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Translation Studies on Concept *Mei* in the *Analects*

1 Introduction to the Concept of *Mei* 美

The most used definition of *mei* in modern days is ‘beautiful’, or by its noun form, ‘beauty’. These are original meanings long used throughout history where evidence can be traced back according to the earliest Chinese dictionary—*Explaining the Text and Deciphering the Characters*¹ that ‘goat that looked big can be considered *mei*’². Another group of scholars may believe that the original meaning of *mei* comes from the fact that people long ago wore headdress made of goat horns³. However, it is certain that *mei* got something to do with human’s subjective judgement on an object and in this narrow sense, it only function to illustrate the superficial exterior of an object. However, in pre-Qin Confucian contexts particularly the *Analects*⁴, *mei* appeared to implicate a much deeper value.

As a term not strictly classified as a philosophical concept in Confucianism, the ways to translate *mei* are limited. Li Zehou⁵ stated in one of his celebrated treatises on aesthetics that the notion of *mei* can be categorised into three, namely, the judgement of sensory organs, ethics and aesthetic value. While ‘beautiful’ mentioned above is assigned to Li’s third explanation, this essay focuses on the character’s different translations⁶ in past eras to modern days according to different Chinese commentaries where statistically, eight of *mei*’s fourteen appearances in the *Analects* are of ethical values (1.12, 3.25, 4.1, 8.11, 12.16, 20.2) rather than mere aesthetic related depictions.

2 Translations of *Mei* When of Aesthetic Value

¹ *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining the Text and Deciphering the Characters). Detail publication information See reference list.

² ‘Goat that looked big can be considered *mei*’ 羊大則美 See Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1978), p. 78.

³ Li Zehou 李澤厚, *Huaxia meixue-meixue sijiang* 華夏美學·美學四講 (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2008), p. 267.

⁴ Chinese version of *Analects* refer to *Lunyu* 論語 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010).

⁵ Li Zehou, *Huaxia meixue-meixue sijiang*, pp. 268-269.

⁶ English translation versions refer to works of Arthur Waley, William Edward Soothill, James Legge, David Hinton, Pual White, LAU Din Cheuk, Peng Ziyong and Guhongming. Detailed publication information See reference list.

When understood in its aesthetic related sense, *mei* is easier to define and more in line with how it is currently used such as beautiful, lovely and fine, especially when describing something people see or hear. As to illustrate an even prettier object, synonyms like elegance, splendour, exquisite, gorgeous, grand, luxurious, magnificence were used. *Mei* appeared in six passages in the *Analects* that indicates this narrow sense of external beauty—depiction of woman’s eyes (3.8), prince’s appearance (6.16), outfit (8.21), jewellery (9.13) and housing (13.8, 19.23) where ‘beautiful’ is the most common term used especially by David Hinton and Arthur Waley. While Li Bingnan’s⁷ thinks that *mei* means ‘perfect’ in 19.23. Waley, Peng Ziyou, William E. Soothill, James Legge and Hinton all followed Huang Kan and Liu Baonan’s commentaries⁸ that *mei* simply implicates the fine exterior of housing therefore translate it as ‘beauty’. Others including D. C. Lau and Paul White wrote ‘magnificence’ and ‘fine’ separately yet still expressing the same thought. It is surprising that Gu Hongming as an exception had expressed the implicated meaning⁹ out by saying ‘treasures of art’, though may be considered not suitable as the translated sentence lost its literal meaning in Chinese.

It is also notable that in 13.8 while Liu thinks that *mei* means *jinshi* 盡飾¹⁰ (fully exquisite), Xing Bing define it as *fumei* 富美¹¹ (beauty bring along by wealth) and Peng, Lau and White translated it as ‘gorgeous’, ‘grand’ and ‘luxurious’ separately, Waley and Hinton still stick to the term ‘beautiful’ which does not fit either of the commentaries as it only manifests the fine appearance with no emphasis on ‘rich’ or ‘fully’.

These translations reflect the problem that though all terms may be aesthetic related which inform readers that the subject has good appearance, the *extent* of such ‘good appearance’ plays an important role in translation decisions. Another example would be in 6.16. Peng, Lau, Hinton and Gu’s ‘good looks’ and ‘fine appearance’ are much more appropriate than Waley, Soothill and Legge’s ‘beauty’ as *mei* in this sense should set emphasis on ‘looks’ or

⁷ ‘perfect’ 完美 See Li Bingnan 李炳南, *Lunyu Jiangyao* 論語講要 (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2011), p. 343.

⁸ *Lunyu jijie yishu* 論語集解義疏, ed. by He Yan 何晏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), p. 274. and Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 751.

⁹ The good character of Confucius.

¹⁰ Liu Baonan, *Lunyu zhengyi*, p. 528.

¹¹ Liu Baonan, *Lunyu zhengyi*, p. 197.

‘appearance’.

3 Translations of *Mei* When of Ethical Value

Generally, *mei* as a term related to ethical judgements may be further divided into two. First conveying the idea that a subject cannot get any better—reaching perfection¹². This may be evidence of why sometimes commentators identified *mei* with *shan* 善¹³, a character often used together with *mei* in Confucianism but tend to be mixed up because they in some respects convey similar meaning of ‘hao 好’¹⁴, a comprehensive character comprising quite a few words of positive qualities. Second way is to make *mei* no longer as an adjective modifying a subject, but the subject itself—the ‘Good things’ or ‘virtues’ one may possess.

3.1 When *Mei* Means Perfection

The word *shan* mentioned above does not have anything to do with kindness, but a term of high status in Confucianism and could be identified with the nobility of *miao* 妙 in Buddhism, both meaning ‘ultimate in excellent’¹⁵, in simple terms, perfection.

A Grand Minister of Education¹⁶ from the Zhou dynasty rephrases *mei* as *shan*¹⁷ when identifying the significance of harmony during practices of rules of propriety as one of the principles of Former Kings (1.12). Taking his idea, Waley, Peng and Hinton’s ‘beauty’ is mere superficial understanding of the character which falls short of the emphasis on ‘utmost perfection’, whereas Soothill’s ‘admirable feature’, Legge’s ‘excellent quality’ and White’s

¹² which somehow remains some connection with aesthetic aspects—perfection can be a form of beautiful.

¹³ ‘*mei* and *shan* have the same meaning’ 美與善同意 see Xu Shen, *Shuowen jiezi*, p. 78.

¹⁴ Fu Xiaowei and Wang Yi, ‘Confucius on the Relationship of Beauty and Goodness’, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 49.1 (2015), 68-81 (p. 70) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jaesteduc.49.1.0068>> [accessed 10 January 2026].

¹⁵ Li Bingnan, *Lunyu jiangji* (internal source unpublished, see <https://reader.z-library.sk/read/33684aab46a56fe6aa701a1c789162e0be83cfe70d9a81f3421480fbc116fad1/28397887/2a1afb/%E8%AB%96%E8%AA%9E%E8%AC%9B%E8%A8%98%E5%8D%B7%E4%B8%8A-%E7%AC%AC%E4%B8%80%E5%86%8Ahz1700601a.html?client_key=1fFLi67gBrNRP1j1iPy1&extension=pdf&signature=7b525b8df2858a6d391827021c360f0ac3db10eac9e58804802b752918c17d0b&download_location=https%3A%2F%2Fz-library.sk%2Fdl%2F28397887%2F3bfe62> [accessed 9 January 2026], pp. 241-242.)

¹⁶ *Dasitu* 大司徒 (Grand Minister of Education): Ancient China’s official position; highest position in the administrative system, equivalent to the modern ‘Premier’ or ‘Prime Minister’.

¹⁷ ‘*Mei*, also called *shan*.’ 美, 善也 See Liu Baonan, *Lunyu zhengyi*, p. 29.

‘especially fine one’ are more accurate. However, they may also have been referencing Huang’s commentary on this passage where he simply repeated that *mei* means *mei*¹⁸.

Zheng Xuan also has the same thought on 4.11¹⁹ while other commentators including Zhu Xi, Li Bingnan, Liu, Huang and Cheng Shude did not give any further explanation. Thus, while Waley, Peng and White kept the use of terms such as ‘beauty’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘fine’, Soothill, Legge and Gu’s ‘excellent’ and Hinton and Lau’s ‘most’ added to modify ‘beautiful’ turned out to be more proper.

Due to different thoughts of commentators, the slight differences between their rendering²⁰ leads to translators having different understanding of *mei*, thus appearing mainly two ways of translations—beautiful and excellent. However, since there are no such criteria as to say which decipherment was *right*, both ways of translation could be explained away according to different commentaries. The other problem would be that in spite of the Chinese commentators may see *mei* in some cases as *shan*, translators often still tend to simply say ‘beautiful’. This may be due to the flexible usability of *mei*’s few definitions where either way do make sense in the translated text, no matter if it was appropriate in Chinese or not.

3.2 When *Mei* Symbolises Subject

Examples of subjects being symbolised by *mei* could be a trait of Duke Zhou (8.11) or qualities possessed by humans (12.16, 20.2) and these were supported by Li Bingnan where he states that *mei* means ‘good deed’²¹. Cheng also gives a more specific explanation—something what people of noble character possess and petty person lack²². In 12.16, Waley, Peng, Soothill, Lau, Gu and White use the word ‘good’ as part of their translations; Legge wrote ‘admirable qualities’ and Hinton said it as ‘what is beautiful in people’, which are all fine renderings.

When Confucius said, ‘To act on the five *mei*’²³ in 20.2, ‘Lovely Things’, ‘good’ and

¹⁸ *Lunyu jijie yishu*, p. 10.

¹⁹ *Lunyu jijie yishu*, p. 44.

²⁰ Translating *mei* either as *shan* or *mei* per se.

²¹ ‘good deed’ 善事、美事 see Li Bingnan, *Lunyu jiangyao*, p. 213 and 351.

²² ‘Thus, *mei* is something *junzi* possess and *xiaoren* lack’ 故美者君子所有而小人所無也 see Cheng Shude 程樹德, *Lunyu jishi (part 2) 論語集釋 (中)* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), p. 215.

²³ ‘To act on the five *mei*’ 尊五美.

‘excellent’ as nouns, ‘excellent practices’ and ‘graces’ are Waley, Soothill, Legge, Lau and Hinton’s decisions separately. However, ‘lovely’ may in this case seem too gentle being the characteristic of things needed to be done in government; those five things also may not be precisely summarised by ‘graces’, where Gu and White’s translations seem to be more appropriate instead. It is noteworthy that though Peng uses the term ‘beautiful’, he does not meant to make any aesthetic judgments as it was used for modifying *de* 德 (virtue) followed by.

Despite the slight differences in translations, none are found to follow what Huang render *wu-mei* 五美 as ‘the beauty of five things’²⁴ where his emphasis was on ‘beauty’ and will be deviating too far from the original meaning.

Another notable passage would be 8.11 where among the studied translations, none have translate *mei* according to Liu and Li Bingnan where they believe that *cai-mei* 才美 in the sentence should be considered as two separate traits of Duke Zhou²⁵. Thus, no translations managed to define *mei* literally as a single word meaning the ‘perfection in handling affairs’ while *cai* means talents and skills. Yet when coming to Zhu, Huang and Liu Kai who decipher *mei* as *cai*’s modifier²⁶, the translations could be explained—‘As wonderful as’ by Waley, ‘as magnificent as’ by Peng, ‘as admirable as’ by Soothill, Legge and Gu, ‘as gifted as’ by Lau and ‘as nobly endowed as’ by Hinton.

3.3 *Mei* in Passage 3.25

As *mei* was written along with *shan* in passage 3.25, it cannot be directly understood as what mentioned in the last paragraphs that it can be rephrased into *shan*. Thus, there appeared four mainstreams of *mei*’s implication, namely, ‘in accord with the sentiments of contemporaries’²⁷ by Huang, ‘paise and honour to virtue of kings’²⁸ by Zheng, ‘grandeur of sounds (refer in

²⁴ *Lunyu jijie yishu*, p. 279.

²⁵ *Lunyu zhushu* 論語註疏, rev. by He Yan 何晏 and others (Beijing: Beijing daxue, 2000), p. 116. and Li Bingnan, *Lunyu jiangyao*, p. 148.

²⁶ ‘Beauty(*mei*) of *cai*’ 才的美 see Zhuxi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集註 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), p. 106. and *Lunyu jijie yishu*, p. 108. and Cheng Shude, *Lunyu jishi*, p. 692.

²⁷ ‘it is to be in line with the sentiments of cotemporaries.’ 是會合當時之心 see *Lunyu jijie yishu*, p. 43.

²⁸ ‘Paise of King Shun and Wu...’ 美順...美武王... See Liu Baonan, *Lunyu zhengyi*, p. 135.

particular to songs)²⁹ by Zhu and the simple sensation of ‘beauty of sounds and music’³⁰ by Xing. Most translators including Waley, Peng, Soothill, Legge, Lau and Hinton took the last commentary which thought of *mei* as with acoustic aesthetic value and agreed to translate it as ‘beautiful’.

4 Contradictions in Chinese Commentaries

It is interesting that scholars either commentators or translators keep relearning the *Analects* and deciphering its meaning throughout the times to publish new ideas on the passages. This phenomenon may be the main reason why great many different translations on either philosophical or unphilosophical terms arise continuously. Just like the prominent evidence in 1.12 and 4.11 those translators followed two different thoughts on *mei* thus their translations fallen into either ‘excellence’ or ‘beautiful’. However, the contradictions hardly help to determine the ‘right’ answer to what the passage originally meant. It is not a serious problem so long as the translations make sense according to a reasonable commentary.

5 Conclusion

To be sure, the term ‘beautiful’ appeared by *mei*’s nature always remained the most popular way people first thought of it nowadays, but it is clear that in the academic circle, it conveys meanings more than a mere outer description of subjects thus cannot simply be translated as ‘beautiful’ or ‘beauty’ every time it appeared in texts. In short, according to the classification of *mei*’s meanings by Li Zehou, its ethical values carried in the *Analects* should be emphasised.

²⁹ ‘*Mei* refers to the grandeur of sounds’ 美者，聲容之盛 see Zhuxi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, p. 68.

³⁰ ‘(the music’s) tone is beautiful’ 樂音美也 see Liu Baonan, *Lunyu zhengyi*, p. 136.

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