

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Translating Chinese Classics in a Colonial Context: James Legge and His Two Versions of the Zhongyong.* By Wang Hui. Bern: Peter Lang, 2008. Pp. 224. €41.50/\$64.95.

Almost anyone writing about China in English is engaged at some level in translation. Even the simplest objects need to be represented in English, and the very act of choosing a standard translation or forging a new one, a thick translation or a thin one, a domesticating or a foreignizing rendering reflects choices, conscious or unconscious. All those who face such choices regularly will find reading Wang Hui's *Translating Chinese Classics in a Colonial Context: James Legge and His Two Versions of the Zhongyong* an important and salutary exercise. Not that many who know about the *Zhongyong* will actually need the book. Although the Legge translations reside on most sinologists' shelves, there are more recent translations such as the version that appears in Wing-tsit Chan's *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*,<sup>1</sup> or Daniel Gardner's *The Four Books: The Basic Teachings of the Later Confucian Tradition*,<sup>2</sup> and interpretive essays such as Tu Wei-ming's *Centrality and commonality: An essay on Confucian religiousness*.<sup>3</sup> *Translating Chinese Classics* is valuable for its careful exploration of how Legge's biases and convictions influenced his translation of the text. Not all translators would have Legge's nineteenth-century biases, but the fact that protestant missionary perspectives are so easy to spot in our own secular age renders the Legge translations a particularly fine case study in how translators' preconceptions, subtle and not so subtle choices, influence their readings of texts.

In fact, Wang Hui deals with two translations of the *Zhongyong* in his book, one published by Legge in 1861 in his *Chinese Classics* series, and a second published in 1885 in *The Sacred Books of the East* series, edited by F. Max Müller. The two translations are different. In particular the second edition seems partially to rectify what are, in Wang's view, four flaws of the 1861 edition: It renders *tian* 天 and *shangdi* 上帝 as God, then criticizes the *Zhongyong* for deviating from China's supposedly monotheistic tradition. It fails to understand the creative relation of heaven, earth, and man in the original, imposing a Christian concept of Heaven. Third, Legge's 1861 under-translates the Chinese word *cheng* 誠, obscuring the crucial role the action described by the verb plays in uniting Heaven, Earth, and Man. By translating *cheng* as the fairly garden-variety

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<sup>1</sup> Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989.

interpersonal virtue of sincerity Legge de-emphasizes the much grander spirituality of the *Zhongyong*. Finally, because Legge refuses in the 1861 version to render the full relationship between heaven, earth, and man involved in the text, he perceives the argument of the last chapters as rambling and incoherent. Not all of the problems in Legge's translation were of his own making. Certainly the translation of *tian* and *shangdi* as "God" was his innovation, and reflected his stance in the Biblical translation controversy of his day. But the matter of the reading of *cheng* and the difficulty of understanding the last part of the text were interpretive conundrums recognized by Chinese scholars long before Legge began his translation. Legge may have made poor choice in his translation, but he reflected readings common among his interpretive community.

Many of these faults, if such they were, were corrected in the 1885 version. In that text, Legge no longer insists on the equivalence of *tian* and *shangdi* with Christian God. He also accepts the notion that in the text, heaven, earth, and man interact to produce the myriad things, and sees *cheng* not as sincerity only, but as the achievement of perfection. This allows him to see the text as more than simply the "Doctrine of the Mean," but as the "State of Equivalence and Harmony," which better reflects the intent of the classic. There is some discussion of why Legge has made the changes in his translation, although the format of Wang's book, which offers numbered paragraphs with slightly different explanations and no synthesis, makes the final explanation of the volume difficult to discern. Wang suggests that by 1885 Legge has come to acquire more "forbearance and tolerance for things non-Christian," and achieved more empathy with the text, approaching it more as a "pilgrim to Chinese culture, whose task is to understand the text as an insider, not to judge from the outside" (p. 162). Legge's changes may also reflect the fact that he had and taken up a role as professor at Oxford. Legge was very much a missionary when he did his first translation; in fact, as Paul Cohen suggests in *Between Tradition and Modernity: Wang T'ao and Reform in Late Ch'ing China*<sup>4</sup> (a text not cited in Wang's volume), during the time he served as Legge's principal Chinese assistant, Wang Tao 王韜, professed Christian belief and attended protestant services quite regularly, a practice he seems not to have engaged in at other moments in his career. Cohen suggests that Wang did not attend such services out of conviction, but in order to preserve his status as tutor and assistant to Legge. On the other hand, when Legge became professor at Oxford, he lived in and wrote for a different community than he had addressed in Hong Kong. The England of his day was just absorbing Herbert Spencer's social vision that societies compete, and so advance, and can be ranked in a hierarchy according to their integration and sophistication. F. Max Müller, who edited *The Sacred Books of East* series was more a comparativist than a preacher. Within this new order it was no longer necessary for the British missionary to proselytize; foreign countries would become modern inevitably; and

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974.

the task was simply to take the measure of where they were in the great social Darwinian hierarchy. The fact that Chinese has moved away from Christian monotheism in their past was less important than the fact that they would move toward a European model in the future. It is charming to think of Legge as a pilgrim in his later years, though it may be important to recognize that pilgrims whether on the Hajj or the Mayflower, do have a vision of where they are going, and a goal in their journey.

But in a sense why Legge translated the *Zhongyong* differently at different moments of his career may be less important than the fact that he did so. At least a third of *Translating Chinese Classics in a Colonial Context* is concerned not with Legge, but with theoretical material about translation. This theory is not assembled so that it can be deployed in explicating Legge's translation; in fact much of the discussion of the two translations is conducted without the terminology introduced in the first and last chapters. Theory is offered, rather, as a conceptual context in which the reader can reflect upon the implications of Legge's two translations. Two elements of the enterprise of translation are foregrounded in this material. The first is that texts, particularly classics, have little meaning until they are read, and readings can change significantly with the baggage the reader brings to his task. The Han learning scholars of the eighteenth century in China raised different questions about the *Zhongyong* than did Zhu Xi 朱熹 and his contemporaries, while those who read Legge's 1885 version had different concerns than those who read his early version. A second crucial point is that there is no one-to-one correspondence between Chinese and English, or for that matter probably any two languages. As a consequence, there is room for a translator to make choices not only of which reading he chooses to render, but also of which words in the target language he chooses to employ. For instance, the translation of *cheng* as "sincerity" is well within the range of permissible renderings; in fact Wing-tsit Chan also uses "sincerity" to render *cheng*, although Daniel Gardner chooses "truthfulness." Tu Wei-ming opts to leave the world in its original Chinese, but tells us that Lao Ssu-kuang 勞思光 of The Chinese University of Hong Kong prefers "full realization."

It is within this space that the shadows of orientalism lurk. The translator assumes for himself the right to speak in the voice of the translated text; and when the translator comes from a politically or economically dominant power this arrogating the right to speak for the dominated is problematic. Edward Said, whose work provides many examples of such arrogation of voice, very much informs this text, although Wang is careful to note that domination worked somewhat differently in East Asia than it had in the Middle East. In fact, Wang distinguishes between missionary orientalism, a kind of dominance based on religious belief, and academic orientalism, in which judgements made on supposedly professional grounds form the basis of decisions in translation. The early type of orientalism applies to Legge's 1861 translation, and the later sort to his 1885 translation. This is a very interesting distinction; with few exceptions, the China field has not adapted the Said model to its own realities but Wang's hypothesis, though not fully developed in the present volume, is one to be considered. The influence of Legge's

Christian belief is amply demonstrated in his 1861 translation; the nature of academic orientalism, in which theoretical concerns, like for instance the notion of social Darwinian competition, come to affect the translation process.

So how can the translator, particularly one who lives in a colonial, or even post-colonial context, reconcile the demands of translation with the realities of cultural and power differences. This is, ultimately the central question of this book, a critical one in our globalizing era, and one to which there is no ready solution. One solution is to assign the task of translation to those who have the most interest in its outcome. Wang writes: "The representation of formerly dominated cultures is too important to be entrusted to the good will of First World intellectuals alone. We can reach out to tell the world about our cultures, not in the spirit of antagonism and animosity, but as a contributing member of humanity." (p. 194) This is certainly a valuable thought, although as Wang notes, the emphasis on science, rationality, and modernity has become so universal, that changing translators might not change the emphases in translations. This cannot be the author's entire solution, however. As this book is written in English, he may reasonably be expected to have some advice for the First World English readers as well, particularly if the task of translating classics is not to be left to those outside the First World *alone*. Here Wang's advice is both refreshing and valuable: he urges translator to consider the ethics of their work as they undertake it.

Ethics in inter-cultural translation is not about deciding the truth or falsehood of alterity, but about understanding and respect. Colonialist translations would appear in a multicultural context as unethical because they denigrate other cultures and seek to subdue, annihilate, or displace them. Such translations breed pride and prejudice, justify imperialism and colonialism, and abet war and conquest. Ethical, decolonizing translations, by contrast, aim to promote understanding and respect for other peoples, cultures, worldviews, and faiths (p. 196).

What makes this perspective valuable is that Wang is talking not so much about professional ethics, as the ethics of professionals. The modern world has built such a cult of professionalism, surrounding it with high fences and putting it on a pedestal, that we have forgotten that much of what we do in professional life is make decisions that are fundamentally ethical. Wang is suggesting nothing less, and nothing more, than that we weigh the words we use in translation, and our motives in using them. This seems the least we can do to honour the spirit of those whose words we translate.

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