



# Norms and Motivation: A Descriptive Study of the English Translations of the Confucian Classic *The Great Learning*

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**Abstract.** With the theory of descriptive translation studies and translation norms, this paper makes a descriptive comparative study of the English version of *The Great Learning* by James Legge (1815–1897) and Gu Hongming (1857–1928) from three aspects: translation motivation, translator strategies and translation evaluation. From the dimensions of east and west cultures and constraints of different norms, this paper analyzes the major differences between the translators and translated texts, and discusses the descriptive translation research model of the English translation of Chinese classics.

**Keywords:** *The Great Learning* · descriptive study · translation · norm · motivation

## 1 Introduction

As one of the important classics of the four Confucian books, *The Great Learning* carries Chinese people's traditional way of dealing with things. Cheng Hao (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi (1033–1107) in Northern Song dynasty regarded it the door for beginners to learn morality. The core ideas, i.e. the three principles and eight guides for a learner, in *The Great Learning* also have a positive significance at present.

It has been several centuries since *The Great Learning* was translated and introduced abroad. However, through data collection, there are few descriptive studies taking the English translation of *The Great Learning* as a case, which is worth further exploring. Through a preliminary comparison of James Legge's and Gu Hongming's English versions, we can find that the two English versions are quite different in style, but why does this difference occur in the text and outside the text, and how does it appear in detail? This requires further investigation and analysis in a broader cultural perspective through theoretical tools.

Based on the translation norm theory proposed by Gideon Toury, Andrew Chesterman and other scholars, this paper comprehensively explores the motivation of translators, translator's strategies and translation evaluation.

## 2 *The Great Learning* and Its Overseas Spread

Zhu Xi (1130–1200), a great scholar in the Song Dynasty (960–1279), listed *The Great Learning* separately from the *Book of Rites*, and incorporated it into the *Four Books Collection*. *The Great Learning* was therefore ranked first among the four books. Zhu Xi (1983) emphasizes that *The Great Learning* occupies an important position in Confucianism [1]. Its translation and introduction to foreign countries also started early. In the initial stage, before the 19th century, it was translated into Latin and French by Jesuits who came to China. Later, many western missionaries translated it into English. In addition to the translations of James Legge (1861) and Gu Hongming (1915), there were other editions translated mainly by Robert Morrison (1812), the first Protestant missionary sent to China by Britain, Joshua Marshman (1814), another English missionary, and Chinese scholar Lin Yutang (1938).

James Legge (1815–1897), a British missionary, was the dean of the Anglo-Chinese College. His English translation of the thirteen classics of Confucianism had an important impact on the spread of Chinese culture in the western society. The translation was regarded in large part as a model for a long time. His translation was based on a detailed review of the Chinese version and annotations, which could be observed through the textual notes and paratext of *The Great Learning*, such as the discussion on the history, authorship, scope and value of the text [2].

Gu Hongming (1857–1928), a scholar in the Qing Dynasty, was proficient in western languages and tried his best, in his later years, to safeguard the Confucian classics. His English translation was intended to publicize China's traditional culture to the West. After a long-time preparation, Gu's translation of *The Great Learning* was completed on the basis of criticizing and pointing out the defects of James Legge's English translation. The time of publication was after his English translation of *The Analects of Confucius* (1898) and *The Doctrine of the Mean* (1906). The translation consists of two parts, namely, a brief introduction and an English translation of *The Great Learning*. This version was finally published after several revisions, bearing Gu's relatively mature view on the translation of ancient Chinese texts. The cross-cultural perspective between Chinese and Western cultures presented in Gu's translation is unique.

## 3 Theoretical Framework

The Israeli scholar Gideon Toury (1942–2016) continued the descriptive translation studies within the general framework put forward by James Holmes, the “founder” of the Translation Studies School [3]. Toury's research not only followed Itamar Even-Zohar's theory of polysystems, but also developed the descriptive translation theory. He put forward some important concepts about norms, namely, what is translation, why translators act, and regularity and laws of translation [4].

Toury regards translation as “facts of target cultures” and points out that translation is a “norm-governed activity”. The paradigm of empirical description advocated by Toury and other scholars has exerted great influence in the academic field of translation studies. On the importance of descriptive research, Zhu Zhiyu pointed out that descriptive study pays attention to objectivity, rationality, analysis and experience and description

is an important means for us to obtain true knowledge [5]. As for the concept of norm, Toury borrowed the concept of norm in the field of sociology, that is, norm refers to the transformation of universal values or views (no matter right or wrong) in society, and norms can guide implementation activities and apply to specific situations [6]. In Toury's view, all translation behaviors are related to norms, such as translation material selection, translation strategies and specific translation behaviors. It can be seen that the study of translation products needs to be done from a broader perspective rather than only focusing on the translated text itself.

## 4 Analysis of Translations of *The Great Learning*

### 4.1 Translation Motivation

Toury proposed the concept of "preliminary norms", including translation policy and directness. The former restricts the translator's choice of text type, while the latter concerns the origin of the source text and whether indirect translation is involved. We will discuss the translator's motivation from the perspective of cultural communication, and observes the translator's behavior at the macro level such as material selection, direct and indirect translation from the perspective of specific historical, social and cultural backgrounds.

The social and historical background of Legge's translation of *The Great Learning* and the *Four Books* is closely related to his missionary activities. Firstly, James Legge referred the achievements of the missionary work of Robert Morrison (1782–1834), the first missionary sent by Britain to China, who compiled the first bilingual Chinese-English Dictionary, translated the Bible into Chinese, and founded the Anglo-Chinese College in 1818 to cultivate Chinese people to spread the gospel. Thus, James Legge continued this missionary policy. The Anglo-Chinese College was later moved from Malacca to Hong Kong, and its scale was expanded under Legge's coordination. Moreover, while engaging in teaching, Legge successively translated Chinese classics. Under the restriction of such norms, the purpose of Legge's translation and introduction of Chinese classics is to understand and spread Chinese moral philosophy, behavior pattern, thinking and beliefs to more missionaries and the western world, so as to better preach.

In contrast, Gu Hongming's translation of Confucian classics in the late Qing dynasty was quite different. Gu grew up in the western cultural environment, and he could skillfully use English, French, German, Latin and other languages. He studied western literature, history, and philosophy, and translated *The Great Learning* from the standpoint of presenting real Confucianism to the West. Based on his multilingual competence, Gu's translation incorporated more western allusions, ideas and cases in target culture, such as Goethe, Montesquieu and other thoughts on study motivation, religious piety, etc. This was a research path of comparative culture and literature.

Under the historical background of the late Qing dynasty, when the society was in turmoil, Gu expressed his concern for the country and the people by publishing many English papers and translating the *Analects of Confucius* and the *Doctrine of the Mean* into English, which were later included in the *Collected Works of Gu Hongming*. Gu regarded himself as a person who cares much about China's good governance order and real civilization [7]. In addition, Gu pointed out that the purpose of his translation is to

provide better translations for educated people in the west who are really and sincerely interested in Chinese education, so as to deepen foreigners' understanding of Chinese thoughts and achieve a deeper understanding [8].

## 4.2 Translation Strategy

Under the influence of the initial norms, different translators prefer to be close to either the source text or the target language in the specific translation process. Translation norms lead to different choices, and the translation strategies adopted by translators could be quite different.

From the rich footnotes in Legge's English translation, one of the purposes of his translation is to express the connotation of Chinese cultural classics in detail to western readers, especially those with certain oriental knowledge. For example, when introducing the text history of *The Great Learning*, Legge pointed out that the compilation of the Book of Rites was completed by Dai De and Dai Sheng, who were famous Confucian scholars in the Western Han Dynasty. Dai De compiled the original 200 articles of the Book of Rites into 89, while Dai Sheng further compiled them into 46. Legge mentioned that in about the second century, Ma Rong, the Confucian scholar, added three articles, including The Great Learning. Thus, the Book of Rites has a total of 49 articles, without any increase or decrease afterwards. Legge listed the Chinese names of "Tai Teh (Dai De)" and "Tai Shang (Dai Sheng)" in the English translation in the footnote, and added that Tai Shang was "a second nephew" of Tai Teh. In the process of translation, under the influence of norms, numerous annotations also reflected Legge's translation strategy of making effort to be detailed and accurate. The translation is centered on approaching closely to the source text.

In Gu's translation, the expression "to abide in the highest excellence" is used to explain one of the important Confucian principles "*zhiyu zhishan* (aim at absolute perfection)". Besides, Gu quoted Matthew Arnold, a professor of poetics at Oxford University in the United Kingdom, emphasizing, in a footnote, that culture does not originate from "curiosity", but from the "love of perfection", and culture is "the study of perfection". Gu tried to guide western readers to understand the "highest good" in The Great Learning through a comparative way.

It can be seen that under the restriction of different initial norms, Gu incorporated the words of western authoritative scholars to compare with the connotation of Chinese traditional culture. When translating, Gu considered the understanding of target readers, so he was more inclined to consider the reception of translation in the target culture, that is, "acceptability" in Toury's translation theory, and "expectancy norms" in Chesterman's. While, Legge is committed to accurately understanding the deep meaning of the source language text, so as to bring the content of the source text to the audience, i.e. the adequacy of the translation. It can also be summarized that translation is affected by the "relationship norms" in the professional norms, and strives to achieve the similarity between the translation and the original text [9].

### 4.3 Evaluation of Translation

The operational norms restrict the translator's translation behavior decisions and affect the translation effects, such as the word, sentence, text structure and fullness of translation. Both Legge and Gu chose the Chinese source text of Zhu Xi's Collected Annotations on the Chapters of the Great Learning. The ST is the same and the translations are complete, but there are differences in the presentation of the translations. In *The Chinese Classics*, Legge made rich notes and commentaries on The Great Learning and other four Confucian books, introducing the historical version, author, value, influence and other external backgrounds of the source text. Legge also integrated his own understanding into a large number of footnotes, which made the structure more complete. The vertical arrangement of Chinese characters was in line with the social and cultural tradition at that time, and also helped more missionaries to read and understand Chinese characters and Chinese culture through this parallel bilingual version. By contrast, the introduction part of Gu's translation of The Great Learning only briefly introduces the translation purpose and text structure of the translation, and does not give too much information about its historical background, and does not add a supplementary interpretation of Chinese characters to the translation.

According to Toury, the translation form, position and degree of change of the translated text are subject to the "matricial norms". At the micro level, the selection of specific language materials for translation is restricted by "textual linguistic norms". Legge's translation is annotated with many Chinese characters and some related knowledge of ancient Chinese characters. While, the translation and introduction of western culture in Gu's translation is unique. For example, the phrase "*Chengyi* (sincerity)" is rendered into "getting true idea", and the meaning of it is explained by the phrase "know yourself" of western philosopher Socrates, so as to compare the cultural images to strengthen English readers' understanding.

In terms of personal pronouns, the frequency of the use of the third person plural, the total number of "they", "them" and "their" were counted. Their number in Legge's translation was 80 times, significantly higher than that of Gu's 57 times. In the translation, Gu usually uses the third person singular "he" or "his". From the perspective of narrative technique and expression effect, the third person plural form avoids the neglect of women in terms of gender, and also shows that the translator intended to cover a broad target audience, not only teaching one person the way of learning and dealing with the world.

The choice of vocabulary reflects the translator's translation thoughts. Legge's translation takes the interpretation of the original meaning of Chinese as the starting point and his translation is plain and concise. Gu tries his best to consider the readers' ability of understanding, and his translation is easy to understand, among which Gu uses expressions related western culture and civilization, such as "enlightenment and civilization" to express "manifesting virtue (*Ming mingde*)", "government in country" to translate "state (*Guo*)", "Conversation alright" to express "self-cultivation (*Xiu shen*)" and "systematic study of things" to render "investigating things (*Ge wu*)". By comparison, we can find that Legge used widely the skill of literal translation, while Gu applied free translation, for example, the Chinese characters Xin, Yi, Guo, Tianxia were translated into "heart, thought, state, kingdom" by Legge, and into "mind, true idea, government, world" by Gu. The above expression effects have different influences on readers of different times and

cultural identities. Under the restriction of specific translation norms, the two translators create different translation effects.

## 5 Discussion

At the early phase of sinology studies, most western scholars, including missionaries, could hardly fully understand the essence of traditional Chinese thoughts. Later, they found that the Confucian classical culture had a profound impact on Chinese society and scholars. Thus, to better understand China required a group of literati to carry out the translation activities, especially on the the translations of Chinese classics. While studying these translation facts, more aspects need to be investigated. Translation, as a part of the intercultural exchange of ideas, needs to be studied in a specific historical period, including the translators, the translator groups and their cultural background [10].

Undoubtedly, Legge's translation and introduction promoted the Chinese culture to travel overseas in the early period. Gu's translation and explanation provided different perspectives for the western world to understand Chinese traditional culture, especially from a comparative perspective.

The study of translation activities is carried out from the perspective of norms under the framework of descriptive study, involving a broader category of cultural studies. Translation studies not only focus on the translation at the linguistic level, but also make a broader cultural study of the information variation, cultural distortion and other phenomena in the process of cross-cultural communication.

The texts were spread to heterogeneous cultures through translation, and more could be done to explore the reasons for its production, transmission and impact. By studying and applying the translation description model, we can form a deeper understanding of translation activities in specific historical backgrounds, which is of great academic significance. For example, Wen Jun pointed out in the descriptive research model of English translation of Chinese poetry that when the number of descriptions reaches a certain level, the English translation of Chinese ancient poetry in a certain period can be comprehensively summarized [11].

## 6 Conclusion

This paper, based on cultural interpretation and text translation, examines the case of the English translation of *The Great Learning* among the translation of ancient Chinese books, and tries to propose a descriptive translation model. It makes a comparative study from the perspective of translation motivation, translator strategies and translation evaluation, and explores the variation and cultural filtering generated in cultural exchanges, and provide different ideas for the future translation of ancient books and records with an empirical research approach. Beside, paratexts of both original and translated works need to be further studied to better understand the translators' subjectivity and the "key differences" [12] of translations. Due to the wide scope of ancient Chinese books and texts, one research model cannot become satisfied once and for all, and the above model needs to be further improved and revised.

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