



Who is James Legge?

James Legge (1815-1897) devoted his career to the study and interpretation of the life, works, and significance of Confucius. This subject was connected not only to his motivations for translating the canonical literature of Confucianism, but also to his interpretive standpoint during the production of his translations. Here some significant problems arise: Why did Legge's evaluation of Confucius alter so greatly in the second edition of his prolegomenon to "The Analects" (1893) in contrast to that of the first edition (1861)? Why was his attitude to Mencius so fundamentally positive and therefore different from his initially very critical assessment of Confucius? What positions were taken in these studies by Legge's contemporaries who were also sinologists during his lifetime? In addition, what did he think about the religious dimensions within Confucianism, which influenced his assessment of Confucius? Since James Legge lived in an age when European ideologies were being transformed dramatically, could this study help to explain some of the interpretive problems we encounter when pursuing contemporary studies of Confucius?

As the first professor of Sinology in Oxford, James Legge was the most influential person among early modern British Sinologists, and his understanding of Confucius has affected numerous thinkers in the English-speaking world. He lived in Hong Kong for about thirty years (1842-1873) and was considered to be a major representative of Anglo-Chinese cultural communication during 19th century.

Few people, however, have noticed the internal contradiction and complexity of Legge's understanding of Confucius. Despite the abrupt and surprising change manifested between the two editions of the Analects, the transformation of his attitude was formed during the lengthy periods of sinological research and underwent processes of interpretive confrontation and principled accommodation between his changing understandings of Confucianism and his own Protestant Christian Theology. Throughout the many years of his Sinological studies, the interpretive changes he expressed were significant, extensive and surprising; they arose both from his deepening understanding of Chinese Ruist ("Confucian") traditions as well as because of new theories and methodologies related to religious studies proposed during the latter decades of the 19th century. As a consequence, we need to identify the impact of these various new theories and the larger historical situation on different periods of James Legge's Sinological studies.