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The Meanings of *Zhi* 直 in the *Analects* and an Evaluation of English Translations

Zhi is a significant philosophical concept in the *Analects*, appearing twenty-two times across sixteen passages. It denotes both an orientation toward moral uprightness attributed to human beings at birth (6.19¹) and the quality expected of exemplary political actors (2.19). At the same time, the text carefully qualifies this virtue: ‘Straightforwardness without ritual becomes rudeness’ (8.2), and ‘To love straightforwardness without learning leads to rudeness’ (17.8). Its meaning shifts with context, posing a challenge for translation. This essay argues for the philosophical concept of *zhi* 直 and, through systematic analysis and an evaluation of translations, shows how different translation strategies privilege distinct semantic layers of *zhi*.

1 The Original Meaning of *zhi*

The character *zhi* appears in Oracle Bone Script as , in Bronze Script as , and in Seal Script as . In Oracle Bone Script, it is composed of 目 and |. ‘A vertical line is drawn above an eye, signifying the use of the eye to aim at a suspended object (such as a hanging bell) in order to measure whether it is vertical or straight.’² Bronze script added 丂 to emphasize the meaning of measurement. Seal script inherited this form, uprighing the 目 component and regularizing its structure.³ *Analytical Dictionary of Characters* (Shuowen Jiezi 說文解

¹ All citations of *The Analects* in this paper are taken from James Legge (trans.), *Confucian Analects, in The Chinese Classics: with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960). Subsequent references will cite only the relevant chapter and verse numbers.

² Xu Zhongshu 徐中舒, *Jiaguwen zidian* 甲骨文字典 (Chengdu: Sichuan cishu chubanshe, 1989), p.1385. Original text: 從目上一豎，會以目視懸（懸鐘），測得直立之意。

³ Gu Yankui 谷衍奎, *Hanzi yuanliu zidian* 漢字源流字典 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2003), p.329. Original text: 篆文承接金文，只是將目豎起並整齊化。

字) states: ‘*zhi* means “correct sight”. It is composed of 𠂇, 十, and 目.’⁴ Its original meaning is using the eye to align squarely with a marker to gauge straightness. It is evident that *zhi* initially referred to a concrete spatial state—the form of an object that is not bent or slanted. In early texts, *zhi* mostly described the physical attributes of objects. Over time, its usage extended to human behavior and character. This semantic expansion—from a concrete physical attribute to an abstract moral quality—laid the foundation for *zhi* to acquire philosophical significance in Confucian classics.

2 The Meanings of *zhi* in *The Analects* and an evaluation of its English Translations

2.1 Referring to ‘the person’: The Upright Individual⁵

Confucius replied, ‘Advance the upright and set aside the crooked, then the people will submit.’ (2.19)⁶ Bao Xian 包咸 states, ‘Raise up the upright person and employ him; set aside the crooked and depraved person.’⁷ Liu Baonan 劉寶楠 elaborates: ‘The upright are placed above, and the crooked are positioned below, enabling the virtuous to fully utilize their talents.’⁸ This highlights the role of the *zhi* individual as a moral exemplar in political selection.

In the comparison of various translations, James Legge's rendering ‘the upright’⁹ effectively preserves both the literal sense of straightness and the established moral meaning

⁴ Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi 說文解字* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), p.267. Original text: 直，正見也。從从𠂇，从十，从目。

⁵ Legge, *Confucian Analects*, Relevant chapters for the concept of ‘referring to “the person”: The Upright Individual’ include 2.19, 12.22, 16.4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.104.

⁷ He Yan 何晏 and Huang Kan 皇侃, *Lunyu jijie yishu 論語集解義疏*, in *Congshu jicheng chubian 叢書集成初編* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), p.22. Original text: 舉用正直之人，廢置邪枉之人。

⁸ Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lunyu Zhengyi 論語正義* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p.64. Original text: 直者居於上，而枉者置之下位，使賢者得盡其才。

⁹ According to the Cambridge Dictionary, upright denotes ‘straight up or vertical’ and ‘honest, responsible, and moral’ < <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-chinese-traditional/upright> > [accessed 11 January

of upright integrity, fitting the context of political selection of the worthy. Arthur Waley, D.C. Lau, and Edward Slingerland's use of 'the straight'¹⁰ emphasizes a literal translation;¹¹ while clear and easily understandable, it foregrounds the literal sense over the moral one and relies on annotations for fuller comprehension. The renderings by Ames and Rosemont as 'the true' and Gu Hongming 辜鴻銘 as 'the cause of the just' are valuable for demonstrating how the term can be re-contextualized, but they deviate significantly from the literal meaning of the text¹². Xu Yuanchong 許淵衝's 'honest' narrows the broad concept of *zhi*—which encompasses uprightness and integrity—into the specific quality of honesty¹³. This fails to capture the full scope of *zhi*, as the concept also includes impartiality, moral courage, and principled action that go beyond mere honesty.

2.2 *Zhi* as Character and Conduct¹⁴

2.21 Frank and Forthright¹⁵

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¹⁰ According to the Cambridge Dictionary, straight denotes 'continuing in one direction without bending or curving' <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-chinese-traditional/straight>> [accessed 11 January 2026]

¹¹ For the literal translation of 'the straight' by Arthur Waley, see Arthur Waley (trans.), *The Analects*, bilingual edn. (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1998), p.21; for D.C. Lau's version, see D.C. Lau (trans.), *The Analects: sayings of Confucius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), p.28; for Edward Slingerland (trans.), *Analects: with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), p.14

¹² For Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr.'s translation of *zhi* as 'the true', see Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. (trans.), *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), p.92; for Gu Hongming's rendering as 'the cause of the just', see Gu Hongming 辜鴻銘 (trans.), *Lunyu, Daxue, Zhongyong* (論語, 大學, 中庸): bilingual edn., trans. into English by Gu Hongming, annotated in Chinese by Xu Changqiang 徐昌強 and Ouyang Jin 歐陽瑾 (Beijing: Beijing University of Technology Press, 2017), p.20.

¹³ For Xu Yuanchong 許淵衝's translation of *zhi* as 'honest', see Xu Yuanchong (trans.), *Thus Spoke the Master* (Lunyu 論語), vol.1 of Xu Yuanchong Wenji 許淵衝文集 (Beijing: Haitun Chubanshe, 2013), p.21.

¹⁴ For the classification in this section, I refer to the first chapter of Jiang Niling 姜妮伶, 'A Re-examination of "zhi" in the Analects' 《論語》「直」義再探, *Fudan Journal (Social Sciences)*, 3(2024), p.14.

¹⁵ Legge, *Confucian Analects*, Relevant chapters for the concept of 'Frank and Forthright' include 5.24, 17.16.

The Master said, ‘Who says of Wei-shang Kao that he is upright? One begged some vinegar of him, and he begged it of a neighbour and gave it to the man.’ (5.24)¹⁶ In traditional commentaries:

Zhu Xi 朱熹 annotates: ‘When the Master said this, he was satirizing (Weisheng Gao) for twisting his own intention to comply with external things and seizing a good reputation to curry favour—this cannot be called *zhi*.’ Fan Shi says: ‘To call “yes” what is yes, “no” what is no; to say “have” when one has, “have not” when one has not—this is what is called *zhi*.’¹⁷

Legge, Waley, and Slingerland translate it as ‘upright’, Lau as ‘straight’, Ames and Rosemont as ‘true’, Gu as ‘an honest man’, and Xu as ‘honest’. Among these, Lau’s ‘straight’ best captures the behavioural contrast between directness and indirectness that underlies Confucius’s irony¹⁸.

2.22 Upright and Impartial¹⁹

Zhi describes a fundamental moral correctness and adherence to principle, a quality inherent in human nature and essential for conduct.

Man is born for uprightness. (6.19)²⁰ Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 annotates, ‘The nature with which one is born is all *zhi*.’²¹ Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 translates it as ‘human survival is due to uprightness’²².

¹⁶ Ibid., p.119.

¹⁷ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), p.82. Original text: 夫子言此，譏其曲意徇物，掠美市恩，不得為直也。范氏曰：「是曰是、非曰非、有謂有、無謂無，曰直。」

¹⁸ Legge, p.119; Waley, p.113; Slingerland, p.49; Lau, p.69; Ames and Rosemont, p.113; Gu, p.60; Xu, p.45.

¹⁹ Legge, *Confucian Analects*, Relevant chapters for the concept of ‘Upright and Impartial’ include 6.19, 8.16, 12.20, 15.7, 18.2.

²⁰ Ibid., p.123.

²¹ Liu Baonan, *Lunyu zhengyi*, p.235. Original text: 始生之性皆正直。

²² Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯註 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), p.61. Original text: 人的生存由於正直。

Legge's 'uprightness' and Slingerland's 'upright' are the most successful, as they combine semantic accuracy with philosophical appropriateness. Ames and Rosemont's 'being true' is an exceptional philosophical interpretation, though it constitutes a form of deep paraphrase.²³

2.23 Forthrightness Requiring Regulation by *Li* (禮 ritual) and *Xue* (學 learning)²⁴

Straightforwardness, without the rules of propriety, becomes rudeness. (8.2)²⁵ There is the love of straightforwardness without the love of learning; the beclouding here leads to rudeness. (17.8)²⁶

Yang Bojun translates: 'to be frank and outspoken, yet ignorant of ritual propriety, will result in being cutting and wounding others'.²⁷ Confucius emphasises that *zhi*, if detached from the restraint of *li*, will degenerate into harshness and extremism, requiring *li* to provide balance. For the second instance (17.8), Huang Kan 皇侃 comments: '*jiao* (絞) is akin to stinging; it denotes a tendency to delight in ridiculing others' faults to establish one's own *zhi*'.²⁸ Sun Qinshan (孫欽善) translates: 'to be fond of straightforwardness but not fond of learning finds its harmful consequence in being acerbic and wounding'.²⁹ Confucius here points out that the potential flaw of *zhi* is *jiao*; it must be corrected through a commitment to learning, to avoid losing proper measure on account of one's forthrightness.

In *Analects* 8.2 and 17.8, the treatment of *zhi* across translations reveals a key divergence: is it a 'dispositional trait' that requires guidance, or an inherently complete 'moral quality'?

²³ Legge, p.123; Slingerland, p.59; Ames and Rosemont, p.119.

²⁴ Legge, *Confucian Analects*, Relevant chapters for the concept of 'Forthrightness Requiring Regulation by *Li* and *Xue*' include 8.2,17.8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.132.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.189.

²⁷ Yang Bojun, *Lunyu yizhu*, p.78. Original text: 心直口快，卻不知禮，就會尖刻刺人。

²⁸ He Yan and Huang Kan, *Lunyu jijie yishu*, p.245. Original text: 絞，猶刺也，好譏諷人之非，以成己之直也。

²⁹ Sun Qinshan 孫欽善, *Lunyu benjie* 論語本解 (Beijing: shenghuo dushu xinzhì sanlián shūdiàn, 2009), p.224. Original text: 喜好直率卻不喜好學習，它的流弊是尖刻傷人。

Legge consistently uses straightforwardness, clearly defining it as a neutral, natural behavioural tendency whose value depends on the temperance of *li* and *xue*. Similarly, Lau and Ames and Rosemont employ forthright(ness) and candor respectively, both emphasizing its sincere, direct mode of conduct. In contrast, Waley shifts to uprightness in 17.8, Slingerland chooses upright in 8.2, and Gu uniformly uses uprightness, thereby elevating *zhi* here to an inherent, positive moral rectitude³⁰. While this choice strengthens the virtuous connotation of *zhi*, it risks obscuring the critical focus of the original text—precisely here, Confucius is explaining that even a good starting point like *zhi*, if uncultivated (without *li*, without *xue*), can become *jiao*.

2.24 Misappropriated *Zhi*

I hate those who make known secrets, and think that they are straightforward. (17.24)³¹ Bao Xian explains: ‘*Jie* (讎) means to attack and expose others’ private secrets.’³² It clarifies that what Zigong 子貢 detests is the act of using the attack and exposure of private matters to masquerade as uprightness, and not the quality of *zhi* itself.

Legge's use of ‘straightforward’ and Lau's use of ‘forthrightness’ is most fitting here, as they directly correspond to the behavioural level of ‘frankness in speech and action.’³³

2.3 *Zhi* as Moral Principle and Social Order³⁴

Zhi can refer to the abstract principle, standard, or spirit of uprightness itself, operating at ethical or social levels.

2.31 At the Ethical Level

³⁰ Legge, p.132, p.189; Lau, p.104, p.244; Ames and Rosemont, p.113; Waley, p.231; Slingerland, p78; Gu, p.94.

³¹ Legge, *Confucian Analects*, p.193.

³² He Yan and Huang Kan, *Lunyu jijie yishu*, p.254. Original text: 讎，謂攻發人之陰私也。

³³ Legge, p.193; Lau, p.253.

³⁴ Legge, *Confucian Analects*, Relevant chapters for the concept of ‘*Zhi* as Moral Principle and Social Order’ include 13.18, 14.34, 15.25.

The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this. (13.18)³⁵ In traditional commentaries:

Fan Ning 范寧 says: ‘If father and son do not conceal for each other, it damages teaching and ruins righteousness, fostering a trend of filial impiety—how can this be considered *zhi*? Therefore, mutual concealment can indeed constitute *zhi*.’³⁶

Here, *zhi* refers to the essential spirit of uprightness. The Lord of She regarded a son testifying against his father’s sheep theft as *zhi*, whereas Confucius held that within the mutual concealment of father and son lies a *zhi* that safeguards the ethics of familial affection.

The renderings by Ames and Rosemont as ‘being true’ and by Gu as ‘true uprightness’ both, notably, incorporate the qualifier ‘true’.³⁷ This is not superfluous but a crucial philosophical judgment: it aims to show that *zhi* here is not a universal legal justice, but rather an authentic emotional expression rooted in ethical relationships.

2.32 As a Just and Fitting Principle

Recompense injury with justice, and recompense kindness with kindness. (14.34)³⁸ Li Bingnan 李炳南 explains: ‘*zhi* is uprightness, neither repaying resentment with kindness nor with resentment. Repaying resentment with *zhi* avoids excess or deficiency, hitting exactly the mean.’³⁹

³⁵ Legge, *Confucian Analects*, p.163.

³⁶ He Yan and Huang Kan, *Lunyu jijie yishu*, p.184. Original text: 若父子不相隱諱，則傷教破義，長不孝之風焉，以為直哉。故相隱乃可為直耳。今王法則許期親以上得相為隱，不問其罪，蓋合先王之典章。

³⁷ Ames and Rosemont, p.175; Gu, p.166.

³⁸ Legge, *Confucian Analects*, p.172.

³⁹ Li Bingnan 李炳南, *Lunyu jiangyao* 論語講要 (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2011), p.256. Original text: 直是正直，既不以德報怨，也不以怨報怨。以直報怨，無過，無不及，正合中庸之道。

Ames and Rosemont's 'remaining true' highlights the internal moral consistency implied in *zhi*, though it represents a philosophically interpretive rendering.⁴⁰

2.33 As a Just Social Operating Principle

This people supplied the ground why the three dynasties pursued the path of straightforwardness. (15.25)⁴¹ Zhu Xi annotates: 'The upright way (zhi dao 直道) means without selfishness or crookedness.'⁴² It refers to a universal principle of social operation. Confucius believed that the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, Zhou) governed by adhering to this 'zhi dao (直道)'. Here, *zhi* is elevated from a personal moral quality to a criterion of social justice.

Slingerland's 'the upright way' and Ames and Rosemont's 'the true path' are superior to the purely literal 'the straight path.'⁴³

3 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that no single English word consistently encompasses the full connotation of *zhi*; rather, its translation must be strategically adapted to its specific function in each passage. When referring to the 'upright individual', upright effectively captures the intended sense, when describing uncultivated forthrightness, straightforward proves more appropriate; and when expressing a situational moral principle, more interpretive renderings such as remaining true or the true path effectively highlight its broader ethical and social implications. Successful translation thus depends more on sensitivity to philosophical context than on lexical consistency.

⁴⁰ Ames and Rosemont, p.175.

⁴¹ Legge, *Confucian Analects*, p.178.

⁴² Zhu Xi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, p.167. Original text: 直道，無私曲也。

⁴³ Slingerland, p181; Ames and Rosemont, p.197.

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