

# Study on the English translation of excerpts from Mencius: Gong Sun Chou based on translator's subjectivity

## -- Taking the translations by James Legge, Derk Bodde, and D.C. Lau as examples

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### Abstract

The translator is the subject of translation, serving as a medium for cultural exchange and communication. However, translators in the external dissemination of Chinese culture have long been neglected and marginalized. With the "cultural turn" in translation studies, translators have gained due attention. As one of the representative works of Confucianism, Mencius is an important part of traditional Chinese culture, but its foreign translation is later than the Analects of Confucius and other classics, which also reflects the problem of scholars' insufficient investment in its research. This paper makes a comparative analysis of how the English translation of the core concepts of Mencius by James Legge, Derk Bodde and D.C. LAU reflects the translator's subjectivity, and in turn how the translator's subjectivity affects their translation strategy, in order to make a contribution to the foreign translation of classics.

### Keywords

Mencius; translator's subjectivity; core concepts; English translation studies.

### 1. Introduction

As one of the pre-Qin ideological classics and one of the Four Books of Confucianism, *Mencius* is an important part of China's outstanding traditional culture. The ideas of the innate goodness of human nature, benevolent governance, and the kingly way in the book continue to have an influence today. Translating classical texts into English is a vital means of spreading Chinese culture, literature, and civilization. The translation of the Four Books also signifies the spread of China's outstanding traditional culture to the world. However, compared to *The Analects*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and *The Great Learning*, the translation of Mencius began later and has received less attention. According to Chen Linlin (2013), the history of Mencius translation can be divided into three phases: (1) translations by missionaries in the 16th to 18th centuries, (2) translations by foreign sinologists in the 19th century based on missionary translations, and (3) translations by domestic sinologists in the 20th and 21st centuries based on the work of foreign sinologists. Based on this, this paper selects three representative translators: the missionary James Legge, the foreign sinologist Derk Bodde, and the domestic sinologist D.C. Lau. It will analyze excerpts from *Mencius: Gong Sun Chou* from the perspective of translator subjectivity, focusing on how these translators from different periods translated the *Mencius*.

### 2. Manifestation of Translator Subjectivity in the Cultural Dimension

When translating, translators inevitably incorporate their subjective thoughts and understanding of different cultures into their work, especially in literary translation. Translators first need to understand the source text, which involves grasping its cultural

connotations, and then meticulously refine the language, using cultural knowledge to bridge cultural gaps. This relates to the cultural background of the translator as well as that of the source text. From the perspective of translator subjectivity, this is the relationship between the subject and the object, where both influence and complement each other.

## 2.1. Subject: Cultural Background

James Legge (1815-1897) was born in Huntly, Aberdeenshire, Scotland. He was a sinologist and missionary deeply influenced by Christianity, and also a pioneer in Sino-Western cultural exchange. While spreading the Christian gospel, he devoted 25 years (from 1861 to 1886) to translating Chinese classical texts such as the Four Books and the Five Classics, producing a total of 28 volumes. Legge not only established his position in sinology but also provided Western scholars with a window into understanding Chinese thought.

Derk Bodde (1909-2003) was one of the most famous American sinologists of the 20th century and laid the foundation for sinology studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Bodde was renowned for his clear and accessible translation style and academic contributions, especially his translation and revision of *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, which still serves as a comprehensive overview of Chinese philosophy for Western readers.

D.C. Lau (1921.3.8-2010.4.26) was a renowned Hong Kong sinologist and linguist. He served as the Professor of Chinese at the University of London, becoming the first Chinese scholar to hold this position in the UK. Lau's translations, such as *Laozi*, *Mencius*, and *The Analects*, have become important references for Western scholars studying Chinese philosophy due to their precision and fluency. His academic rigor and translation skills have deeply influenced cross-cultural understanding and respect for Chinese culture.

## 2.2. Object: Cultural Identity

Cultural identity theory, proposed by the famous American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson in the early 1950s, refers to the affirmative recognition of the most meaningful aspects of one's ethnic community formed through long-term collective life. Samuel Huntington pointed out that different people often answer "Who are we?" with what is most meaningful to them, defining themselves through "ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions," and using certain symbols as markers of their cultural identity.

James Legge was a missionary in China, who was attracted by Chinese thought and culture while spreading the Christian gospel, leading him to dedicate himself to the dissemination of China's outstanding traditional culture. However, Legge's deep Christian influence limited his understanding of Chinese culture, which is reflected in his translations. Derk Bodde, a foreign sinologist, aimed to explore and transmit China's excellent thought and culture to the world, enriching world civilization. However, both Legge and Bodde, as "others," faced challenges in achieving full cultural identity when understanding Chinese culture due to factors such as language, thought, values, and customs, which could lead to mistranslations. In contrast, D.C. Lau, as a domestic sinologist, grew up immersed in Chinese culture and was deeply influenced by Confucian thought. Therefore, he faced fewer difficulties and obstacles in cultural understanding and identity than the two foreign translators. The external translation of Chinese classics has evolved from external to internal and then from internal to external, aligning with the transformation of translator subjectivity. Therefore, while we are grateful to foreign missionaries and sinologists for their love of Chinese culture, the external translation of classics increasingly requires the involvement of more knowledgeable sinologists.

Cultural identity is the foundation of translation, and a translator's choice of source text also reflects their subjectivity. Language is the carrier of culture, and a translator's cultural identity with the source text is reflected in the use of language.

### 3. Manifestation of Translator Subjectivity in the Linguistic Dimension

Translator subjectivity, when applied to the linguistic level, typically manifests in aspects such as words, sentences, and texts. This section mainly focuses on the distinctive features of the text itself and compares and analyzes how different translators manifest subjectivity in the linguistic dimension through word choice, sentence structure, and rhetorical handling.

#### 3.1. Translation of Core Concept Characters

In Chinese, characters are the basic unit, while in English, words are the basic unit. The process of translating characters into words reflects the translator's subjectivity. Some culturally specific concept words in Chinese manifest the translator's cultural identity in the process of translation.

Table 1: Vocabulary selection of core concepts in Mencius: Gong Sun Chou

Numble	Original text	James Legge	Derk Bodde	D.C. Lau
1	duān	principle	beginning	germ
2	rén	benevolence	human-heartedness (jen)	benevolence
3	yì	righteousness	righteousness (yi)	dutifulness
4	lǐ	propriety	propriety(li)	observance of the rites
5	zhì	knowledge	wisdom (chih)	wisdom

Example 1: The term "端" (duān) is derived from the phrase "惻隱之心，仁之端也；羞惡之心，義之端也；辭讓之心，禮之端也；是非之心，智之端也" (The heart of compassion is the germ of benevolence; the heart of shame, of dutifulness; the heart of courtesy and modesty, of observance of the rites; the heart of right and wrong, of wisdom). Here, "端" refers to "beginning" or "incipient stage." According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "端" can be translated into three English terms: 1) Principle: a belief that is accepted as a reason for acting or thinking in a particular way; 2) Beginnings [pl.]: the first or early ideas, signs, or stages of something; 3) Germ: the origin of something that develops, especially a cell from which grain grows or the beginning of an idea. James Legge misunderstood "端" due to an insufficiently deep interpretation, simplifying it as a principle or concept, which led him to translate it as "principle." Both Bodde and Lau understood it correctly, but Lau's choice of "germ" is more vivid, evoking an image of a sprout growing, while Bodde's translation is more literal.

Example 2: The concept of "仁" (rén) is the core of Confucian values regarding humanity, first introduced by Confucius. In *The Analects*, the term "仁" appears 109 times. For example, "Fan Chi asked about humanity. The Master said, 'Love others.'" This love for others means treating them as one's kind and using this principle to build interpersonal relationships and form a social community. Confucius advocated the principle of benevolence to harmonize interpersonal relationships, practicing "the way of loyalty and forgiveness." After Confucius, Mencius traced the premise of benevolence back to human nature, asserting that human nature is inherently good, and that the human heart is inherently benevolent. *The Analects* was translated before the *Mencius*, where "仁" was rendered as "benevolence," meaning "the quality of being kind and helpful; charity." James Legge and D.C. Lau both followed this earlier translation, while Bodde translated it as "human-heartedness (jen 仁)," adding his interpretation and annotating it with the Chinese character to promote Chinese culture. Bodde's translation is more concrete, distinguishing it from Confucius's concept of "仁," while Legge and Lau's translations are more abstract.

Example 3: The translation of "义" and Example 4: "礼" by James Legge and Derk Bodde are consistent, with Bodde maintaining his style of transliteration with annotations. "义" arises from "仁," outlining the correct path for "becoming fully human." Mencius stated, "仁 is the peaceful abode of humans; 义 is the correct path of humans." This means that "仁," as a goal, is the place where individual values are settled, and "义" is the path to realizing those values. According to Mencius's concept, benevolent governance cannot be established directly on the foundation of "仁"; "义" must serve as an intermediary. Legge and Bodde's translation of "义" as "righteousness" is incorrect, as it does not capture this idea. D.C. Lau's translation of "义" as "dutifulness," meaning "a moral or legal obligation; a responsibility," better fits the idea of "义" as the path for practicing "仁." If "仁" is a concept, then "义" is the concrete measure for realizing "仁," which can be understood as a sense of moral responsibility.

Example 4: The concept of "礼" (li) further deepens the idea of "义," highlighting the importance of "礼" (rituals) as the institutional guarantee for "becoming fully human." "义" is abstract, while "礼" is concrete and represents operable institutional provisions. Clearly, due to their different cultural backgrounds, Legge and Bodde misunderstood this concept, translating "礼" as "propriety," which means "the rules of correct behavior; etiquette; norms." D.C. Lau's translation as "observance of the rites" is more appropriate.

Example 5: "智" (zhi) synthesizes 仁, 义, and 礼, emphasizing that all three must be grounded in "智" (wisdom). "智" is the rational awareness necessary for "becoming fully human." Mencius associated "智" with "the heart of right and wrong," clearly placing it within the scope of value rationality. As a comprehensive concept, "智" emphasizes its abstract nature. Legge's interpretation of "智" as "knowledge" is overly concrete, while both Bodde and Lau's translation of it as "wisdom" better captures its abstract essence.

### 3.2. Translation of Special Sentence Structures

Classical Chinese text differs slightly in sentence structure from modern Chinese. Therefore, the understanding and mastery of these unique sentence patterns during translation also reflect the translator's cultural identity with Chinese culture and their subjectivity. Different translation methods can convey different nuances.

Table 2: Sentence selection of special sentence in Mencius: Gong Sun Chou

Numble	Original text	Those who possess these four beginnings but claim they cannot act virtuously are those who harm themselves; those who say their ruler cannot act virtuously are those who harm their ruler.
1	James Legge	When men, having these four principles, yet say of themselves that they cannot develop them, they play the thief with themselves, and he who says of his prince that he cannot develop them plays the thief with his prince.
	Derk Bodde	When, having these four beginnings, he says of himself that he is incapable (of developing them), he is injuring himself. And when he says of his sovereign that he is incapable, he is injuring his sovereign.
	D.C. Lau	For a man possessing these four germs to deny his own potentialities is for him to cripple himself; for him to deny the potentialities of his prince is for him to cripple his prince.

2	Original text	It is not to form a connection with the child's parents, nor to seek praise among friends in the village, nor because I dislike the child's crying.
	James Legge	They will feel so, not as a ground on which they may gain the favour of the child's parents, nor as a ground on which they may seek the praise of their neighbours and friends, nor from a dislike to the reputation of having been unmoved by such a thing.
	Derk Bodde	This will not be as a way whereby to gain the favor of the child's parents, nor whereby they may seek the praise of their neighbors and friends, nor that they are so because they dislike the reputation (of being unvirtuous).
	D.C. Lau	He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child.

Example 1: "Those who possess these four beginnings but claim they cannot act virtuously are those who harm themselves; those who say their ruler cannot act virtuously are those who harm their ruler." is an example of an object-fronted sentence. The modern Chinese order for "自贼者也" would be "贼自者也," which means "to harm oneself." Here, "贼" is a word with a different meaning in ancient and modern contexts; in ancient usage, it means "to harm," whereas today, it refers to "a thief." James Legge translated it as "thief," which clearly shows a misunderstanding of the word's historical meaning. Legge treated it as a verb-object structure, Bodde used a subject-predicate structure, and Lau employed a non-verbal structure. Despite using different structures in English, all three translators converted the object-fronted sentence "自贼者也" into the modern Chinese order for translation.

Example 2: "It is not to form a connection with the child's parents, nor to seek praise among friends in the village, nor because I dislike the child's crying." is an adverbial-postposed sentence. The modern Chinese order for "内交于孺子之父母" would be "于孺子之父母内交," and for "要誉于乡党朋友," it would be "于乡党朋友要誉." All three translators treated these as verb-object structures, converting the adverbial-postposed sentences into the modern Chinese order before translating them.

These examples demonstrate that when translating classical Chinese, translators often rearrange the classical sentence structure into a modern Chinese sequence before translating. This approach makes the translation more accessible and avoids the need to explain unique structures like object-fronting and adverbial-postposing to foreign readers, making the text easier for Western readers to understand.

### 3.3. Translation of Rhetorical Structures

Since the dawn of language, rhetoric has been inseparable from it. Rhetoric highlights the essential characteristics of things, enhances the imagery of language, and makes writing concise and refined, with language rich in variety and humor. It evokes associations and makes the expression more vivid, distinct, and specific. The translation of rhetoric reflects the translator's grasp of the text. Rhetoric is the art of language and also serves as a test of the translator's skill, highlighting the translator's subjectivity.

Table 3: Sentence selection of rhetorical sentence in Mencius: Gong Sun Chou

Numble	Original text	
		From this perspective, one who lacks a heart of compassion is not human; one who lacks a sense of shame is not human; one who lacks a heart of modesty is not human; and one who lacks a sense of right and wrong is not human.
1	James Legge	From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man, that the feeling of shame and dislike is essential to man, that the feeling of modesty and complaisance is essential to man, and that the feeling of approving and disapproving is essential to man.
	Derk Bodde	From this case we may perceive that he who lacks the feeling of commiseration (ts'e yin ) is not a man; that he who lacks a feeling of shame and dislike(hiu wu) is not a man; that he who lacks a feeling of modesty and of yielding(tz'üjang) is not a man; and that he who lacks a sense of right and wrong(shi fei)is not a man.
	D.C. Lau	From this it can be seen that whoever is devoid of the heart of compassion is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of shame is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of courtesy and modesty is not human, and whoever is devoid of the heart of right and wrong is not human.

In the sentence "From this perspective, one who lacks a heart of compassion is not human; one who lacks a sense of shame is not human; one who lacks a heart of modesty is not human; and one who lacks a sense of right and wrong is not human." the phrase "非人也" is repeated multiple times, creating a rhetorical device known as repetition. Repetition involves the recurrence of the same words or sentences, requiring only two instances to be effective. The rhetorical effect of repetition emphasizes a particular idea or highlights a specific emotion, focusing on the repeated words or sentences. The translation of such rhetorical devices reflects the translator's subjectivity. James Legge, Derk Bodde, and D.C. Lau all recognized this rhetorical repetition and preserved it in their translations, respecting both the form and meaning of the original text.

However, Legge employed the reverse translation method, which involves translating a sentence in a way that follows the opposite order or expression of the original Chinese, not strictly adhering to the literal meaning. He translated it as "essential to man," which aligns better with English thinking and expression habits, making it sound more natural. In contrast, Bodde and Lau used the direct translation method, translating the sentence in a way that mirrors the original Chinese order and expression. This approach is more straightforward and easier to understand. Bodde translated it as "not a man," emphasizing humanity in general, while Lau translated it as "not human," focusing on human nature.

#### 4. Manifestation of Translator Subjectivity in the Translation strategies

Due to the different historical backgrounds in which the missionary James Legge, the foreign sinologist Derk Bodde, and the domestic sinologist D.C. Lau conducted their translations, their language styles and the translation strategies they adopted differ significantly. The variations

in translation strategies that lead to different translation styles also precisely reflect the subjectivity of the translators.

#### 4.1. James Legge: Literal Translation with Annotations, Strong Christian Influence

James Legge's primary purpose was missionary work; hence, he adopted a literal translation approach, with detailed annotations at the end of each section. His choice of words and sentence structure often reveals a strong Christian influence.

Example 1: "人皆有不忍人之心"

Legge's translation: "All men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others."

Annotation:

- 1) "不忍" alone is used in Bk. I. Pt. I. vii. 4,5,6.
- 2) "人" is added here because the discourse is entirely about a man's feelings as exercised towards other men.
- 3) "心," "the mind," embraces the whole mental constitution.

#### 4.2. Derk Bodde: Transliteration with Annotations, Highlighting Chinese Cultural Characteristics

As a foreign sinologist interested in Chinese culture, Derk Bodde was motivated by a desire to spread China's outstanding culture through the translation of classical texts. While he generally employed a literal translation strategy, he often used transliteration combined with annotations for terms that carried distinctive Chinese cultural significance, even including Chinese characters to facilitate the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture.

Example 1: "由是观之，无恻隐之心，非人也；无羞恶之心，非人也；无辞让之心，非人也；无是非之心，非人也。"

Bodde's translation: "From this case we may perceive that he who lacks the feeling of commiseration (ts'e yin 恻隐) is not a man; that he who lacks a feeling of shame and dislike (hiu wu 羞恶) is not a man; that he who lacks a feeling of modesty and of yielding (tz'ü jang 辞让) is not a man; and that he who lacks a sense of right and wrong (shi fei 是非) is not a man."

Example 2: "恻隐之心，仁之端也；羞恶之心，义之端也；辞让之心，礼之端也；是非之心，智之端也。"

Bodde's translation: "The feeling of commiseration is the beginning of human-heartedness (jen 仁). The feeling of shame and dislike is the beginning of righteousness (yi 义). The feeling of modesty and yielding is the beginning of propriety (li 礼). The sense of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom (chih 智)."

#### 4.3. D.C. Lau: Domestication and Conciseness, More Acceptable to Western Readers

As a domestic sinologist deeply influenced by Confucian culture, D.C. Lau aimed to responsibly disseminate China's outstanding traditional culture. With a shared cultural background and deeper cultural identity, domestic sinologists naturally face fewer challenges in cultural understanding and identification compared to foreign translators. Lau adopted a domestication translation strategy, localizing the source language to the target language, focusing on the expressions familiar to target language readers to convey the original content. Domestication aids readers in better understanding the translation, enhancing its readability and appreciation. Therefore, Lau's translations are more concise and more readily accepted by Western readers.

Example 1: "恻隐之心，仁之端也；羞恶之心，义之端也；辞让之心，礼之端也；是非之心，智之端也。"

Legge's translation\*\*: "The feeling of commiseration is the principle of benevolence. The feeling of shame and dislike is the principle of righteousness. The feeling of modesty and complaisance is the principle of propriety. The feeling of approving and disapproving is the principle of knowledge."

Bodde's translation\*\*: "The feeling of commiseration is the beginning of human-heartedness (jen 仁). The feeling of shame and dislike is the beginning of righteousness (yi 义). The feeling of modesty and yielding is the beginning of propriety (li 礼). The sense of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom (chih 智)."

Lau's translation\*\*: "The heart of compassion is the germ of benevolence; the heart of shame, of dutifulness; the heart of courtesy and modesty, of observance of the rites; the heart of right and wrong, of wisdom."

## 5. Conclusion

As one of the "Four Books," *The Mencius* is a crystallization of China's outstanding traditional culture. However, the domestic sinologists have been late to engage in its translation, with insufficient in-depth research. This paper selects passages from *The Mencius: Gong Sun Chou*, and conducts a comparative analysis of the subjectivity of three translators—missionary James Legge, foreign sinologist Derk Bodde, and domestic sinologist D.C. Lau—in their English translations. The study examines the manifestation of translator subjectivity in terms of cultural, linguistic, and translation strategy aspects, revealing that the translators' styles and strategies differ based on the influence of both subject and object. Due to differing cultural backgrounds, the degree of cultural identification varies, leading to distinct translation styles and strategies: Legge employed a literal translation with annotations, characterized by strong Christian influences; Bodde used a transliteration with annotations strategy, striving to introduce the authentic Chinese culture to the world; and Lau adopted a domestication strategy, aiming to promote Chinese culture globally.

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