

Research Article

Constellation of the Five Constant Virtues in English Translations of *The Analects*

Shiwei Fu^{1, 2, *} 

¹Department of Translation and Interpreting, School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Wuhan University, Wuhan, China

²Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Medicine, Health and Human Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Abstract

The five constant virtues (*rén*, *yì* *lǐ*, *zhì* and *xìn*) are central to Confucian philosophy and have grown in influence over time, shaping not only traditional moral teachings but also contemporary practices in business management and personal development. However, limited research has explored how these virtues are translated and conceptualized in English versions of *The Analects*. This study aims to address this gap by examining how the five constant virtues are formed, related, and legitimized across four major English translations, spanning different historical periods. To achieve this, a mixed-methods approach is employed, integrating both qualitative and quantitative analyses. First, a multi-parallel corpus is established, enabling a detailed quantitative examination of how the five constant virtues are expressed across different translations. This analysis highlights variations in the rendering of these key concepts in each text. In parallel, Legitimation Code Theory's (LCT) constellation analysis is applied for the qualitative component of the study. This approach explores the relationships among the virtues and how translators have conceptualized and structured these interrelations. Results indicate a reduction in variation over time, suggesting a stabilization in how the virtues are conceptualized. While translations consistently represent simpler pairings of virtues, differences emerge when more complex constellations involving all five elements are considered. These findings reveal how philosophical perspectives and temporal contexts shape translation, impacting the way Confucian virtues are legitimized and structured.

Keywords

The Analects, Five Constant Virtues, Constellation, Conceptualization

1. Introduction

Confucianism, which originated from the philosopher Confucius (551-479 BC) in the Spring and Autumn Period (772-476 BC), is a foundational philosophy that has shaped Chinese society's sense of self and guided its interactions for centuries. Its influence extends beyond China to other Asian cultures. The five values—仁 (*rén*, benevolence), 义 (*yì*

righteousness), 礼 (*lǐ*, propriety), 知 (*zhì* wisdom), and 信 (*xìn*, faithfulness), collectively known as the 五常 (*wǔ cháng*, five constant virtues)—are central to the essence of Confucianism and widely recognized among Chinese readers.

The Analects (*Lún Yǔ*, 论语), the Confucian classic, addresses these virtues individually and forms the foundational

*Corresponding author: shiwei.fu.yan@gmail.com (Shiwei Fu)

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text, later thinkers further elaborate the system of five constant virtues. Mencius (372-289 BC), following Confucius, provided a clear connection between these concepts, as evidenced by his statement, “The nature of a gentleman is rooted in benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom in the heart,” further elaborated by Dong Zhongshu (195 BC-115 BC), who stated, “the way of the Five Constant Virtues should be that which the king cultivates. If the king cultivates the Five Constant Virtues, then he will receive blessings from Heaven and will enjoy the spiritual efficacy of the spirits; moreover, his virtue will extend across the world and will reach all creatures “. In Ban Gu’s *Baihutong* (79 CE), the Five Constant Virtues are symbolically linked to the five viscera of the human body. Ban Gu states “humans are born embodying the form of the Eight Trigrams, endowed with the five vital forces as constants”. Furthermore, the influence of the five constant virtues extends beyond the individual to the natural world and cosmology, as seen in the corresponding Five Musical Notes, the Five Classics, and the Five Cardinal Directions, reinforcing their central role in maintaining balance in the universe. The concept of the five constant virtues has evolved, with each context offering new interpretations and applications that reflect shifts in how these virtues are legitimated as knowledge. Today, these virtues remain relevant in areas such as corporate management [1, 2], personal development [3], and psychology and wellbeing [4]. In each of these fields, the virtues are recontextualized to fit different knowledge systems, shaping how moral principles are understood and applied.

While *The Analects* serves as the foundation for the five constant virtues, it does not explicitly present them as a formal framework, even though these key terms are found throughout the text. Translating these concepts as a system helps readers better understand the epistemic relations, i. e. the way knowledge is structured within Confucian philosophy. Such translations may also offer a deeper portrayal of Confucian thought as it evolved, particularly in later interpretations that treat these virtues as an interrelated, coherent system of moral principles. However, since *The Analects* itself does not present these concepts as a structured system, translators face the challenge of conceptualizing these virtues into a framework that was later recognized as a system, while reflecting their original meanings.

Since the late 17th century, *The Analects* has been translated into more than 40 English versions, with new versions continuing to draw global scholarly interest. Scholars are investigating the translation of cultural keywords, focusing either on individual terms [5] or how groups of related terms interact with each other [6-8]. However, limited research has examined how the system of the five constant virtues has been translated and how different translators across historical periods have legitimized their interpretations of these virtues. Given the significance of faithfully translating these virtues, it is crucial to investigate how these key terms are interrelated in translation and whether they are conceptualized as a coherent

system. To address this gap, I will explore the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do the English translations of *The Analects* form and relate the concepts of the five constant virtues (*rén*, *yì* 义, *zhì* 智 *xùn*)?

RQ2: What variations exist among the translations in capturing the interrelations between the five constant virtues?

RQ3: How do different translators across historical periods legitimize and structure the five constant virtues in their English translations of *The Analects*?

2. Literature Review in Translating Keywords in *The Analects*

Studies that focus exclusively on the translation of single words are particularly prevalent. For instance, Bergeton [5] explores *wén* (文, culture) and how its meaning evolved by analyzing English translations from the 17th to the 21st century, showing how translators’ understanding of *wén* shifted over time, influenced by broader changes in the meaning of the English word “culture.” Similarly, Zhang [9] centers on *rén* (仁, benevolence) and its political application (*rén zhèng* 仁政), highlighting how the translation of key terms can affect both ethical and governance-related interpretations. Liu [10] analyses the translations of *tiān* (天) and *rén* (仁) by two translators from the perspective of Eurocentrism, and argues that the prejudice of cultural relativism should be eliminated. The keyword *tiān* (天) also drew the attention of Zhang and Hu [11], who argued that transliterating “天” as Tian better conveys the true meaning of this core Chinese concept. While such in-depth analyses provide valuable insights into certain keywords, they often limit the understanding of how a constellation of related cultural keywords interact across translations.

In contrast, another group of scholars focuses on multiple cultural keywords, exploring the relationships between them through various approaches. Qualitative methods have also been used, as seen in Pejda [12], who examines the etymological roots and conceptual meanings of key cultural terms in D. C. Lau’s and James Legge’s translations of *The Analects* and *Mengzi*. *rén* (benevolence) is the central moral concept in both philosophies. It symbolises ideal relationships and is closely linked to other key terms like *shù* (恕), *zhōng* (忠), *yì* (义), and *lǐ* (礼). In *The Analects*, *rén* serves as the basis of proper moral conduct, while in *Mengzi*, it is one of four virtues rooted in natural human dispositions. However, Pejda’s study, while thorough, does not span multiple historical periods or translation eras. Yang [13] also analyses key cultural keywords in Confucian philosophy, focusing on how Legge and Ku Hungming translated them into English. For example, Legge renders *rén* as “virtue” and *rén zhě* as “virtuous man,” reflecting a Western moral and religious framework. In contrast, Ku translates *rén* as “moral” and *jūn zǐ* (君子) as “moral man,” focusing on ethical morality within Confucian culture.

Similarly, *lǐ* (禮), representing rituals and propriety, is translated by Legge as “ceremonies” or “propriety,” while Ku’s broader interpretations, such as “civilization” and “good manners,” reflect Confucian rituals’ diverse connotations. Tao [7] examines the interconnectedness of cultural keywords such as *rén*, *lǐ*, and *jūn zǐ*, discussing transliteration, while others use creative translation by adapting the terms into Western philosophical frameworks. The study also identifies varying translation approaches: some translations favor domestication, while others emphasize foreignization. She shows how different translators’ backgrounds and translation philosophies impact the transmission of Confucian ideas to a Western audience.

Quantitative approaches have also been applied. Zhang and Han [6] examine three core Confucian concepts—*rén* (仁), *lǐ* (禮), and *dé* (德)—using qualia structure (based on Pustejovsky’s Generative Lexicon theory) to analyze how the semantic information of these keywords is structured in both the Chinese source texts and their English translations. They argue that the relationship between these three cultural keywords forms a conceptual framework for moral behavior and social harmony. Their study reveals that translations of these core concepts are not always semantically equivalent, as different translators may emphasize various aspects of their meanings. Yang and Zhou [8] take another quantitative approach by examining core cultural terms in *The Analects*, such as *rén* (仁), *jūn zǐ* (君子), and *lǐ* (禮), comparing translations from five translators—D.C. Lau, James Legge, William Jennings, Edward Slingerland, and Burton Watson—using Natural Language Processing (NLP) to quantify semantic similarities. Their study shows that core concepts like *rén* and *jūn zǐ* are linked, and their translations influence the overall interpretation of *The Analects*. However, they acknowledge that purely computational approaches fail to capture qualitative factors such as philosophical shifts, translator choices, and historical contexts, advocating for a mixed-method approach.

From current studies, it is clear that comparing different translators’ approaches is feasible but requires comprehensive methods that consider both philosophical perspectives and quantitative empirical evidence. This combined approach allows for a more complex understanding of how cultural concepts are nested in translations. By examining how different translations reinforce or alter the relationships between key concepts, we can better understand how these translations contribute to the ongoing validation of Confucian knowledge in new contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework: Construing Constellation Through Meaning

In this study, I used a mixed-methods approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative analyses. For the qual-

itative analysis, I view each of the five constant virtues (*rén*, *yì*, *lǐ*, *zhì*, *xìn*) as essential components that collectively construct a larger system of moral knowledge in Confucianism. To analyze how these virtues form a coherent structure, I use Maton’s constellation analysis from Legitimation Code Theory’s (LCT) cosmological analysis, which examines how knowledge is structured and legitimated across different fields [14].

LCT framework aligns with the idea proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen [15], who suggest that knowledge is constructed through linguistic processes and emerges as a product of semiotic systems. In their view, language is the primary means by which meaning is created and knowledge is built. This approach illustrates how abstract ideas, such as the five constant virtues, can be conceptualized through linguistic structures, transforming them into more interpretable forms. Using LCT’s cosmological analysis, I describe the five constant virtues as a constellation of concepts within Confucian cosmology, arranged into a pattern that reflects a system of moral knowledge. Each virtue is imbued with specific values that govern interpersonal relationships, statecraft, and self-cultivation, contributing to an epistemic framework central to Confucian thought.

In analyzing the constellation of the five constant virtues, it is important to recognize not only how these virtues form a coherent structure of knowledge but also how this knowledge is presented through translation. One of LCT’s key concerns is how knowledge is legitimated within different fields. In this context, the different translations of the five constant virtues represent varying legitimations of Confucian knowledge. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how different translators conceptualize these virtues, as their choices shape the knowledge presented to new audiences. These choices influence both the epistemic and social dimensions of knowledge, with certain interpretations gaining dominance over time.

To complement the qualitative analysis, I adopt a corpus-based approach for the quantitative component. This allows for a detailed examination of translation strategies across multiple versions, focusing on the patterns related to the translation of key terms associated with the five constant virtues. The multi-parallel corpus enables comparison of different translations, providing a quantitative foundation to support the qualitative insights from LCT’s cosmological analysis. Details of the corpus and the specific data used for this analysis will be introduced in the following section.

3.2. Data Description

The Analects is a compilation of dialogues that predominantly consist of interactions between Confucius and his disciples. These dialogues explore core Confucian values, particularly the concept of *rén* (benevolence), and provide insights into how Confucius conveyed his teachings across various contexts. The text comprises 499 sections¹, with the

¹ In *The Analects*, there are many sentences that generate divergent interpretations, and scholars’ readings vary significantly. This article primarily references Li

Chinese text containing 22,090 tokens, and 1,364 types. The four English translations collectively comprise 109,655 tokens and 7,787 types, forming a multi-parallel corpus that allows for a detailed comparative analysis. This corpus-based analysis focuses on the semantic level. Special emphasis is placed on the five key virtues: *rén* (benevolence), discussed in 60 sections and mentioned 110 times; *yì* (righteousness) appearing in 20 sections, mentioned 24 times; *lǐ* (propriety) explored in 43 sections and mentioned 75 times; *zhì* (wisdom) featured in 18 sections with 33 mentions; and *xìn* (faithfulness), discussed in 19 sections and mentioned 24 times.

These virtues are interwoven throughout the dialogues, contributing to a constellation of moral values that are contextually linked and reflective of Confucian philosophy. Although *rén* is the central theme, it is never explicitly defined; its meaning is instead revealed through its connections with the other virtues. The frequent occurrence and contextual use of these terms demonstrate how they collectively construct a moral framework, where their meanings are legitimized through situational contexts. Additionally, Confucius' responses to questions about *rén* vary significantly across different interactions, reflecting the situational nature of his teachings. For example, in Chapter *雍也* (*Yongye*), disciples Fan Chi (as in Example 1), Zai Wo (as in Example 2), and Zi Gong (as in Example 3) each received distinct answers to their questions about benevolence. This approach *underscores* the fluidity and contextual richness of *rén*, linking it to other virtues like *yì* (righteousness), *lǐ* (propriety), *zhì* (wisdom), and *xìn* (faithfulness).

Example 1

仁者先难而后获，可谓仁矣。 [Source Text]

One who is benevolent must first find it difficult and then succeed. This can indeed be called benevolence. [Literal Translation]

In Example 1, Fan Chi asks Confucius about *rén* (benevolence). Confucius explains that true benevolence means prioritizing giving before receiving, emphasizing that a benevolent person contributes to others and the community before seeking personal gain. Through this explanation, Confucius legitimises *rén* as a socially oriented virtue, establishing it as foundational to ethical conduct in Confucianism.

Example 2

宰我问曰：“仁者，虽告之曰：‘井有仁焉。’其从之也？”子曰：“何为其然也？君子可逝也，不可陷也；可欺也，不可罔也。” [Source Text]

Zai Wo asked, “If a benevolent person is told, ‘There is benevolence in the well’, would he follow it?” Confucius replied, “Why would that be so? A gentleman may be approached, but not ensnared; he may be deceived, but not deluded.” [Literal Translation]

In Example 2, Zai Wo skeptically questions the practicality of *rén* (benevolence), fearing it may lead to naivety. Confu-

cius asserts that while a gentleman helps those in need, he avoids reckless actions and self-endangerment. Confucius' explanation of benevolence in this context legitimizes *rén* as a situational and balanced virtue, showing that it requires wisdom and discernment, not blind self-sacrifice.

Example 3

子贡曰：“如有博施于民而能济众，何如？可谓仁乎？”子曰：“何事于仁，必也圣乎！尧、舜其犹病诸！夫仁者，己欲立而立人，己欲达而达人。能近取譬，可谓仁之方也已。” [Source Text]

Zi Gong said, “What if someone generously assists the populace and is able to help the many, how about that? Can this be called benevolence?” Confucius replied, “What does this have to do with benevolence? Must one not be a sage? Even Yao and Shun still had their faults! The benevolent person desires to establish himself and establish others, desires to achieve for himself and help others achieve. Being able to take examples from nearby, this can be called the method of benevolence.” [Literal Translation]

In Example 3, Confucius responds to Zi Gong by emphasizing that true *rén* (benevolence) is not limited to grand acts but is achieved through helping others and fostering mutual growth. He explains that benevolence is characterized by a desire to establish and achieve for both one and others, rather than focusing solely on extraordinary deeds. Through this practical ethical guidance, Confucius legitimizes the concept of *rén* as an essential moral principle, reinforcing its relevance through consistent actions. This legitimation process moves beyond abstract ideals, grounding the virtue of benevolence in real experience, making it a key element of Confucian ethics.

These varied responses demonstrate how Confucius explored *rén* through its different manifestations and its relationships with other virtues, forming a constellation of concepts. The situational and relational aspects of *rén* illustrate the epistemic relations within Confucianism, where each virtue contributes to a broader moral framework.

The translations of *The Analects* by James Legge (1840s) [17], Arthur Waley (1930s) [18], Roger T. Ames (1990s) [19], and Burton Watson (2000s) [20] were chosen for this study, as they represent different historical periods and translation philosophies. According to Tao [7], these translators illustrate distinct phases in the translation history of *The Analects*: from the Early Period of Missionaries to the more recent Twenty-First Century Sinologists. Each translator has extensively studied traditional Chinese culture and classical texts, and their works reflect evolving trends in interpreting key cultural terms, contributing significantly to both Chinese and international scholarship. In addition, in each example, literal translation is provided as a back translation for understanding the source text.

4. Results and Discussion

To address the research questions on the formation and relationships of the five constant virtues and their evolving

Zehou's "A Modern Interpretation of *The Analects*" [16] to assist in understanding these passages.

legitimation over time, this section begins with a quantitative overview of translation trends. It then proceeds to a linguistic analysis of examples, mapping and synthesizing the constellation of the virtues across translations, connecting them to the original epistemic framework of *The Analects*.

4.1. Quantitative Overview of Translation Variations

After lemmatizing the expressions used by the four translators for the five constant virtues, Table 1 provides the number of variations found in their translations.

Table 1. Number of Translation Variations for the Five Constant Virtues Across Four Translators.

Source Text	Target Text			
	James Legge	Arthur Waley	Roger T. Ames	Burton Watson
r ń (benevolence)	6	3	3	1
y ì (righteousness)	4	6	2	2
lǐ (propriety)	4	4	4	2
zh ì (wisdom)	10	18	12	6
x ù (faithfulness)	12	12	8	8

Table 1 shows that earlier translators, such as James Legge and Arthur Waley, use a wider range of expressions for each virtue, particularly for *zh ì* (wisdom) and *x ù* (faithfulness). For instance, Legge uses 10 variations for *zh ì* while Waley uses 18, indicating greater interpretative diversity in their translations. In contrast, later translators, such as Roger T. Ames and Burton Watson, show fewer variations, especially Watson, who uses only 1 term for *r ń* and 6 for *zh ì*. The decreased variation in the translation of the five constant virtues in the later period suggests a more stabilized legitimation of Confucian knowledge. In earlier periods, translators exhibited significant variation in how they rendered these complex

concepts, indicating that the process of knowledge legitimation was still evolving. However, as the discourse around these virtues matured and certain interpretations gained acceptance, later translators operated within a more stabilized epistemic framework. This reduction in variation reflects how the translations of the five constant virtues had become more standardized, signifying a consolidation of authoritative knowledge over time.

To provide a more detailed analysis of the variations shown in Table 1, Table 2 presents the specific lemmas and their frequencies used by the four translators in rendering the five constant virtues.

Table 2. Translations of Five Constant Virtues by Four Translators.

Source Text	Target Text			
	James Legge	Arthur Waley	Roger T. Ames	Burton Watson
<i>r ń</i> (benevolence)	virtue (66)			
	benevolence (4)	good (49)	authoritative (71)	
	beneficence (2)	wicked (2)	lack in character (1)	humane (66)
	principle (2)	human (1)	the perverse (3)	
	humanity (2)			
<i>y ì</i> (righteousness)	good (1)			
	right (4)	right (12)		
	righteous (16)	righteous (3)	appropriate (24)	rightness (8)
	just (1)	wrong (1)	inappropriate (1)	right (9)
	duty (2)	just (1)		

Source Text	Target Text				
	James Legge	Arthur Waley	Roger T. Ames	Burton Watson	
<i>lǐ</i> (propriety)		duty (1)			
		right or wrong (1)			
		propriety (52)	ritual (54)	ritual propriety (59)	
		proper (1)	rite (3)	ritual (2)	ritual (54)
		ceremony (12)	order (1)	rite (4)	rite (14)
		regulation (2)	rituals (4)	noble (1)	
			know (46)		
			wise (21)		
			realize (1)		
			understand (14)	realize (13)	
<i>zhì</i> (wisdom)	know (73)	see (1)	wise (22)		
	knowledge (15)	hear (1)	know (30)		
	wise (16)	find (1)	acknowledge (4)	wise (10)	
	perceive (2)	expert (1)	understand (1)	understand (47)	
	recognize (3)	sure (1)	aware (1)	know (47)	
	understand (2)	conscious (1)	sure (1)	ignorant (1)	
	take no note of (2)	recognize (11)	notice (1)	realize (1)	
	fool (1)	teach (1)	recognize (3)	aware (1)	
	be aware of (2)	fill out (1)	provide with (1)		
	acquaint (1)	get through (1)	appreciate (4)		
<i>xìn</i> (faithfulness)		is quite right about (1)	fool (1)		
		full (1)			
		idea (1)			
		believe (1)			
		believe (3)			
	true (1)	trust (5)			
	truthful (1)	faithful (5)	make good on one's word (1)	true (1)	
	truthfulness (2)	faith (8)	confidence (3)	trust (4)	
	sincere and truthful (1)	confidence (2)	commitment (2)	trustworthy (14)	
	faith (4)	fact (1)	adequate (1)	faith (2)	
faithful and sincere (1)	carry out words (1)	believe (1)	believe (1)		
confide (2)	observe promises (1)	earnest (2)	confident (1)		
assure (1)	keep promises (6)	trust and confidence (1)	sincere (1)		
give credit (1)	stand by one's word (1)	honesty (2)	insincere (1)		
sincere (7)	break promises (1)				
sincerity (8)	trustworthy (1)				
believe (7)					

Table 2 compares how four translators, James Legge, Arthur Waley, Roger T. Ames, and Burton Watson translate the five constant virtues from *The Analects*, revealing differing emphases and interpretations.

For *rén*, Legge frequently uses “virtue”, focusing on moral evaluation, while Waley’s choice of “good” suggests an abstract ideal. Ames’s use of “authoritative” introduces a social

dimension, implying authority in moral behavior. In contrast, Watson’s “humane” highlights empathy and benevolence in personal conduct, focusing on relational aspects.

In the translation of *yì* Legge’s use of “righteousness” indicates a strong moral tone, whereas Waley’s “right” suggests an absolute moral standard. Ames prefers “appropriate,” pointing to context-dependent ethics, while Watson uses

“rightness,” leaning towards a universal sense of correctness.

For *lǐ*, the term is often rendered as “ritual” by the translators. Legge and Waley expand its meaning to include “ritual propriety,” encompassing both ceremonial practices and broader social norms. Ames’s use of “ritual propriety” combines these ceremonial and social aspects, while Watson’s translations like “ritual decorum” and “rites” emphasize the structural order and social conventions inherent in *lǐ*.

Regarding *zhì* both Legge and Waley use “know” to convey the dual sense of being and the process of acquiring wisdom. Ames introduces “realize,” suggesting a continual journey towards understanding, while Watson’s term “understand” captures the internal comprehension and insight implied by *zhì*.

For *xùn*, which is associated with trustworthiness and sincerity, the translators take varying approaches. Legge emphasizes moral qualities with terms like “faithfulness,” “truthful,” and “sincere.” Waley emphasizes relational aspects using “trust” and “belief,” reflecting the concept’s interpersonal dimension. Ames uses action-oriented phrases like “make good on one’s word” and “trust,” focusing on fulfilling commitments and practical reliability. Watson prefers “trustworthy” and “faith,” stressing dependability and sincerity in human conduct.

Overall, each translator’s approach reflects distinct philosophical frameworks, as identified by previous scholars. James Legge employs a Victorian ethical lens, aligning Confucian ideas with Western virtues and a strong focus on morality [5, 13]. Arthur Waley presents a more relativistic and philosophical interpretation, blending moral ideals with practical human behavior [5]. Roger T. Ames emphasizes a pragmatic perspective, centering on social conduct and situational appropriateness [21]. Meanwhile, Burton Watson aims for clarity and accessibility, translating Chinese concepts into straightforward personal qualities. These varied perspectives underscore how each translator’s choices uniquely shape the conceptualization of the five virtues, highlighting moral, social, or relational dimensions.

4.2. Mapping the Constellation

The five constant virtues *rén*, *yì*, *lǐ*, *zhì*, *xùn* are characterized by their implicit representations, yet the concepts they encompass are polysemous. These concepts are linked through similar features in Confucianism, forming an open conceptual system. To illustrate this, please refer to the following Example 4 to Example 7 from *The Analects*:

Example 4

克己复礼为仁。（《论语 颜渊》12: 1）

To subdue oneself and return to propriety is benevolence.
[Literal Translation]

To subdue one’s self and return to propriety, is perfect virtue. [James Legge]

He who can himself submit to ritual is Good. [Arthur Waley]

Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety (li) one becomes authoritative in one’s conduct. [Roger T. Ames]

To master the self and return to ritual is to be humane.
[Watson Burton]

In Example 4, where *lǐ* (propriety) and *rén* (benevolence) are bridged, the source text suggests that personal efforts to control impulses and adhere to societal norms lead to a recognized state of moral development, understood as benevolence. The act of returning to propriety directly results in achieving benevolence. The source text presents a linear, cause-and-effect relationship in which engaging with societal rituals and norms is a pathway to cultivating personal virtue. The straightforward structure legitimizes the relationship between self-discipline and propriety as a natural, causal progression leading to benevolence.

In the target text, Legge introduces the term “perfect virtue,” expanding the concept from “benevolence” to a more holistic moral state. The use of a comma emphasizes the process as foundational to achieving this state. Legge extends the relationship by interpreting *lǐ* (propriety) not just as a step towards *rén* (benevolence) but as an essential component of achieving “perfect virtue.” This implies that *lǐ* is part of a broader moral excellence, indicating that social rituals and personal virtues are inseparably linked, involving both internal and external changes. Waley simplifies the connection between ritual and good, suggesting an almost automatic transformation where moral goodness results passively from submitting to social norms, offering a clear and accessible pathway to being “Good.” Ames, in contrast, emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between self-discipline and ritual, where they continuously interact. Observing *lǐ* leads to an authoritative moral stature, implying personal virtue is validated through public conduct. Watson depicts a linear development from self-mastery through ritual to humaneness, presenting a balanced path to moral virtue. The term “master” suggests a higher level of control than merely subduing oneself, while “humane” aligns with the Confucian ideal of *rén*, emphasizing compassion and empathy.

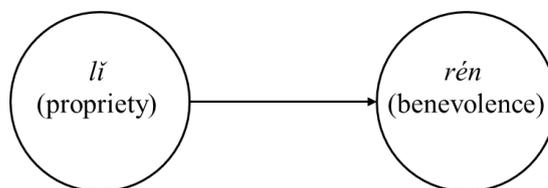


Figure 1. Constellation maps of *lǐ* and *rén* by the four translators.

When conceptualizing the cultural keywords within their philosophical context, all translations reflect the same constellation pattern (as shown in Figure 1). However, in terms of legitimation and meaning making, each translation frames the concepts differently. Waley’s translation promotes an individual-centric perspective, legitimizing goodness as an outcome of personal choice and submission, emphasizing an

accessible and straightforward path to moral development. Legge legitimizes propriety through a traditional view, where moral development is the result of a complex interplay between internal discipline and adherence to societal norms, achieving a holistic moral state. Ames's translation aligns with a perspective that sees Confucianism as guiding leadership and social influence, legitimizing propriety as essential to the transformation of personal virtues into social responsibilities. Burton emphasizes personal ethical development, legitimizing self-mastery and ritual as pathways to humaneness, positioning individual virtue as foundational to social harmony and interpersonal relationships.

Example 5

人而不仁，如礼何？人而不仁，如乐何？（《论语·八佾》

3.3）

If a person is not benevolent, what use are rituals to them?

If a person is not benevolent, what use is music to them?
[Literal Translation]

If a man be without the virtues proper to humanity, what has he to do with the rites of propriety? If a man be without the virtues proper to humanity, what has he to do with music?
[James Legge]

*A man who is not Good, what can he have to do with ritual?
A man who is not Good, what can he have to do with music?*
[Arthur Waley]

What has a person who is not authoritative (ren) got to do with observing ritual propriety (li)? What has a person who is not authoritative got to do with the playing of music (yue)
[Roger T. Ames]

A human being who lacks humaneness—what is ritual to someone like that? A human being who lacks humaneness—what is music to someone like that? [Burton Watson]

In Example 5, Confucius addresses the relationship between *rén* (benevolence), *lǐ* (ritual) and *yuè* (music), positioning *rén* as essential for appreciating music and suggesting that without this virtue, music lacks deeper significance. Legge's translation reinforces the legitimation of *rén* by balancing the relationship between ritual and music, suggesting that both are interdependent expressions of virtue. Waley also draws parallels but simplifies the terminology, framing *rén* and *lǐ* as more universally relatable concepts, which makes the Confucian ideas more accessible but may dilute their cultural specificity. Ames emphasizes the active practice of *lǐ* and its connection to moral authority, reinforcing a hierarchical constellation where the enactment of rituals signifies one's moral standing. Meanwhile, Watson's translation personalizes ritual and music, implying that only those who truly embody *rén* can fully understand or perform these practices, thereby grounding the virtues in personal experience. Each translator legitimizes these concepts in distinct ways, thereby shaping the constellation of *rén*, *lǐ*, and *yuè* through varying emphases on cultural expectations, moral hierarchy, and human significance, as shown in Figure 2.

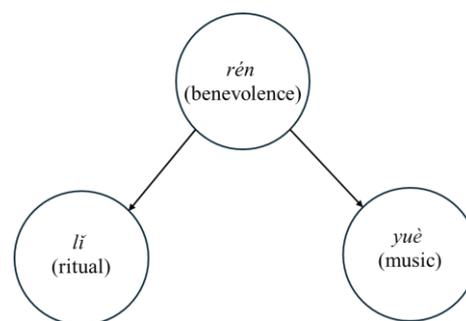


Figure 2. Constellation maps of *rén*, *lǐ* and *yuè* by the four translators.

Example 6

仁者安仁，知者利仁。（《论语·里仁》4: 2）

The benevolent find comfort in benevolence; the knowledgeable profit from benevolence. [Literal Translation]

The virtuous rest in virtue; the wise desire virtue. [James Legge]

The Good Man rests content with Goodness; he that is merely wise pursues Goodness in the belief that it pays to do so. [Arthur Waley]

Authoritative persons are content in being authoritative; wise persons (zhī 知) nourish in it. [Roger T. Ames]

The humane person rests in humaneness, the wise person profits from humaneness. [Burton Watson]

In Example 6, where Confucius discusses the benevolent person, the source text uses clear parallelism to balance concepts of *rén* (benevolence) and *zhì* (wisdom). Legge and Waley legitimize *rén* as a higher state of being, positioning it above the pursuits of wisdom. In their translations, *rén* is something that the virtuous already possesses, while the wise strive towards it, implying a hierarchical relationship between the virtues. Ames offers a more integrated view, where *rén* is an active process that “nourishes” *zhì* legitimizing *rén* as essential to the growth of wisdom and thus creating a more balanced constellation. Watson and the literal translation suggest that *rén* serves multiple roles: it is both comforting for the benevolent and profitable for the wise. Watson's use of “rest” and “profit” highlights the personal and pragmatic aspects of *rén*, legitimizing it as both a source of inner fulfillment and external gain. The constellation of *rén* and *zhì* varies in these translations, with each framing offering a different perspective on the relationship between moral and intellectual virtues.

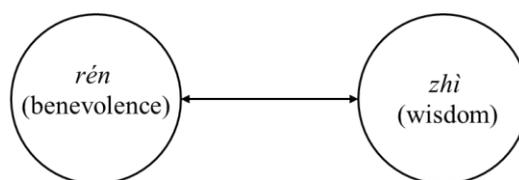


Figure 3. Constellation maps of *rén* and *zhì* by the four translators.

Example 7

君子义以为质，礼以行之，孙以出之，信以成之。君子哉！（《论语·卫灵公》15: 18）

A gentleman considers righteousness as his substance, propriety as his way of practice, humility as the way of expression, and trustworthiness as the way of achieving it. This is what makes a gentleman! [literal translation]

The superior man in everything considers righteousness to be essential. He performs it according to the rules of propriety. He brings it forth in humility. He completes it with sincerity. This is indeed a superior man. [James Legge]

The gentleman who takes the right as his material to work upon and ritual as the guide in putting what is right into practice, who is modest in setting out his projects and faithful in carrying them to their conclusion, he indeed is a true gentleman. [Arthur Waley]

Having a sense of appropriate conduct (yi) as one's basic disposition (zhi), developing it in observing ritual propriety (li), expressing it with modesty, and consummating it in making good on one's word (xin): this then is an exemplary person (junzi). [Roger T. Ames]

The gentleman makes rightness the substance, practices it through ritual, displays it with humility, brings it to completion with trustworthiness. That's the gentleman. [Burton Watson]

In Example 7, Confucius discusses what makes a *jūnzǐ* (gentleman) and how this quality relates to the virtues of *yì* (righteousness), *lǐ* (propriety), *xù* (humility), and *xìn* (faithfulness). The source text presents a logical and linear progression, with each virtue introduced to elaborate on the characteristics of a gentleman. This sequence moves from righteousness as substance, to propriety as practice, humility as expression, and trustworthiness as achievement.

However, James Legge's translation introduces the phrase "in everything," which emphasizes the comprehensive nature of righteousness, suggesting that it encompasses all actions of a gentleman. This interpretation creates a hierarchical structure where righteousness acts as the overarching principle, with other virtues functioning as its subordinate expressions. In contrast, Arthur Waley's translation emphasizes "projects" and a process-oriented journey, presenting righteousness as a tool actively used in shaping a gentleman's character to completion. This approach highlights a developmental pathway, focusing on the dynamic process of becoming, rather than a fixed state of being. Meanwhile, Roger T. Ames' translation underscores a layered progression from internal disposition to outward practice, using terms like "developing," "expressing," and "consummating" to imply that becoming a gentleman is a continuous and interconnected process. This contrasts with other translations that focus more on substance and completion. Similarly, Burton Watson's translation adopts a parallel sentence structure, offering a clear, step-by-step transformation from core virtue (righteousness) to action (ritual), to expression (humility), and finally to outcome (trustworthiness). This structure creates a cohesive and cumulative progression, reinforcing a natural alignment between the virtues.

The textual analysis reveals differences in how each element is presented. However, the constellation analysis shows that all versions frame the character of a *jūnzǐ* (gentleman) as rooted in a core virtue of righteousness, with each translation highlighting different aspects of how these virtues are practiced, expressed, and fulfilled (see Figure 4). The legitimation of each cultural keyword depends on how the translator prioritizes the relationship between substance (righteousness), practice (ritual), expression (humility), and fulfilment (trustworthiness).

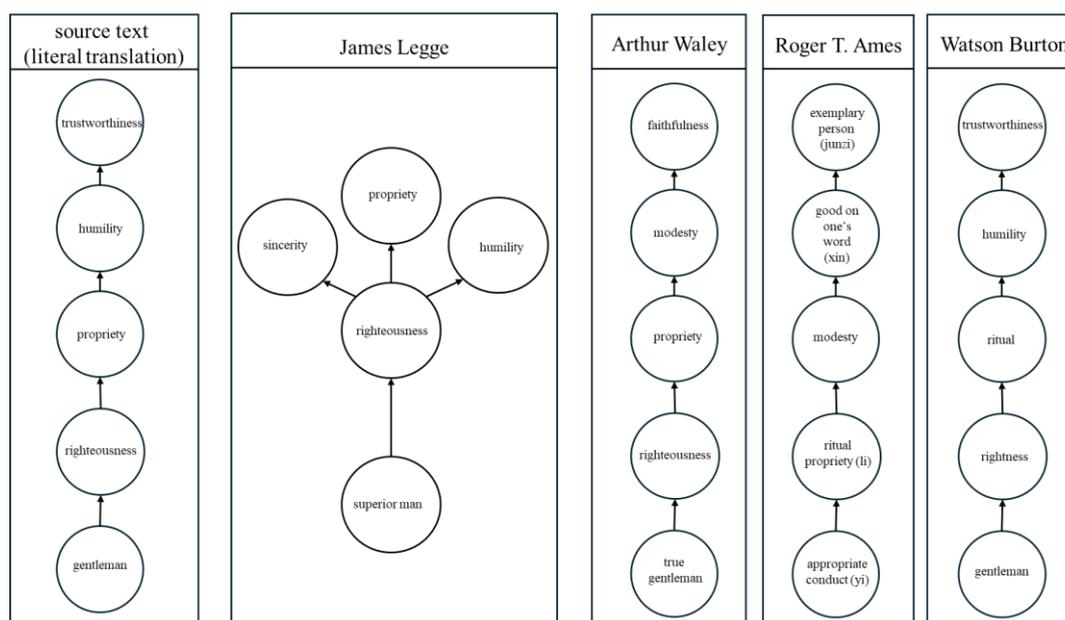


Figure 4. Constellation maps of *jūnzǐ* (gentleman), *yì* (righteousness), *lǐ* (propriety), *xùn* (humility), and *xìn* (faithfulness) by the four translators.

The examples in this section reveal that while the representations of individual virtues vary across translations, they form a complex constellation where each virtue is interconnected within a larger moral framework. The constellations mapped by the translators show both stability in simpler dyadic relationships and flexibility in complex multi-virtue networks. Each translator's approach to interpreting these virtues contributes to a distinct mapping of Confucian ideals, shaping how the virtues are understood and practiced within the context of English translations. The constellation analysis thus uncovers how Confucian cultural keywords are translated, legitimizing and contextualizing the virtues within broader philosophical discourses.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how the five constant virtues (*rén*, *yì*, *lǐ*, *zhì* and *xìn*) in *The Analects* are conceptualized, interrelated, and legitimized in English translations. The analysis addressed how these virtues are formed and related in translation, the variations in their conceptual interrelations, and how translators across historical periods have structured and legitimized these key concepts. Using a corpus-based approach and LCT's constellation analysis, the study sheds light on how Confucian virtues have been interpreted and adapted over time in English-speaking contexts.

The study reveals that the five constant virtues are translated with variations that reflect each translator's cultural background and philosophical orientation. Simple pairings of virtues, such as *rén* (benevolence) and *yì* (righteousness), are rendered with greater consistency, indicating stable relationships within these translations. However, as the complexity of the constellation increases, namely incorporating multiple virtues, the translations show greater variability, reflecting diverse conceptual mappings of the full network of Confucian virtues. Another noticeable trend is the reduced variation in translations over time, pointing to a stabilization of understanding these virtues' meanings and relationships. Earlier translations offer a wider range of terms and interpretations, influenced by cultural differences and the unfamiliarity of Confucian concepts in English. Over time, later translations converge more on established terms, leading to a relatively unified interpretation in the target culture. This suggests that translations are subject to diachronic changes and may evolve toward consensus, which raises important questions about the balance between innovation and adherence to established norms in translation practice.

To address the research question regarding constellation and legitimation, the results show a trend towards a more unified constellation, where simpler relationships among virtues are consistently represented across translations. However, when translating the more complex interrelations of all five virtues, each translator provides a unique interpretation, reflecting different strategies for legitimation and con-

ceptualization. Earlier translators like James Legge align Confucian virtues with Western moral and religious ideals, focusing on individual moral qualities. In contrast, later translators such as Roger T. Ames and Burton Watson adopt a more holistic approach, framing the virtues as interdependent elements within a broader moral framework. This shift indicates a developing engagement with Confucian philosophy, evolving from a view of the virtues as discrete moral terms to their understanding as part of a cohesive ethical constellation. Additionally, the findings suggest that translations undergo diachronic changes, evolving toward a more stabilized interpretation. This raises questions about how translators balance innovation with adherence to established norms as they contribute to the evolving conceptualization of Confucian virtues over time.

One limitation of this study is that the database includes only a selection of representative translations, which may restrict the ability to fully capture the trends of conceptualization over time. For a more comprehensive analysis, future research should expand the corpus to include a wider range of translations. Additionally, to deepen the understanding of how the five constant virtues are legitimized through translation, future studies could incorporate the English translations of *Mencius* and compare these conceptualizations with those found in *The Analects*.

In summary, the study finds that while there is growing consistency in the English conceptualization of the five constant virtues, significant variations remain in how different translators navigate and interpret the constellation of virtues, particularly in more complex relationships. This underscores the nature of translation as a process of evolving legitimation. As a deeply interpretive act, translation is influenced by cultural context, shifting norms, and philosophical frameworks. Constellation analysis allows for a detailed examination of how concepts are mapped, legitimized, and stabilized in translation over time, enhancing the understanding of how philosophical ideas move across cultures and emphasizing translation as a dynamic act of meaning-making.

Abbreviations

LCT Legitimation Code Theory

Author Contributions

Shiwei Fu is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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