

The Dialectical Unity of “Compression” and “Depth-Preservation”: An Empirical Study of English Translation Project of *Nine-Volume History of Chinese Confucianism*

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Using the English translation project of the *Nine-Volume History of Chinese Confucianism* as a case study and based on symposium materials from 2026, this paper constructs a three-dimensional “theory-practice-coordination” model to explore the methodology for translating large-scale scholarly works. The research focuses on the “compression paradox” in translation, arguing for the dialectical unity between macro-structural compression guided by the theory of rewriting and micro-level deepening of connotation guided by the theory of thick translation. It further examines how translation quality is ensured through terminology coordination and a “human-AI (artificial intelligence) collaboration” workflow, offering theoretical and practical reference for similar projects.

Keywords: translation of Chinese academic works, *History of Chinese Confucianism*, rewriting, translation

The National Social Science Fund’s project for translating Chinese academic works aims to facilitate the global dissemination of China’s scholarly classics (National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences, 2025). Large-scale works, such as the *History of Chinese Confucianism* (nine volumes, approx. 4.5 million Chinese characters) edited by Tang Yijie and Li Zhonghua, face stringent length restrictions (approx. 200,000-300,000 English words) in the international publishing market, requiring compression to 40%-50% of the original length (National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences, 2025). This presents a “compression paradox”: How to reduce length without compromising intellectual depth? This study introduces André Lefevere’s theory of rewriting and Kwame Anthony Appiah’s concept of thick translation construct a methodological framework addressing this paradox. Lefevere posits translation as a rewriting constrained by ideology, poetics, and patronage (Lefevere, 1992, p. 2), while Appiah advocates for thick translation through paratexts like annotations to preserve cultural context (Appiah, 1993, p. 817). The practice of this project demonstrates that successful translation entails the dialectical unity of macro-level “rewriting” and micro-level “thick” translation.

Theoretical Foundations: The Theoretical Implications of Rewriting and Thick Translation

Lefevere’s Theory of Rewriting: Ideology, Patronage, and Text

Lefevere argues that translation is controlled by “professionals” within the literary system and external “patronage”, the latter exerting control through ideological, economic, and status factors (Lefevere, 1992, pp. 15-

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16). In this project, the National Social Science Fund and the publishing house constitute the “patronage”, whose ideological imperative is to “tell China’s story well”. Simultaneously, Western academic conventions emphasize direct and linear argumentation, conflicting with the source text’s Chinese-style “narrating without creating” exposition, necessitating textual rewriting to conform to the target culture’s poetic norms (Lefevere, 1992, pp. 26-27).

Appiah’s Thick Translation: Reconstructing Cultural Context

Drawing on the concept of “thick description”, Appiah advocates for reconstructing the cultural-historical context necessary for target-reader comprehension through paratextual means such as annotations and commentary (Appiah, 1993, pp. 817-818). This is crucial for translating core Confucian concepts like *ren* (benevolence/humaneness) and *li* (principle/pattern), which are highly historical and philosophical. Beyond transliteration or basic translation, deep explication is required to prevent the erosion of cultural connotations.

Practical Pathways: The Dialectical Unity From Macro-Structural Compression to Micro-Terminological Deepening

Structural Compression Under Patronage Regulation and Textual Adaptation

Ideological filtering: Focusing the core narrative. Aligning with the directive to “tell China’s story well”, the translation adjusted the narrative focus regarding historically critical content. For instance, details on the harshness of the “literary inquisition” in the Ming and Qing Dynasties were downplayed, shifting emphasis to how it prompted Confucianism’s turn towards textual criticism, thus transforming the narrative from a “portrayal of victimhood” to an “analysis of intellectual evolution dynamics”.

Textual reconfiguration: Transforming argumentative modes. The Chinese layered structure of “thesis—multiple pieces of evidence” was transformed into the Western academic linear structure of “problem—argument”. For example, when handling Dong Zhongshu’s theory of “interaction between Heaven and humankind”, the core logical chain was extracted as the backbone, embedding only representative source-text citations, while numerous parallel citations were integrated or summarized. This achieved a shift from a “documentary compilation style” to a “problem-argumentation style”.

Construction of the Terminology System and Paratexts From the Perspective of Thick Translation

“Thick” naming of terminology. A historicized terminology translation system was established, employing a “basic translation + contextual annotation” approach. For instance, *li* uses “principle” as its base translation but is contextually anchored through glossaries and footnotes: In pre-Qin volumes referring to the pattern of things, it is annotated as “pattern”; in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism volumes as the ontological “Heavenly Principle” with detailed explanation of its relationship with *qi*; in Wang Yangming’s proposition “the mind is principle”, it may be rendered as “the principle within the mind” with notes explaining its School of Mind connotations. For core categories like *qi* and *Taiji*, transliteration (*qi*, *Taiji*) with explanatory notes was adopted to preserve cultural alterity.

Paratextual contextual compensation. The translation project strategically prioritized paratexts, constructing a multi-layered “scaffolding” for comprehension. Each volume begins with a specially commissioned “Introduction to Historical and Intellectual Context”, outlining the macro-background of dynasty politics, society, and thought, and indicating the core Confucian issues of the volume, providing readers with a cognitive map.

Scholarly footnotes within the main text provide concise background on key figures, events, texts, and China-specific institutions, official titles, and place names, resolving queries without interrupting the flow of discourse.

Multiple appendices were added, such as a “Comparative Chronology of Chinese and Western History” and “Biographical Sketches of Major Figures”. The chronology table effectively addresses Western readers’ difficulty in temporal orientation by visually juxtaposing imperial reign titles, the Chinese celestial-stem and terrestrial-branch system, and the Gregorian calendar.

This practice demonstrates the synergy between macro “structural compression” and micro “thick translation”. The former removes physical barriers to dissemination, while the latter builds bridges for cross-cultural comprehension. Their dialectical unity collectively defines the mature methodological stance for translating Chinese academic works: It is both a “rewriting” that submits to the target system’s rules and an “interpretation” committed to reconstructing the depth of the source culture within the target system.

Process Management: Terminology Coordination and “Human-AI Collaboration”

Establishing a Cross-Volume Terminology Coordination Mechanism: “Mandatory Unity With Flexible Handling”

Core principle. The principle of “95% mandatory unity, 5% contextual differentiation” was established. Mandatory unity covers: personal and place names (uniform Hanyu Pinyin, e.g., Zhu Xi); core meta-concepts of Confucianism (e.g., *ren*, *yi*, *li*), their translations determined by synthesizing classical translations, contemporary sinological interpretations, and national terminology project outcomes; dynasty names, canonical titles. Flexibility is reserved for specific historical terms (e.g., “New Text/Old Text Confucianism”) and significant shifts in a term’s meaning for specific thinkers (e.g., *li* in Wang Yangming’s context).

Technical support. A cloud-based central terminology database was created, supported by a lightweight auxiliary translation application. This tool displays recommended translations and explanations for terms in real-time as translators type, technically ensuring terminology consistency.

Defining the Boundaries of “Human-AI Collaboration”: AI as Tool, Not Agent

Application scenarios and the “Reverse-Check” method. AI (artificial intelligence) use was strictly limited to: preliminary conversion of classical Chinese to modern Chinese; retrieval of parallel texts and academic expressions; generating draft translations. A “reverse-check method” was applied to all AI output: back-translating AI-generated English into Chinese to verify core information and logic; checking English argument logic and academic conventions; verifying terminology consistency. This formed a quality loop of “AI generation—human deep-editing”.

Institutional safeguards: “Three Reviews and Three Proofreads” and Sino-foreign expert collaboration. A “three reviews and three proofreads” process was implemented: translator self-check, team cross-check, expert final review. The final review specifically involved native English-speaking sinologists, who conducted “pre-adaptation” reviews from the target culture perspective, identifying needs for added cultural annotations, adjusted argument structures, and expressions incongruent with academic English conventions, significantly enhancing translation receptivity.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the English translation project of the *History of Chinese Confucianism* achieved textual structural compression to meet publishing constraints through Lefevere-inspired macro “rewriting”, and preserved the academic core by constructing terminology and paratextual systems through Appiah-inspired micro “thick translation”, realizing their dialectical unity. Furthermore, by establishing coordination mechanisms for terminology and a strictly defined human-AI collaborative workflow, it achieved the unity of intellectual accuracy and communicative effectiveness. This provides a systematic reference encompassing methodology and management paradigms for large-scale academic translation projects.

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