



Western Missionaries' Perception of the Confucian Notion of *Li*

Haeyoung Kim*

Abstract

This study aims to examine the perception of Confucian thought through an analysis of the translation terms of *li* 禮 in the Western missionaries' translations of the Four Books. *Li* is a key concept in Confucian philosophy, as the foundation of the philosophical system, and the procedures supporting it. Furthermore, *li* has significant religious connotations, particularly in ancestral rites and ceremonies. Therefore, the translation of *li* was important to the Western missionaries, and they struggled to find an appropriate translation for *li*. In this study, various translations made in Western languages were examined and classified according to the semantic characteristics of *li*.

In *The Doctrine of Mean*, the initially translated book, Jesuits missionaries focused on *li* as an external procedure, translating it as *ritus* or *ceremonia*. Later, in *The Analects* and *Mencius* translations, diverse translations emerged. First, *officium*, *ratio*, *modus*, and *honestas* represented that *li* must be based on *ren* 仁, requires internal morality, and is a component of human nature, the Four Sprouts. Next, *urbanitas* and *civilitas* reflected that *li* is one of the qualities that people of high status or social reputation have. Last, *decorum* and “propriety” emphasized that the ultimate goal of *li* means harmony. Due to difference in the scope of meaning between the translations and original concept of *li*, and the tendency of Protestants to avoid philosophical and religious term, “ceremony” and “propriety” eventually became the translation terms for *li* until today. This study demonstrates the process of translating *li* and its interpretation in the West, which represents Western understandings of the Confucian culture and the East.

Keywords: Confucian philosophy, *li* 禮, Jesuit missionaries, translation of the Four Books, Matteo Ricci, James Legge

* Haeyoung Kim is a researcher at the Institute of Youngnam Culture Research at Kyungpook National University in Daegu, Korea. E-mail: haeyoungkim44@gmail.com

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I. Introduction

Jesuit missionaries, beginning from their first missionary activities in China in the sixteenth century, translated the Four Books—*The Analects* (論語), *Mencius* (孟子), *The Great Learning* (大學), and *The Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸)—into Western languages. Based on the method of Jesuit missionaries, known as accommodationism, they tried to have Christianity permeate the local culture while understanding the local culture and customs, from simply donning Chinese clothing to translating the Confucian classics.¹ As one of the outcomes of the Jesuits' approach based on accommodationism, the translations of Confucian classics served not only as studying materials for missionaries who came to China but also as a window for the people in the West who had never been to China to explore the East. Subsequently, Protestant missionaries succeeded in their endeavors to lay the groundwork for Eastern studies in the West. As missionaries' translations have played an essential role in such cultural exchanges, this study focuses on the translations of the Confucian classics by Western missionaries to examine Western perception of Confucian thought.

Second, this paper selects the translation term of *li* 禮 as a research subject. This is because *li* is a key concept in Confucianism, and its importance is reflected in how Confucianism is also known as the *Lijiao* 禮教, or “Teaching of *Li*.” Moreover, *li* holds significant religious connotations, particularly in ancestral rites and ceremonies. For example, the *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字) defines the character *li* 禮 and its radicals *shi* 示 and *li* 豐 as follows²:

The character *li* 禮 means “implementation” (*lu* 履), that is, to offer sacrifices to obtain benediction. It is composed of *shi* 示 and *li* 豐, with *li* 豐 representing a sound.³

¹ Accommodationism reflects the identity of Christianity and strengthens faith through the culture of the mission field, contrary to imperialistic cultural policies. The latter aims to purify the incorrect culture of the mission field and utilize the correct culture as a means of evangelism.

² Translations are the author's own.

³ 禮,履也。所以事神致福也。从示从豐,豐亦聲。(Shuowen Jiezi 1)

The character *li* 禮 means “implementation” (*lu* 履), that is, to offer sacrifices to obtain benediction. It is composed of *shi* 示 and *li* 豐, with *li* 豐 representing a sound.

The character *shi* 示 means that the heavens cast shapes and show good and bad fortune to inform people. The component of *shi* is *er* 二. The three dangling elements from the sky are the sun, moon, and stars; People observed changes in the sky and used them to track seasonal changes. The component *shi* represents the work of the gods, and in all characters that contain *shi*, it functions as the semantic element.⁴ The character *li* 豊 means “artifacts for ritual practice.” The component of *li* is *dou* 豆, and it is a pictograph. In all characters that contain *li* 豊, it functions as the semantic element.⁵

As the explanation of the *Shuowen Jiezi* shows, the word *li* carries religious connotations related to heaven, gods, and ancestral rituals. In addition, the “Chinese rites controversy,” a dispute on the religiosity of Confucianism and Chinese rituals during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reflects how important the interpretation of *li* was to the Western missionary community. First, it is about how to designate God in Chinese. Second, it is about how to define worship service as either a superstitious practice or a mundane ritual regarding the ceremonies of ancestor worship (敬祖之禮), of Confucian sacrifice (祭孔之禮), and of worshipping heaven (祭天之禮). Due to the significant impacts of the controversy on their mission in China, as a result, the Jesuits were discharged, by which Christian missionary activities in China came to a halt.⁶ It reflects how important the interpretation of *li* was to the Western missionary community.

After two defeats in the Opium Wars, China reopened its borders, allowing Protestant missionaries to begin missionary work in China. British and American missionaries began to be active in China, playing dual roles as both missionaries and scholars, laying the foundations for Western Chinese studies.

⁴ 示,天垂象,見吉凶,所以示人也。从二,三垂,日月星也。觀乎天文,以察時變。示,神事也。凡示之屬皆从示。(Shuowen Jiezi 1)

⁵ 豊,行禮之器也。从豆象形,凡豊之屬皆从豊。(Shuowen Jiezi 9)

⁶ In 1742, Pope Benedict XIV declared in his decree (*Ex quo singulari*) that traditional Chinese rituals could not be allowed in Christianity. In response, the Chinese emperor expelled Jesuit missionaries from China and banned missionary activity. There have been studies on the Jesuit missionary's Rites controversy. Representative books include *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning* (Mungello 1994) and *The Rites Controversy in the Early Modern World* (Zupanov and Fabre 2018).

Although there are prior studies on missionaries' translation texts, they have primarily focused on translations done by specific translators or missionary societies such as Jesuits and Protestant missionaries. For example, Thierry Meynard (2011), Luisa M. Paternicò (2017), Michele Ferrero (2019), and Luo Ying (2014, 2015a, 2015b) have revealed the characteristics of the translated terms used in each Latin text. Li Xin-de (2015) studied a broad range of translated works; however, his study did not include a discussion of specific translation terms. On the other hand, in the sphere of Protestant missionaries' translation, previous research has predominantly centered on the translations done by James Legge. While Legge made significant contributions to the Western translations of Chinese classics, it would be premature to view his translations as the sole origin or standard without a thorough investigation into earlier translations. In this regard, this study proposes that the translations of Protestant missionaries, including Legge, may have been influenced by Latin translations of Jesuit missionaries. Studies on Western translations of Chinese classics still need comprehensive accounts of the historical process.

Therefore, this paper investigates the translation of *li* in Western translations of the Four Books and analyzes characteristics of the terms used in translations as well as the process of settling down the translation terms. Furthermore, it aims to shed light on the Western missionaries' perception of Confucian thought and contribute to understanding the cultural exchange between the East and the West.

II. Translations of the Four Books

In Confucian philosophy, the Four Books—*The Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean*—are highly significant. These four texts reflect the ethical and philosophical principles of ancient Chinese, emphasizing moral development and social harmony. In addition, Western missionaries recognized the importance of the Four Books and were able to bequeath many translated texts. Western missionary translations of Chinese classics continued for about 200 years, from Jesuit missionaries to James Legge, and of course, they are

still underway. This study confines the scope of the study to Legge's work.

The following is a list of translations of books left by Western missionaries.

- (1) Ignatio da Costa and Prospero Intorcetta. 1662. *Sapientia Sinica*.⁷
- (2) Prospero Intorcetta. [1667] 1669. *Sinarum Scientia Politico-moralis*.⁸
- (3) Philippe Couplet. 1687. *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus sive Scientia Sinesis*.⁹
- (4) François Noël. 1711. *Sinensis Imperii Libri Classici Sex*.¹⁰
- (5) Angelo Zottoli. 1879. *Cursus litteraturæ sinicæ: neo-missionaries accommodates*.¹¹
- (6) Joshua Marshman. 1809. *The Works of Confucius; Containing the Original Text, with a Translation, Vol. 1. (to which is prefixed a dissertation on the Chinese language and character)*.¹²
- (7) David Collie. 1828. *The Chinese Classical Work Commonly Called the Four Books*.¹³
- (8) James Legge. [1861] 1960. *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*. Vol. 1 of *The Chinese Classics (with a translation, critical and exegetical notes, prolegomena, and copious indexes)*.
- (9) James Legge. 1861. *The Works of Mencius*. Vol. 2 of *The Chinese Classics (with a translation, critical and exegetical notes, prolegomena, and copious indexes)*.

⁷ Da Costa taught the Four Books to missionaries who entered China, and one of his students, Intorcetta, listened to the lecture and recorded the contents, which was published in Jianchang (建昌). For details on the translation process of the text, see Thierry Meynard (2011, 10–11). This paper references the digital version provided by the University of Vienna, Austria (da Costa and Intorcetta 1662).

⁸ This study uses two versions. One is Intorcetta (1667), a digital version provided by the Munich Digitization Center (MDZ) that was translated into Korean by Ahn Jaewon. The other is the published version (1669), edited by Rodney Lokaj and Alessandro Tosco (2021).

⁹ This paper references the Internet Archive digital version (Couplet 1687) and the English translation by Thierry Meynard (2011).

¹⁰ This paper references the Google Books digital version (Noel 1711).

¹¹ This paper references the Internet Archive digital version (Zottoli 1879).

¹² This paper references the Google Books digital version (Marshman 1809).

¹³ This paper references the Internet Archive digital version (Collie 1828).

The first part of the Jesuit missionaries' translations (1)–(5) were all written in Latin. Ignatio da Costa (1603–1666) and Prospero Intorcetta (1625–1696) translated *The Great Learning* and half of *The Analects*. Their translation was the first published book among the Four Books translated by Jesuit missionaries. Philippe Couplet (1623–1693) revised and supplemented the earlier translations; his translation included translations of *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and *The Analects*. It was published in Paris with the support of Louis XIV. It is considered one of the most significant academic achievements of the Jesuit missionaries. François Noël (1651–1729) completed the translation of the Four Books, including *Mencius*. He published *Sinensis Imperii Libri Classici Sex* (1711) in Prague. In addition to the Four Books, he also translated *The Classic of Filial Piety* (孝經) and *The Small Learning* (小學) and included a total of six volumes. About 100 years after the dissolution of the Society of Jesuits in China, Angelo Zottoli published *Cursus litteraturæ sinicæ: neo-missionariis accommodates* (1879), a Latin translation of Chinese classics and literature, including the Four Books. It was the last Latin translation by Jesuit missionaries.

In addition, this study also references the translation of Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607). He completed the translation of the Four Books in 1588 and intended to publish it in Rome; however, only part of it was handed down as a manuscript without publishing.¹⁴

After the Opium Wars, Protestant missionaries also worked on translations of Chinese classics and left behind the following translations. Joshua Marshman (1768–1837) was the first to translate *The Analects* into English and later translated *The Great Learning*, adding the translation manuscript as an appendix to his Chinese grammar book. David Collie (1791–1828) and Legge translated all the Four Books. Legge's translation, in particular, contains an extensive amount of critical interpretation and commentary, as mentioned in the title.

¹⁴ Ahn Jaewon (2021) included Ruggieri's translation of *The Doctrine of the Mean*, which is referenced in this. However, it was not listed above because the primary sources could not be verified. It is also possible that other translations were overlooked due to limitations in the current research. If additional texts are found, they will be examined in future work. For more detailed information on each translation, including the background, translator, and translation process, see Thierry Meynard (2011).

Therefore, it has laid the foundation for Sinology in the West.

The translations by the Jesuit and Protestant missionaries differ in the target languages of Latin and English. Although the translations may carry different meanings between these two related target languages, we will discuss both the Latin and English-translated terms together.

III. The Variety of Translations of *Li*

The concept of *li* is significant but elusive in the philosophy of Confucius. Thus, the missionaries had trouble finding a translation for *li* and commented on the difficulty as follows:

It is often exceedingly difficult to find an appropriate word for *Ly*, the term in the text, the general idea it suggests, is that of reason applied to governments and the manners and custom of life, hence reason, propriety, politeness, urbanity, good manners will often express the idea, while no one of them can be used invariably. (Marshman 1809, 145)

Li is not easily rendered in another language. There underlies it the idea of what is proper. It is the fitness of things (事之宜) what reason calls for in the performance of duties toward superior beings, and between man and man. Our term "ceremonies" comes near meaning here. (James Legge 1861, 143)

As the two translators mentioned above, *li* is difficult to translate and define with a single word. However, given that Protestant missionaries could have access to the previous translated works of Jesuit missionaries, it can be inferred that Jesuit missionaries faced greater challenges in translating *li*.

One reason is that early Jesuit missionaries showed a tendency to attempt various translation terms. Among the Four Books, *li* appears 18 times in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, 75 times in *The Analects*, 67 times in *Mencius*, and zero times in *The Great Learning*. Ruggieri used *ritus*, *ceremonia*, *officium*, and *ratio* in his translation of *The Doctrine of the Mean*. Given that *The Doctrine of the Mean* is a short text and the

frequency of the term *li* is not particularly high, there was a relative variety of translation terms used by the translator. It was part of his efforts to convey the various aspects of the meaning of *li*. However, these translations were used within a single text, even without the original Chinese characters included, making it difficult for their readers to grasp the concept of *li*. In this chapter, the usage and succession of each translation term are examined. The order of translations listed below is based on time and frequency of their appearance.

Ruggieri commonly translated *li* as *ritus* and *ceremonia* in his translations. For instance, *tianzi zhili* 天子之禮 as *regiis ceremoniis* (“royal ceremony”), *liyue* 禮樂 as *ritus et musica* (“rite and music”), and *jiaoshe zhi li* 郊社之禮 as *ritus sacrificandi regi caeli et terrae* (“rite of sacrifice to the king of heaven and earth”).

Ritus was the earliest and most frequently used term for translation *li* in Latin translations. Da Costa and Intorcetta (1662), Intorcetta ([1667] 1669), Couplet (1687), Noël (1711), and Zottoli (1879) commonly translated *li* as *ritus*. However, the term “rite” is not commonly used in English translations. For example, Marshman (1809) never translated *li* as “rite,” and Collie (1828) used “rite” only five times in his translation of *The Doctrine of the Mean* and only twice in *The Analects*. Legge employed “rite” in the book’s title, *The Book of Rites* (禮記), and, only once, translated *li* as “the rites of propriety” in *The Analects*.

On the other hand, although Ruggieri translated *li* as *ceremonia*, other Jesuits in later periods hardly ever used *ceremonia* for *li* in Latin translations. Except for Couplet (1687), who used *ceremonia* twice, Costa and Intorcetta (1662), Intorcetta ([1667] 1669), Noël (1711), and Zottoli (1879) did not use *ceremonia* as the translation for *li*. As explained above, Latin translations more commonly used *ritus* and rarely *ceremonia*. Conversely, in English, *li* is generally translated as “ceremony.” In translations of Collie (1828) and Legge (1861), “ceremony” is the most frequently used translation word.

Ruggieri also translated *li* as *officium* and rendered *liyi* 禮儀 as *humanitatis officiis* (human duty). *Yi* also means “ceremony” or “model,” so the word *liyi* is a single term compound term consisting of two synonymous characters. Later, Intorcetta ([1667] 1669) translated *liyi* as *rituum et officiorum* (rite and duty). Strictly speaking, among the

two characters of *liyi*, the former, *li*, was translated as *ritus*, and the latter, *yi*, was translated as *officium*. Later, *officium* was often used as a translation term of *li*. Examples can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of *Officiorum* as a Translation of *Li*

Costa and Intorcetta (1662)	<i>officioru et urbanitatis</i>
Intorcetta ([1667] 1669)	<i>ritus et urbanitatis official</i> <i>pietatis officium, rationem officii,</i> <i>urbanitatis official</i>
Couplet (1687)	<i>ritus et urbanitatis official</i> <i>rituum, officiorum</i> <i>officioru et urbanitatis</i> <i>officiorum lex</i> <i>pietatis officium</i>
Noël (1711)	<i>externa rituum & urbanitatum official</i> <i>urbanitatis official</i> <i>rituum leges & honestatis officia</i>
Zottoli (1879)	<i>officiorum</i> <i>officiorum leges</i>

Costa and Intorcetta (1662), and Couplet (1687) often used *officium*. It was commonly combined with words like *urbanitas*, *ritus*, and *ratio* and composed as a compound word.

Officium is a Latin word with various meanings, including “duty,” “obligation,” “kindness,” “service,” “office,” “courtesy,” “ceremony,” and the like. *Officium* reminded its readers of Cicero's *De officiis*. Cicero translated the Greek *kathekon* (καθηκον), which meant “what it belongs to us to do,” or “what accords with our nature,” into *officium* in Latin. In Cicero's philosophy, *officium* referred to moral and ethical duties that individuals should observe. Accordingly, the translation *officium* implied that the practice of *li* was rooted in inner virtue and moral self-cultivation.

Intorcetta also emphasized that *li* encompassed not only cultural rituals but also all the rules of the state and the most important virtues, arguing that *li* is meaningful only when grounded in virtue (Ahn 2021,

349). The translation term *officium* highlighted the moral and ethical aspects of *li*, in contrast to the terms such as “rite” and “ceremony,” which focused on external formalities.

Ruggieri also employed *ratio* as a translation for *li*. Examples are as follows:

- (1) 宗廟之禮，所以序昭穆也。... (*The Doctrine of the Mean* 19.4)

Ruggieri: In regio templo sacrificiorum tempore ita cultus et humanitatis *ratio* habebatur, ut ordine sederet. . . ,

Legge (1861): By means of the ceremonies of the central temple, they distinguished the royal kindred according to their order of descent.

- (2) 齊明盛服，非禮不動，所以修身也。 (*The Doctrine of the Mean* 20.19)

Ruggieri: Intus sincera virtus, extra ornatus et cultus in vestitu et actionibus, nihil fieri sine ratione, tria haec pertinent ad omtimam vitam et morum constitutionem.

Legge (1861): Self-adjustment and purification, with careful regulation of his dress, and the not making a movement contrary to the rules of propriety, this is the way for a ruler to cultivate his person.

Ruggieri translated *li* in the above sentences as *ratio*. In (1), the function of *li* is to establish a standard for determining seating arrangements based on the status and kinship of those participating in the ritual. In (2), *li* is the moral standard for conduct based on rational judgment and morality. It represents that application of *li* to each individual varies. Subsequent Latin translations more often used *ratio* as a translation for *li*.

- (3) 君子博學於文，約之以禮，亦可以弗畔矣夫。 (*The Analects* 6.27)

Couplet (1687): Verus Philosophus amplissimo quodam versatur studio in libris scientiisque omnibus; Omnia examinans restringit exigitque ad regulam rectae rationis. Et sic quidem fieri poterit, ut is a veritate ac virtute nunquam declinet.

Legge (1861): The Master said, "By extensively studying all learning, and keeping himself under the restraint of the rules of propriety, one may thus likewise not err from what is right."

(4) 博我以文, 約我以禮. (*The Analects* 9.11)

Couplet (1687): dilatabat animum meum praesidiis philosophiae suae, & restringens ad unum omnia, contrahebat me ad unam caelitus inditae rationis moderationem ac regulam.

Legge (1861): The Master, by orderly method, skillfully leads men on. He enlarged my mind with learning, and taught me the restraints of propriety.

Couplet frequently used *ratio* for *li*, for example, as "rule of right reason" in sentence (3) and as "one moderation and rule of reason divinely enrooted" in sentence (4).

Jesuit missionaries' use of *ratio* as a translation of *li* was derived from two main sources. First, Jesuit missionary societies were deeply influenced by Scholasticism, particularly by Thomas Aquinas, who emphasized the *ratio* to explain theological and philosophical concepts. Meynard (2011) also argued that the Jesuits followed their rationalist interpretation. Second, the Jesuit missionaries' translation of *li* as *ratio* was heavily influenced by the *Collected Commentaries on the Four Books* (四書集註) by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), who describes *li* as "the articulation of heavenly principles" (禮者, 天理之節文). Intorcetta (1667) and Couplet (1867) translated *li* as *coelo lex* and *ratio*.

Among English translations, Marshman (1809) translated *li* as "reason." Legge also interpreted *li* as "what reason calls for in the performance of duties."

(5) 子曰, 恭而無禮則勞, 慎而無禮則蕙, 勇而無禮則亂, 直而無禮則絞. (*The Analects* 8.2)

Marshman (1809): Chee says, Respect, not regulated by propriety, will become a painful burden; prudence, not restrained by reason, will become timidity; courage, without the guidance of reason, will become insubordination; frankness, not regulated by reason, will become folly.

Marshman translated *li* as “reason” and emphasized the significance of *li* in this sentence, explaining that this sentence well demonstrates the essence of the virtue of *li*.

Later in the translation of *The Analects* and *Mencius*, new translation terms of *li* appeared. First, Costa and Intorcetta (1662) used *urbanitas* as a translation of *li*. *Urbanitas* means “city living,” “city life or manners,” “sophistication,” “polish,” or “wit.” Intorcetta (1669) and Couplet (1687) used *urbanitas* as a translation of *li* in the same sentence of *The Doctrine of Mean*. Couplet (1687) also used *urbanitas* once in *The Analects*. Examples are as follows:

(6) 非天子不議禮, 不制度, 不考文. (*The Doctrine of the Mean* 28.2)

Intorcetta (1669): Nisi Imperator, nemo instituat urbanitatis officia; nec inducat curiae usus; nec mutet quidquam rei literariae.

Legge (1861): To no one but the Son of Heaven does it belong to order ceremonies, to fix the measures, and to determine the written character.

(7) 居上不寬, 爲禮不敬, 臨喪不哀, 吾何以觀之哉. (*The Analects* 3.26)

Couplet (1687): Praefecti non sint clementes, rursus si qui funguntur mutuis urbanitatis officiis ceremonisque, si non ex animo colant se mutuò: si denique tot inter apparatus funebres, nullus tamen veri doloris luctusque sensus existat; Ego quorsum obsecro spectator horum omnium esse velim?

Legge (1861): High station filled without indulgent generosity; ceremonies performed without reverence; mourning conducted without sorrow; wherewith should I contemplate such ways?

In both sentences, the subject is a person of high status, such as *tianzi* 天子 (“a son of heaven”) or *jushang* 居上 (“a high nobleman”). That is, it influenced the usage of *urbanitas* as a translation term. The frequency of *urbanitas* is low, and as shown above in Table 1, *urbanitas* is commonly used with other words like *ritus et urbanitatis official* (“ritual and urban duty”), *urbanitatis official* (“urban duty”), and *mutuis urbanitatis officiis ceremonisque* (“mutual urban duties and ceremonies”). Later, Noël (1711) and Zottoli (1879) used *urbanitas*

more commonly, and in the case of Zottoli (1879), used only the word *urbanitas* for *li*. However, Protestant missionaries didn't utilize "urbanity" as the translation for *li*.

Couplet (1687) employed new terms for *li* like *civilitas* and *decorum* in his translation of the *Analects*. First, *civilitas* means "civil," "legal," "affecting fellow citizens," "political," and "public." *Civilitas* was used four times in Couplet's translation of *The Analects*.

(8) 如其禮樂, 以俟君子. (*The Analects* 11.24)

Couplet (1687): Caeterum quod spectat ad ipsos ritus officiaque civilia, necnon mutuam omnium inter se suoque cum principe concordiam, moresque & disciplinam Reipublicae bene constitutae; ad hoc perficiendum, sicut ipse sum impar, ita praestolor eximiae virtutis sapientiaeque virum, qui perficiat.

Legge (1861): As to teaching them the principles of propriety and music, I must wait for the rise of a superior man to do that.

(9) 君子三年不為禮, 禮必壞. (*The Analects* 17.19)

Couplet (1687): etenim si vir ac probus domestic lucut occupatus totos tres annos non fungitur ullis officiis civilibus, officia procul dubio vel ipsa desuetudine paulatim oblitterabuntur ac peribunt.

Legge (1861): Abstain for three years from the observances of propriety, those observances will be quite lost.

Both sentences refer to a *junzi* 君子 ("gentleman") who is considered an ideal figure in the East. The other two sentences in which Couplet translated *li* as *civilitas* also mention a gentleman and *chengren* 成人 ("a complete person").¹⁵ In other words, a person who knows and practices *li* is considered an ideal person like a gentleman or complete person. Therefore, Western missionaries regarded *li* as one of the qualities to become such a person and expressed it as *civilitas*. Later, Zottoli succeeded in using it two and five times, respectively, in his translation

¹⁵ 子路問成人。子曰，“若臧武仲之知，公綽之不欲，卞莊子之勇，冉求之藝，文之以禮樂，亦可以為成人矣。” (*The Analects* 14.12) 孔子曰，“不知命，無以為君子也，不知禮，無以立也，不知言，無以知人。” (*The Analects* 20.3)

of *the Analects* and *Mencius*. However, it is hard to find examples of *li* translated as civilization in English translations of Protestant missionaries.

Decorum was also first employed in the Couplet (1687); the phrase *liyuli* (立於禮) in *The Analects* was translated as *in omni vita decorum constantiamque servantes, per Officiorum libros* (“maintaining *decorum* and constancy in all life, through the book of *The Book of Rites*”). He explained that based on *The Book of Rites* (禮記), one must keep *decorum*. It means “which is suitable, seemly, and propriety.” Furthermore, Noël translated *feili* (非禮) as *indecorum*; Zottoli did the same. However, the term *decorum* was rarely used in subsequent translations. Later, Edouard Constant Biot (1803–1850) translated *The Book of Etiquette and Ceremonies* (儀禮) as the *Decorum Ritual*, published in 1851 in Paris.

Decorum is also a translation influenced by Cicero’s philosophy. It refers to the idea of appropriate behavior that aligns with an individual’s role in society and their personal virtues. However, Protestant missionaries did not use “*decorum*” but instead used “*propriety*” as a translation of *li*. This difference will be discussed in more detail in section IV.

Noël was the first to translate *li* as *honestas*. It means “honor,” “integrity,” “honesty,” and “respectability.” Although Noël usually translated *li* as *ritus* in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, he chose *honestas* when translating the sentence *qinqin zhi sha, zunxian zhi deng, li suosheng ye* “親親之殺，尊賢之等，禮所生也。” (*The Doctrine of the Mean* 20.8). He translated *li* as *rectae rationis caelitus hominibus infusae honestate* (“the right reason of heaven infused with honesty to men”). Furthermore, Noël often used *honestas* as a translation term for *li* in *The Analects* and *Mencius* translations. He also translated *ren* 仁 as *honestas* in *Mencius*.¹⁶ Examples are as follows:

(10) 仁人心也，義人路也。 (*Mencius* 6A.11)

Noël (1711): *Ista enim interior honestas, pergit Memcius, est velut ipsum hominis cor; æquitas autem est velut recta hominis via.*

¹⁶ Noël used *pietas* as a translation term of *ren* as in other Latin translations, but just in *Mencius* (especially from *Li Lou* I 離婁上), he often used *honestas* for *li*.

Legge (1861): Benevolence is man's mind, and righteousness is man's path.

(11) 陽貨欲見孔子而惡無禮. (*Mencius* 3B.7)

Noël (1711): . . . Noluit Confucius eum convenire, quia urbanitatis & honestatis leges non servabat.

Legge (1861): Yang Ho wished to get Confucius to go to see him, but disliked doing so by any want of propriety.

In Noël's translation, *ren* and *li* were both translated into *honestas*. However, he differentiated *ren* as internal honesty and *li* as the laws of honesty and urbanity. Later, Zottoli also translated *li* as *honestas* many times. In Cicero's philosophy, *honestum* refers to moral goodness. Like *officium*, Jesuits missionaries utilized Cicero's philosophical terms. However, in English translations, these terms were not used for *li*.

Later, Protestant missionaries mostly translated *li* as "propriety" in English translations. For example, Marshman translated it as "reason and propriety" or "propriety" about ten times. Collie translated *li* as "propriety" around 55 times and Legge approximately 70 times. "Propriety" was commonly used and gradually settled in as the translation of *li*. Propriety means behavior accepted as socially or morally correct and proper, or the state or quality of being correct and proper.

The translation of *li* as "propriety" was not first introduced by Protestant missionaries; rather, it originated in the Latin works of Jesuit missionaries. In Latin translation, *proprius* was used twice as a translation term of *li*: Ruggieri translated *li* as *ratio, proprius honor, ceremonis* ("reason, proper honor, ceremony") and Couplet translated it as *officiosi ritus ususque proprius* ("official rites and proper usage"). In these Latin texts, *proprius* functioned as a modifier. Whereas Latin terms such as *officium*, *ratio*, *honestas*, and *urbanitas* emphasized the moral, civic, and cultivated dimensions of *li*, the English term "propriety," derived from *proprius*, conveys a more limited interpretation in comparison. It tends to focus on manners and social etiquette, rather than encompassing ethical and philosophical aspects of *li*.

Apart from these, there are other translation terms: *jus* (law), *mos* (custom), *obsequium* (compliance), and *licita* (licit) in Latin, and

politeness, custom, manner, regulation, and rule in English. However, they were used less frequently. In this way, Western missionaries suggested various translations to convey the concept of *li* in their translations.

IV. The Changes in Translations of *Li*

This chapter focuses on the changes in missionaries' use of translation terms and analyzes their characteristics. A variety of terms were used in early Latin translations for *li*, and these laid the foundation for later English translations. Protestant missionaries selected and employed particular terms from these earlier versions; for example, Legge mainly used two translation terms, "propriety" and "ceremony." This trend has continued to the present time. Ultimately, the translations of *li* are determined in the two terms. It is therefore important to explore how this translation tradition has been maintained and transmitted.

Early Latin translations show a tendency to use a variety of terms. Accordingly, Jesuit missionaries' translation of the Four Books, in the order of *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects*, and *Mencius*, led further translation terms to appear, including *urbanitas*, *decorum*, *modus*, *civilitas* and *honestas*. At first, Jesuit missionaries easily captured the meaning of the external procedure of *li* and commonly translated it into "rite" and "ceremony." It is because they first translated *The Doctrine of the Mean*, which was a part of *The Book of Rites* whose content were related to ancestral rites and ritual procedures. Therefore, the early Jesuit missionaries translated *li* ambiguously if *li* was used as a meaning except for an external procedure. For example, Ruggieri, one of the earliest translators, translated it into *ritus* and *ceremonia*, focusing on formal aspects while translating *The Doctrine of the Mean*. When *li* carries abstract and comprehensive meaning, he omitted it in his translation.¹⁷ Examples are as follows:

¹⁷ This does not mean that Ruggieri misunderstood the meaning of *li*. He was aware that *li* had implications pertaining to internal morality and harmony. The characteristics of text influenced this tendency.

(1) 親親之殺，尊賢之等，禮所生也。 (*The Doctrine of the Mean* 20.8)

Ruggierie: Porro haec parentum observantia ordinem habet, profectum a parentibus ipsis ad propinquos usque pertinent.

Legge (1861): The decreasing measure of the love due to relatives, and the steps in the honour due to the worthy, are produced by the principle of propriety.

(2) 溫故而知新，敦厚以崇禮。 (*The Doctrine of the Mean* 27.8)

Ruggierie: . . . praeterita repetit, nova addiscit, demum semper lucem cognitionis addendo ipsam auget cognitionem.

Legge (1861): He cherishes his old knowledge, and is continually acquiring new. He exerts an honest, generous earnestness in the esteem and practice of all propriety.

In sentences (1) and (2), Ruggieri did not translate phrases letter by letter. There was no corresponding translation for the character *sheng* 生 meaning “come into being,” nor was there one for *li* as an object of *sheng* 生. Similarly, in sentence (2), Ruggieri only referred to “cognition,” which does not clearly translate *li*. In contrast, later translators translated *li* in these sentences as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Examples of Translation Terms for *Li*

	Latin translations	English translations
(1)	- <i>officiorum ratione</i> , Intorcetta ([1667] 1669) - <i>officiorum harmonica quadam ratione seu symmetria</i> , Couplet (1687) - <i>rectae rationis caelitus hominibus infusae honestate</i> , Noël (1711) - <i>officiorum lex</i> , Zotoli (1879)	- propriety, Collie (1828) - the principle of propriety, Legge (1861)
(2)	- <i>coelo lex et ratio</i> , Couplet (1687) - <i>externum decorum</i> , Zottoli (1879)	- decency and proprieties, Collie (1828) - propriety, Legge (1861)

As shown in Table 2, *li* was usually translated into *ratio*, *officium*, or *decorum* in Latin translations and “propriety” in English translations.

What is noteworthy is that *li* was never translated as “rite” or “ceremony” in the quoted phrases. This is because the translators regard the meaning of *li* not as a formal procedure but as a different meaning in these sentences. Since there were few initial translated texts, the translation words for *li* were also limited.

However, the frequency of the term *li* appeared more often in the texts of *The Analects* and *Mencius*, and its meaning was also more varied. Therefore, in the translations of the two texts, various translation terms were introduced to reflect the diverse semantic characteristics of *li* in the contexts. It led to the expansion of the range of translation terms for *li*. New translation terms were adopted to represent semantic characteristics of *li*, especially in translations of *The Analects* and *Mencius*.

First, Western missionaries recognized that *li* must be based on inner morality, especially in *The Analects*. *Ren* is a crucial concept and *li* is often presented as its counterpart in *The Analects*.

- (3) 子曰，克己復禮爲仁。一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉。．．．子曰，“非禮勿視，非禮勿聽，非禮勿言，非禮勿動。” (*The Analects* 12.1)

Couplet (1687): Confucius respondit : Vincere seipsum, atque ita redire ad primaevum illud temperamentum naturae rationalis, hoc est obtinuisse cordis innocentiam & perfectionem. Mortales universi vel unico die si vincerent seipsos & redirent ad temperamentum illud, tunc orbis universus rediret ad innocentiam nativam & perfectionem. . . . Confucius respondit ; Contra rationem ne quid cernito, contra rationem ne quid audito, contra rationem ne quid effator, contra rationem ne quem animi corpositive motum suscipito.

Legge (1861): The Master said, “To subdue one’s self and return to propriety, is perfect virtue. If a man can for one day subdue himself and return to propriety, an under heaven will ascribe perfect virtue to him.” . . . The Master replied, “Look not at what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not what is contrary to propriety; make no movement which is contrary to propriety.”

Practicing *li* is a means of actualizing *ren*, the highest virtue. *Li* serves as a moral guideline for how a person should see, hear, speak, and act.

As a counterpart of *ren*, *li* represents external customs and manners. However, *The Analects* emphasizes that the practice of *li* must be rooted in an inner sense of morality. This idea is also reflected in the following sentence: “If a man be without the virtues proper to *ren* what has he to do with *li*?” (人而不仁，如禮何?) (*The Analects* 3.3), suggesting that *li* is of no use if it is not based on the virtues of *ren*. To emphasize this moral dimension of *li*, missionary translators used Latin terms such as *ratio* and *officium*.

Mencius describes *li* as one of The Four Sprouts: *ren* 仁, *yi* 義, *li* 禮, and *zhi* 智. These are understood as inherent virtues in human beings. And as one of the factors, *li* refers to an innate sense of respect, propriety, and proper conduct. According to *Mencius*, *li* is something inborn in all humans, reflecting a natural inclination toward proper behavior in social interactions. Translating *Mencius* for the first time, Noël often translated *li* as *honestas*, which is the same as the translation of *ren*. It also emphasizes the internal morality of *ren*.

Second, the Western missionaries regarded *li* as one of the qualities that people of high status or social reputation, such as emperors, gentlemen, and saints, should have, so they translated *li* as *urbanitas* and *civilitas*. These translations convey a high regard for the concept of *li*. There is no example of *li* translated as civilization in English translations of Western missionaries. However, Gu Hongming¹⁸ translated the Four Books into English and translated *li* into “civilization.” He emphasized that Chinese civilization was moral due to the role of Confucianism in the formation and maintenance of the Chinese civilization. It is a positive interpretation of *li*.

Moreover, although Intorcetta did not translate *Mencius*, he also mentioned *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* when he argued that the required virtues of a *junzi* (君子), an idealized figure in the East, were the same

¹⁸ Gu Hongming 辜鴻銘 (1857–1928) was a prominent Chinese scholar during the late Qing dynasty and early Republican period. He was born in 1857 in Penang, Malaysia, and educated in the Western tradition, attending schools in Scotland and earning a degree from the University of Edinburgh. Despite his Western education, he became a fervent advocate of traditional Confucian philosophy, particularly during a time when many intellectuals in China were pushing for modernization and Westernization. One of his major works is *The Discourse and Sayings of Confucius*, which is a translation of *The Analects*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and *The Great Learning*.

as those required by Western humanistic education, *humanitas*. *Ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* correspond to the four cardinal virtues of love (*pietas*), justice (*iustitia*), harmony (*convenientia*), and knowledge (*prudential*) (Ahn 2021, 49). He translated *li* as *convenientia*, which corresponded to “harmony,” which was different from the previous translation of *li* in his *Doctrine of the Mean* translation. *Decorum* and “propriety” both relate to the idea of behaving in a way that aligns with societal standards or expectations, and linked to the concept of harmony in social and personal interactions. Two terms represent a function of *li* that foster harmony by guiding individuals to interact respectfully and thoughtfully within society.

Therefore, Jesuit missionaries translated the Four Books, and various translations appeared, like *officium*, *ratio*, *modus*, *civilitas*, *honestas*, *decorum*, *proprius* and so on. These terms reflect the semantic characteristics of *li*, internal moral standards that must be observed out of a sense of duty or through rational judgment, moderation, self-control, a guideline for individual conduct, and qualification for becoming a cultured person and required virtue for social harmony.

However, over time, these various translation terms gradually fell out of use. It is important to analyze how the range of translations became narrowed and how certain terms were anchored. Protestant missionaries did not adopt many of the earlier Latin terms for several reasons. First, there was a difference in the scope of meaning between the translation terms and the original concept of *li*. Some Latin translation terms were too broad or ambiguous to serve as precise translation of *li*. As a result, when such terms were used as a translation for *li*, it often required additional terms to convey the intended meaning accurately. For example, *officium* was so general in meaning that it was necessary to modify it with other words in order to indicate the specific aspects of *li*, so it was commonly combined with other words like *urbanitas*, *ritus*, or *ratio* and composed as a compound word in Latin translations. In addition, some were often associated with other concepts. For example, *ratio* was also used as a translation of *li* 理 and *dao* 道. *Honestas* was also used for both *ren* and *li*.

On the other hand, some terms pertain to just one aspect of *li* and were insufficient to encompass its full meaning. For example, *urbanitas*

highlights only one characteristic of *li*, so it is difficult to encompass the meaning of *li* in it. *Urbanitas* has no example used as translation of *li* in a single word, it was composed with a list of several synonyms or many modifiers, such as *ritus et urbanitatis official* (“ritual and urban duty”), *ritus, ceremoniae, officiaque exterior* (“rite, ceremony, and external duties”), and *externa rituum & urbanitatum official* (“external rite and urban duty”). It is the reason why most of the early Latin translations are lengthy and complicated. However, in the last Latin translation of Zottoli, these translation terms of *li* were primarily inherited and used as single words. Therefore, terms such as *urbanitas* and *officium* were used as a single word for *li* in Zottoli’s translations. However, Protestant missionaries did not inherit these terms.

Second, Jesuit missionaries often utilized Cicero’s terms like *officium*, *honestum*, *decorum*, and so on. Cicero’s emphasis on ethical teachings, rhetoric, and the moral life aligns closely with the educational system of the Jesuits. For instance, in Cicero’s philosophy, *officium* refers to the moral and ethical obligation that humans, as social beings, must uphold. He elaborated on this concept in his work *De Officiis*, where he discussed the duties individuals owe to each other and to society at large, emphasizing the importance of fulfilling one’s role in the community. Consequently, the translation *officium* reflects that the practice of *li* is based on virtue which arises from internal morality. Translations of Jesuits were closely related to Western philosophical traditions, whereas Protestant missionaries were not. Protestant missionaries tended to avoid using words with strong philosophical connotations in their translations.

Furthermore, the translation terms *ritus* and “ceremony” are semantically similar, as both refer to the formal procedures or rules for events or actions. Jesuit missionaries chose the former, while Protestant missionaries chose the latter. Thus, Latin translations commonly used *ritus*, whereas English translations used “ceremony” for the term *li* because “rite” has a stronger religious connotation, which Protestant missionaries were reluctant to use.

Through this process, the range of translation terms for *li* was narrowed down, and it eventually settled on “ceremony” and “propriety” until today.

V. Conclusion

In modern times, Western missionaries have played a role in cultural exchanges between the East and the West. Especially their translations of Chinese classics into Western languages serve as an encounter between Western and Eastern philosophy, a basis for the Western understanding of the Chinese culture. This study examined the translation of *li* and the process of its interpretation in the West, which represents Western understanding of the Confucian culture and the East.

Early Jesuit missionaries regarded *li* as external rituals in the translations of *The Doctrine of the Mean*. Later, they came to understand more diverse characteristics of *li* in the translations of *The Analects* and *Mencius* and attempted more various translations: terms of *officium*, *ratio*, *modus*, and *honestas* represent *li* as internal moral standards that must be observed out of a sense of duty or through rational judgment, and moderation; *urbanitas* and *civilitas* as conduct for becoming a cultured person; and *decorum* and “propriety” as the idea of behaving in a way that aligns with societal standards, the concept of harmony in social interactions.

However, there was a difference in the scope of meaning between the translation and the original, and the Protestants were reluctant to use the philosophical terms of Cicero or religious terms. Ultimately, the Protestant missionaries selected and used “ceremony” and “propriety.”

This examination of the missionaries’ translations of *li* leads us to reconsider the meaning and value of *li*. This study suggests that the ultimate goal of *li* is harmony. Harmony encompasses two significant meanings. The first refers to both internal and external harmony, by which morality rooted in virtues is properly expressed through external actions. The second refers to the harmony between an individual and society. Unlike laws, *li* does not apply uniformly to everyone; appropriate manners vary according to position and situation. Each individual’s proper practice of *li* contributes to social order, and when every member of society practices *li*, society becomes harmonious. Moreover, this study is meaningful in that it sheds light on one aspect of the cultural exchange between East and West, and reconsiders the

concept of *li* through the lens of Western missionaries. Their interpretations contribute to understanding of other cultures and remain highly relevant in today's multicultural world.

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