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

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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.
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