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<i>Student Name: Min Zheng</i>	
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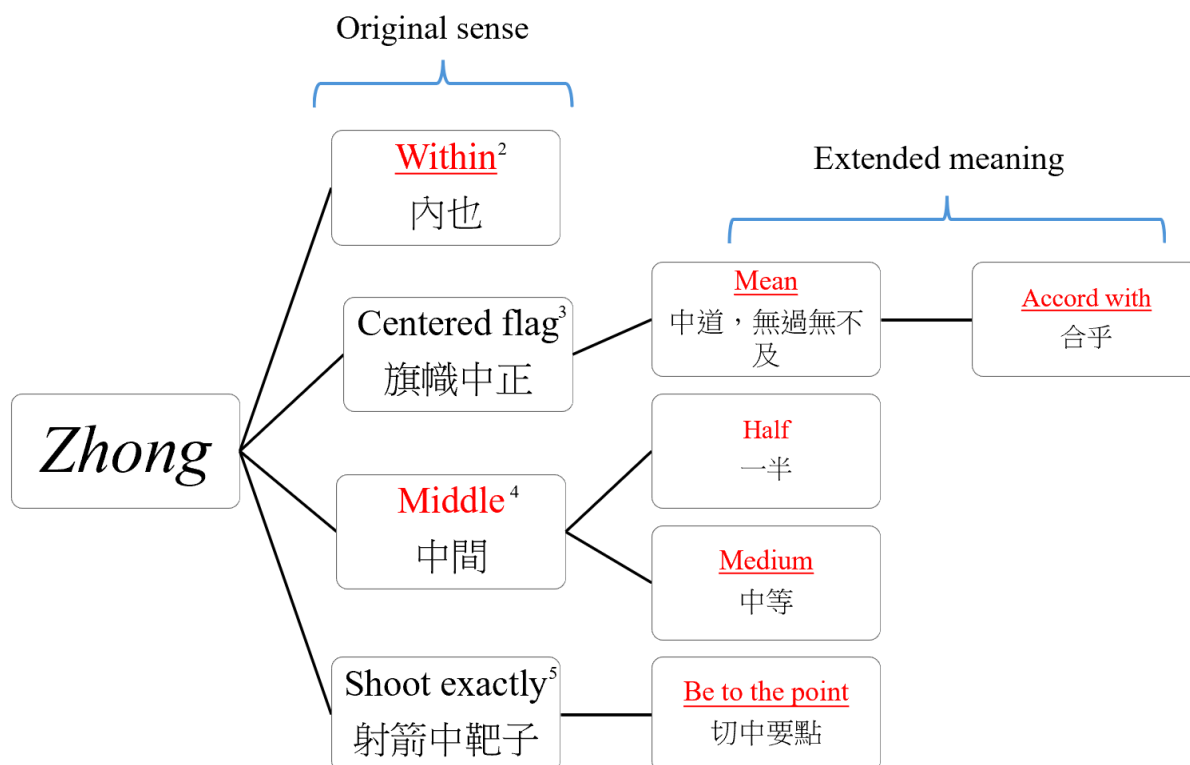
The meaning of *zhong* 中 and its translation comparison

The character *Zhong* 中 is a frequent and indispensable concept in Chinese and Confucian classics, being one of the cardinal core ideas in Confucianism. In addition, the character *Zhong* not only represents the well-known ‘Middle Way’, but also carries numerous meanings and is worthy of exploration. In the field of classical translation, whether a translator can correctly understand the meaning expressed in the context and accurately translate it is related to whether the philosophical concept can be precisely understood by foreign readers, which is particularly important in the cultural exchanges between China and the West. This paper will compare translations of some sentences with *Zhong* in *The Analects*.

1. Meaning Relations of *Zhong* in *The Analects*

According to statistics, there are a total of 19 sentences¹ containing the character *Zhong* in *The Analects*. From these 19 sentences, 7 meanings of *Zhong* can be summarised. Before proceeding with the translation analysis, I have mapped a semantic network diagram below, which illustrates the relationships between these 7 meanings and their original sense as well as the interconnections among the 7 meanings themselves. (The red-highlighted areas in the diagram represent the 7 categories of *Zhong* in *The Analects*; among them, the 5 meanings with an underline will be the focus of the subsequent discussion.)

¹ Shidian guji 識典古籍, *Lunyu zhongzi cipin tongji* 論語中字詞頻統計
<https://www.shidianguji.com/search-distribution/SBCK011/chapter/all?page_from=reading_page&enter_method=sidebar_search&version=63&keyword=%E4%B8%AD> [accessed 5 January 2026]



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2. Classical Commentaries edition

When exploring the translation of Chinese characters with philosophical connotations, first clarify their specific meanings in the original context, then examine the translators' renderings. After analyzing their translations, we can infer the academic perspectives they adopted. In order to accurately grasp the various meanings of *Zhong* in *The Analects*, this paper will refer to three authoritative commentaries, namely:

1. *Xinbian zhuzijicheng* 新編諸子集成, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200)
2. *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義, Liu Baonan 劉寶楠 (1791-1855)
3. *Lunyu jishi* 論語集釋, Cheng Shude 程樹德 (1877-1944)

The authors of the above commentaries are all not from overly remote eras, but each

² Handian 漢典 <<https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E4%B8%AD>> [accessed 6 January 2026]

³ Guyin xiaojing 古音小鏡 *Xungu gongjushu chaxun* 訓詁工具書查詢 <http://www.kaom.net/book_xungu.php> [accessed 6 January 2026]

⁴ Guyin xiaojing 古音小鏡, *Xungu gongjushu chaxun* 訓詁工具書查詢 <http://www.kaom.net/book_xungu.php> [accessed 6 January 2026]

⁵ Huang Shiming 黃石明, 'Lun "Zhong": Taizhou xuepai meixue fanchou yanjiu' 論“中”：泰州學派美學範疇研究 (PhD dissertation, p. 12).

edition includes commentaries by scholars from both earlier and later dynasties —— such as Kong Anguo 孔安國 from the Western Han Dynasty, Ma Rong 馬融 and Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 from the Eastern Han Dynasty, Huang Kan 皇侃 from the Southern Dynasties, etc. Therefore, these commentaries can still provide a cross-temporal and diverse perspective for research, rather than being limited to a single era.

3. Translation discussion in the original texts

Building on the first part of this paper, I will now discuss the translations of these meanings category by category.

3.1. *Zhong* as ‘Within’

3.1.1. *The Analects 13.18*

There are relatively few annotations for the character *Zhong* in this context, because its meaning is clear and straightforward, with little controversy. Readers can easily grasp its meanings: ‘within’ or ‘in this’. For example, Zhu Xi pointed out: ‘When father and son conceal each other’s faults, it is the ultimate manifestation of heavenly principle and human nature. Therefore, they do not seek to be upright, but uprightness lies within it.’⁶ Comparing the following translations, although the rendering methods vary greatly, only Waley and Legge used the same expression ‘be found in’, but all the translations share the same core meaning, accurately conveying the meaning of *zhong*.

English Translations of *Zhong* in *Zhi zai zhong qi yi* 直在其中矣

Translator	Translation
Arthur Waley	Involve
Edward Slingerland	Be found in
David Hinton	Between them, they were upright
Moss Roberts	And to my mind in this there is justice
James Legge	Be found in

⁶ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 147. Original text: 父子相隱瞞，天理人情之至也。故不求爲直，而直在其中。

3.2. *Zhong* as ‘Mean’

3.2.1. *The Analects* 6.27

Regarding *Zhong* or *Zhongyong* 中庸 (since in this sentence, most translators rendered the two words together). For these characters, Zheng Xuan explained them as follows: ‘*Zhong* means being balanced, and *Yong* means “to use.”’⁷ Cheng Hao 程顥 and Cheng Yi 程頤 defined them as: ‘Not being biased is the *Zhong*; not changing is *Yong*; it is the constant principle for the world.’⁸ Zhu Xi interpreted *Zhong* as ‘having no excess or deficiency’, and *Yong* as ‘ordinary’.⁹ Liu Baonan also interpreted *Zhong* as ‘not going too far or too short’, but he combined the two interpretations of *Yong*: What is commonly practised is called *Yong*, which means being commonly used.¹⁰

By comparing the translations, we can see that Waley adopted Zheng Xuan's interpretation, accounting for both of them and translating *Yong* as ‘use’. Slingerland combined *Zhongyong* into one word ‘mean’, which the Cambridge Dictionary defines as ‘the middle between two extremes’. Hinton's translation leans toward the meaning of *Yong*, with the two English terms sharing similar connotations. In the Cambridge Dictionary, ‘Constant’ is explained as ‘remaining the same’, and the explanation of ‘commonplace’ is ‘happening often and not considered to be special.’ By combining these with the annotation above — ‘not changing is *Yong*’ — a speculation can be made that Hinton's selection of ‘constant’ was influenced by Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, and the selection of ‘commonplace’ was influenced by Zhu Xi and Liu Baonan. Roberts translated *Zhong* as ‘middle’ and did not directly translate *Yong*; instead, he translated it as ‘way’, but this is understandable, because the Cambridge Dictionary defines ‘way’ as ‘the manner in which someone behaves or thinks, or in which something happens.’ Hence, ‘middle way’ can be understood as ‘a way of moderation.’ Legge also considered both meanings of *Zhongyong*. He may have drawn on

⁷ Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 247. Original text: 鄭君《目錄》云:「名曰中庸者,以其記中和之爲用也。庸,用也。」

⁸ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 91. Original text: 程子曰:不偏之謂中,不易之謂庸。中者天下之正道,庸者天下之定理。

⁹ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 91. Original text: 中者,無過無不及之名也。庸,平常也。

¹⁰ Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 247. Original text: 不得過、不及謂之中,所常行謂之庸。常行者,即常用是也。

Zhu Xi's or the Cheng brothers' commentaries on *Yong*, which explains why he translated it as 'constant.'

English Translations of *Zhong* in *Zhongyong zhiweideye* 中庸之為德也

Translator	Translation
Arthur Waley	Middle use
Edward Slingerland	Mean
David Hinton	Constant commonplace
Moss Roberts	The middle way
James Legge	The constant mean

3.3. *Zhong* as 'Accord with'

3.3.1. The Analects 18.8

In this sentence, the character *Zhong* appears frequently, totaling four times. For clearer comparison, I divided it into two groups based on their meanings.

The first group: Scholars such as Kong Anguo¹¹ and Zhu Xi,¹² almost uniformly interpreted *Zhong* as 'in accordance with'. Translators like Waley, Slingerland and Legge also followed this annotation in their translations. In contrast, Hinton and Roberts' translations carried an additional emotional nuance—the phrase 'be true to'—which is defined in Collins Dictionary as 'be loyal to something'.

English Translations of *Zhong* in *Yanzhonglun xingzhonglv* 言中倫，行中慮

Translator	Translation
Arthur Waley	Were consonant with
Edward Slingerland	In accord with
David Hinton	Were true to
Moss Roberts	Stayed true to, were
James Legge	Corresponded with, were

¹¹ Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 728. Original text: 子曰：「但能言應倫理，行應思慮，如此而已矣。」

¹² Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 187. Original text: 言中倫，行中慮：倫，義理之次第也。慮，思慮也。中慮，言有意義合人心。少連事不可考，然記稱其善居喪，「三日不怠，三月不解。葦悲哀，三年憂。」則行之中慮，亦可見矣。

The second group: Ma Rong¹³ and Cheng Shude's¹⁴ annotations are the same, both interpreting *Zhong* as ‘conforming to’. However, unlike the first group, the translators did not use concise expressions such as ‘in accordance with’ to render *Zhong* literally —— only Legge used ‘according to’ once, while other translators mostly explained the entire meaning of the sentence with more vocabulary based on the context. For instance, in the first half ‘*Shen Zhong Qing*’, all five translators used words with the meaning of ‘maintain’ and ‘preserve’ to convey the connotation of ‘conforming to and upholding integrity’. For the second half, ‘*Dao Zhong Quan*’, the translations follow the same pattern. Yet, the use of words is diverse and the connotations they carry are also different, which reflects the authors’ distinct understanding of the text.

English Translations of *Zhong* in *Shenzhongqing dao zhong quan* 身中清，道中權

Translator	Translation
Arthur Waley	<u>Secured</u> personal integrity, when set aside <u>maintained</u> due balance
Edward Slingerland	Remained pure, were
David Hinton	Keep themselves pure and turning exile into a position of authority
Moss Roberts	Stay uncorrupted, was
James Legge	Preserving their purity, according to

¹³ Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 728. Original text: 馬曰：「清，純潔也。遭世亂，自廢棄以免患，合於權也。」

¹⁴ Cheng Shude 程樹德, *Lunyu jishi* 論語集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), p. 1655. Original text: 放，置也。隱居幽處，廢置世務，世務不須及言之者也。身不仕亂朝，是中清潔也。廢事免於世患，是合於權智也。以又引江熙云：超然出於塵之表，身中清也。晦明以遠害，發動中權也。

3.4. *Zhong* as Medium

3.4.1. The Analects 6.19

Regarding the term *Zhongren* 中人, numerous annotations can be generally summarised as ‘average wisdom’. Han Yu 韓愈 in *Shishuo* clearly divided it into three grades: superior, average, and inferior;¹⁵ Zhang Shi 張栻¹⁶ and Cheng Shude¹⁷, based on their own research, also supported this interpretation. It is worth noting that Zhu Xi's annotation of *Zhongren*: rather than adopting that tripartite classification, he used the words ‘high’ and ‘low’ to distinguish the differences of wisdom.¹⁸

In the translation table below, Waley, Slingerland, and Roberts all chose words that pointed to the meaning of ‘ordinary, medium level’, which were relatively neutral but failed to convey the core meaning of ‘average wisdom’. By contrast, Hinton's translation echoed Zhu Xi's annotation: he did not directly translate *Zhongren*, but extracted its underlying meaning, using ‘those who have achieved a lofty state’ and ‘those who have not’ to correspond to the division between ‘above *zhongren*’ and ‘below *zhongren*’. However, Legge's translation ‘Mediocrity’ carries a derogatory connotation. This word is explained in the Cambridge Dictionary as ‘not very good’.

English Translations of *Zhong* in *Zhongren* 中人

Translator	Translation
Arthur Waley	Middling sort
Edward Slingerland	Average
David Hinton	those who've made something lofty of themselves, those who haven't

¹⁵ Cheng Shude 程樹德, *Lunyu jishi* 論語集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), p. 522. Original text: 師說云：就人之品識大判有三，謂上中下也。

¹⁶ Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 89. Original text: 穀梁傳二年傳有「中知以上」「中知以下」之文。然則此兩言「中人」，謂中知矣。中人爲中知，則上謂上知，下謂愚也。

¹⁷ Cheng Shude 程樹德, *Lunyu jishi* 論語集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), p. 522. Original text: 【考證】劉氏正義：《漢書古今人表》列知仁之目，亦引此文說之。穀梁傳僖元年傳有「中知以上，中知以下」之文，然則此兩言中人謂中知矣。中人爲中知，則上謂上知，下謂愚也。顏師古人表注解此文以中人为中庸，失之。

¹⁸ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 89. Original text: 言教人者，當隨其高下而告語之，則其言易入而無躐等之弊也。

Translator	Translation
Arthur Waley	Middling sort
Moss Roberts	Ordinary man
James Legge	Mediocrity

3.5. *Zhong* as Be to the point

3.5.1. The Analects 11.13

In this utterance, Zhu Xi interprets *Zhong* as follows: ‘Words should not be spoken aimlessly; when spoken, they must be in accordance with reason.’¹⁹ Apart from this, few scholars have paid attention to the meaning of *Zhong* here. Translators’ renderings are also very similar, except that Hinton chose a different expression. Nevertheless, the core is the same, and all renderings are in line with Zhu Xi’s annotation. The analysis of this sentence aims to show that *Zhong* is not a positional word in the literal sense or a ‘half’ indicating quantity. It contains philosophical and abstract connotations, which are worthy of elaboration and comparison.

English Translations of *Zhong* in *Yanbiyouzhong* 言必有中

Translator	Translation
Arthur Waley	Hits the mark
Edward Slingerland	Hits the mark
David Hinton	Right on the target
Moss Roberts	Hits the mark
James Legge	Hits the point

4. Conclusion

In *the Analects*, *Zhong* is a frequent character. However, if we carefully analyse and categorise it systematically, we would not be deterred by its ‘abstractness’. In the cultural exchanges between China and the West, Chinese characters with philosophical meanings are

¹⁹ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 127. Original text: 言不妄發，發必當理，惟有德者能之。

undoubtedly profound topics worthy of exploration. Only by deeply understanding the original annotations and proceeding with translation comparisons can we achieve a genuine resonance between Eastern and Western civilizations.

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