

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Journal of Global Humanities and Social Sciences
Generative AI in the Humanities: Methods, Applications, and Critical Perspectives
2026, Vol. 1 24-29
DOI: [10.61360/BoniGHSSAH262020830103](https://doi.org/10.61360/BoniGHSSAH262020830103)

The Feasibility of Translating "Li" as Code in Different Contexts of the Zuo Zhuan: A Comparison of Human and AI Translations



Hang Dong^{1,*}

¹*Shanghai Normal University, China*

Abstract: Li is a core concept with multiple meanings in the Zuo Zhuan. It can refer to concrete ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, sacrifices, and banquets, and it can also denote Zhou ritual institutions, political order, diplomatic conventions, status ethics, and behavioral norms. Existing studies show that li cannot be simply equated with ritual, rites, or propriety; its translation must vary according to context. This study examines 50 passages containing li from the Zuo Zhuan and compares two human translations—those by James Legge and Luo Zhiye—with AI translations produced by ChatGPT and DeepSeek. It focuses on the range of applicability of the English word code as a translation for li. In the prompts, the two AI systems were deliberately instructed to test the possibility of code first, while also permitting other renderings in contexts involving concrete ceremonies, etiquette, and courteous treatment. Through item-by-item analysis and manual review, 30 of the 50 passages could use code relatively naturally; 12 could use it but with a semantic shift or a need for a limiting collocation; and 8 were not recommended for code. The study argues that code is better suited to expressing the institutional, normative, and systematic dimensions of li. When li is realized as a concrete ceremony, external etiquette, or actual courteous treatment, renderings such as rites, etiquette, and courtesy are more natural. Code therefore cannot become a fixed equivalent of li, but it has certain advantages when the meaning is that of a normative system.

Keywords: Zuo Zhuan, Li, code, James Legge, AI translation, context

1. Introduction

Li runs through the political narrative, character evaluation, and social-ethical judgment of the Zuo Zhuan. In reviewing materials on li in the Zuo Zhuan, Gao Ruimin points out that li in the text includes concrete "matters of li," such as court visits, sacrifices, and military affairs, while also performing the function of sustaining the state, regulating relations between ruler and minister, and adjusting social behavior. Liu Pan further distinguishes two levels of li in the Zuo Zhuan: yi and li. Yi emphasizes external behavioral forms, whereas the deeper li involves self-conscious social norms and the ordering of state governance and political rule. This distinction shows that li in the Zuo Zhuan cannot be understood simply as a set of ritual actions.

This point is also corroborated by early Western studies of Confucianism. In discussing li in the Analects and the Xunzi, Radice notes that although li

is often translated as ritual, etiquette, or propriety, its functions span ethics, religion, and politics, and it is far more complex than mere ritual behavior. Therefore, whether one approaches the issue from the Zuo Zhuan itself or from early Confucian thought, fixing li to a single English word creates problems of semantic under-coverage.

This difficulty is clearly visible in existing English translations. In examining English translations of the Analects, Deng Yawen and Zhang Xiaorong find that James Legge uses words such as propriety, ceremony, regulations, and rites in different contexts, and they point out that a single translation term tends to narrow the cultural connotations of li. Through a cross-cultural comparison, Wang Chong further argues that propriety, rites, ritual, courtesy, and etiquette can each cover only part of the meaning of li; translators often need to choose according to the specific context and target culture.

Corresponding Author: Hang Dong
Shanghai Normal University, China

©The Author(s) 2026. Published by BONI FUTURE DIGITAL PUBLISHING CO., LIMITED. This is an open access article under the CC BY License(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

The word code, which is the focus of this article, can refer not only to a modern written legal code but also to a set of behavioral principles or rules recognized and observed by a society or group, as in code of conduct and moral code. If a given instance of li emphasizes norms commonly recognized in political, social, or status relations, can code better highlight its rule-like and systematic character than rites? Conversely, when li refers to a concrete ceremony, an etiquette action, or courteous treatment given to others, does code appear overly abstract or even evoke modern legal associations?

Therefore, the central question of this article is not the simple yes-or-no issue of whether li can be translated as code, but in which contexts code is viable and in which contexts it should be abandoned. By comparing human translations with AI trial translations, this article attempts to provide relatively clear contextual criteria for judgment.

2. Related Research

2.1 Studies on the meaning of Li in the Zuo Zhuan

Gao Ruimin argues that li in the Zuo Zhuan is strongly practical: it concerns both domestic and foreign affairs of the state and the behavior of rulers, ministers, families, and individuals. The importance of li lies precisely in its ability to incorporate social members into a certain order of behavior. That study also analyzes the statement "This is yi, not li," pointing out that the Zuo Zhuan does not equate external ritual forms with the full meaning of li.

Liu Pan provides a clearer theoretical account of this point. She argues that li in the Zuo Zhuan has two levels, li and yi: yi is the external manifestation of li, including behavioral forms such as advancing and withdrawing, social interaction, bearing, and speech; the deeper li is the fundamental principle that sustains social forms and political order. She also notes that li in the Zuo Zhuan not only inherits Zhou ritual but also absorbs new political, military, and ethical content as Spring and Autumn society changes. This judgment is highly instructive for the present article because it means that the same character li may fall at different levels in different contexts, and translation cannot simply proceed according to a single literal equivalent.

From the broader context of early Confucianism, Radice also emphasizes the complexity of li. He points out that li is not merely the preservation of

traditional rituals but plays an active role in Confucian ethical, political, and religious thought. This view is quite close to the situation in the Zuo Zhuan materials, where li combines ritual form and social norm.

2.2 English translations of Li and their semantic differentiation

Research on the translation of li generally notes the diversity of translation terms. Deng Yawen and Zhang Xiaorong point out that James Legge often uses propriety and ceremony, but in different contexts also adopts other expressions such as regulations and rites; each term captures one aspect of li but cannot fully correspond to all its meanings.

The statistical analysis by Lu Kaili, Hou Shuang, and Zhang Zixin of James Legge's translation of the Book of Rites illustrates this differentiation more directly. They divide li into four categories: ritual li, normative li, ethical li, and institutional li. They find that ritual li is often rendered with rites or ceremonies, normative li tends toward rules, ethical li often uses propriety, and institutional li commonly appears as expressions such as rules of ceremony. Although their object of study is not the Zuo Zhuan, this classification provides a valuable reference for judging whether code is usable in the present article.

Wang Chong's study further compares li and rites from a cross-cultural perspective. He notes that traditional Chinese li expanded from sacrificial behavior to political institutions, social ethics, and personal norms, whereas English rites still easily evoke religious or ritual associations in many cases; propriety, moreover, mainly indicates behavioral or moral appropriateness. Therefore, if li in a context emphasizes a whole set of political or social norms, using only rites or propriety may not fully express this layer of meaning. It is here that the research value of code emerges.

2.3 AI translations and prompt intervention

This article uses GPT and DeepSeek as comparative materials but does not treat AI output itself as a criterion of judgment. In comparing human translations of the Analects with AI translations, Ding Liming and Wu Honglin have already observed that when users modify the prompt, DeepSeek's choice of translation terms and modes of expression also change, indicating that the prompt itself intervenes in translation generation.

On this basis, the AI experiment in this article

does not observe whether the model would choose code in a completely free state, but actively sets code as a candidate word and requires the model to test its usability first. The resulting translations are closer to controlled trial translations. Whether code is ultimately adopted still requires manual review in light of the Zuo Zhuan context, human translations, and natural English expression.

3. Materials and Methods

This article uses 50 previously compiled passages from the Zuo Zhuan containing *li*, retaining duplicate entries in the original table so that different translations can correspond item by item. The human translations are Luo Zhiye's English translation of the Zuo Zhuan and James Legge's Zuo Zhuan: English-Chinese Bilingual Edition. The AI translations were generated by ChatGPT and DeepSeek using the same prompt.

The prompt first requires the model to distinguish different meanings such as state

institutions, political order, social behavioral norms, patriarchal ethics, diplomatic norms, military norms, concrete ceremonies, and evaluative meanings such as "conforming to *li*" and "appropriate." It then requires the model to give priority to code without sacrificing the original meaning or natural English. If code would cause obvious misunderstanding, other expressions such as rites, ritual, propriety, proper conduct, norms, and conventions are permitted. The complete prompt is provided at the end of the article.

Because the prompt already clearly guides the model toward code, this article does not use the frequency of AI use of code to prove its correctness. The object of statistics is the "applicability" of code after manual review of the 50 passages—that is, whether code is natural and accurate in a given place, and whether it needs to be narrowed by qualifiers such as ritual or hospitality.

The results are divided into three categories:

Table 1. Applicability of Code in the 50 Passages

Judgment	Number	Percentage
Code can be used	30	60%
Possible, but semantically weighted or requiring a limiting collocation	12	24%
Code not recommended	8	16%

**"Possible but limited" includes expressions that require a limiting range, such as code of hospitality and code of etiquette, as well as cases that are semantically viable but not necessarily more natural than propriety or rites in the main text. This classification emphasizes a gradient of feasibility rather than a simple "right" or "wrong."*

4. Applicability of Code in Different Contexts

4.1 "Zhou Li": the clearest category of institutional and normative system

"Zhou *li*" is the category among the 50 passages in which code is most easily viable. For example:

It cannot be done; [Lu] still upholds Zhou li.

James Legge uses the rules of Zhou, whereas Luo Zhiye leans toward the rites of Zhou. The former highlights rules, while the latter highlights ritual tradition. GPT translates it as:

It cannot be done; [Lu] still upholds the Zhou code.

The DeepSeek translation also takes the Zhou code as its core. Similar examples include:

Zhou li is that by which the root is established . . .

Lu has not abandoned Zhou li; it cannot be attacked yet.

In these sentences, "Zhou *li*" is not a particular ceremony but a whole set of institutions on which state politics, hierarchy, ethics, and behavioral order

depend. Liu Pan points out that the Zuo Zhuan inherits Zhou *li* and regards it as an important basis for establishing the state and governing; "Zhou *li* is that by which the root is established" is a concentrated expression of this point. Therefore, in this type of context, code more easily highlights systematic character than rites alone.

However, the Zhou code may still lead modern English readers to think of a written legal code. On first occurrence, using the Zhou ritual code and later shortening it to the Zhou code can appropriately preserve the cultural attribute of ritual institutions while reducing modern legal associations.

4.2 "Bu Li" in interstate relations: norms and politeness are not the same

When the Marquis of Qi went out [into exile], he passed through Tan, and Tan did not treat him according to li.

In winter, the Qi army destroyed Tan because Tan had no li.

In human translations, expressions such as *bu li*

and wu li are often rendered as courtesy, politeness, or properly. If one looks only at the reception behavior, such renderings are not wrong; but when the narrative is read as a whole, "Tan had no li" is clearly not merely a matter of personal attitude but a normative judgment concerning status, reception, and interaction in relations among feudal lords.

The latest version of GPT translates the first passage as:

Tan did not observe the code of hospitality toward him.

The second passage is rendered as:

Tan had violated the code.

What is truly valuable here is not replacing every instance of "no li" with code, but using code of hospitality to limit the scope of li to the norms of interstate reception. Similar passages such as "When he passed through Wey, Duke Wen of Wey did not treat him according to li," "When he reached Zheng, Duke Wen of Zheng likewise did not treat him according to li," and "because he had no li toward Jin" can also be handled in the same way.

However, "He treated him with generous li and sent him back" and "There was additional li," which also appear in diplomatic scenes, are not suitable for code, because these sentences speak of actual courteous treatment given to someone, not the norm system itself. In such cases, courtesy or honors is more accurate. It can be seen that the criterion is not "whether it is diplomacy," but "whether li in the sentence is a norm or an act."

4.3 "This is Yi, not Li": the key distinction between code and ritual

Zitaishu met Zhao Jianzi. Jianzi asked him about the li of bowing and yielding and of ceremonial deportment.

He replied, "That is yi, not li."

In the first sentence, "bowing and yielding and ceremonial deportment" are etiquette actions that can be directly observed and performed. Both GPT and DeepSeek use expressions such as etiquette:

Jianzi asked him about the etiquette of bowing and yielding and of ceremonial deportment.

But the next sentence is rendered as:

That is ceremony, not the code.

This difference happens to accord with the Zuo Zhuan's own conceptual distinction. Gao Ruimin believes that this passage is intended to remind readers not to equate trivial rituals with the entire

content of li. Liu Pan further points out that yi in the Zuo Zhuan is an external carrier, while li is a deeper social norm and value principle. Therefore, etiquette in the first sentence and code in the second are not contradictory; rather, they separate the two levels of the original text.

This is the example in this article that best illustrates the boundary of code. External actions do not need to be abstracted into a code; only when li is used to refer to the principles governing these actions, status, and social order does code begin to show its advantage.

4.4 Abstract Li: the systematic advantage of code

Li is the backbone of a person. Without li, one cannot stand.

Now li is the constant way of Heaven, the righteousness of Earth, and the conduct of the people.

Li is the bond between high and low, the warp and weft of Heaven and Earth, and that by which the people live.

These sentences can no longer be easily explained as "concrete rituals." Gao Ruimin regards them as important materials in the Zuo Zhuan's discussion of li, arguing that li here is directly related to personal conduct, state order, and social operation. Liu Pan also understands this level of li as an internal social norm and principle of governance. Radice's judgment that early Confucian li involves ethics and politics likewise shows that compressing li merely into ritual would omit part of its function.

GPT and DeepSeek generally attempt to code in these sentences. For example:

The code is the backbone of a man. Without the code, one cannot stand.

The code is the bond between high and low, the warp and weft of Heaven and Earth, and that by which the people live.

Here, the strength of code is that it allows li to be understood as a whole set of interrelated principles rather than an isolated ritual. It can also collocate with verbs such as observe, uphold, violate, abandon, and conform to, enabling expressions such as "uphold li," "lose li," "abandon li," and "practice li" to maintain a certain conceptual continuity in English.

However, semantic explicability does not mean that a rendering is always the most natural in English. For example, translating "How great is li!" as How

great is the code! appears relatively modern and stiff. Although such passages can be explained from the perspective of a normative system, code is not necessarily more appropriate than propriety, ritual order, or other renderings. They are therefore classified as "possible but semantically weighted."

4.5 Concrete rituals and courteous treatment: clear limits of code

When the li is completed but he does not return, there is no one to blame.

Wine is used to complete the li; not to continue to excess is righteousness.

To complete the li on behalf of the ruler and not let him fall into excess is benevolence.

These instances of li fall directly on ritual procedure. The two AI systems ultimately adopt expressions such as the rites were completed and complete the rites. English can naturally say complete the rites, but it cannot say complete the code in the same sense.

Similarly, in "Meng Xizi was troubled that he could not assist in li. . . . If there were one who could perform li, he would follow him," "assist in li" and "perform li" mean assisting in and executing ritual. Assist in the rites and perform the rites are more natural. "He treated him with generous li" and "There was additional li" refer to giving courteous treatment, and courtesy or honors is more appropriate.

These counterexamples also respond to the two-level structure of li and yi described by Liu Pan: some passages indeed fall at the level of external yi, and their concreteness should be preserved in translation. They should not be uniformly elevated to code simply because a ritual system lies behind them.

5. Comparison of Human and AI Translations

The human translations and AI translations are not simply a contest between "old translations" and "new translations." James Legge uses words such as rules, propriety, and courtesy in different contexts, which is consistent with the differentiation of translation terms observed in studies of the Analects and the Book of Rites by Deng Yawen, Zhang Xiaorong, Lu Kaili, Hou Shuang, Zhang Zixin, and Wang Chong. This approach can change with context, but the same Chinese concept is split into multiple English words. Luo Zhiye uses rites more often, giving the cultural marker relative stability, but in sentences with strong institutional or normative

meaning, it may also appear overly ritual in color.

Under the prompt set in this article, GPT and DeepSeek deliberately give priority to testing code. The two models more easily accept code in places such as "Zhou li," interstate norms, and abstract principles of ritual institutions, while in "completion of li," "assisting in li," concrete etiquette, and courteous treatment they again choose rites, etiquette, and courtesy. This result cannot prove that AI has automatically discovered a so-called "correct translation," but it can show that code is operable at certain semantic levels and has clear boundaries.

The prompt intervention discussed by Ding Liming and Wu Honglin also reminds us that AI translations cannot be viewed apart from their conditions of generation. Therefore, this article treats AI as a tool for testing candidate translation terms, not as a judge. The real judgment still comes from the source-language context, existing human translations, and the semantic differences among candidate English words.

6. Conclusion

Through a comparison of 50 passages containing li from the Zuo Zhuan, it can be seen that the value of code lies not in finding a new unified translation for li, but in supplementing the normative-system meaning that traditional translation terms have difficulty fully expressing.

After manual review, 30 passages could use code relatively naturally, 12 could use it but required limiting collocations or involved a semantic shift, and 8 were not recommended for code. Contexts suitable for code mainly include holistic ritual institutions such as "Zhou li," interstate norms among feudal lords, political and status order, and abstract discussions of li. In these cases, li appears as a set of norms recognized by members of a community and possessing binding force, and the systematic character of code is more prominent than that of rites.

On the other hand, when li is realized as a concrete ceremony such as a wedding, funeral, or banquet, or as a specific etiquette action or actual courteous treatment, words such as rites, ritual, etiquette, courtesy, and honors are more accurate. Liu Pan's distinction between li and yi in the Zuo Zhuan is especially able to explain this phenomenon: the same character li sometimes refers to an external form and sometimes rises to a normative principle, so

the translation term naturally cannot be completely uniform.

Therefore, code cannot serve as a replacement for rites, ritual, or propriety. It is an optional translation for li when the institutional, normative, and systematic dimensions are relatively strong. In translating li in the Zuo Zhuan, what truly needs to remain consistent is not a particular English word but the method of judgment: first determine which semantic level li occupies in a given place, and then decide whether to highlight ritual, propriety, courteous treatment, or a normative system. This preserves the complexity of the concept of li in the Zuo Zhuan better than pursuing superficial terminological uniformity.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest in this work.

Acknowledgement

The author received no financial support for this research.

References

- Deng, Y., & Zhang, X. (2022). An analysis of the English translation of the core concept li in *The Analects*. *English Square*, (8), 30–33. (in Chinese)
- Ding, L., & Wu, H. (n.d.). The changing translation of "li": A comparative study of the translation of core concepts in *The Analects* from the perspective of ANT. In *Translation teaching and research* (Vol. 16, pp. 29–38). (in Chinese)
- Gao, R. (2008). Zuo Zhuan and "li." *Journal of Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities (Social Sciences Edition)*, 34(2), 50–54. (in Chinese)
- Liu, P. (2016). An analysis of the connotation and characteristics of "li" in *Zuo Zhuan*. *Journal of Wenshan University*, 29(1), 44–47. (in Chinese)
- Lu, K., Hou, S., & Zhang, Z. (n.d.). Connotation interpretation and interlingual transfer: Translation strategies for "li" in James Legge's English translation of *The Book of Rites* (pp. 123–125). (in Chinese)
- Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Code. In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press.
- Radice, T. (2017). Li (ritual) in early Confucianism. *Philosophy Compass*, 12(10), Article e12463. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12463>
- Wang, C. (2019). A study of cross-cultural issues in the translation of "li" [Master's thesis, Qingdao University of Science and Technology]. (in Chinese)
- Zuo, Q. (2017). *Zuo Zhuan* (Z. Luo, Trans.). Southeast University Press. (Original work ancient)
- Zuo, Q. (2018). *Zuo Zhuan*: English-Chinese bilingual edition (J. Legge, Trans.). Zhongzhou Guji Press. (Original work ancient)

How to Cite: Hang, D. (2026). The Feasibility of Translating "Li" as Code in Different Contexts of the Zuo Zhuan: A Comparison of Human and AI Translations. *Journal of Global Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(SpecialIssue), 24-29
<https://doi.org/10.61360/BoniGHSSAH262020830103>