

# Review of Ni, Peimin, Understanding the analects of Confucius : a new translation of Lunyu with annotations

Sung, Winnie

2017

Sung, W. (2017). Review of Ni, Peimin, Understanding the analects of Confucius : a new translation of Lunyu with annotations. <https://hdl.handle.net/10356/152312>

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/152312>

---

© 2017 The Author(s). All rights reserved.

*Downloaded on 29 Mar 2023 17:55:13 SGT*

**Review of Ni, Peimin, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius: A New Translation of Lunyu with Annotations*, Albany NY: SUNY, 2017.**

Winnie Sung

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

To date, there are about forty complete English translations of the *Analects of Confucius*. Any new translation that adds to the existing stack faces the challenge of presenting something new and interesting about the text while not sacrificing the faithfulness to the original text. In my view, Ni Peimin's *Understanding the Analects of Confucius* accomplishes this feat impressively. It offers readers a new perspective for understanding Confucius and his teachings as recorded in the *Analects*. This is achieved mainly in two ways. The first is by providing extended annotations on the passages. Unlike many other translations, Ni's annotations not only include traditional Chinese commentators, but also include modern scholarship on Confucius's thought, as well as Ni's own comparative notes on other traditions, such as Daoism, Christianity, and ancient Greek philosophy. In doing so, Ni makes vivid that the *Analects* is still very much a living text. Another is by presenting Confucius's teachings as having a *gongfu* orientation that emphasizes on "the embodiment and manifestation of excellent abilities" (25). Ni's *gongfu* reading of the *Analects* is, at least, a very plausible way of understanding the *Analects*, which does not seek to have the readers comply with each one of the teachings as moral norms but rather, to have them apply the teachings in their everyday life.

Ni's translation, in general, is sensitive to textual nuances and difficulties. For example, is his decision to translate "peng" 朋 in *Analects* 1.1 as "companion" instead of "friends." There is a subtle difference between the terms "peng" 朋 and "you" 友 in classical texts that is often overlooked in modern translations. The meaning of "you" is probably closer to our contemporary conception of friends, whereas "peng" is more about being together. Without a high level of textual sensitivity, one could have easily followed the many other translations and understand *peng* as meaning friends, which is not wrong, but also not precise enough. Ni is also careful with terms that have multiple usages and connotations. "Zhi" 知 is one such term. Ni pays attention to the context and translates accordingly, sometimes as "understand" (3.22), sometimes as "being wise" (6.23), and sometimes as "knowledge" (7.20). It would have been more helpful though if Ni had always put the transliteration and Chinese character in brackets for terms that are translated differently so that readers—who do not read Chinese—can have a vague sense that it is the same Chinese character under consideration.

Ni's understanding of the *Analects* as *gongfu* instructions provides a helpful angle to appreciate the different layers of Confucius's teachings. Since *gongfu* orientation emphasizes the embodiment and manifestation of certain traits, Ni's translation is particularly good at highlighting concepts or ideas in the text that have to do with one's possession of certain qualities, as opposed to only appearing to have certain qualities (12.20, 17.13). Ni's translation of "xin" 信 as trustworthiness, in my view, better approximates Confucius's view than many other existing translations that convert "xin" as something like "being true to one's words," or "making good one's words." If we look at all the occurrences of the term "xin" in the *Analects*, it is possible to read "xin" as "keeping one's words"; but if we read the *Analects* as a whole, then there are many other passages that bear on our understanding of *xin* and it

is palpable that the emphasis of *xin* is not just on whether one's words describe reality accurately, or whether one keeps one's promises. Rather, *xin* has more to do with whether the person has the relevant character traits to substantiate the image they project. This concept reinforces Ni's point that the passages in the *Analects* are not meant to be read as moral norms (27). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the text, one has to read the text as a whole. For example, 17.20 tells a story where Confucius declines to see Ru Bei's visit and pretends that he is ill. But just as Ru Bei was stepping out of the house, Confucius played his lute and sang so that Ru Bei can hear it. Although this passage does not make any reference to "xin," it can be read as further illustrating what being *xin* involves. Ni's translation is superior to many of the existing ones in retrieving insights about the importance of embodying ethical qualities and living a moral life.

A drawback to reading the *Analects* as providing *gongfu* instructions however is that its overemphasis on an individual's traits and dispositions hides the relational dimension of Confucius's thought. Ni translates "ren 仁"—one of the most important terms in the *Analects*—as "human-heartedness." This translation gives the impression that *ren* is more about subjective feeling, a reading that Ni would want to reject. Even though Ni might say that this kind of subjectivity is "not dualistically in opposition to objectivity, otherness, and human conduct," Ni has not provided satisfactory justification for this translation (34). Instead, Ni only makes a quick reference to the later Confucian thought that everything is one-and-the-same body to justify his translation. However, *ren* in the *Analects* probably has not acquired the connotations that it had in later Confucian thought. There is ample evidence in this text to suggest that there is a relational dimension in the *ren*, and that it is intimately linked with *li* 禮 (ritual propriety)—a linkage that is crucial to understanding the *Analects* but which has not been made prominent in Ni's translation. Other terms that have overly-subjective or individualistic undertones in Ni's translation include: *da* 達, *zhi* 質, and *zhong* 忠. These terms all have a relational aspect to them but are translated as "unblock," "disposition," and "wholehearted devotion," respectively. The annotations of these terms are also dominated by later-Confucian commentaries that already favor Ni's translation.

Ni's translation is an exciting contribution to the field. Readers are encouraged to read Ni's translation together with other versions, as Ni himself suggests (22), especially ones that favor faithfulness to the original text over philosophical interpretation. I also encourage readers to carefully read the annotations of each passage, for they not only further our understanding of *Analects*, but also our general understanding of the Confucian tradition.

H. C. Winnie Sung is assistant professor of Chinese philosophy at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.