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The Connotation of *Shu* 恕 in the *Four Books* and Appropriate Translations

Shu 恕 is one of the most important philosophical concepts in Confucianism, appearing five times¹ in the *Four Books*². Confucius said that *shu* is the word which can be a guide to conduct throughout one's life³ and it is called the method of benevolence (*ren* 仁)⁴. Mencius stated that if one strives to treat others with *shu*, nothing brings one closer to benevolence than this⁵. And together with the term *zhong* 忠, which is another important philosophical concept in Confucianism, *zhong* and *shu* constitute the one underlying thread that runs through Confucius' doctrine⁶.

Roger T. Ames observed that there have been different interpretations of *shu* in the commentarial literature. This perplexity is reflected in the various ways in which *shu* has been translated:⁷ as 'the benevolent exercise of them to others' (James Legge),⁸ as 'reciprocity' (Legge, Irene Bloom, Wu Guozhen 吳國珍, Ian Johnston and Wang Ping),⁹ as 'consideration' (Arthur Waley),¹⁰ as 'putting oneself in the other's place (*shu* 恕)' (Ames

¹ The passages numbers are 4.15, 15.24 in the *Analects*, 7A.4 in the *Mencius*, Chapter 11 in the *Great Learning*, Chapter 13 in the *Doctrine of the Mean*. The original texts are '曾子曰：「夫子之道，忠恕而已矣！」', '子貢問曰：「有一言而可以終身行之者乎？」子曰：「其恕乎！己所不欲，勿施於人。」', '強恕而行，求仁莫近焉', '所藏乎身不恕，而能喻諸人者，未之有也。' and '忠恕違道不遠，施諸己而不愿，亦勿施於人' respectively.

² Zhu Xi 朱熹 grouped four Confucian texts as the *Four Books*: *Analects*, *Mencius*, the *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*.

³ In the *Analects* 15.24.

⁴ In the *Analects* 6.30.

⁵ In the *Mencius* 7A.4.

⁶ In the *Analects* 4.15 and the Chapter 13 in the *Doctrine of the Mean*.

⁷ Roger T. Ames, *A Conceptual Lexicon for Classical Confucian Philosophy* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2021), p. 248.

⁸ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p. 170.

⁹ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p. 301. Irene Bloom, *The Mencius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 144. Wu Guozhen 吳國珍, *Lunyu zuixin yingwen quanyi quanzhu ben* 論語最新英文全譯全注本, (Fuzhou: Fujian jiaoyu chubanshe, 2015), p. 118, p. 408. Ian Johnston and Wang Ping, *Daxue and Zhongyong: Bilingual Edition* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2012), p. 83, p. 250.

¹⁰ Arthur Waley, *Library of Chinese Classics Chinese-English: The Analects* (Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House, 1999), p. 37, p. 139.

and Henry Rosemont Jr.),¹¹ as ‘in using oneself as a measure to gauge the likes and dislikes of others’ (Lau, D. C.),¹² as ‘forbearance’ and ‘leniency’ (Xu Yuanchong 許淵衝)¹³ etc. Given the paramount significance and controversial translation of *shu*, it is worthwhile to explore its sound explanation and appropriate translations.

This essay will analyze the connotation of *shu* drawing on authoritative commentaries on the *Four Books* from different periods of Chinese history, and further explore appropriate English translations through analyzing authoritative English translations.

This essay analyzed *shu* in three commentaries of the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, one commentary of the *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*.

1. *Lunyu jijie yishu* 論語集解義疏, collected commentaries by He Yan 何晏 (?-249) and subcommentary by Huang Kan 皇侃 (488-545), representing pre-Tang dynasty (before the sixth century CE).

2. *Lunyu jizhu* 論語集注, commentary by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), representing Song dynasty (960-1279).

3. *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義, by Liu Baonan 劉寶楠 (1791-1855), representing Qing dynasty (1644-1912).

4. *Mengzi Jizhu* 孟子集注, by Zhu Xi 朱熹, representing the Song dynasty.

5. *Mengzi Zhengyi* 孟子正義, by Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763-1820), representing the Qing dynasty.

6. *Mengzi Yizhu* 孟子譯注, by Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (1909-1992), representing modern society.

7. *Daxue Jizhu* 大學集注, by Zhu Xi 朱熹, representing the Song dynasty.

8. *Zhongyong Jizhu* 中庸集注, by Zhu Xi 朱熹, representing the Song dynasty.

¹¹ Roger T. Ames, *A Conceptual Lexicon for Classical Confucian Philosophy* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2021), p. 92.

¹² D.C.Lau, *The Analects* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1979), p. 33.

¹³ Xu Yuanchong 許淵衝, *Lunyu: Hanying duizhao* 論語：漢英對照 (Beijing: Haitun chubanshe, 2013), p. 136, p. 36.

1. Extending one's own feelings to others and translating such cognitive insights into practical actions

This definition is the most fundamental and universally accepted explanation. As a philosophical concept, commentaries by Huang¹⁴, Zhu¹⁵, Jiao¹⁶ and Yang¹⁷ interpreted the concept of *shu* in this manner. In the first step, *shu* is a mindset in interpersonal relationships, referring to a person who first puts themselves in others' shoes. According to the earliest Chinese dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字, 'by the etymology of the graph, *shu* constituted as it is by the combination of the cognate character, *ru* 如, that means "as to, like, as if, resembling, can be compared with, supposing, the same as" and *xin* 心, "heartminding" ' ¹⁸. Based on the above analysis, '*shu* is a consideration: a thoughtful and heartfelt deference to others as we determine what it is best to do'¹⁹, as Ames mentioned. But it is not only a thought of cognition but also a practice of treating others, namely considering how they would like to be treated, then treats others in the way they would like to be treated. Ames said that '*shu* is a critical and experimental strategy in which, with imagination, we rehearse the different possible dramatic scenarios for action in our roles and relations in our attempt to find the best one among them.'²⁰

According to this meaning, Waley used 'consideration'.²¹ In Cambridge Dictionary, the term 'consideration' refers to behaviour that is kind and considers people's feelings.²² As we mentioned, *shu* is consideration to others as we determine what it is best to do. At the semantic level, *shu* and 'consideration' partially overlap, but if we translated *shu* as 'consideration', it would raise two issues. Firstly, the term 'consideration' significantly

¹⁴ He Yan 何晏 and Huang Kan 皇侃, *Lunyu jijie yishu* 論語集解義疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), p. 221. The original text: '恕謂內付己心, 外以應物'.

¹⁵ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 9, p. 23, p. 350. The original text: '推己以及人'.

¹⁶ Jiao Xun 焦循, *Mengzi Zhengyi* 孟子正義, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), p. 950. The original text: '以我推之也'.

¹⁷ Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Mengzi Yizhu* 孟子譯注, (Zhonghua shuju, 2012), p. 332. The original text: '推己及人的恕道'.

¹⁸ Roger T. Ames, *A Conceptual Lexicon for Classical Confucian Philosophy*, p. 249.

¹⁹ Roger T. Ames, *A Conceptual Lexicon for Classical Confucian Philosophy*, p. 249.

²⁰ Roger T. Ames, *A Conceptual Lexicon for Classical Confucian Philosophy*, p. 248.

²¹ Arthur Waley, *Library of Chinese Classics Chinese-English): The Analects*, p. 37, p. 179.

²² Cambridge Dictionary <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>> [accessed 10 January 2026].

weakens its dynamic reasoning process of ‘putting oneself in others’ shoes’. Secondly, in English contexts, it is commonly used in everyday situations (e.g., ‘Thank you for your consideration’) to denote ‘polite consideration’, which differs significantly from the philosophical meaning of *shu*. Therefore, ‘consideration’ is entirely inadequate to embody the philosophical essence of *shu*. Ames and Rosemont translated *shu* as ‘putting oneself in the other’s place’²³, which is a relatively appropriate translation.

This meaning can be further divided into negative and positive dimensions.

On the negative side, Confucius states *shu* as ‘do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.’²⁴ Based on this negative side of *shu*, Xu Yuanchong 許淵衝 translated *shu* as ‘forbearance’²⁵ and ‘leniency’²⁶. In the Cambridge Dictionary, ‘leniency’ refers to treatment in which someone is punished or judged less strongly than would be expected.²⁷ It denotes a hierarchical dynamic where higher-ranking officials or judges show compassion toward subordinates or offenders, whereas *shu* represents an attitude applicable to all equal interpersonal interactions. The term ‘forbearance’²⁸ denotes the idea of ‘restraining oneself from harming others’, and captures the negative aspect of *shu*, but ignores its positive dimension. Its semantic scope is obviously narrower than *shu* itself. For these reasons, neither term is the best choice for translating.

On the positive side, Confucius formulates *shu* as ‘help others to take their stand in that he himself wishes to take his stand, and get others there in that he himself wishes to get there’.²⁹

Some other translators render *shu* as ‘reciprocity’. Among the numerous English translations of *shu*, it is not difficult to find that ‘reciprocity’ has gained considerable popularity.³⁰ The reason may be that the term ‘reciprocity’ has a long history as a

²³ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, p. 92.

²⁴ D.C.Lau, *The Analects* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1979), p. 155. The original text: ‘己所不欲，勿施於人’.

²⁵ Xu Yuanchong 許淵衝, *Lunyu: Hanying duizhao* 論語：漢英對照, p. 136.

²⁶ Xu Yuanchong 許淵衝, *Lunyu: Hanying duizhao* 論語：漢英對照, p. 36.

²⁷ *Cambridge Dictionary* <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>> [accessed 10 January 2026].

²⁸ The quality of being patient and being able to forgive someone or control yourself in a difficult situation. (From *Cambridge Dictionary* <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>> [accessed 10 January 2026].)

²⁹ D.C.Lau, *The Analects*, p. 55. The original text: ‘己欲立而立人，己欲達而達人’.

³⁰ ‘Reciprocity’ a translation for *shu* appears in the following texts: James used it in the *Analects* 15.24; Irene Bloom used it in the Mencius 7A.4; Ian Johnston and Wang Ping used it in the Great Learning and the *Doctrine of the Mean*; Burton Watson and Wu guozhen adopted it and supplemented it with explanatory notes.

philosophical and ethical terminology which is familiar to Western readers. From Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*³¹ to John Rawls' *Justice as Fairness*³², this term has been employed as a distinct philosophical concept. This enables Western readers to quickly establish cognitive connections and it conveys the core characteristics of *shu* in interpersonal interactions. While 'reciprocity' emphasizes the idea of mutual exchange and mutual benefit, which carries utilitarian motives, it may misinterpret *shu* as 'you help me, I help you'. This is a fundamental misreading: Practising *shu* is not equivalent exchange, but arises from the subject's recognition that their own flourishing is inseparable from that of others, and thus they choose to act benevolently. Therefore, the translation 'reciprocity' distorts the altruistic nature of *shu*, and replaces its moral motive with a utilitarian purpose.

In the *Mencius* 7A.4, Lau translated *shu* as 'treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself'³³, which is appropriate in the context of applying *shu* into practice.

2. Measuring others thoughts and needs by reflecting on and gauging oneself

Beyond the most fundamental meaning, the commentaries of Huang³⁴ and Liu³⁵ further explains *shu* as 'to measure others by reflecting on and gauging oneself' further.

According to this interpretation, Lau rendered *shu* as 'in using oneself as a measure to gauge the likes and dislikes of others'³⁶. This translation conforms to the textual exegesis, cognitive mechanism and ethical practice of the concept of *shu*, while avoiding cross-cultural misinterpretation. Furthermore, I concur with Ames' viewpoint, who argues that Lau best captures the meaning and function of *shu*.³⁷

3. *Shu* is the pathway to benevolence (*ren* 仁).

According to the commentary of *Shuowen Jiezi*, *shu* means *ren*. Confucius said that the

³¹ Terence Irwin, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 74-76.

³² John Rawls, edited by Erin Kelly, *Justice as Fairness :A Restatement* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 122-124.

³³ D.C. Lau, *Mencius*, (New York: Penguin Group Press, 2004).

³⁴ He Yan and Huang Kan, *Lunyu jijie yishu*, p. 50. The original text: '以己測物'.

³⁵ Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lunyu zhengyi 論語正義* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 153. The original text: '賈子道術: 「以己量人謂之恕」'.

³⁶ D.C.Lau, *The Analects*, p. 33.

³⁷ Roger T. Ames, *A Conceptual Lexicon for Classical Confucian Philosophy*, p. 248.

ability to take what is nearest [i.e. oneself] as an analogy can be called the method of benevolence. Mencius also said that to dedicate oneself in all earnestness to *shu*—there can be no closer approach to benevolence. So to practice benevolence is nothing but to practise *shu*.³⁸

So in the *Analects* 4.15, Legge translated as ‘the benevolent exercise of them to others’³⁹. The term ‘exercise’ highlights the practice nature of *shu*. The term ‘benevolent’ emphasizes the relationship between *shu* and benevolence, expressing that practicing *shu* is the way to achieve benevolence. To analyze ‘to others’, we must examine the contextual relationship between *shu* and *zhong* 忠. In Confucianism, *zhong* and *shu* are two sides of the same coin, the *dao* 道. *Zhong* is directed at oneself, demanding honesty toward one's true nature, while *shu* is for others. Hence, Legge translated *zhong* as ‘to be true to the principles of our nature’, and translated *shu* as ‘the benevolent exercise of them to others’, thereby highlighting their respective targets and the relationship between them. While this translation effectively conveys the practical essence of *shu*, its relevance to interpersonal relationships and its connection to *ren* and *zhong*, but it overlooks the crucial and distinctive empathetic dimension of *shu*.

In conclusion, *shu* is a fundamental and significant concept in the *Four Books*. Its central connotation is extending one's own feelings to others and translating such cognitive insights into practical actions. In terms of an English translation, ‘putting oneself in the other's place’ and ‘in using oneself as a measure to gauge others’ are ideal candidates. In the context of its practical application in the Mencius, ‘treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself’ is an appropriate translation. In addition, if the translator needs a one-word rendering, presenting the Chinese character with its Pinyin (*shu* 恕) accompanied by a brief explanatory note would also be preferable.

³⁸ Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen Jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 <<https://szsw.bnu.edu.cn/#/>> [accessed 10 January 2026]. The original text: ‘恕。仁也。孔子曰。能近取譬。可謂仁之方也矣。孟子曰。彊恕而行。求仁莫近焉。’

³⁹ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean*, p. 170.

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