

**James Legge, 1815-1897**  
**First of Four Culture & Translation Talks,**  
**John Minford, Hang Seng Management College,**  
**Saturday, 20 February 2016**

**Life**

Born: 20 December 1815, in Huntly Scotland  
Died: 29 November 1897, Oxford  
Among his contemporaries from Huntly: George MacDonald

An extremely thorough classical education at school and at King's College, Aberdeen University; a formidable ability to memorize  
Then attended Highbury theological seminary  
Commenced his study of Chinese in Reading Room of British Museum, 1837-1838

**Background historical dates**

First Opium War, 1839-1842  
Second Opium War, 1857-1860  
Taiping Rebellion, 1850-1864

**Personal Life**

Legge married twice, first to Mary Isabella Morison (1816–1852) and after she died he married again, a widow, Hannah Mary Willetts (d. 1881, née Johnstone). Hannah left HK in 1866.

**Missionary Career**

1842-1843: founding of Hong Kong, Legge moves Anglo-Chinese College from Malacca. Founds the HK Union Church  
1846-1847: travels to England with three Chinese boys  
1852: death of Mary in childbirth in HK  
1857-1860: Second Opium War (preface to *Analects*, p.ix – the hostilities of 1856 were favourable to retired and literary work)  
1858: Joseph Jardine's patronage, Ride p. 11  
1862: Wang Tao 王韜 joins Legge in Hong Kong  
1867: travels to Dollar. Wang Tao follows him there.  
1870-1873: returns to HK as pastor  
1873: travels to northern China, Tientsin, Peking, Shandong, Shanghai  
On return to England, made Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford  
1873: death of French sinologist Stanislas Julien  
1876: appointed to new Chair Professorship of Chinese, backed by Max Muller &

Benjamin Jowett.

27 October 1876: Legge's Inaugural Lecture in the Sheldonian Theatre

1881: death of Hannah Legge from breast cancer

1897: death of James Legge in Oxford

### Legge the Man

Gustav Schlegel, in *T'oung Pao*, vol.9, no.1 (1898): 59-63, called Legge 'le Nestor [= aged king] des Sinologues'.

He rose daily at three in the morning to make time for his translations:

This was a habit he maintained almost to his death, a habit which was the cause of no little astonishment among his friends. He habitually rose about 3 a.m., and worked at his desk for five hours, while the rest of the household slept. Soon after his arrival, the lighted study attracted the night-policeman to the house, 'fearful lest, at so suspicious an hour, mischief in some dishonest form or other was afoot'.

A letter, dated 3 a.m., January 2, 1878, has been preserved:

'My dear Nephew,

'Happy new year to you. Here I am at this early hour, while all the rest of the house are, I hope, locked in the arms of sleep. Not a sound is heard but when the hammers of St Giles clock, near at hand, or the boom of 4 great Tom, farther off, sends to my ears through the still air a note of the passing of time. Yet, again, my little girl's pet canary has been roused on his perch, and seeing the gas-light, and myself at the table, fancies it is day, and twitters a few notes, soon settling back to sleep. Ah, Confucius, thou wast the most "timeous" of sages, and I am the most a untimeous 'of ordinary mortals.' He wrote to a friend: 'Next to Hong Kong, Oxford is the most delightful place in the world.'

Cordier, 'Les Etudes Chinoises', 1895-1898, *T'oung Pao* (1898) supplement to vol.IX. p.5:

'Un homme grand, corpulent, haut en couleur; ses favoris étaient entièrement blancs, tandis que ses sourcils et ses cheveux étaient restés chatains; il avait l'air d'un gentleman farmer et faisait contraste avec son confrère le Dr. Edkins, petit maigrelet, à la barbe fleuve grisonnante aux longs dents prominents.'

He had the frostiest of silver hair, the pinkest of cheeks, the bluest of eyes. Ride, p.22.

In his early days in Malacca he used to swing his pet crocodile round his head as it clung to a plank by its teeth.

Mary Isabella, his wife, wrote, a few weeks into their voyage out to Malacca:  
Dear James doffed his clerical habiliments , and made his debut in white calico...  
decked out in white from head to foot, with ... a broad-brimmed hat, the very picture of a  
West Indian plantation master. — Shadick, *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.22, no.2  
(February 1963): 203.

Legge constantly suffered poor health, was at times almost blind. He was partially deaf,  
had episodes of nocturnal sleepwalking and falling. NG, pp,72  
& 34. Legge lacked a musical ear, and would speak Chinese only in a halting fashion.  
He did not like Chinese food.

### **Legge on Translation**

A diligent translator must always work as if he were writing for the 'hundredth man' who  
cares about the meticulous technical details of scholarship (99 out of 100 do not care for  
critical notes). Only in this way will a translation have permanent value... NG, p.62.

'Page gets trotted off after page – it is just like ascending a peak – if you stand at the  
bottom and dwell on the distance and the steepness of the ascent, the feet almost  
refuse to move. At times the toil seems too great to be undertaken but you must simply  
'gird up your loins and go at it, you pant and groan and perspire – but ere long the  
summit is attained.' Letter to Hannah, 16 April 1866, NG, p.65.

He found the labour of translation 'very 'absorbing', even though 'the mind has not the  
exhaustion of prolonged original thought such as is produced in building the lofty rhyme  
or elaborating the philosophical discussion, or even in writing the three volume novel.'  
A constant mental exercise of a minute and accurate discrimination.  
[His aim was] to find the place of China in the scheme of universal history and thought.  
Scholars had a sacred mission to know the 'great story' of other nations.  
NG, p.76.

### **Legge & China**

There must be amongst the [Chinese] people certain moral and social principles of the  
greatest virtue and power... In no country is the admiration of scholastic excellence so  
developed as in China, no kingdom in the world where learning is so highly revered.  
Ride, p.10.

His one trip north in 1873. He arrived in Shanghai on 2 April, returned to Shanghai at  
the end of May. Peking 16 April 1873. Visited the Temple of Heaven 天壇, 'I never felt  
under a more holy awe than when I was there.' NG, p.87. Legge also paid his respects  
at the graves of the Jesuits Ricci, Schaal et al.

Below Taishan, at the hostelry, after dinner 'a bevy of young ladies was sent to entertain  
the missionaries with music and help us otherwise to pass the time. They quickly sent

them away and informed the Chinese landlord of the enormity of letting such questionable characters come about his establishment. NG, pp.92-93.

### **Legge the Oxford Professor: Inaugural Lecture**

The university must live up to the duty of imparting to its youth the highest knowledge which the age enjoys on all subjects belonging to the culture of the mind and the formation of the character. Girardot, p.175.

We cannot know humanity as we ought to do, as in these days we must do, without [China]. NG, p.176.

Chinese literature has a stamp of genuineness and credibility such as no other ancient literature exhibits.

Sinology is 'the exploration and unfolding of the stores of Chinese literature, of worlds besides our own'. NG, p.180.

He who would understand the Chinese nation, then, must know its classical literature.

### **The Legacy of Legge**

A mere knowledge of the language does not in fact constitute the real understanding of that language. In order to understand the feelings expressed in the Chinese language one must be acquainted with at least some of the many rich works of literature which have been written in Chinese... We are concerned not only with a language and a literature but, through the learning of that language and literature, with something more lasting, a deeper, and hence more intimate and even sympathetic, understanding of the people whose language and literature we are studying.

— From Professor Liu Ts'un-yan's Inaugural Lecture, ANU, 5 October 1966

But we must always insist that the Honour School of Chinese should be based on the study of literature. To conclude, then, our task is not the training of interpreters, nor the indulgence of exotic tastes, nor the revelation of some arcane Truth which the Orient possesses but we do not, nor the mastery of a sterile Asiatic scholasticism, but literature. If universities are not to teach language by means of literature—by means of books which are intrinsically worth-while reading, I for one do not want to be a university teacher.

— From Professor David Hawkes' Inaugural Lecture, Oxford, 25 May 1961.

### **The Book of Odes 詩經, Legge & his Versified *Shijing***

An ode in praise and honour of the King. The verse rendering is by Legge's nephew John Legge, Congregationalist minister at Brighton, Victoria, Australia, who died of consumption in 1878, aged forty-one.

Heaven shields and sets thee fast; And round thee fair has cast  
Thy virtue pure. Thus richest joy is thine;— Increase of corn and wine,  
And every gift divine, Abundant, sure.

Heaven shields and sets thee fast From it thou goodness hast  
Right are thy ways. Its choicest gifts 'twill pour  
That last for evermore, Nor time exhaust the store  
Through endless days.

Heaven shields and sets thee fast, Makes thine endeavour last,  
And prosper well, Like hills and mountains high, Whose masses touch the sky;  
Like stream aye surging by; Thine increase swell.

With rite and auspice fair, Thine offerings thou dost bear,  
And son-like give, The seasons round from spring, To olden duke and king,  
Whose words to thee we bring:— 'For ever live.'

The Spirits of thy dead Pour blessings on thy head,  
Unnumbered, sweet. Thy subjects, simple, good,  
Enjoy their drink and food, Our tribes of every blood  
Follow thy feet Like moons that wax in light;  
Or suns that scale the height; Or ageless hill;  
Nor change nor autumn know; As pine and cypress grow;  
The sons that from thee flow Be lasting still.

(Part II., Book I., Ode VI, compare earlier version in *Chinese Classics*, pp. 255-258).

### Legge's Chinese Collaborators

Legge's early contact with Luo Zhongfan 羅仲藩. See the Preface to *The Great Learning*, p.25. 'I knew the man many years ago. He was a fine scholar, and had taken the second degree, or that of *Juren* 舉人. He applied to me in 1843 for Christian baptism, and offended by my hesitancy, went and enrolled himself among the disciples of another missionary. He soon, however, withdrew into seclusion, and spent the last years of his life in literary studies... In his own exhibitions of the meaning [of *The Great Learning*] he blends many ideas of the Supreme Being and of the condition of human nature, which he had learned from Christian Scriptures.

Wang Tao 王韜. Long-lasting partnership. Says much about Legge's adaptability to the world of Chinese Letters.

### Instructive examples taken from Legge's first volume of *The Chinese Classics*

**p.33-34** Legge's warmth and generous sincerity of purpose

Excellence must be rooted in the state of the heart, and be the natural outgrowth of internal sincerity... As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. This is the teaching [these are the **eternal verities**] alike of Solomon and of the author of *The Great Learning*. (Proverbs 23:7, King James Version, For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.)

from Legge's *Analects Translation & Commentary*

Throughout Legge explains clearly and without any ideological bias key Chinese terms such as *junzi* 君子, *xue* 學, *dao* 道, *se* 色, *li* 禮, *zheng* 爭, *tianxia* 天下, *ren* 仁, *zhong* 忠, *shu* 恕

He is capable, in so doing, of being both wise and humorous, and always adopts a sympathetic tone, never sneering, or condescending

**p.174** perceptive

子曰，道不行，乘桴浮于海從我者其由與。

The Master said: 'My doctrines make no way. I will get upon a raft and float about on the sea. He that will accompany me will be You, I dare to say...'

*Confucius proposing to withdraw from the world* — a lesson to Zilu. Zilu supposed his master really meant to leave the world, and the idea of floating along the coasts pleased his ardent temper. But Confucius only expressed in this way his regret at the backwardness of men to receive his doctrines.

**p.177** Honest to his reader

There is hardly another [chapter] more perplexing to the translator.

**p.183** Concise, and accurate

子路曰，願聞子之志。子曰，老者安之，朋友信之，少者懷之。

Zilu then said, I should like, sir, to hear your wishes. The Master said, They are, in regard to the aged, to give them rest; in regard to friends to show them sincerity; in regard to the young, to treat them tenderly.

**p.192** Thoughtful, sincere

子曰，知者樂水，仁者樂山，智者動，仁者靜，知者樂，仁者壽。

The Master said, The wise find pleasure in water; the virtuous find pleasure in hills. The wise are active; the virtuous are tranquil. The wise are joyful; the virtuous are long-lived.

*Contrasts of the Wise and the Virtuous*

The wise or knowing are active and restless, like the waters of a stream, ceaselessly flowing and advancing. The virtuous are tranquil and firm, like the stable mountains. The pursuit of knowledge brings joy. The life of the virtuous may be expected to glide calmly on and long. *After all, the saying is not very comprehensible.*

**p.222** Personal, direct

子在川上曰，逝者如斯夫，不舍晝夜。

The Master standing by a stream, said, It passes on just like this, not ceasing day or night.

*How Confucius was affected by a running stream*

[The words] indicate something in the sage's mind, suggested by the ceaseless movement of the water.

**p.223-224** Wide sphere of reference, lightly used

子曰，後生可畏，焉知來者之不如今也。

*How and why a youth should be treated with respect*

With Confucius' remark compare that of John Trebonius, Luther's schoolmaster at Eisenach, who used to raise his cap to his pupils on entering the schoolroom, and gave as the reason – 'There are among these boys men of whom God will one day make burgomasters.. Although you do not yet see them with the badges of dignity, it is right that you should treat them with respect.'

**p.205** Simple

子與人歌，而善，必使反之，而後和之

*The Good Fellowship of Confucius*

When the Master was in company with a person who was singing, if he sang well, he would make him repeat the song, while he accompanied it with his own voice.

**p.206** Frank, but never cynical

We wish that our information about Confucius were not so stinted and fragmentary.

**p.219** Culturally informative, fluent exposition

子曰，鳳鳥不至，河不出圖，吾矣夫

The Master said, The Feng bird does not come; the river sends forth no map. It is all over with me.

*For want of auspicious omens, Confucius gives up the hope of the triumph of his doctrines.*

The *feng* is the male of a fabulous bird, which has been called the Chinese phoenix, said to appear when a sage ascends the throne or when right principles are going to triumph. The female is called 凰. In the days of Shun, they gambolled in his hall, and were heard singing on mount Qi in the time of King Wen. The river and the map carry us farther back still – to the time of Fuxi, to whom a monster with the head of a dragon, and the body of a horse, rose from the water, being marked on the back so as to give that first of the sages the idea of his diagrams.

### **Tributes, Conclusions**

陳其元 (1812-1881), 《庸閑齋筆記》: 聖教西行

I cannot help but dance with joy 不禁為之起舞 to hear that the doctrines of our sages have now become available to the people of the Western sea 西海. ... James Legge has proven himself a man of culture and courage 孟子所謂豪傑之士也 by studying the way of our sages through the commentaries so as to transform the Western barbarians 用夏變夷.

The authentic transformative power is translated to the Anglophone audience due to

Legge's ability to participate in the rich Chinese traditions of commentary in an almost native Chinese way. NG, p.361.

### **Rev. Fairbairn Eulogy**

James Legge had a largeness and simplicity of nature, and was distinguished by a dignity which never fails to adorn the single-minded man. He was, though so upright, as gentle as a child, and while severely conscientious he was saved by his delightful humour from being either fierce or fanatical. Oxford did not know him till the shadows of his long and gracious evening were about to fall, but it saw him soon enough to know that he was a man of fine presence, pure purpose, and courageous speech; a man whose high spirit a small school and imperfect sympathy could not break, whose wide and lofty aims a circumscribed sphere could neither narrow nor lower...

He was sent Eastwards, to the oldest of living civilisations, and he studied it with an eye made luminous by love. For if ever a man loved a people, James Legge loved the Chinese, and he could not bear to see them do wrong or suffer it. And he not a man to see that happen which he hated without straining every nerve to prevent it... He entered, indeed, in his mission upon a noble inheritance left by Robert Morrison, who saw that English ignorance was as invincible and as mischievous as Chinese exclusiveness...

He gained the affection and confidence of the Chinese as but few foreigners have ever done, for he loved them truly, and they knew the simple integrity of his love. It was characteristic of him that one of his very last acts was to rise from what was to be his death-bed to greet with his fine old-world courtesy a Chinese youth of humble origin and rank, whose only claim to such attention was the blood which ran in his veins. And as he loved the people, he was jealous for all that was good and true in their faith... Did he not judge with charity as well as knowledge? He had the insight which comes of the heart even more than of the head into their literature and religion; and he saw that the primary condition of making the West influential in the East was to make the East intelligible to the West...

Out of this understanding came his magnificent edition of the Chinese Classics. Of its learning it does not become me to speak; the invincible patience, the heroic industry that went into its production, we can all admire. But only those who knew the man can appreciate the idea, the splendid dream of humanity and religion that gave it birth.

— Dr Andrew Martin Fairbairn (1838-1912)

### **Wang Tao Scroll**

With himself he is honest, to others he is gracious 其持己也廉，其待人也惠，In receiving friends or dealing with people, he is modest and sincere. 周旋晉接，恂恂如也。At first sight he looks dignified and stern as if he were difficult to approach, but if you have associated with him for a long time, you will feel the breadth of modesty and friendliness filling the world. 驟見之頃，儼然道貌，若甚難親，而久與之處，覺謙沖和靄之氣浸淫大宅間。For over twenty years he has never ceased from loving talent and



cherishing scholars, teaching them to hold to the great principles and not to esteem petty virtues. 即其愛育人才，培養士類，務持大體，弗尚小仁，二十余年如一日也。Everybody in Kwangtung, whether acquainted with him or not, when they hear his name, are full of his praise. 粵中士民，無論識與不識，聞先生之名，輒盛口不置。Thus one can see what kind of a man Dr Legge is. 嗚呼！即以是可知先生矣。Now that he must go back to his native land to attend to some business, those who are his disciples imbued with his teaching all feel sad at his departure and hope for his early return. 今以有事返國，凡游先生之門，涵濡教化者，無不甚惜其去而望其即至。In my adversity I have known Dr Legge, and we became close friends through our community of interest in writing and scholarship. 余獲識先生於患難中，辱以文章學問相契，於其歸也，曷能已於言哉？Although I cannot say that I know the mind of Dr Legge, yet I know him well enough to speak briefly about his life-work. 是雖未敢謂能識先生之心，而亦略足盡其生平用力之所在矣。I would testify to this with all in China who admire him. 願與海內之景慕先生者，共証之可也。

p.218 [they were] bold generals in the battle for human understanding and unity, striving towards the universal communion of mankind

Mungello p.586 **Making meaningful** (i.e. translating) the entire culture of China

Macklin p.61 Almost as long as Legge was a missionary he was an **undercover translator**

NG 82 his destinations can be seen as stations in his own inward journey of self-translation, a journey to the heart of heathen darkness, to the very source of China's Confucian otherness.

p.67 In his zeal to do service to humanity he tried to **enter into the heart and mind of Asia**

John Legge: whereas the tawny-faced oblique-eyed grinning Mongolian was not redolent of the aroma of lettered culture, Legge's Chinese Classics **documented China's place within the 'universal history of man'**.

His quest for 'the universal Chinese mind', Ride p.20.

In 1873 he removed his shoes at the Temple of Heaven 天壇 because he felt he was on holy ground

Reference has been made to his nephew John Legge, who died in 1878 in Australia, where his health had obliged him to settle several years before. He was a scholar, a man of rare mental endowment, and a warm correspondence was ever maintained between him and his uncle. In his letters are many allusions to Dr Legge's literary work. 'What a terra incognita of human thought you have laid open in that old eastern lore. You have made an amazing contribution to human chronology and history. It is as if one had discovered and translated Livy for the first time.

Your toil and patience and thoroughness put you rather with Erasmus than with common Classical scholars,

'What a nomad you have been for a literary man. How you have accomplished so much

I often wonder, considering the extent of your travels. You must have habits of method and concentration of mind such as I am yet a stranger to.

'When you last wrote you were just issuing Vol. V. from the Press. What a Hercules you are, and when will the 12th labour end? It will be a work for posterity, and in the inevitable opening up of China must set you alongside the Sanscrit scholars in Oriental literature. These last books of Chow impressed me more than any with the fundamental identity of human thought in all time, both in the inception of philosophical speculation and in its highest reaches. Nature seems always to touch fatalism, and consciousness to insist on freedom.

'May you be supported in your magnum opus, for it is a mighty undertaking. It is the wonder of all who look at my bookshelves.

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