

An Introduction to the Chinese Classical Translations of James Legge

Introduction

Good morning, Professor Honey, and good afternoon to my fellow students. Today I will present to you on the life and contributions of the Scottish missionary and sinologist James Legge. He is best known as a translator of Chinese classical texts, especially his five-volume publication *The Chinese Classics*.

Life

Born December 20, 1815, in Huntly, Aberdeenshire in Scotland, Legge was the youngest of four sons in a family of seven. He attended King's College in Aberdeen, and later in 1837, Highbury College in London. Before entering Highbury, Legge had already had the sense that he was meant to be a missionary. He applied to the London Missionary Society and was accepted as a missionary to the Chinese. Thus, for a year before commencing his work, he studied the Chinese language at the University of London with a former missionary. In 1839, he married Mary Isabella Morison, the daughter of his Congregational pastor, and together, set sail shortly after.

Beginning in 1840, upon arriving in Malacca, Legge assisted the Anglo-Chinese College there, later becoming principal. After spending three years in Malacca, the college moved to Hong Kong, where Legge continued his missionary work. It was during the nearly three decades there that Legge completed his most enduring work, the five-volume *Chinese Classics*. The first of the volumes was published in 1861, containing three of the Chinese *Four Books*. He worked relentlessly, often rising early to work on his translations while continuing his missionary duties during the day.

Legge published his final volume of *The Chinese Classics*, completing the work in 1872. After a tour of Northern China, including visits to Mount Tai (*Tai Shan* 泰山) and the temple of Confucius, he left China for the last time in 1873, returning to Scotland. Two years later, he was appointed a fellow at the Corpus Christi College at Oxford,

and beginning in 1876, he became the first professor of Chinese studies at Oxford College, where he continued to teach until his final years. During this time, he carried on translating Chinese classics, and contributed six volumes of Chinese classical texts, including Confucian and Daoist texts, to Max Muller's fifty-volume *Sacred Books of the East*. Legge was honoured with a Doctor of Laws from the University of Edinburgh and in November of 1897, he died at Oxford and is buried there at Wolvercote Cemetery.

Major Contributions

James Legge leaves his legacy of translations of the Chinese classics published in multi-volume publications. His works include, most notably, *The Chinese Classics* in five volumes, subtitled: *with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes*. Of the fifty volumes of Max Muller's *Sacred Books of the East*, six are by the contribution of James Legge.

The *Chinese Classics* included the *Four Books*: The Analects of Confucius (*Lun Yu*), The Great Learning (*Da Xue*), The Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhongyong*), and Mencius (*Mengzi*); which comprised the first two volumes. The latter three volumes are the *Shoo King*: [which Legge styled as] The Book of Historical Documents (or Shangshu), the *She King*: Classic of Poetry, and the *Ch'un Ts'ew* and *Tso Chuen*, the Spring and Autumn Annals and the Commentary of Zuo, respectively.

These five volumes, accompanied by Legge's own introductions, commentarial notes, and indexes, are a monumental and lasting work

During his later years in Oxford, Legge translated several more classical texts, some of which were published in the six volumes that he contributed to Max Muller's *Sacred Books of the East*. Among these six volumes he included the *Shoo King* (The Book of Documents) and the *She King*: The Book of Poetry, and what was yet unpublished, the *I Ching*: Book of Changes, the *Li Ji*: The Book of Rites, the *Xiao Jing*: The Classic of Filial Piety, and several texts of Daoism including the *Dao De Jing*, the *Writings of Zhuangzi*, the *Taishang Ganying Pian* which Legge styled the "Tractate of Actions and

their Retributions”, and other shorter works.

Thus, of the Thirteen Classics of the Confucian canonical texts, Legge produced translations for eleven of them.

Scholarly Approach

When Legge first had the idea of translating the Chinese classics into English, he did so out of belief that it was necessary for missionaries to understand the Chinese classical texts. His translations are characterized by its faithfulness and accuracy to the original Chinese text in terms of content, structure, and style, typical of a translation theory that is source-oriented. Legge’s interpretive principles focusses on the original meaning of the source text and the author’s intention, rather than the more interpretive approach of later translators which is known as target-oriented translation.

When he came across difficult texts which had differing and even controversial interpretations, he would decide which was the “comparatively better one” and then include the alternatives in the commentarial notes, often with reference to a statement by a Chinese commentator, so as to allow the reader to be informed and consequently to judge for themselves which was the appropriate rendering. To do so, Legge had consulted and researched the commentaries of more than 300 individual Confucian commentators.

In his approach to publishing translations, Legge identified the version of the original Chinese text for his translation, the one which he identified as authorised, and included the Chinese version directly above his English translations, which are then followed by his commentarial notes in his publication of *The Chinese Classics*. The commentarial notes provide the reader a means to judge whether the interpretation is appropriate.

In his publications, Legge also included indexes to subjects and names of persons and places found in each classical text. Prior to his work, previous translators of the Chinese classics did not have such thorough indexes.

These approaches established a set of standards for Chinese classical translations, ones that remain relevant and important precedents to classical translation even today.

Conclusion

James Legge left a legacy of translation of Chinese classics and set standards for later translators. His translations are a major and lasting contribution to the study of Chinese classics in the West and are still used even today.

And that is a brief introduction to the life and legacy of James Legge. This concludes my presentation. Thank you for listening.