

***The Chinese Classics* and Three Chinese Assistants to James Legge—Wang Tao, Hong Rengan and Huang Sheng**

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Abstract: *The Chinese Classics* was not only the culmination of James Legge's own years of sinological research, but also the result of his collaborative research and translations with Chinese assistants Wang Tao (1828-1897), Hong Rengan (1822-1864), and Huang Sheng (Wong Shing, 1827-1902). The three Chinese assistants differed from each other in terms of their reasons and motives for assisting James in translation, their own mastery of the Confucian classics, and their attitudes toward and needs for Western learning. Wang Tao is James Legge's most competent assistant, who was familiar with the Chinese canon and who took volumes of translation notes. Wang Tao was a close personal friend of James Legge and they shared similar academic interests and worked well together. Hong Rengan's knowledge of Christianity and familiarity with the Confucian classics enabled him to perform well in his duties as a missionary assistant and Chinese language teacher well in Hong Kong. He studied Western politics, economics, history and geography etc., in order to develop his career in Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. As for his mastery of the English language and publishing, Huang Sheng made a special contribution to the dissemination of the *Chinese Classics*. In the nineteenth century, Chinese scholars and Western missionaries jointly undertook the mission of spreading Western learning from the East to the West in the context of the cultural collision between the East and the West. This paper attempts to present the roles of the Chinese assistants who helped James Legge translate the *Chinese Classics*, so as to provide a reference for presenting the real picture of Sino-foreign cultural exchanges in the mid- and late nineteenth century.

Keywords: James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, Chinese Assistant, Wang Tao, Hong Rengan, Huang Sheng

1. Introduction

On August 17, 1956, Yang Lien-Sheng (1914-1990) wrote a letter to Hu Shii (1891-1962) and mentioned the positive role of James Legge's Chinese assistants in helping him: "You mentioned the mistakes Arthur Waley made in his translation of *Lao Tzu*, I think most of them are due to the fact that he has no Chinese assistants, If only Waley had a Chinese assistant like James Legge, it would not be so easy for them to make such mistakes." [8]. This letter raises a good academic question: As for James Legge, who were his Chinese assistants and what did they do in the preparation and translation of *The Chinese Classics*?

According to reference books such as *The Chinese Classics*, *Wang Tao's Diary*, *Wang Tao's Commentary*, *Biography of James Legge*, *Hong Rengan's Selected Works*, etc., this paper states that James Legge's Chinese assistants consisted mainly of Wang Tao, Hong Rengan and Huang Sheng. The three of

them played different roles because of their different educational backgrounds, different periods of contact with Legge, different lengths of time, and different starting points and motives for assisting Legge in translating *The Chinese Classics*.

James Legge (1815-1897) was the first modern British missionary who systematically study and translate the ancient Chinese classics. From the time of his arrival in Malacca in 1839, James Legge realized that "it was only by familiarizing himself with the Chinese canon that he could be qualified for the office of pastor" [10]. However, he was soon disappointed to find that the available translations were "vulgar and inaccurate" [21], and they could not meet the needs of James Legge to learn the Confucian classics. During this period, James Legge himself was not yet proficient in Chinese, and could not

find a qualified Chinese language teacher, so he had to seek help from some Chinese students at the Anglo-Chinese College (Ying Wah College) in Malacca, mainly Liang Fa (1789-1855) and He Jinshan (1817-1871), who later became Chinese pastors in Hong Kong. In 1843, the Anglo-Chinese College moved to Hong Kong, where James Legge had the opportunity to meet his Chinese assistants Wang Tao, Hong Rengan and Huang Sheng, etc., who could systematically answer his questions about learning the Confucian classics and finally realize his ambition of translating the Chinese classics into English. *The Chinese Classics* were published in Hong Kong. According to such reference books as *Chinese Classics*, *Wang Tao's Diary*, *Wang Tao's Commentary*, *Biography of James Legge*, *Hong Rengan's Selected Works*, etc., this paper states that James Legge's Chinese assistants mainly consisted of Wang Tao, Hong Rengan and Huang Sheng. The three of them played different roles because of their different educational backgrounds, different contact times with Legge, different lengths of time, and different starting points and motives for assisting Legge in translating the *Chinese Classics*.

James Legge (1815-1897) was the first modern British missionary who systematically study and translate the ancient Chinese classics, and he was awarded the Prix Stanislas Julien Award for *the Chinese Classics*, which opened up a new era of Sinological studies. [9]. As early as his arrival in Malacca in 1839, James Legge realized that "only by familiarizing with the Chinese canon could he be qualified for the office of pastor." [10] However, he was soon disappointed to find that the translations available were "vulgar and inaccurate" [21], and they could not meet the needs of James Legge to learn the Confucian classics, and during this period, James Legge himself was not yet proficient in Chinese, and could not find a qualified Chinese language teacher, so he had to seek help from some Chinese students in Anglo-Chinese College (Ying Wah College) in Malacca, mainly they are Liang Fa (1789-1855) and He Jinshan (1817-1871), who later became Chinese pastors in Hong Kong. In 1843, the Anglo-Chinese College moved to Hong Kong, where James Legge had a chance to meet his Chinese assistants Wang Tao, Hong Rengan and Huang Sheng, etc., who could systematically answer his questions about learning the Confucian classics and finally realize his ambition of translating the Chinese classics into English. *The Chinese Classics* were published in Hong Kong from 1861 to 1872, thus completing James Legge's transition from a missionary to a scholar.[6] The translation and publication of the *Chinese Classics* was the culmination of decades of Sinological research by James Legge and his Chinese assistants. The Chinese assistants helped a great deal in the collection of reference books, the detailed interpretation of the translation, the verification, the evidence, and the typesetting. James Legge could not have done it without the help of his Chinese assistants, each of whom is described below.

2. Wang Tao: A Competent Assistant



Figure 1. Wang Tao (1828-1897).

Wang Tao was a modern Chinese reformer and thinker. His life was rich in experience, complexity and diversity of thought, and he contributed to many fields such as education, society, and journalism, etc. In 1862, Wang Tao was wanted by the Qing government and went into exile in Hong Kong, where he was mainly responsible for translating Chinese Classics and the founding of the journal *Circular Times* [5]. It was in Hong Kong that Wang Tao began his long career as an assistant, becoming James Legge's most famous Chinese assistant and embarking on one of the most famous collaborative translation journeys of the nineteenth century. Wang Tao's role as James Legge's Chinese assistant is characterized by the following features:

First, Wang Tao was forced by the times to become James Legge's assistant. Wang Tao's attitude toward Western missionaries was complicated. Since 1849, when he came into contact with them in Shanghai, on the one hand, he got along well with them and was well paid, but on the other hand, he "explained his motives for his behavior to outsiders [...] only in connection with considerations of the economic situation." "At that time, people like Wang Tao who "sold their professional writing to foreigners were still regarded with suspicion and contempt by their compatriots." [13]. The cause of this ambivalence was most likely that he still harbored illusions about the imperial examination system, and he agreed with and adhered to the Confucian ideal of "cultivating one's moral character, aligning one's family, ruling the country and leveling the world". [3] In the mid-19th century, it was still the proper way for intellectuals to enter the civil service through the imperial examinations, which is also illustrated by the study experience of Rong Hong (1928-1912), an intellectual who lived at the same time as Wang Tao. As a teenager, Rong Hong studied in a church school with few Chinese students, and "the wealthier people were not willing to send their children to Western schools because they could not take the Imperial Examination, and thus they could not become prominent officials." [14].

If Wang Tao's work as a missionary at the the London Missionary Society Press (1843-1866) in Shanghai was a means of earning a living, his political exile to Hong Kong, where he lived in the church and assisted James Legge in translating the classical Chinese texts was a choice forced by the times and was his last resort. Wang Tao once recalled: "The government authorities wanted me, I was angry and frustrated. I was in a hurry to return to Shanghai, but after waiting for a long time, the matter was not over, so I had no choice but to take a boat to Guangzhou and then to Hong

Kong.” [18]. In October 1862, under the auspices of the London Missionary Society, Wang Tao traveled to Hong Kong and was hired by James Legge, beginning a years-long career as his intellectual assistant.

Wang Tao recorded this experience in his diary in 1862, “On August 11, Walter Henry Medhurst came to Hong Kong and invited me to go there at once”. Arriving in Hong Kong a few days later, Wang Tao immediately went to see James Legge: “Arriving in Hong Kong on the October 8, I hired a porter to carry my luggage to the Anglo-Chinese College in Central Road, where I met Mr. Legge.” [17].

It should be noted here that although initially Wang Tao’s exile in Hong Kong to help Legge translate books was initially a choice of “last resort”, through the contact with Legge the two men appreciated each other and developed a deep mutual respect, and more importantly, after many years of living in Hong Kong and two years of traveling in Europe, Wang Tao was already as concerned about the country and the people as Wei Yuan (1794-1857) was, and the idea of reformism had gradually taken shape. [21]. This was perhaps an unforeseen result of Wang Tao’s initial exile in Hong Kong, where he had no choice but to become the Chinese assistant to the Western missionaries.

Second, Wang Tao was James Legge’s competent Chinese assistant who made great efforts to help James Legge with his translation. Although Wang Tao was exiled to Hong Kong and had no choice but to become James Legge’s assistant, he made every effort to help James Legge translate the Chinese classics. There are two reasons for this. The first was to repay James Legge for his kindness in taking him in. As a literati, Wang Tao was suddenly wanted by the government, and one can imagine his fear. After the incident, the pastor of the London Missionary Society Press wrote a letter to the director of the Anglo-Chinese College in Hong Kong, Mr. James Legge, asking him to take Wang Tao in.” [21]. The second reason was Wang Tao’s admiration for James Legge. Already in Shanghai, Wang Tao was introduced to James Legge by Walter Henry Medhurst, the pastor of the London Missionary Society Press in Shanghai, and he “expressed his deep admiration for James’s learning and his dedication to translating Chinese masterpieces.” [21]. The numerous journals written by Wang Tao after his arrival in Hong Kong to study the Confucian classics are the most direct and strongest evidence of his heartfelt help in James Legge’s translation career. When Wang Tao came to Hong Kong in 1862, Volumes I and II of the *Chinese Classics* had already been published, so Wang Tao mainly helped James Legge to translate and publish Volumes III, IV, and V of the *Chinese Classics*. Wang Tao first helped James Legge to translate the *The Book of History and the Bamboo Annals*, for which he wrote the 24 volumes of explanatory notes to *Huang Qing Jing Jie*¹; Second, Wang Tao helped James Legge translate *She King; or the Book of Ancient Poetry*, for which he wrote the 30 -volume explanatory notebooks called *Mao Shi Ji Shi*. Wang Tao once recalled: “I had to sail to Guangzhou and then to Hong Kong. Here, he concentrated on his studies *Mao Shi Ji Shi* [18]. These notes written by Wang Tao, “were not published, but Legge often

referred to them when translating the *She Kin*, which made the translation much faster.” [21]. Wang Tao then helped James Legge to translate the *Ch’un Ts’ew, with the Tso Chuen*. Wang Tao studied those *books*, especially the *Ch’un Ts’ew*, very deeply, and spent a lot of time and effort writing the 60 volumes of notes on the *Ch’un Ts’ew*, which was “a great help in the accurate and comprehensive translation of the the book.” [21]. James Legge said of Wang Tao: “The scholar [...] worked with enthusiasm, explaining or arguing for me from time to time [...]” [10]. Wang Tao gradually became an indispensable Chinese assistant to James Legge in his translations, so much so that when James returned home at the end of his ministry in 1867, he invited Wang Tao to accompany him to England to continue to assist him in his translations.ⁱⁱ

Third, Wang Tao is the most qualified and integral Chinese assistant of James Legge, and his qualifications are mainly reflected in the following three aspects. First, Wang Tao was familiar with the Chinese canon. Wang Tao had been educated in the traditional scriptures since childhood, and he was familiar with the Confucian classics, having passed the Imperial Examination (Grand Test) as a Xiucai (scholar) and having served as a teacher in a private school. The large number of translation notes written by Wang Tao is a strong proof of his profound knowledge of the classics. Second, Wang Tao had helped Rev. Walter Henry Medhurst (1796-1857) translate the *New Testament* in Shanghai, and “his translations were beautifully written, and the meaning of the words was clear.” [21]. This shows that Wang Tao already had some experience in translation. American Sinologist Paul A. Cohen commented that “Wang Tao had played a key role in the transmission of the Western Tao to China [...] He played an equally important role in the transmission of the Chinese Tao to the West.” [13].

Furthermore, Wang Tao had a rich book collection and was the most competent Chinese assistant to James Legge. Legge’s collection of books did not fully satisfy Wang Tao’s need to write notebooks. The bibliography books that Wang Tao sent to Hong Kong, which are recorded in Wang Tao’s diary, provide tangible evidence of Wang Tao’s scholarly dealings with James Legge. [12].

Fourth, Wang Tao was a close personal friend of James Legge. The interaction between the two men can be understood on three levels in chronological order. On the first level, during their stay in Hong Kong from 1862 to 1867, the two men shared similar academic interests and worked well together. “It was probably the collaboration with the extremely gifted missionary sinologist Legge, more than any other factor, that enabled Wang Tao to endure life in Hong Kong.” [13]. Legge, on the other hand, says of Wang Tao, “He not only helps me with my work, but he also brings me joy in the midst of all the hard work.” [10]. On the second level, Wang Tao and James Legge traveled together to Europe together, and in 1867, “Legge returned to his country on business, and on his way home, he asked me to go to England to assist in the collection of books. In the winter of 1867, he wrote to invite me, and I went.” [16]. Wang Tao recorded his

sights and sounds in Europe in his travel notebook *Man You Sui Lu*. Wang Tao stayed at Legge's house in Scotland for two years and helped him in continue his translations, translating *the Spring and Autumn Annals, the Book of Changes, and the Book of Rites*. At the same time, they traveled together to see places of interest, churches, hospitals, factories, in London and Scotland, Wang Tao was invited to give lectures at Oxford University and other places, for which James Legge briefly translated. During this time, Wang Tao got along well with Legge's family, as he documented several times in his travel note *Man You Sui Lu*. about Legge's daughter Mary Legge.

Wang Tao came to Hong Kong and became the indispensable Chinese assistant of James Legge in 1862. Before Wang Tao came to Hong Kong, who played the role of James' Chinese assistant? In the author's opinion, Hong Rengan and Huang Sheng served as James Legge's Chinese assistants during the preparation, translation and publication of *The Chinese Classics* (Volumd I &II) from 1855 to 1862.

3. Hong Rengan: Obsessed with Western Studies

Hong Rengan (1822-1864), a king of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. During his refuge in Hong Kong from 1854-1858, he befriended James Legge and became his missionary assistant and translator. Compared with Wang Tao, Hong Rengan's experience of becoming James Legge's translation assistant has similarities and fundamental differences. The following is a comparison of Hong Rengan's experience as James Legge's Chinese assistant with that of Wang Tao.

First, Hong Rengan and Wang Tao came to Hong Kong for similar reasons and with similar educational backgrounds. Like Wang Tao, Hong Rengan was James Legge's Chinese assistant because he took refuge in Hong Kong. Hong Rengan fled to Hong Kong three times because he was wanted by the Qing government: In April 1852, Hong Rengan fled to Hong Kong for the first time and stayed with the Swedish missionary Rev. Theodore Hamberg; but "when Rev. Theodore Hamberg went to preach, Hong Rengan was alone and had a hard time making ends meet, and ventured back to Dongguan County, Guangdong Province, to hide with a friend. Later, due to the serious political situation, he fled to Hong Kong again." [2]. In November 1853, Hong Rengan returned to Rev. Theodore Hamberg. In the spring of 1854, with the financial support of Rev. Theodore Hamberg, Hong Rengan sneaked back to Shanghai, but failed to find an opportunity to meet with Hong Xiuquan and was forced to return to Hong Kong again in the winter of 1854. "Returning to Hong Kong from Shanghai, Hong Rengan was appointed by Rev. James Legge, on the recommendation of Rev. Walter Henry Medhurst, as a missionary of the London Missionary Society, specializing in church evangelism and teaching Rev. John Chalmers (1825-1899)." [11]. Hong Rengan was employed by the London Missionary Society, "He began as a Chinese teacher for Rev. John Chalmers, and soon became extensively involved in various missionary activities. Hong Rengan also

became an academic assistant to James Legge. As James Legge became more proficient in the Chinese language, he developed an extensive program to translate a series of Chinese Confucian texts into English. Thus Hong Rengan, who had been familiar with the Chinese Confucian texts since childhood, was invited to assist Legge in his translation efforts, and became James Legge's Chinese assistant in the translation and interpretation of the Chinese texts. [19]. From 1854 to 1858, Hong Rengan was a minister of the Christian Church in Hong Kong and taught Chinese language to foreign ministers. His four years in Hong Kong were a crucial time for James Lee to prepare his translation of the *Chinese Classics*. Hong Rengan once recalled his association with missionaries in Hongkong: "I said goodbye to my colleagues and moved to Hong Kong, where I lectured for four years with Rev. James Legge and John Chalmers." [7]

During Hong Rengan's tenure as pastor and Chinese language teacher at the Anglo-Chinese College in Hong Kong, "it did not take long for him to gain the trust and respect of the members of the congregation as well as the Chinese congregation, the reason for this being partly due to his special status, "knowing that he was the brother of the King of Taiping Tian Guo (Ti Ping Tien Kwoh), the foreigners treated him differently. [7]. But more importantly, "his literary achievements were also admired. His kind and affectionate nature and open-mindedness were rare among the Chinese." [1].

Hong Rengan's knowledge of Christianity and his familiarity with the Confucian classics enabled him to fulfill his duties as a missionary assistant and Chinese language teacher well in Hong Kong. Hong Rengan recalled that "James Legge, John Chalmers (1825-1899), William Charles Milne (1815-1863), Rev. George Piercy (1829-1913), William Muirhead (1822-1900), Joseph Edkins (1823-1905) were all good friends of mine." [7]. Secondly, the motivation for their mission to assist James Legge's translation is different. Unlike Wang Tao, Hong Rengan was not willing to be an assistant to the Western missionaries. He always thought of the great cause of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, and twice he dared to sneak back to the mainland from Hong Kong in an attempt to meet with Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864), but both times he failed.

When he was forced to return to Hong Kong for the third time in 1854, he wanted to "learn the skills to assist Hong Xiuquan in the future, and so he taught in a foreigner's house in Hong Kong, learned astronomy, geography, calendars, and medicine, and knew everything." [7]. It can be inferred that although Hong Rengan was well versed in the Chinese classical Confucius texts and qualified to assist James in the translation of the *Chinese classics*, Hong Rengan only did his duty by assisting James in the translation because he did not want to do so. In this respect, he was very different from Wang Tao, who made great efforts to assist Jacob in his translation. While assisting James Legge in translation, Hong Rengan devoted himself to Western studies. "Through his work, Hong Rengan studied Western politics, economics, history, geography, astronomy, calendars, mechanics, and

other sciences, and his knowledge improved greatly, thanks to Rev. James Legge's collection of books and his generosity in lending them." [11]. The position of pastor gave him the opportunity to study Western learning. The missionaries not only directly provided Hong Rengan directly with knowledge of Western studies, but also provided him with a stable teaching position, which gave him the opportunity to observe Hong Kong society at first hand and to feel deeply the drastic changes brought to Hong Kong by Western culture [...]" [15].

Hong Rengan indirectly helped James Legge in the preparation of the translation, and "other missionaries who assisted in the translation at that time were John Chalmers, Benjamin Hobson, Josiah Cox, etc." [21].

4. Huang Sheng: An Assistant to the Typography



Figure 2. Huang Sheng (1827-1902).

Huang Sheng was one of the first foreign students in China in the 1840s. In 1848, after a year's stay in the United States, he returned to China due to illness and was employed as a printer in the printing office of the Anglo-Chinese College in Hong Kong. He also assisted James Legge in translating the Bible and the Four Books into English. Compared to Wang Tao and Hong Rengan, Huang Sheng's strengths were his knowledge of English and publishing. In his early years, Huang Sheng studied at the Morrison Memorial Schools in Macao and Hong Kong and he also spent two years at Monson Academy in Massachusetts. Seven years of Western education and more than a year of study in the United States laid the foundation for his English and modern Western knowledge, which made him the first Chinese member of a Hong Kong court jury. [20] When the *Chinese Classics* were printed in 1861, James Legge thanked Huang Sheng in his preface, praising him for his "mastery of the English language." [22].

Although Huang Sheng did not write as many notes as Wang Tao to assist James Legge in his translation, he made a special contribution to the dissemination of *The Chinese Classics*. James Legge's translation of the Chinese Confucius texts is the standard translation, not only for its accuracy of content, but also for its typographical strengths. The format of the text of *Chinese Classics* is that the original Chinese text is at the top, the translation is in the middle, and the commentary is at the bottom. Each chapter

of the original text is divided into several sections, and the translation and commentary follow, making it clear and easy to review. "With such a layout, one can imagine that a lot of hard work has gone into it. As for the typesetting and printing, Huang Sheng had put a lot of effort into it." [4]. At the Anglo-Chinese College, according to James Legge's introduction, Huang Sheng met Wang Tao, and the two of them translated *Huo Qi Lue Shuo (Introductory to Treatise on Firearms)* in 1862, to spread the knowledge of Western weapons. By that time, Hong Rengan had long returned to Nanjing to become a king of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and carry out his reforms.

5. Conclusion

In modern China, as Western knowledge spreads to the East, Chinese culture also spreads to the West, and cultural exchange goes both ways. *The Chinese Classics* by James Legge, with the help of his assistants, is a good example of the Western transmission of Chinese culture. Wang Tao, Hong Rengan, and Huang Sheng, three of their peers, came to the Anglo-Chinese College at different times and for different reasons, either for a short period of time or for permanent residence, and all of them acted as Chinese assistants to James Legge in his translation of Chinese classic texts, and played different roles in promoting the spread of Chinese culture to the West; at the same time, they all used their knowledge of Western culture in Hong Kong and became trendsetters of the times. Wang Tao lived in exile in Hong Kong, had a profound knowledge of the classics, wrote volumes of notes, assisted in the translation of *the Chinese Classics* (Volumes III, IV, and V), and he traveled in Europe, and advocated for social reform. Hong Rengan took refuge in Hong Kong and served as Legge's missionary and translation assistant. He has a better foundation in Scripture, but his ambition is not to do so. He did his part to help James Legge's early translations to prepare for the work, he was keen to draw on Western learning to change the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom; Huang Sheng, who had been educated in Western studies since childhood and was proficient in English, assisted James Legge in the preparation of *The Chinese Classics* (Volumes I and II), and made great efforts to optimize the typesetting of *The Chinese Classics*, and collaborate with Wang Tao in translating books and running a newspaper to disseminate Western studies.

The purpose of studying the contributions of James Legge's Chinese assistants to *Chinese Classics* is twofold: first, it is dedicated to constructing a real picture of Sino-foreign cultural exchanges in the mid- to late 19th century; second, it may be possible to connect their network of relationship by using the node that they were both James Legge's Chinese assistants, which may provide a new perspective for the understanding of the process of the gradual development of Western studies and the spread of Western studies in the mid- to late 19th century.

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i *Huang Qing Jing Jie* contains one hundred and eighty-eight kinds of books, all 1,400 volumes. It is a comprehensive summary of Qianjia scholarship, summarizing the great achievements of Confucian scripture and sutra interpretation. The author was Ruan Yuan (1764 - 1849). Wang Tao's notes on these books, mostly in manuscript and unpublished, are now in the National Library of the City of New York, USA.

ii Wang Tao left Hong Kong for Europe in December 1867 and returned to Hong Kong in March 1870.