

# Memetic Study of Transimission of Cultural Symbol “LI” in English World

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**Abstract:** *Based on Leege’s version, this paper makes detailed analysis of the foreign transmission of the cultural symbol “Li” with memetic perspective. With qualitative analysis method, this paper gives an exploration into foreign transmission stages of cultural symbols “Li”, based on the memetic foreign dissemination schema proposed by the author. Then the explanation of why the resymbolized memes “propriety” can be successfully perceived by Western readers is presented.*

**Keywords:** *memetic, resymbolization, cultural symbol*

## 1. Introduction

The memetic theory is the study of memes. Since the concept of meme was firstly proposed by Richard Dawkins, who holds that the memetic theory has been employed to explain the phenomenon of cultural transmission [1]. However, its status as an independent discipline is still queried due to the incompleteness of its theoretic framework and some scholars disapprove of memetic theory. The famous linguist Sperber is the typical figure who disapproves of memetic theory. Sperber hold that the memetic theory is actually not a new theory because anthropologists once point out that the spread of culture is not by means of genes. In addition, Sperber thinks that the replication of culture is not by means of memes which is opposite of Dawkins’ideas. Semiotics is the humanities studying the meaning of symbols. At present, it has developed into a complete theoretic system. Memetic theory is devoted to the study of culture transmission, while Semiotics is more concerned with the interpretation of symbolic meaning, and they also focus on the cultural level. Thus, it is possible for us to conduct researches into the complementary aspects of these two theories, which will benefit to the development of memetics and enhance the application of memetic theory.

There is a close connection between memes and symbols, which can be understood from the two levels. On the one hand, any symbol which can be imitated and replicated is considered to be a meme. On the other hand, the memetic symbol will employ the resymbolization with variation in the signifier and signified to be perceived and transmitted in the life cycle of the meme. That is to say, the resymbolization, as an effective strategy for memes to be noticed and imitated, accompanies the life cycle of the meme. The original symbol is said to be a meme with continuous replication. In order to maintain the essential cultural part and infect more hosts, the memetic symbol should make changes in the form and meaning to realize the resymbolization. For example, the symbol “LI” can be called a meme because it has been copied and transmitted. In order to achive successful transmission ,the cultural symbol “LI” constantly experiences resymbolization with variation in the form and meaning in the domestic and foreign transmission. With the spread of the English versions of The Analects, the cultural symbol “LI” enters into the western world, and it has experienced the resymbolization process to adapt to the cognitive and emotional features of Western readers by means of translation. In Legge’s version, the source meme “LI” has become the resymbolized variant “propriety”, and its signifier is English word “propriety” and the pronunciation / prə'praɪəti /, referring to “correct or appropriate behavior”. In a word, the resymbolization accompanies the transmission of the cultural meme “Li”.

## 2. Evolution of the memtic-symbol “Li” in form and meaning

The cultural symbol, “Li”, has been constantly imitated and replicated for thousands of years since it was created. In different historic periods, the external form and internal cultural implication, which refers to the signifier and signified of a symbol, have experienced constant changes. This process can be considered as mutation and evolution of meme “Li”. This part will give a comprehensive introduction to the evolution of “Li” aiming to get a better understanding of its resymbolizd form

“propriety”.

### ***2.1 Mentic-symbol “Li” in character pattern***

The Chinese character “Li” is a phonogram with “Shi” presenting its external form and “Yi” conveying the internal meaning, while its complex form “Li” uses “shi” as the form and “Li” the meaning. Character “Li” is a seal character born in the Qin Dynasty. In oracle bones, “Li” is the vivid figure of a drum and two strings of jade. In the sacrificial ceremony in ancient times, there must be some precious articles as sacrificial offerings for gods as well as playing music. As for ancient Chinese people, nothing appears more precious and sacred than jade in terms of article and drum of music. So playing the drum and offering jade are regarded as the highest sacred form in sacrificial ceremony, which inspires ancient people to create the character “Li”[2].

When the trace of character comes to bronze inscriptions, another horizontal strike was added to the “Li” of oracle bones. Over thousands of years, the form of “Li” has changed a lot in the Qin Dynasty. In the new form, the part for “drum” is separated to two parts. With the further development of official script and regular script in the Han Dynasty, a real Chinese character “Li” finally comes into being[2].

However, the character “Li” cannot indicate the pronunciation. To solve this problem, an additional part is added in front of “Li”, that is “Shi” whose original meaning was spirit stones and extended meaning was spirit, becoming the phonogram “Li”. With the wide usage in the long history, “Li” is gradually used in social language communication.

### ***2.2 Mentic-symbol “Li” in cultural implication***

In the very beginning of Theory of Rites, Zhang Jue mentioned the origin of “Li”. Individuals are born with desire for material goods [2]. If he cannot get what he desires, he would keep pursuing. If there is no standard or principle to restrict his desire, there must be disputes between citizens. Disputes will lead to wars, and wars to poverty. The ancient ruler detests wars, so he set a ritual system to allocate material goods and adjust individual’s desire. Then, material goods and desires will keep coordinated development. This is where “Li” originates from. In Xunzi’s view, “Li” is a series of acceptable rules which generate from social interactions between social members to resolve the discrepancy between human’s desire and limited material wealth.

“Li” originates from daily customs and religious ceremonies in the primitive society which mostly refers to the ceremony of worshiping gods or ancestors. At the beginning, “Li” is a verb which means making sacrifices to the gods to ensure a good fortune. In Shuo Wen Jie Zi, Xu Shen has explained “Li” as follows, in ancient times, the character “Li” has an interchangeable character which means holding the ceremony to sacrifice the gods for blessing [2]. In terms of religious ceremony, “Li” refers to worshiping the gods for blessing. That is to say, the original meaning of “Li” is the act of holding the religious ceremony, presenting offerings to the gods and praying for blessing and good fortune. Besides, “Li” also refers to the exchange of gifts between clans for the sake of friendship.

During the Yin-Shang Dynasty, “Li” has received more attention than before and experienced a series of reforms and improvements on the basis of “Li” in the ancient China, thus becoming the specific etiquette and manners which are suitable for holding the sacrificial ceremony. After the Shang Dynasty was replaced by the Zhou Dynasty, people in the Zhou Dynasty combined existing etiquette and manners of Shang with the unique customs of Zhou and developed them into the whole system of Zhouli. In the system of Zhouli, “Li” no longer just included the etiquette and manners in sacrifice ceremony, but more widely covered political field, making “Li” become the political system for the first time to maintain patriarchal and hierarchical system. In the Spring and Autumn Period, “Li” mostly has equaled to rules and manners in nowadays society. It involves all aspects of manners and rules in the society, which standardize the daily life of the supreme monarch and the common people, far beyond the sacrifice ceremony. The implication of “Li” gets a further enlargement owing to the contributions of Confucianists. It finally becomes the collective term which consists of the social hierarchy, rules of behaviors to regulate marriage, bloodline, seniority order and social status as well as moral rules, gradually achieving its institutionalization and legalization. Over the long historic development, “Li” plays an important role in shaping and promoting spiritual qualities of the Chinese people. With the social development and reform, “Li” will constantly obtain new elements and experience changes and adjustments.

### 3. Interpretation of resymbolized form of “Li” in Legge’s version

James Legge, the distinguished sinologist, has translated *The Analects* into English version. His version of *The Analects* is considered to be one of the authoritative versions. Before Legge came to China, he had received the comprehensive and systematic Christian education, which makes a contribution to the unique interpretation of culture-loaded terms in *The Analects*. In terms of “Li”, one of the main core concepts in the Confucianism, Legge has made a connected perception based on the Jewish manners and mainly translated “Li” into “propriety” or “rules of propriety” according to different conditions.

Based on the definitions of “propriety”, “propriety” in the Christian culture refers to etiquette, code of conduct, reflecting the regulations of the Christian moral ethics which has much in common with “Li” in Chinese culture. Even in Christian culture, regulations of moral ethics embodied in the word “propriety” have the same efficacy of the law. “Li” in the Chinese ethical system and “propriety” in the Christian ethical system share the importance of keeping the society move smoothly, coordinating the relationship and interaction between social members and the country as well as among individuals.

In Christianity, most of the ethical and moral principles come from the Ten Commandments which are regarded as basic behavior principle of the Bible with profound influence. Up to now, the Ten Commandments have been the chief source of the legislation of Israel and the core morality concept in the western civilization.

The first three commandments focus on “the love for God” while the rest emphasizes on “love your neighbor as yourself”, which manage to regulate the individual behaviors in detail. The forth commandment “honor your father and mother” exactly conforms to the filial piety in the Confucianism.

In Confucianism, the behavior principle system of “Li” consists of the “three cardinal guides” (emperor guides minister, father guides son, husband guides wife) and “the five constant virtues” (benevolence, loyalty, propriety, wisdom and fidelity). The “three cardinal guides” emphasizes emperor-minister relationship, parents-child relationship and husband-wife relationship while the “five constant virtues” offers regulations of being a real man with good personalities. In addition, brotherhood and friendship holds importance in Confucianism, and altogether with the brotherhood and friendship, the emperor-minister relationship, parents-child relationship and husband-wife relationship are referred to as “the five cardinal relationships [3]”.

It is clear that both “Li” in the Confucianism and “propriety” in the Christianity regulate the individual behavior and social manners from the macro and micro perspectives. Although “Li” and “propriety” are generated from different cultural backgrounds and differ in the expression and cultivation, they share the same essence of the regulations of the moral ethics and behaviors.

### 4. Memetic analysis of English translation of “Li”

Based on the transmission schema proposed in the paper, this part will make exploration of the diffusion cycle of meme “Li” in a foreign cultural environment and explain the memetic reasons for successful transmission of “propriety”---the resymbolized form of “Li”.

#### 4.1 Dissemination schema of memtic-symbol “Li” in foreign countries

Based on the theory of Heylighen, the lifecycle of a meme, a meme will go through four subsequent stages.(1) Assimilation: a meme should be noticed and received by the new host.(2)Retention: a meme should retain in the host’ memory.(3) Expression: a meme should be expressed with variation by new host in such forms as language, behavior, picture (4)Transmission: the meme with little variation will continue to spread and be imitated by more people [4]. As for the transmission of memtic-symbols in foreign culture, these four stages also work successfully. However, it should be noticed that there are some differences in the expression stage, in which the meme has finished resymbolization with translation. The foreign dissemination schema of memtic-symbols is depicted as follows. As is shown in Figure 1.

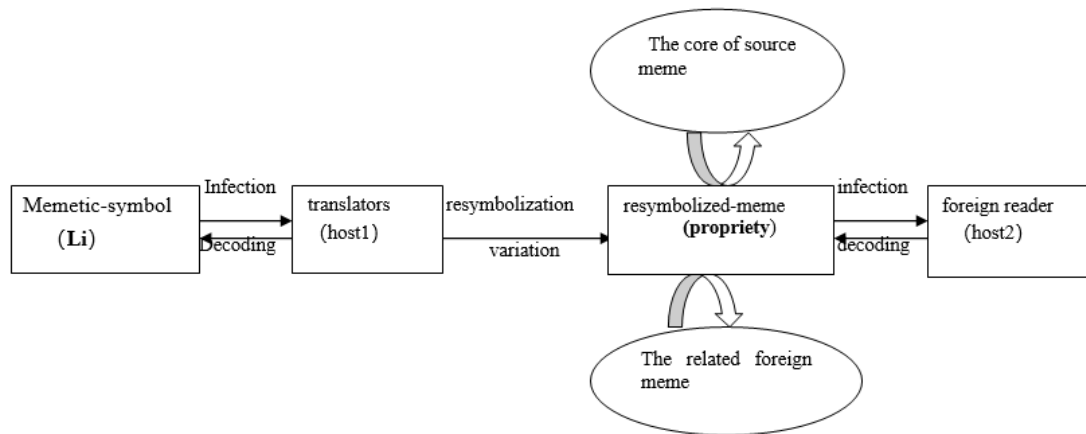


Figure 1 The Foreign Dissemination Schema of Memetic-symbols

In the figure above, memetic-symbols here refer to cultural-loaded symbols “Li” in The Analects. If the cultural memes want to survive and get transmitted, they must go through assimilation stage which mainly contains infection and decoding. When the translator (the foreign host) gets in touch with The Analects, it is easy for the foreign host to get infected by the core cultural meme “Li”, which are the essence of Confucianism. Then the translator will decode and interpret cultural meme “Li”, and in the process the meme “Li” will be integrated into the cognitive system of the translator. As part of the translator’ cognitive structure, the memetic-symbol “Li” could successfully finish the retention stage.

After stages of assimilation and retention, memetic-symbols have to go through expression stage to be perceived by foreign readers.[5] In this stage, the translator will make creative expression to fit foreign transmission environment. Generally speaking, two effective strategies will be employed at expression stage, one is resymbolization and the other is integration. Finally, the resymbolized-meme with variation both in form and content will be presented to the foreign readers. The resymbolized-meme here refers to the variant of memetic-symbol in source domain. From the figure above, it is obvious that the resymbolized-meme is a combination of the essence of memetic-symbol in source domain and the relative meme in target domain.

The resymbolized-meme, the new meme carrying the essence of source meme, will continue to spread in the foreign cultural environment. With distinctive features, the resymbolized-meme will draw the attention of foreign readers to achieve infection stage. Then foreign readers, as the new host, will decode and perceive the resymbolized-meme. Till to now, the whole transmission process is successfully completed, and then the next cycle transmission will start again.

Based on the above schema, the following part will make a detailed analysis of the foreign transmission of memetic-symbol “Li”.

#### 4.2 Foreign transmission cycle of meme “Li”

Professor Francis Heylighen thinks there are four stages in meme's life cycle, namely, assimilation, retention, expression, transmission and these four stages run in circles [6]. “Li”, as the cultural meme, has to go through these four stages in the new cultural environment to be replicated and transmitted. In the following part, the four stages will respectively be expounded.

(1) Assimilation. The meme shares the similar life cycle with that of the parasite. The meme “Li” is in the genetic phase when it exists in the vector-The Analects. If the source meme “Li” want to survive, it has to get transmitted, and go through the phrase of assimilation. As one of the prominent concept, the meme “Li” has been a strong meme and succeeded in disseminating in the China. With the powerful influence, it is easy for the meme “Li” to draw the attention of the translator Legge. With his Christian educational background, Legge can easily make connection between the meme “Li” and the similar Jewish meme. The Confucian meme “Li”, which conveys common regulations of the moral and social behaviors with the Western world, will culturally resonate with the Christian host Legge, and then it can easily infect and be integrated into Legge’s cognitive system, which makes contribution to the decoding and transmission of the meme “Li”. Based on the Christian interpretation of the meme “Li”, Legge decodes the elementary meaning of the meme “Li”.

(2) Retention. The cultural meme should be maintained in the host's memory. The longer meme stay, the more chances can affect host[6]. The meme "Li", the essential meaning of which has something in common with memes in Christian culture, can succeed in creating a feeling of affinity. Therefore, the meme "Li" can be integrated into Legge's Jewish mental schema, which is good for the retention of foreign meme "Li" in his memory.

(3) Expression. After stages of assimilation and retention, cultural meme "Li" will go through expression stage to be perceived and transmitted by more foreign readers. The meme "Li" should employ the suitable concrete vector like words to be correctly expressed. The key to successful foreign spread of the meme "Li" is the acceptable means of expression. The suitable expression is a perfect combination of the essential meaning of the original meme and the creative interpretation of the host. With the education of Christian Humanism in Christianity church, Legge makes a creative interpretation of the source meme "Li" based on the original meaning to achieve a better reception in the Christian world. Finally, he expresses "Li" with "propriety" on the basis of the common cultural meaning of each other. The resymbolized variant, "propriety" conveys the core meaning of meme "Li", that is correctness of social and moral behavior. As the acceptable means of expression, this variant makes a good combination of the meaning of the original meme and the creative Christian meaning.

(4) Transmission. The original meme "Li" has experienced the stages of assimilation, retention and expression to make a good preparation for the last transmission stage. The resymbolized meme "propriety", carrying the essence of the original meme "Li", will continue to spread in the foreign cultural environment. In the Christian cultural world, the Western readers can make a sense of intimacy when seeing the symbol "propriety", which makes a valuable contribution to the integration of the original "Li" into mental schema of Christian readers. Then foreign readers, as new hosts, will continuously decode and transmit the resymbolized-meme "propriety" with the essence of the original meme "Li". Till to now, the Chinese cultural meme "Li" has completely experienced the four stages of a meme's life cycle, and made a effective transmission in the Christian cultural environment with the resymbolization.

### ***4.3 Successful transmission of "propriety"***

(1) Emotional resonance. It is the emotion that drives the meme "Li" to activate and infect people successfully who share the similar emotional reaction. The strongest meme are those which could exactly and properly activate emotional hot keys [7]. If the original meme "Li" want to achieve the successful dissemination in the exotic cultural environment, it requires the ability to activate the emotional resonance of the Western readers and be received by the new hosts. It is mentioned that the resymbolization runs through the spread of the meme in the previous chapter. Therefore, the meme "Li" makes the variation, being the variant meme "propriety" in the foreign transmission. The mental schema of the variant meme "propriety" in the Western culture means the social morality and social order system, which all countries share to regulate the individual behaviors and social orders. For instance, human beings all pursuit the common ethics and moralities like the filial piety in family system, being kind and friendly with neighbors in individual interaction and obeying the regulations in social activities. It is this shared emotion that helps the Chinese cultural meme "Li" activates emotional hot keys of Western readers. With the pleasant intimate feeling, the Western hosts are willing to perceive and get a friendly reception of the source meme, paving the way for better transmission of the meme "Li".

(2) Cultural adaptation. In terms of culture, a new meme from the source culture finally get itself reproduced and transmitted in the target culture only by the means of adjusting itself to cater to the target culture and getting itself close or similar to the memes in the target cultural meme pool. Therefore, if the mew meme "Li" becomes culture-intimate meme of the Western culture, it will complete the process of foreign transmission. The Christian ethics, as the dominant culture deeply rooted in all westerners' mental schema, would impel the Western readers to get rid of the different cultural information. The reception of new memes for Western hosts is exclusive to memes which bear a resemblance to the Christian memes. The variant meme "propriety" has success in activating the rooted Christian cultural element of Western readers, that is, the correctness of social or moral behavior. In this way, the meme "Li" has achieved cultural transmission and evolution in the Western world and kept its Chinese cultural essence in the process of adapting to the Western culture and resonating with the Christian cultural schema.

As a concrete carrier of "the ideology of Li" in Confucianism, the memetic symbol "Li" has experienced resymbolization with variation of both external form and internal cultural implication to

complete the transmission in the foreign cultural environment. The variant meme “propriety” carries and conveys the most basic Confucian information of the source meme “Li” in spite of missing something. However, the variant “propriety” has combined the basic Confucian cultural element of “Li” and its intrinsic Christian elements, which enables it to have the features of the emotional resonance and cultural adaptation. The meme “propriety” differs with meme “Li” in the cultural horizon, however, the shared cultural elements enable “propriety” to attract the target readers and interest them, leading to the transmission of the source meme “Li” in the exotic land. Drawing attention from target readers and infecting them, the resymbolized variant “propriety” has contributed a lot to the transmission of “Li” in the Western culture for the first time, which plays an important role in the primary stage of disseminating the traditional Chinese culture.

## 5. Conclusion

After the detailed analysis of the foreign transmission of cultural meme “Li”, the conclusions of the study can be summarized as the following aspects:

(1) Resymbolization accompanies the life cycle of the meme. That is to say, the meme has to employ the resymbolization with variation both in form and meaning to fit the new environment. From memetic perspective, the translation is essentially the resymbolized variant of the source meme. This creative finding not only redefines the translation from the point of memetics, but also reveals the key principle of successful transmission for source memes in the foreign cultural environment. Cultural memes “Li” must experience the resymbolization to become the resymbolized-variant, “propriety”, which is an effective strategy for being noticed and perceived by Christian hosts.

(2) Two features of the meme, emotional resonance and cultural adaptation, can make a contribution to the successful spread of the meme in the foreign cultural environment. The emotional resonance and cultural adaptation are beneficial to the reception of the source memes by foreign hosts. This finding is the core law for the successful transmission of source memes in the foreign cultural environment. The resymbolized variant, “propriety” have such features as emotional resonance and cultural adaptation, and then they can enjoy successful transmission in the Christian cultural environment.

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