



Trinity Saint David

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The Meaning of *Shan* 善 in the *Analects* and Suitable Translation

Shan 善 is an important moral concept existing in Chinese traditional culture. According to statistics, *Shan* 善 appearing in thirty-five passages and a total of forty-two times of the *Analects*.¹ In modern Chinese society, most people intuitively think that *Shan* means to goodness 善良. But, *Shan* is mostly distributed in sentences related to moral character and personality in the *Analects*. The distribution of *Shan* from the side confirms Confucius' political proposition of "governing by virtue" and implementing "benevolent governance".² This essay will analyze different meaning of *Shan* and offer suitable translation of *Shan* in *Analects*.

1.The Meaning of *Shan*

This essay analyzed the thirty five passages with *shan* in the four commentaries:

1. *Lunyu jijie* 論語集解, representing pre-Tang dynasty; commentary by He Yan 何晏 and subcommentary by Huang Kan 皇侃.
2. *Sishuzhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注, representing Song dynasty, by Zhu Xi 朱熹.
3. *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義, representing Qing dynasty, by Liu Baonan 劉寶楠.
4. *Lunyu jiangyao* 論語講要, representing modern society, by Li Bingnan 李炳南.

According to statistics, there are a total of forty-two characters for *shan* in the *Analects*. Among these characters, there are thirteen characters that represent moral character and personality, eleven characters indicating a judgment of behaviour, eight characters original meanings of *shan*, seven characters that express technical ability and three characters express commend. From these analysis, the meanings of *shan* can be summarized by this chart:

	The Semantics of <i>Shan</i>	The Meaning of <i>Shan</i>
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¹ The passages numbers are 2.20, 3.25, 5.18, 5.27, 6.9, 7.3, 7.22, 7.26, 7.28, 7.32, 8.4, 8.13, 9.11, 9.13, 11.19, 12.11, 12.19, 12.21, 12.23, 13.8, 13.11, 13.15, 13.22, 13.24, 13.29, 14.5, 15.10, 15.32, 16.4, 16.5, 16.11, 17.7, 19.3, 19.20 and 20.1.

² Liu Lingfeng 劉凌峰 'The Semantic Analysis and Culture Explanation of Chinese Traditional Cultural Core Category of SHAN' 中華傳統文化核心範疇“善”的語義分析及文化闡述, (Fujian: Fujian Normal University, 2012), p.19.

<i>Shan</i> 善	Represent moral character and personality	A person of noble character 品德高尚的人
	Indicating a judgment of behaviour	Correct, Properly 正確，妥當地
	Original meanings	Fine, Good 美好，好
	Express technical ability	Be skilled in 擅長
	Express commend	Praise 讚許

1.1 Represent Moral Character and Personality

In the Analects, *shan* more often conveys meanings at the ethical and moral level. Confucius expressed the concept of ethics and morality in the character *shan*, which paved the way for the interpretation of *shan* as an ethical category to become more diverse. Therefore, the interpretation of *shan* mostly naturally belongs to the semantic field of moral character and personality.³ For a monarch, having a good moral character and personality enables him to govern country better. For the common people, families can be more harmonious.

In the Analects: Confucius said, “If you desires goodness (*shan*), the people will be good (*shan*).”⁴ Confucius advocated governing the people through moral influence rather than relying on stringent criminal laws. If one wishes to guide the masses to embrace goodness, the ruler must first set an exemplary standard with his own conduct. Just as one wholeheartedly pursues selfish desires, the ruler should exert the same earnest effort to strive for virtue—then the people will naturally follow suit and turn towards goodness. Whether a person is “*shan*” or not should be judged by whether he has good moral character and personality, and whether a person has good moral character and personality should be judged by whether he can handle affairs in accordance with ethics and morality.

³ Liu Lingfeng ‘*The Semantic Analysis and Culture Explanation of Chinese Traditional Cultural Core Category of SHAN*’, p.43.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all translation are by myself. The interpretation of this passage is in accordance with Li Bingnan’s commentary (see *Lunyu jiangyao* 2011, p214). Original text: 子欲善，而民善矣。

1.2 Indicating a Judgment of Behaviour

In the realm of education, Confucius' influence has been particularly profound. As he put it, "I choose the good qualities of others and follow them, and I reflect on and correct my own shortcomings by observing their bad qualities."⁵ Here, the concept of *shan* does not refer to abstract moral essence, but to specific words and deeds. From Zhu Xi's explanation emphasizes that the words and deeds of others, whether good or bad, they can all serve as a mirror for self-reflection.⁶ *Shan* in others acts as a reference to identify one's own shortcomings, *bushan* 不善 in others also serves as a warning to check if one has the same flaws. The starting point of such judgment is never to pass verdict on others' behaviors, but to focus on self-cultivation and self-improvement.

1.3 Original Meanings

In the Analects, Confucius commented on Shao 韶, saying, 'It is perfectly beautiful, and also perfectly good, on Wu 武, he said, 'It is perfectly beautiful, but not perfectly good.'⁷ This remark marks Confucius' introduction of *shan* as an aesthetic notion.⁸ The music Wu eulogized the seizure of the throne by military force, which ran counter to Confucius' political ideals and moral pursuits. Thus, he held that Wu lacked the manifestation of "supreme virtue" in ideology and therefore was "not perfectly good". In contrast, Confucius believed that the ideological and moral essence of the music Shao was fully aligned with his own aspirations, hence Shao achieved perfection both in artistic merit and in moral virtue.⁹ In this way, Confucius elevated *shan* 善 and *mei* 美 to the same level of significance.

⁵ "I choose the good qualities of others and follow them, and I reflect on and correct my own shortcomings by observing their bad qualities." The good quality in this sentence means *Shan*. Original text: 擇其善者而從之，其不善者而改之。

⁶ Collected Commentaries, Zhu Xi noted: "When three people walk together, one of them is myself. Of the other two, if one embodies goodness and the other evil, then I follow the example of the former and rectify the flaws reflected by the latter. In this way, both of them can be my teachers." The interpretation of this passage is in accordance with Zhu Xi's commentary (see Lunyu jiangyao 1983, 98).

⁷ Original text: 子謂《韶》：「盡美矣，又盡善也。」謂《武》：「盡美矣，未盡善也。」

⁸ Liu Lingfeng 'The Semantic Analysis and Culture Explanation of Chinese Traditional Cultural Core Category of SHAN', p.43.

⁹ The interpretation of this passage is in accordance with He Yan and Huang Kan's commentary (see Lunyu jijie 1985, 2), p.43

1.4 Express Technical Ability

Confucius said, “Yen Ping knew well how to maintain friendly intercourse.”¹⁰ *Shan* here does not refer to the superiority or inferiority of moral character, but rather to Yan Pingzhong's skills and abilities in interpersonal communication. From the perspective of context and comment¹¹, this statement by Confucius is an affirmation of Yan Pingzhong's ability to handle affairs, emphasizing the practical skills and wisdom he demonstrated in interpersonal communication, rather than a characterization of his moral character.

1.5 Express Commend

Confucius Said: “What a good (*shan*) question!”¹² Here *shan* does not refer to moral cultivation or skill level. Rather, it was Confucius' positive evaluation and direct agreement with the words and actions of others.

2. Suitable Translations for *Shan*

This essay looked at four kinds of English translations of Analects:

1. *The Chinese Classics Confucian Analects , The Great Learning , and The Doctrine of the Mean* by James Legge
2. *Confucius the Analects* by Lau, D. C. 劉殿爵
3. *The Analects* by Arthur Waley
4. *Lu Yu of Confucius* by Peng Ziyong 彭子游

According to the content of the first: The Semantics and meaning of *Shan*, Analyze and select the English translations of *shan* in sequence.

1. *Shan*: Translation Represent Moral Character and Personality

¹⁰ Original text: 子曰：「晏平仲善與人交」

¹¹ In accordance with Li Bingnan's commentary: Therefore, Therefore, it is necessary to gradually get to know and get along with each other from the superficial to the profound and from the distant to the close. After a long period of time and a genuine and profound understanding has been formed, if I treat (the other party or handle affairs) with a sincere and respectful attitude, I can naturally avoid the hidden dangers of missing out on talents and losing myself. This is precisely the method and principle of *shan*. (see Lunyu jiangyao 2011, p83)

¹² Original text: 子曰：「善哉問」

Legge: good, excellence, goodness

Lau, D. C.: good, goodness

Waley: worthy, good qualities, good, faultless, right

Peng Ziyou: good, goodness

2. *Shan*: Translation Indicating a Judgment of Behaviour

Legge: politely, good, excellence, skilfully

Lau, D. C.: tactfully, right, good, properly,

Waley: polite, good, discreetly, right

Peng Ziyou: good, kindly and discreetly

3. *Shan*: Translation of Original Meanings

Legge: good, excellence, great

Lau, D. C.: good, perfection

Waley: goodness, best, good

Peng Ziyou: goodness, value, good

4. *Shan*: Translation Express Technical Ability

Legge: maintain, well, skilful, insinuating, good

Lau, D. C.: excel, good, laudable, be good at, well

Waley: good, liked, skilful, mighty

Peng Ziyou: talented, well, skilful, be good at, obsequious

5. *Shan*: Translation Express Commend

Legge: good, truly

Lau, D. C.: splendid, well

Waley: true, excellent, well

Peng Ziyou: right, good

Based on the above summary, it can be observed that "good" is the most common translation of "*shan*" regardless of its specific semantic category. However, in comparison, the connotation of "good" in the Western cultural context seems vastly different from that of "*shan*" in the Chinese cultural context. Why then do scholars consistently opt for "good" when translating "*shan*"? The term "good", whose etymological equivalents in Greek and Latin connote "fitness" or "appropriateness", has in fact been tacitly equated with the Chinese concept of "*shan*" by many Western scholars through in-depth reflection and rigorous reasoning.¹³ By comparison, the meanings of "good" and "*shan*" do overlap with each other some extent.

The correlation between the Chinese "*shan*" and the Western "good" can be traced back to the late 16th century, when Western missionaries arrived in China to propagate their religion. At that time, the meaning of "*shan*" incorporated both the connotation of "good" in Western religious ethics and the unique implication of "kindness" inherent in Chinese culture. During the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, "*shan*" had already, to a certain extent, possess the connotation of "good" of Western religious ethics. Later, however, "*shan*" and "good" distinction between within their respective Chinese and Western cultural and linguistic contexts. The meaning of "*shan*" thus reverted to the interpretation given by ancient Chinese philosophers such as Mencius in their original temporal and spatial contexts. It was not until the outbreak of the Opium Wars in modern times that "*shan*" and "good" were reconnected in the course of China's modernization drive.¹⁴

The interpretation of the concept of "*shan*" in both Chinese and Western cultural contexts reflects the respective cultural perceptions of scholars from the Chinese and Western country.¹⁵ In the Chinese cultural context, the moral value meaning of "*shan*" as mentioned

¹³ Gao Mingxia 高敏霞 and Liu Wei 劉偉, 'The Cross-cultural Tension in the Translation of Chinese Classics and Its Resolution: An Analysis of the "Nature of Goodness" in James Legge's English Translation of Mencius' 中国经典翻译的跨文化张力及其消解理雅各英译《孟子》性”善”性善”探析 (2024), Hanji and Hanxue 漢籍與漢學, 1 (2024), 106-115 (p.111).

¹⁴ Yang Yurong 杨玉荣, 'The research on the generation of core terms in modern Chinese ethics centers on Liang Qichao, Wang Guowei, Liu Shipei and Cai Yuanpei' 中国近代伦理学核心术语的生成研究以梁启超, 王国维, 刘师培和蔡元培为中心, (Research Center for Chinese Traditional Culture, Wuhan University, 2011), p.172.

¹⁵ Gao Mingxia and Liu Wei, 'The Cross-cultural Tension in the Translation of Chinese Classics and Its Resolution: An Analysis of the "Nature of Goodness" in James Legge's English Translation of Mencius' p.112.

by Confucius is an important philosophical category for constructing the issue of the origin of Chinese morality and traditional Chinese culture. By contrast, the connotation of "good" in the Western cultural context is relatively broad-ranging. Hence, despite the divergent implications of "*shan*" and "good" arising from contextual differences, their connotations do share certain common ground. If I were to make the choice, in most cases I would choose to translate "*shan*" as "good", but translation still needs to select appropriate words in accordance with the cultural context and cultural connotation.

3. Conclusion

To summary, this essay have five different meanings of "*shan*" in the Analects. Although most scholars translate "*shan*" as "good", and there is indeed a certain connection between the two in terms of connotation, it cannot be simply assumed that "*shan*" is "good". In translation, it is still necessary to select appropriate words based on different cultural backgrounds.

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