

DOCTORAL THESIS

A postcolonial perspective on James Legge's Confucian translation: focusing on his two versions of the Zhongyong

Wang, Hui

Date of Award:
2007

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

**A Postcolonial Perspective
on James Legge's Confucian Translation:
Focusing on His Two Versions of the *Zhongyong***

WANG Hui

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Principal Supervisor: Prof. Martha P. Y. CHEUNG

Hong Kong Baptist University

January 2007

Abstract

James Legge (1815-1897) was a monumental figure in nineteenth-century European Sinology. His five-volume *The Chinese Classics* (1861-1872), produced during his missionary years in Hong Kong, won him international acclaim and secured for him the first Chinese professorship in Oxford University, where he completed his Confucian translation project with the four-volume *Sacred Books of China: Texts of Confucianism* (1879-1885). These colonial products have functioned as standard translations of the Confucian texts ever since their publication, and continue to exert influence in a postcolonial era.

This thesis subjects Legge's Confucian translation project to postcolonial scrutiny to uncover the workings of ideology within the seemingly innocent and transparent act of translation. Legge's two versions of the *Zhongyong* – a central Confucian text of metaphysics, produced in 1861 and 1885 respectively, are brought into focus to gauge Legge's evolving translational approaches to Confucianism.

Close textual reading reveals Legge's 1861 version to be highly critical of the *Zhongyong*: its cosmic vision, central ontological concepts, and structure are all challenged and attacked. Although Legge sometimes poses strategically as a Confucian fundamentalist in critiquing the *Zhongyong* or wrestling with Confucian commentators, this version ultimately reflects his missionary will to deconstruct and decanonize the sacred text of a "heathen" culture. As such it constitutes an act of missionary Orientalism and cultural imperialism.

In his 1885 version, Legge drops his confrontational missionary approach and virtually all his previous charges against the *Zhongyong*. He appears unimpassioned and open, and is willing to allow the text to speak through the Chinese commentaries. As a

result his new version testifies to a fusion of horizons between Legge and the *Zhongyong*. Viewed in the larger context of Legge's Oxford translations and writings, however, Legge's sympathetic openness to the *Zhongyong* proves to be little more than a common Orientalist technique of stooping to understand things Oriental. His *Sacred Books of China* could be seen as products of academic Orientalism because these translations were produced to document the inferiority of the East and its need for Western civilizing missions.

A postcolonial reading of Legge's two versions of the *Zhongyong* demonstrates that even "faithful", scholarly translation can be a site of intense ideological contention, control and manipulation. It is the subtle and pervasive workings of colonialist ideology that prompted Legge to use translation, wittingly or unwittingly, as a tool of intellectual colonialism. This study highlights the need for postcolonial translators to critically reflect on their ideological commitments and the ethics of translation in cultural representation. Only when translators realize their power and responsibility can there be hope for turning translation into an effective channel for decolonization.

Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	vi
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Research Topic.....	1
1.2 Postcolonial Translation Studies: History, Arguments, and Problems.....	2
1.3 Relevance of Postcolonial Studies to China.....	6
1.4 Translation and the Ethics of Alterity.....	8
1.5 Orientalism and China.....	10
1.6 Missionary Sinology and Orientalism.....	12
1.7 Research Questions and Scope.....	13
1.8 Methodological Considerations and Reflections.....	16
1.9 Structure of the Dissertation.....	23
Chapter 2 James Legge and His Confucian Translation: An Overview.....	25
2.1 James Legge and the Leggian Research.....	25
2.2 Legge's Confucian Translation Project: Motivation and Scope.....	30
2.3 Features of Legge's Confucian Translation.....	33
2.3.1 Multiform Translations.....	33
2.3.2 Legge's Principle of Translation.....	38
2.3.3 Standard Sinological Translations.....	42
2.3.4 Christian Bias, Wooden Style, and Mere Pedantry.....	44
2.4 Reasons for Selecting the <i>Zhongyong</i> for Case Study.....	46
2.5 Discovering God and Monotheism in China.....	49
2.6 Confucianism as a Religion.....	61
Chapter 3 The <i>Zhongyong</i> as a Central Confucian Text.....	70
3.1 The Importance of the <i>Zhongyong</i>	70
3.2 Authorship and Dating of the <i>Zhongyong</i>	72
3.3 Central Message of the <i>Zhongyong</i>	72

3.3.1 <i>Zhongyong</i> 中庸	73
3.3.2 <i>Tian</i> 天	74
3.3.3 <i>Cheng</i> 誠	78
3.4 Structure and Coherence of the <i>Zhongyong</i>	79
3.5 Commentarial Presuppositions concerning Sacred Books	82
3.6 The Confucian Approach to the <i>Zhongyong</i>	86
3.7 The Principle of Charity.....	87
3.8 The Otherness of the <i>Zhongyong</i>	90
Chapter 4 Translation as Missionary Orientalism: James Legge’s 1861 version of the <i>Zhongyong</i>	92
4.1 Legge’s Critique of the <i>Zhongyong</i>	93
4.1.1 Heaven and God: Monotheistic Promises.....	93
4.1.2 The Confucian Ternion: Filing Man with the Supreme Power?	102
4.1.3 Questionable Sagely Perfection and Mysterious“Sincerity”	106
4.1.4 Rambling Structure	113
4.2 Siting Legge’s 1861 Version of the <i>Zhongyong</i> : Missionary Orientalism, Cultural Imperialism and Intellectual Colonialism.....	117
4.2.1 Christianity as the Standard	118
4.2.2 Mystification of the Other.....	120
4.2.3 Deconstruction and Decanonization of the “Heathen” Classic	123
4.2.4 Christian Conversion as the Ultimate Purpose	125
4.3 Interpretive Stance and the Politics of Interpretation	126
4.4 A Brief Survey of Other Confucian Translations in <i>The Chinese Classics</i>	131
4.5 Missionary Orientalism versus Secular Orientalism	134
Chapter 5 Translation as Academic Orientalism: Hermeneutic Openness in James Legge’s 1885 Version of the <i>Zhongyong</i>	136
5.1 Re-presentation of the <i>Zhongyong</i>	137
5.1.1 Discouraging Monotheistic Expectations	137
5.1.2 Coming to Terms with the Confucian Trinity	139
5.1.3 <i>Zhongyong</i> and <i>Cheng</i> : Significance of New Translations.....	140
5.1.4 The Structure of the <i>Zhongyong</i> : Newly Found Coherence	147
5.2 Positive Revaluation of the <i>Zhongyong</i>	149
5.3 Legge’s Enhanced Hermeneutical Openness.....	152
5.4 Factors Contributing to Legge’s Sympathetic Openness.....	155
5.4.1 New Capacity as an Oxonian Professor.....	155
5.4.2 Influence of Max Müller.....	156

5.4.3 Enlarged Theological Horizon.....	159
5.4.4 Translatorial Experience	162
5.5 Sympathetic Orientalism.....	165
Chapter 6 Conclusion.....	173
6.1 The Leggian Standard? Rethinking Legge’s Orientalist Legacy	173
6.2 Colonialist Translation: Translation as a Tool for Colonialism	176
6.2.1 The Myth of Foreignization	177
6.2.2 Translation and Colonialist Ideology	179
6.3 Postcolonial Translation: Translation as a Channel for Decolonization	184
6.3.1 A Poststructuralist Solution.....	185
6.3.2 Translation as Cultural Self-Representation	186
6.3.3 Translation as Representation of the Other.....	188
6.3.4 Thick Translation as a Mode of Cultural Representation	189
Bibliography	194
Curriculum Vitae.....	214