only promote the dissemination of Chinese classics, but also enable domestic scholars to appreciate *the Analects of Confucius* from different perspectives. Therefore, excellent translators play a pivotal role in this process. Although Mr. Xu Yuanchong, a centuries-old translator in China, has passed away, the study of his translations is particularly important for

promoting the development of translation and related disciplines. The study of Xu's translation of *the Analects of Confucius* will not only enable us to study the classics and learn Confucius' statecraft, but also enable us to admire the translation style of great master and put it into practice. The study of Xu's translation of *the Analects of Confucius* from the perspective of ecological translation is not only an in-depth excavation of China's outstanding cultural heritage, but also an important contribution to the development of related theories and the strategy of "going abroad" of Chinese classics. By making use of the essence of ancient Chinese culture and reflecting its higher cultural value in contemporary times, we can deeply explore the thought of Confucianism, and make Confucianism available to our society today. This fully embodies the value of translation studies.

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