



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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James Legge's Methodology in Sinology as Observed in *The Confucian Analects*

1. Introduction

The Scottish missionary and sinologist James Legge (1815–1897) was a scholar known for his translations of Chinese classical texts. Born in Aberdeenshire, Legge attended King's College in Aberdeen and later, with the goal of becoming a missionary, he continued his education at Highbury College in London, in 1837. Two years later, the London Missionary Society sent him and his newlywed wife to Malacca, where he assisted the Anglo-Chinese College and later became the principal. In 1843, the college moved to Hong Kong, and there, Legge continued his missionary work and began translating the Chinese classics. After more than thirty years' work as a missionary and five volumes of published translations, he left China for the last time in 1873. Legge continued his scholarship at Oxford, becoming the first professor of Chinese studies there in 1876, where he taught and translated more Chinese texts until his final years.

Legge's contributions to nineteenth century Western sinology are undoubtedly of great significance. The sheer volume of his work stands testimony to his dedication and sense of mission. His translations include ten of the thirteen Confucian canonical texts as well as other Chinese Daoist and Buddhist texts. This essay will focus on James Legge's scholarship and methodology in the Chinese classics, particularly his *Confucian Analects*, and will use it as an example to analyse his research methods.

2. The Scholarship of James Legge

In Western sinology, especially amongst English-speaking scholars, James Legge's work is an incredible monument of the nineteenth century. As a missionary, Legge tasked himself with such massive amount of work as translating the Confucian canonical texts out of the belief that missionaries to China should possess a certain understanding of the people's culture. This want of understanding the Chinese classics and to further provide future missionaries with a comprehensive translation of them was what motivated his scholarship:¹

It seemed to him [the author, Legge]...that he should not be able to consider himself qualified for the duties of his position, until he had thoroughly mastered the Classical Books of the Chinese, and had investigated for himself the whole field of thought through which the sages of China had ranged, and in which were to be found the foundations of the moral, social, and political life of the people.²

The scope of Legge's scholarly productions includes translations of the entire *Four Books* and *Five Classics*, most of which were published in his *Chinese Classics*, as well as the *Xiao Jing* 孝經 and multiple texts of Daoism and Buddhism such as the *Daode jing* 道德經, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, the *Taishang Ganying Pian* 太上感應篇, and *Foguo ji* 佛國記. These latter works were completed during his later years at Oxford and were published in six volumes amongst Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East*. Legge's ability to produce such an impressive amount of works was greatly due to his academic discipline.³ He was known to rise early to study, a habit that began at a young age, and which he carried with him throughout his life. During his missionary

¹ Lindsay Ride, 'Biographical Note', in *The Chinese Classics: with a translation, critical and exegetical notes, prolegomena, and copious indexes*, 3rd edn, 5 vols (repr. Taipei: SMC Publishing, 2016), I: *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, pp. 1–25.

² James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: with a translation, critical and exegetical notes, prolegomena, and copious indexes*, 3rd edn, 5 vols (repr. Taipei: SMC Publishing, 2016), I: *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, p. vii.

³ Lauren F. Pfister, 'Clues to the Life and Academic Achievements of One of the Most Famous Nineteenth Century European Sinologists—James Legge (AD 1815–1897)', *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 30 (1990), 180–218 (pp. 189–190).

life, he utilised the time in the early morning to complete his translation work and carried on with his missionary duties during the day.

2.1. *The Chinese Classics*

During the nearly three decades that Legge spent in China, he completed and published his monumental and enduring five-volume work *The Chinese Classics*. This series, with its publication spanning from 1861 to 1872, consists of the *Four Books*, which comprise the first two volumes, the *Shujing* (*Shoo King*) 書經, the *Shijing* (*She King*) 詩經, and the *Chunqiu* (*Ch'un Ts'ew*) 春秋 and *Zuozhuan* (*Tso Chuen*) 左傳. Legge's *Chinese Classics* is subtitled: *with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes*. And he also provides the original Chinese text along with his translations. Each page is laid out comprised of three parts: at the top, the original text in Chinese; below it, the English translation; and at the bottom, Legge's extensive commentarial notes which often consume more than half the page. Legge's indexes for subjects and names of persons and places found in each classical text were also a precedent for translation work at the time.

The Chinese Classics remains a widely used English version of the Confucian classics even today and 'is renowned for its accuracy and faithfulness to the original Chinese text in terms of content, structure, and style.'⁴ Although Legge's nineteenth century English can sometimes be archaic for the modern reader, his translation still proves to be a monumental work in Western sinology.

⁴ Zheng Shuhong, 'James Legge's Hermeneutical Methodology as Revealed in His Translation of the *Daxue*', *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, 12:2 (2017), 249–264 (p. 251).

3. Legge's Methodology in *The Confucian Analects*

In researching the Chinese classical texts for translation, Legge consulted a great number of Chinese commentaries.⁵ For his translation and notes on *Lunyu* 論語 (the Confucian analects), he mainly based it on the interpretation of the Song Neo-Confucian scholar, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), but not indiscriminately so. Legge's level of engagement with the Confucian commentarial tradition surpassed that of his contemporaries. Despite his translations being viewed by some as 'wooden' and 'antiquated,' which in part is due to his biblical training,⁶ they are a rendering faithful to the original Chinese text.

3.1. Legge's Use of Commentaries

The critical and exegetical notes under Legge's translations regularly include evidence and quotes from Chinese classicists and commentators to support his interpretations. But although Legge consulted a great number of commentaries, more often than not, he agreed with the interpretation of Zhu Xi.⁷ For instance, the word 'benevolent' is translated from the character *ren* 仁 in Legge's translation of *The Analects* 1:2: 'Filial piety and fraternal submission!—are they not the root of all benevolent actions?'⁸ Legge's commentarial notes on *ren* in this passage states: '仁 is explained here as "the principle of love," "the virtue of the heart."' ⁹ This is a direct translation of Zhu Xi's

⁵ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, I, 128.

⁶ David B. Honey, *Incense at the Altar: Pioneering Sinologists and the Development of Classical Chinese Philology*, American Oriental Series, 86 (New Haven, CT: The American Oriental Society, 2001), p. 209–210.

⁷ Zhao Xin 趙欣, 'A Research on the Hermeneutics in James Legge's English Version of *The Analects of Confucius*' 理雅各《論語》譯注本闡釋研究, (master's thesis, Central China Normal University, 2022), p. 39.

⁸ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, I, 139. Original text in Chinese: 孝弟也者，其為仁之本與！

⁹ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, I, 139.

commentary: ‘*Ren* is the principle of love, the virtue of the heart.’ 仁者，愛之理，心之德也。¹⁰

Although Legge agrees with Zhu’s interpretation in many cases, he does not do so blindly. His commentarial notes are supplemented with the explanations of other interpreters on the occasion that there were different understandings of the text. As can be seen in the following example, Legge’s interpretation was not entirely a reproduction of Zhu’s commentary:¹¹

Analects 7:17 (translation by Legge): ‘The Master’s frequent themes of discourse were: the Odes, the History, and the maintenance of the Rules of Propriety. On all these he frequently discoursed.’¹² 子所雅言，詩、書、執禮，皆雅言也。

Legge: ‘Chu Hsi [Zhu Xi] explains 雅 (3rd tone) by 常, “constantly.” The old interpreter Chang [Zheng Xuan] explains it by 正, “correctly,”—“Confucius would speak of the Odes, &c., with attention to the correct enunciation of the characters.” This does not seem so good.’¹³

Here, Legge quotes the interpretation of Zhu Xi and Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) but also expresses that of his own opinion. Given adequate reason, Legge mostly adhered to Zhu Xi’s reading of the *Analects*, but he gave any differing views and sometimes even his own in his notes. In fact, Legge ‘never hesitated to express his own scholarly assessment.’¹⁴ At times, his own understanding disagreed with that of the commentarial tradition and Legge, unsatisfied by the scholars’ interpretations, readily indicated as such.¹⁵

¹⁰ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注, 2nd edn (repr. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2016), p. 48.

¹¹ Zhao Xin, ‘A Research on the Hermeneutics in James Legge’s English Version of *The Analects of Confucius*’, p. 44.

¹² James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, I, 200.

¹³ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, I, 200.

¹⁴ David B. Honey, *Incense at the Altar*, p. 211.

¹⁵ Zhao Xin, ‘A Research on the Hermeneutics in James Legge’s English Version of *The Analects of Confucius*’, pp. 44–48.

3.2. Approach to Translating

A translator of philosophical texts frequently encounters difficulties in the text which can be open to interpretation. An approach to translating such terms is presented by Ni Peimin:

If the translator's job is to convey meaning rather than interpreting for the reader, the ideal translation of the term should preserve the ambiguity of the original term and let the reader decide the sense in which it is used in each specific context.¹⁶

This is one of the virtues of Legge's translations. When the Chinese text of *The Analects* presented a difficult passage, Legge's treatment of it reflected the difficulty of the original.

For example, Legge translated the following section (*Analects* 5:16): 'The Master said, "Yan Ping knew well how to maintain friendly intercourse. The acquaintance might be long, but he showed the same respect as at first."' ¹⁷ 子曰：晏平仲善與人交，久而敬之。 In different readings of this text, the character *zhi* 之 either refers to Yan Pingzhong himself or his acquaintances. Legge follows the commentary of Chengzi 程子 who interprets it as the latter.¹⁸ But he leaves his translation ambiguous, only giving his interpretation in the commentarial notes where he explains that 'The antecedent to 之 is 人.'¹⁹ In comparison, a translation of the same section by Burton Watson reads, 'The Master said, Yan Pingzhong was skilled in his dealings with others. Even toward those he had known for a long time, he remained respectful.'²⁰ It is clear in Watson's version that 'he' refers to Yan Pingzhong. Therefore, his interpretation is the same as that of Legge, but his rendering does not

¹⁶ Peimin Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius: A New Translation of Lunyu with Annotations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), p. 33.

¹⁷ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, I, 179.

¹⁸ Zhu Xi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, p. 80.

¹⁹ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, I, 179.

²⁰ *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 38.

preserve the same level of ambiguity.

Legge's version directly mirrored any uncertain meaning from the Chinese text: 'difficulties in the English translation merely reflected difficulties in the original.'²¹ In the case of difficult passages and ambiguous sections, Legge chose not smooth over any semantic issues but remained faithful and accurate to the original text and presented alternative interpretations in his critical and exegetical notes, thus allowing the reader to be informed and able to judge for themselves the appropriate rendering. Rather than taking the more interpretive approach, Legge produced a translation that was focussed on the original meaning of the Chinese text.

4. Conclusion

Throughout a life a duty and mission, James Legge contributed enduring works of translation to Western sinology, an accomplishment unparalleled by his contemporaries and few scholars to date. Legge's scholarship on the Chinese classical texts was that of a true sinologist. His use of Chinese commentaries of the Confucian tradition was of considerable comprehension, and his English translations faithful and true, speaking to his rigorous methodology. His scholarship was recognised by his contemporaries, earning him the first ever Julien Prize to be awarded in 1875. Even today, more than a century and a half later, Legge's translation of *The Confucian Analects*, and all of his translations of *The Chinese Classics*, continues to be recognised as authoritative versions.

²¹ David B. Honey, *Incense at the Altar*, p. 218.

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