

The Cultural Imagery of Junzi in the English Translation of the Analects

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Abstract: As a classic of Confucianism, *the Analects* carries the core values of Chinese culture. Junzi is an extremely important cultural image in *the Analects* and represents an ideal personality standard in Confucian culture. This article combines the original text of *the Analects* and James Legge's English translation of *the Analects* to provide some explanation of Junzi's character. The traits exhibited by Junzi image are worthy of our high pursuit to achieve inner peace and self-improvement.

Keywords: English translation of *the Analects*; James Legge; Image of Junzi

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The Analects, as a classic of Confucianism, is a pioneer in spreading Chinese culture, influencing generations and inheriting the noble ideals of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith. As a significant cultural image in this work, the term "Junzi" makes people realize the supreme wisdom contained in the Analects when it constantly refers to "Junzi."

The term "Junzi" originated in ancient China and first appeared in classic texts such as *Book of Changes* and *The Book of songs*. *The Book of Documents* also mentions, "When Junzi holds office, Xiaoren remains in the wilderness." Literally, "Jun" refers to a monarch or someone with power, while "zi" is a respectful title for people, usually referring to virtuous individuals or scholars. Therefore, in these classics, the political significance of "Junzi" is substantial, typically referring to the ruling class of nobles. However, Confucius interpreted the term "Junzi" from his own perspective, making it a pursuit of his ideal personality. In James Legge's *The Chinese Classics*, the English translation of the *Analects* is a significant component, where the author demonstrates his unique understanding of the term "Junzi."

1. Brief Overview of the Term "Junzi" in the English Translation of *the Analects*

"Junzi" runs through the entire Analects. It explains in detail the virtues and behaviors, governance philosophy and moral standards, etiquette and behavioral norms, cultivation and behavior, ideals and pursuits of Junzi. In the English translation, Legge tends to translate "Junzi" as "superior man," which can be understood as "a person with noble moral qualities."

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In fact, “Junzi” appearing in *the Analects* can roughly be divided into two categories—one is a symbolic representation of personality, and the other is a truly virtuous person. In “Xue Er,” it states, “Junzi does not seek to be full when eating, nor does he seek comfort in his dwelling. He is quick in action and cautious in speech.” Legge translates this as “He who aims to be a man of complete virtue in his food does not seek to gratify his appetite, nor in his dwelling place does he seek the appliances of ease.” Here, Legge uses “man of complete virtue” to refer to Junzi. Combining this with “Shu Er,” which says, “A sage it is not mine to see; could I see a man of real talent and virtue, that would satisfy me.” we can understand that “Junzi does not seek to be full when eating” symbolizes a symbolic representation of Junzi’s personality, representing the pursuit of an ideal personality. Therefore, Legge’s translation of “man of complete virtue” as a perfect existence aligns with the original intent to some extent.

Furthermore, in *the Analects*, “Junzi” often contrasts sharply with “Xiaoren.” Its purpose is to highlight the noble qualities of Junzi. For example, in the original text, “Junzi is broad-minded, while Xiaoren is always worried.” In *the Analects*, “Xiaoren” does not refer to morally corrupt people but rather those who are overly concerned with immediate benefits and lack great aspirations. When translating such people, Legge deeply understood the meaning in the original text, so he did not translate “Xiaoren” as “fool,” but more commonly used “small man” without any derogatory connotation, indicating the mundane life and lack of achievements in a Xiaoren’s life. Comparing such ordinary people with Junzi highlights the preciousness of Junzi’s qualities.

In Legge’s English translation, there is a typical case of contrasting Junzi with Xiaoren: “The superior man thinks of virtue; the small man thinks of comfort.” Junzi has a heart for the world, a broad vision, and high morals. In contrast, Xiaoren is preoccupied with their homeland, calculating favors, and considering personal livelihood. Here, the translator translates “morality” as “virtue” and “soil” as “comfort,” which interprets the meaning of “Junzi thinks of virtue, while Xiaoren thinks of comfort” in the original text: “Junzi has a heart for the world, a broad vision, and high morals. In contrast, Xiaoren is preoccupied with their homeland, calculating favors, and considering personal livelihood.”

2. Examining the Spiritual Qualities of Junzi Image

In the previous section, I provided a brief description of the cultural image of “Junzi.” In Legge’s English translation, how this cultural image of “Junzi” is explained cannot merely remain superficial but requires in-depth study.

What makes one a Junzi is most importantly the broad-mindedness that differs from Xiaoren, which enables one to attain a unique spiritual realm of being a Junzi. “At fifty, I knew my decrees of Heaven.” This sentence originally means “At fifty, I understood the will of Heaven.” Here, “understanding the will of Heaven” does not refer to the true meaning of “heavenly decree.” Heavenly will transcends the material realm, and despite human attempts to understand and pursue it over thousands of years, its ethereal nature remains unchanged. As a renowned thinker of the Pre-Qin period, Confucius certainly could not base his entire life on such an intangible foundation. What “heavenly decree” represents here is Junzi’s own life. Confucius believed that at fifty, one understands what they should do, sets firm goals, and becomes the master of their own life and destiny. This is something that Xiaoren cannot achieve. A Junzi should know that their fate should not be controlled by others but should control their own destiny; Xiaoren, however, only knows to struggle for sustenance throughout their life.

The Analects state, “Junzi is broad-minded, while Xiaoren is always worried.” Legge translates this as, “The superior man is satisfied and composed; the mean man is always full of distress.” At first glance, we might not fully understand this. If translated literally, it would be “Junzi is often calm and composed, while Xiaoren is always anxious and distressed.” Master Yiguo explains, “Generous, is the footnotes of the word ‘tang’ in the original text, which means to wait for fate calmly; this is the body of vigilance and caution. Apprehensive, is precisely the place of recklessness. Think about it.” In Master Pou Yi’s annotations, it points out that Junzi cultivates himself and maintains a peaceful

and contented state, hence the saying “broad-minded.” This means having a broad mind, composed demeanor, not being swayed by fame or profit, acting with integrity, and thus being a Junzi. Legge’s translation of “broad-minded” also has its connotations. As for “always worried,” Master Pou Yi’s annotation of “think about it” suggests that this is the result, while the cause is “always worried.” Because Xiaoren act unjustly for the sake of fame and profit, they are often anxious and fearful, hence the worry. Looking back at Legge’s translated text, “full of distress” is very similar to Xiaoren’s anxiety. Xiaoren are anxious, fearing losing what they have gained, so they often feel embarrassed or even suffer. Therefore, comparing the bilingual annotations, there is no significant difference. From Legge’s translation, we can see his sharp and profound expression, which is actually a warning to the reader: “Junzi stands on virtue and has inner peace; Xiaoren, due to inner turmoil, find it hard to be at peace. True wisdom and maturity lie in inner satisfaction and composure, not in external pursuit and anxiety.”

“The superior man understands what is right; the mean man understands what is profitable.” This translates “Junzi understands righteousness, while Xiaoren understands profit.” Considering “always worried,” it is clear that Xiaoren’s life cannot escape the word “profit.” However, we must also understand that “Riches and honor are what men desire; if they cannot be obtained in the right way, they should not be accepted.” “What men desire” indicates that wealth and honor are human desires, and Confucius does not reject wealth and honor. However, wealth must be acquired through proper channels. If one violates righteousness, profit will make one suffer—this is also the source of Xiaoren’s anxiety. Betraying what should be the basis for others’ praise or criticism, they suffer day and night, leading to anxiety. Thus, we can see that Junzi is not against profit, but compared to profit, what Junzi cannot abandon is righteousness and morality. One must know that sacrificing one’s life for righteousness is insignificant compared to righteousness, let alone profit. Therefore, Junzi will never abandon righteousness for petty gains. Junzi’s life creed is the reason for their “broad-mindedness.”

3. Examining the Worldly Standards of Junzi Image

As the saying goes, “Junzi cultivates himself through literature and governs the country through propriety.” Xunzi continued Confucius’ idea of ritual propriety, emphasizing that Junzi should enrich themselves with cultural knowledge. The Analects also expound on the worldly principles that Junzi should possess.

As the saying goes, “No gold is pure, and no man is perfect.” Even as a Junzi, as an individual in society, there are many flaws and shortcomings. “Junzi’s mistakes are like eclipses of the sun and moon: when they occur, everyone sees them; when they are corrected, everyone looks up to them.” Who can be without fault? The determination and courage Junzi shows in correcting mistakes are the reasons why they are respected by others. Therefore, one of Junzi’s principles in dealing with matters is to recognize their faults and bravely correct them. The English translation states, “The Master said, ‘To have faults and not to reform them—this, indeed, should be pronounced having faults.’” Making mistakes is not terrible; the real mistake is knowingly committing them and refusing to change, being stubborn. Therefore, Junzi should be humble and open to others’ advice; continuing to err or pretending not to hear is strictly forbidden for Junzi. “Can men refuse to assent to the words of strict admonition? But it is reforming the conduct because of them which is valuable.” This explains that one should listen to stern warnings and correct their mistakes accordingly. Additionally, wise words can be harsh, and even if they contain criticism, Junzi still needs to humbly accept them.

From this, another principle of Junzi in dealing with matters can be derived—calmness. The philosopher Zeng once said, “I daily exam myself on three points.” Zhu Xi derived from this, “Correct if you have faults; strive harder if you don’t.” The calmness of Junzi can be seen in their peaceful mindset. “Is he not a man of complete virtue, who feels no discomposure though men may take no note of him?” In this sentence, the translator indicates that even if people pay no attention to him, he can still remain calm. This is the famous saying, “If others do not know me, am I not a gentleman?”

Junzi's calmness can also be reflected in their appropriate approach to dealing with matters. "There is nothing to be done, yet everything can be done." In the course of a Junzi's life, they will inevitably need to master the art of diplomacy and interact with all sorts of people. Therefore, when interacting with others, Junzi often associates without forming factions. "The friendship of Junzi is as light as water" also contains this layer of philosophy. As the saying goes, "Junzi is harmonious but not identical, while Xiaoren is identical but not harmonious." The Master said, "The superior man is affable, but not adulatory; the mean man is adulatory, but not affable." Here, the translator translates "harmonious but not identical, identical but not harmonious" as "friendly but not flattering, flattering but not friendly." This translation fits the meaning of the original text very well. Junzi often maintains harmony and cordiality with those around them but has their own opinions on everything. As for Xiaoren, they often try to conform to others but often follow the crowd. Therefore, although Junzi finds it unavoidable to interact with all kinds of people, they do not need to force themselves when dealing with matters. "The philosopher Zeng said, 'The superior man on grounds of culture meets with his friends, and by friendship helps his virtue'" This emphasizes that Junzi should help each other and cultivate benevolence as the purpose of making friends. By making friends in this way, both parties benefit, which also reflects the worldliness attitude that Junzi should possess in Confucian culture.

4. Conclusion

In summary, in Legge's English translation of the Analects, it truly reflects the characteristics of Junzi in Confucian culture—broad-minded and calm. The cultural image of Junzi is not only a pursuit of ideal personality but also embodies the deep moral concepts in Chinese culture. Therefore, the basic qualities it exhibits should also be our high pursuit. With this, one can live uprightly and openly.

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