

# A Study on the Translation Revision of *The She King* Retranslated by James Legge—Taking the English Translation of Ode as the Analysis Center

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Manuscript received March 21, 2024; revised April 19, 2024; accepted May 6, 2024; published July 19, 2024

**Abstract**—James Legge, a famous British sinologist in the 19th century, translated *The She King* three times in nine years, and he translated *The She King* into English for the first time, making great contributions to the English translation of Chinese classics. The three versions of *The She King* present different characteristics, so this study selects the 40 poems in Legge's 1871 prose version, the 1876 rhymed version of *The Odes in The She King*, and the 38 poems in the 1879 selected translations on religious themes as the main objects of study, analyzes the translation modifications at the macro and micro levels in the retranslation of *The She King* to further explore the Legge's translation. The reasons for Legge's retranslation of *The She King* mainly in terms of changes in identity, adjustments in one's own religious thoughts and poetic cognition, and the care for readers. This kind of revisions and retractions facilitated the wide dissemination and process of classics.

**Keywords**—*The She King* or *The Book of Poetry*, *The Odes*; retranslation, translation revision

## I. INTRODUCTION

As the first poetry collection in China, *The She King* or *The Book of Poetry* (hereafter referred to as "*The She King*") laid the foundation for the development of Chinese poetry. It has been translated by many translators at home and abroad. According to statistics, there are at least 16 versions of *the Book of Songs*, of which the most milestone is the English Sinologist James Legge's translation. James Legge (1815–1897) translated *The She King* into English for the first time in 1871.

Legge was a famous English missionary and Sinologist. *The She King*, published in 1871 in his *Chinese Classics*. In 1876, he retranslated and published the rhymed version. In 1879, The translation of the religious-related poems from the *Chinese Classics* was included in the third volume of *The Sacred Books of the East* edited by Max Müller. Although the interval was only nine years, Legge's experiences, circumstances and identity have changed dramatically.

Retranslation has two meanings. It can refer to indirect translation, that is, the translation of a certain language as an intermediary rather than a direct translation of the original text [1]. It can also refer to the act of re-translating the original text that has already been translated into the same language, or refer to the retranslated works produced by this act [2]. The study of the retranslation of *The She King* in this study is based on the second meaning, that is, the same translator has translated the same work successively, or different translators have translated the same work in different periods, of which the former can also be called self-retranslation. The retranslation of classics is conducive to the dissemination of

works and spread Chinese culture.

## II. THE MACROSCOPIC TRANSLATION MODIFICATION OF LEGGE'S RETRANSLATION OF *THE SHE KING*

*The Odes* is an integral part of *The She King*. It is the music for the nobles to sacrifice to ghosts and gods in the ancestral temple and praise the merits of ancestors and rulers. There are 40 pieces in total, which are divided into *Odes to Zhou*, *Odes to Lu* and *Odes to Shang*.

From a macro perspective, the three versions of *The She King* can be divided into four aspects: text, paratext, content and format. In terms of text, the original 40 poems were retained in the prose version of 1871 and the rhyme version of 1876, while the selected version of 1879 had only 38 poems. The two poems of *Odes to Lu*, Chapter Jiong and Chapter Youbi, were deleted. In the preface of *Odes to Lu*, there are only 38 poems in the selected translation version, which also showed the rigor of Legge in selecting poems on religious themes.

According to their position in the text, paratexts can be divided into peritext and epitext [3]. From the perspective of the paratext, the preface has already reflected the great differences between the three translations: the preface of *The Odes* in the prose version did not contain an introduction, while the 1876 rhyme version added two introductory paragraphs, which respectively introduced what *The Odes* is, namely, "songs sung in ancient times during ancestor worship in temples" and "songs used for sacrifice" [4] to give a general description of the whole chapter. In addition, in the rhyme version, Legge added a large number of Chinese characters to the prose version of *The She King*. In each poem, the original Chinese text was first followed by the translation. In the annotations, Legge directly interpreted the original Chinese characters and listed the names of ancient Chinese scholars or books in Chinese. In contrast, the rhyme version removed all Chinese characters and annotations, which was more friendly to English readers; The selected version also deleted all Chinese. However, because of the reference to ancient Chinese religious customs such as sacrifice and worship, for the consideration of scholars who were interested in ancient Chinese religious customs, Legge added a lot of annotations to explain these customs [5].

From the perspective of format, in the prose version, Legge took the top to bottom arrangement of the Chinese original text, English translation and annotations, while the Chinese translation took the title and the original text in order from right to left, and all the poetry translations followed the left-aligned format. The 1876 rhyming edition deleted the original

Chinese text, so it was arranged from top to bottom in order of the poem introduction and translation, and Legge took more than 50 different indentation formats, and the translation alignment format was mainly centered. And in 1876 version there is no Chinese text, only the English translation with rhyme was retained. The 1879 religious selection version reverted to the prose version, but with a different indentation and alignment format, and the translated poem was arranged in prose rather than each line being a complete poem, largely downplaying the poetic character of the original in order to “emphasize its religious content” [6].

### III. THE MICRO-LEVEL TRANSLATION AND MODIFICATION OF LEGGE’S RETRANSLATION OF *THE SHE KING*

After reading, collating and comparing, the author summarizes four main changes at the micro level: different translations of the same image in the translated text, adding figures of speech, clarification and omission, and comments on typical examples.

#### A. Different Translations of the Same Image

The main purpose of poetry is to convey what it wants to express, so how to accurately and appropriately convey the original image in the translation process is the key to test whether a translator understands the source language culture. In the retranslation of *The She King*, there may be different translations of the same image. For example:

(1) Original text: 龙旂十乘,大糇是承。邦畿千里,维民所止,肇域彼四海。(Long qi shi sheng, da xi shi cheng. Bang ji qian li, wei ming suo zhi, zhao yu bi si hai.) [5].

1871 translation:

Ten princes, [who came] with their dragon-embazoned banners,  
Bear the large dishes of millet.  
The royal domain of a thousand *le*  
Is where the people rest;  
But there commence the boundaries that reach to the four seas [5].

1876 translation:

Ten lords, whose chariots dragon banners grace,  
His millet dished in due order place.  
A thousand *le* extends the king’s domain,  
And there the people to repose are fain.  
Lo! To the four seas thence our borders spread,  
And from the space with there come to aid  
Our temple service many chiefs arrayed.  
Our hill of King for border had the Ho.  
’Twas right the sovereignty to Shang should go;  
And from its ruler now all honours flow [4].

“龙旂”(Long qi) refers to an ancient flag with the shape of a dragon painted on it and a brass bell tied to the pole. “乘”(Sheng) refers to an ancient chariot with four horses pulling together to ride. The 1871 translation faithfully translated the “龙旂” but omitted the “乘”. Although the 1876 translation did not literally translate the “龙旂”, it conveyed the meaning of “龙旂” and “乘” relatively completely. Although in order to rhyme and read more smoothly, Legge did not literally translate, but the original meaning was basically the same. Thus, it can be seen that Legge no longer blindly pursued the translation of the image in the poem word by word, but took

into account the reading, aesthetics and poetics to a greater extent, so the translation of the rhyme version in this sentence has more room for development.

The different translations of the same image in the process of retranslation reflect Legge’s rigorous academic attitude. He took the initiative to correct and modify some of the impressions that have been formed, and strove for a better translation. At the same time, in the rhyme version, although some sentences were added sometimes, the translation became rhymed and aesthetic for a better reading experience.

#### B. Adding Figures of Speech

In addition to the different translations of the same image, Legge also added a lot of rhetorical devices in the rhyme version, such as metaphor, exaggeration, personification, etc., to convert the unfamiliar customs and knowledge in the original text or that the target readers do not understand into the content in the translated text, which enhanced the resonance with readers, increased the reading interests, and brought out the literariness of the translated text. For example:

(2) Original text: 黍稷重穰,稊稚荻麦。奄有下国,俾民稼穡。有稷有黍,有稻有秬。(Shu ji tong lu, zhi zhi shu mai. An you xia guo, bi min jia se. You ji you shu, you dao you ju) [5].

1871 translation:

How first to sow pulse, and then wheat.  
Anon he was invested with an inferior State,  
And thought the people how to sow and to reap  
The millet and the sacrificial millet,  
Rice and the black millet [5];

1876 translation:

He knew, and first the pulse to sow,  
And then the wheat, where each should grow.  
soon called a State, though small, to rule,  
It under him became a school,  
Where husbandry men learned to know,  
To sow, to reap, to weed, to hoe.  
Millets, —the early, black, and the red,  
And rice that loves the watery bed [4]

“稻(Dao)” is rice. The prose version was directly expressed by “rice”, which simply and directly conveyed the meaning of the original text, but the rhyme version was expressed by “rice that loves the watery bed”, and described “水稻(Shui dao)” as “rice that loves the watery bed” with anthropomorphic rhetoric. The habits of “rice” are also vividly and humorously expressed, greatly improving readers’ interests in reading, and “bed” also rhymes with the above “red”, which is catchy to read.

#### C. Clarification

Since the 1871 prose version of *The She King* contained a large number of annotations which can explain the contents of the original text in detail and thoughtfully, while the 1876 rhyming version of *The She King* deleted all the notes, in order to facilitate readers to read, understand the broad and profound Chinese culture, and had a full understanding of some characters, things and deeds in Chinese culture. Legge chose to clarify the important information in the poem translation, so as to facilitate readers to read. For example:

(3) Original text: 赫赫姜嫄, 其德不回。上帝是依, 无灾无害。(He he jiang yuan, qi de bu hui. Shang di shi yi, wu zai wu hai) [5].

1871 translation:

Highly distinguished was Keang Yuen,  
Of virtue undeflected.

God regarded her with favour;  
And without injury or hurt [5],

1876 translation:

From then our thoughts to Keang Yuen go,  
The mother of our Chow and Loo.

She grandly shone with virtue rare  
That nought could bend. So did she share  
God's favour, and How-tseih she bore,  
Without a pang, or a labour sore [4]

In the annotations of Chapter Shengmin in *Daya*, it was described in detail that Jiang Yuan is the mother of Hou Ji, the ancestor of Zhou. At first, citizens were born by Jiang Yuan. She prayed to the Gods to worship heaven and earth and prayed for children. She walked on God's thumbprint, seeking divine protection. The fetus is dynamic and static, she was born and raised diligently. This child is Houji, the ancestor of Zhou. However, the translation in rhyming version pursued simplicity and fluency, thus it was impossible to have such a long length of annotations, so Legge chose to directly show the image of Jiang Yuan in the poem, so as to avoid readers feeling confused and increase the readability of the article.

#### D. Omission

Due to the need of the rhythm of English poetry, Legge deleted the translation of part of the content in the rhyme version to achieve the purpose of rhyming. However, some of the contents were shortened to avoid wordy expressions, or the translators thought that whether a certain content was translated or not would not have a great impact on the expression of the original text, so they chose to omit it. For example:

(4) Original text: 黍稷重穋, 稊稚菽麦。奄有下国, 俾民稼穡。(Shu ji tong lu, zhi zhi shu mai. An you xia guo, bi min jia se) [5].

1871 translation:

[To know] how the millet ripened early, and the sacrificial millet late,

How first to sow pulse, and then wheat.  
Anon he was invested with an inferior State,  
And thought the people how to sow and to reap [5].

1876 translation:

That millet's times were not the same,  
This ripening quickly, and that slow,  
He knew, and first the pulse to sow,  
And then the wheat, where each should grow,  
Soon called a State, though small, to rule,  
It under him became a school,  
Where husbandry men learned to know,  
To sow, to reap, to weed, to hoe [4].

“重穋(Tong lu)” refers to two kinds of grain, commonly known as “稊稷”, “稊” is sown earlier and ripen later, and “稷” is sown later but ripen earlier. The prose version translated both crops word by word, but the rhyme version

only translated them as “different maturation time”. This treatment is more vague, easy to make the reader confused: which crop corresponds to the early maturity time? Such arbitrary omission of some images is easy to cause the loss of the original content and is not conducive to the spread of traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, although this kind of provincial translation made the translation simpler, it made the translation lose some essential contents and integrity.

#### IV. AN ANALYSIS OF THE REASONS FOR LEGGE'S RETRANSLATION OF *THE SHE KING*

Legge retranslated *The She King* three times, making a great contribution to its dissemination. Through careful reading of Legge's retranslation and combining with the historical background at that time, it can be roughly concluded that there are four reasons for his three retranlations, namely, the change of social identity, the change of poetic view and the reader's criticism.

The first one is the change in the role of Legge in society. Legge first came to China as a missionary, and he began to pay attention to the “*Thirteen Classic Works*” of China by preaching it to every family. He began to try to translate these ancient Chinese classic works, trying to change the religious beliefs of Chinese people by translating Chinese classics, and made then eventually convert to Christianity. However, he believed that it was not enough to translate only, but also to fully and profoundly grasp the religious, political, moral and other thoughts contained in these classics. After returning to China, Legge often participated in various religious activities, and in this process, he gradually realized that he was “a translator, a scholar, a teacher, an orientalist, a Sinologist. Only by chance had he been engaged in missionary work” [7]. It can be seen that Legge was slowly transforming his identity as a missionary and senator into a sinologist, scholar and translator. After he became a professor of Sinology at Oxford University in 1876, he became more aware of his responsibilities as a scholar, sinologist and translator, so he became more independent in translation activities. His translation focus would unconsciously shift to Chinese culture and literature itself, hoping to show the charm of Chinese literature and culture through translation. In 1876, the rhyme version of *The She King* was also translated. The rhyme version was full of dynamic and vitality, with less penetration of religion and politics, more attention to humanistic concern, and the language became vivid and smooth. In 1879, Legge was invited by Müller to include *The She King* into *The Sacred Books of the East*, but Legge insisted on choosing a translation that only reflected religious content. Hence the 1879 selective translation of religion was created.

Then there is the change of Legge's conception of poetics. At the beginning, Legge mainly adopted the foreignization, literally translating every word. Moreover, to convey the original content as completely as possible and ensure the accuracy and fidelity of the translation, transliteration was used to express some things with Chinese characteristics. At first, he thought that there is no need to publish *The She King* in rhyme. However, the prose version of the translation was not popular in the Western world at that time, which laid the foundation for Legge's retranslation of *The She King*. In the preface to the 1876 rhyme version, Legge described the

differences between Chinese poetry and English poetry. In the preface to the 1876 rhyming version, Legge re-discussed the differences between Chinese poetry and English poetry, and he also admitted that the 1876 version is better than the 1871 version, because of the retaining of the beauty of poems. In rhyme version, Legge also translated every sentence with rhymes as much as possible to provide readers with the aesthetic feeling of reading as well as increase the aesthetic value.

Finally, the reader's reading experience is also one of the important factors affecting the translator. In order to be faithful to the original text and better show the ancient Chinese's thoughts. Legge adopted the strategy of "rich translation" in the prose version, which not only added a lot of Chinese characters and phonetic alphabet, but also added a lot of annotations in the translation, so that it is more suitable for the comparison between Chinese and English reading as well as more suitable for readers interested in Chinese cultures to read. However, he ignored those Western readers who did not know China and were not satisfied with the acceptability of the prose version of the translation. Since *The She King* itself is presented in the form of poetry, this literal translation did not reflect the charm of the original poems.

#### V. CONCLUSION

From 1871 to 1879, Legge translated *The She King* three times, which made an indelible contribution to the spread of Chinese culture, and his attitude towards academia is also worth learning. Each of the three translations has its own characteristics: From having Chinese academic characteristics to pursuing the beauty of poetics to integrating religious themes; From criticizing Confucianism to slowly accepting it with an objective attitude; From literal translation

to later adding his own thoughts and opinions, Legge has promoted the wide dissemination of Chinese classics in the Western world and accelerated their acceptability in the minds of Western readers. At the same time, Legge's retranslation of *The She King* has great inspiration for the retranslation of Chinese literature and cultural classics. Translators should adopt different translation strategies according to different translation purposes, whether focusing on academic or literary value or spreading religious ideas, they should make the translation show different aspects. Only in this way can the translator constantly surpass himself and bring better translated works.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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