

Network Construction of Translation and Dissemination Process of James Legge's *Shijing* from Actor Network Theory Perspective

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Abstract

This study employs the three core concepts “actor, network, and translation” of Actor-Network Theory, alongside the four phases of translation (problematization, interessement, enrollment, and mobilization) to investigate the key actors and their interconnections within James Legge's translation and dissemination network of *Shijing*. The findings indicate that Legge, functioning through multiple identities, acted as both the initiator of the translation project and the principal agent in forming alliances among actors. While the translator's subjectivity was dynamically exercised throughout the process, it operated under constraints imposed by other actors. Additionally, the research highlights the collaborative role of non-human actors alongside human participants in shaping the translation and dissemination dynamics of Legge's versions. This analysis underscores the hybrid agency inherent in cross-cultural translation networks under ANT frameworks.

Keywords

Actor-Network Theory, James Legge, *Shijing*, Translation and Dissemination Process, Network Construction.

1. Introduction

As one of the canonical texts in Chinese cultural heritage, *Shijing* has been revered as a national treasure in China while attracting increasing scholarly attention from Western academia since the Age of Exploration. The three times translation practices (1871, 1876, 1879) of James Legge, a 19th-century sinologist, in rendering *Shijing* into English not only constitute a milestone in Sino-Western hermeneutic exchanges but also illuminate the dynamic complexity inherent in constructing cross-cultural epistemic networks.

As a missionary-scholar, Legge's translational endeavors were embedded within an intricate web of multiple actors: On one hand, his interpretative framework was shaped by the coalescence of late Qing exegetical traditions (particularly Zhu Xi's commentary system), Victorian academic paradigms, and Christian theological presuppositions; On the other hand, the iterative evolution of his translations, from prose-form literalism to metrical reconstruction and ultimately theological recontextualization, reveals how material mediators (such as annotation systems, poetic forms, publishing programs) and non-human actors (such as the editorial apparatus of *The Sacred Books of the East series*) exerted sustained intervention in translational strategies. While existing scholarship like Tan[1], Mary[2], Moratto&Xu[3] predominantly focuses on poetic interpretation, linguistic comparison, and case studies of Legge's *Shijing* renditions, there remains a critical gap in systematically revealing how human and non-human collaborative networks drive textual production and comprehensively examining Legge's *Shijing* translation and dissemination process. The Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and its redefinition of “translation”—particularly its dynamic mapping of heterogeneous actors' associations, controversies, and negotiations—provide methodological insights for re-

examining Legge's translational practices. This study proposes to reconstruct the network of Legge's *Shijing* translation and transmission guided by ANT principles, investigating the interactive relationships between the translator, other human actors and non-human actors. Such an approach aims to offer novel perspectives for advancing research on the global dissemination of Chinese classics.

2. Theoretical Framework: Actor-Network Theory

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is a sociological theory proposed by French sociologists Bruno Latour and Michel Callon in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It proposed by Latour primarily consists of three core concepts, including "actor", "network", and "translation". An "actor" refers to any human or non-human entity that takes action or is affected during the intervention in others' actions [4]. The "network" denotes a star-shaped configuration formed through a series of actions, comprising dynamic traces left by countless agential actors during interactive connections [5]. The process of forming such networks is termed "translation", which serves to trace research and work processes. It functions as a method through which actors recruit others, binding humans and non-humans together to reveal subtle yet influential entities in research activities, demonstrating how they collectively operate. Translation represents a process of interest alignment among heterogeneous actors [6], yet these interests may shift due to individual or environmental factors, "simultaneously providing new interpretations of these interests and steering participants toward different directions"[7].

In the seminal article "*Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay*," Callon delineates the establishment of actor-networks into four stages: problematisation, interessement (interest alignment), enrolment, and mobilization [8]. The problematisation phase lays the foundation for actor alliances by clarifying actors' identities and objectives to establish relevant connections. During interessement, techniques such as negotiation, persuasion, or coercion are employed to reinforce these connections by aligning actors' interests. The enrolment phase sees the successful incorporation of actors into the network, while mobilization involves the alliance of recruited actors taking collective action under spokespersons' leadership to achieve ultimate goals [8].

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has emerged as a significant framework in translation research, particularly in understanding the complex interactions among various actors involved in the translation process. This study employs James Legge's three English versions of *Shijing* as a case study. Through analysis of relevant literature and biographical materials, it utilizes ANT's core concepts "actor", "network" and particularly the four-phase "translation" process, to trace the production, dissemination, and interactive dynamics among actors throughout Legge's translation projects. The research aims to investigate the translator's specific role within translation networks and reconstruct the actor-network underpinning Legge's *Shijing* translation processes.

3. Network Construction of the Translation and Dissemination Process

Guided by Actor-Network Theory (ANT), this section systematically examines James Legge's three editions of *Shijing (The Book of Poetry)* translations. It explores both human and non-human actors involved in the initiation, production, and dissemination processes of the translation project, while attempting to construct the network that underpins this entire translational endeavor.

3.1. Initiation of Translation

The transnational transmission of *Shijing (The Book of Poetry)* in the late 19th century was shaped by a dynamic interplay of missionary ambition, commercial pragmatism, and cross-

cultural scholarly strategy, forming a multifaceted translation network. This process unfolded through the three pivotal editions (1871, 1876, and 1879)—each catalyzed by distinct historical actors and intellectual currents. James Legge, driven by evangelical zeal and a conviction in mastering China's canonical heritage, laid the foundation in 1871 as part of his lifelong mission to systematize Chinese classics for Western audiences. By 1876, shifting public demand for accessible Eastern texts and concerns over unauthorized adaptations spurred Legge's collaboration with Trübner & Co. to produce a revised popular edition. Finally, the 1879 edition emerged from Max Müller's scholarly vision to position *Shijing* within a global canon of sacred literature, bridging Chinese traditions with Indo-European intellectual frameworks. Together, these initiatives reflect the evolving intersections of religion, academia, and publishing that propelled classical Chinese poetry into the orbit of Victorian-era global scholarship.

The 1871 translation project of *Shijing (The Book of Poetry)* originated with James Legge. This endeavor can be traced back to the mid-19th century when Legge, motivated by Christian evangelization, formulated a systematic plan to translate Chinese classics after arriving in China. As Legge asserted, "Only by thoroughly mastering Chinese canonical texts and personally examining the entire ideological foundation of morality, society, and political life established by Chinese sages can one truly fulfill the responsibilities commensurate with their position and missionary duties" [9]. In the preface to *The Rambles of the Emperor Ching T'ih in K'ang Nan*, Legge revealed that his initial conception of translating Chinese classics emerged in 1841 [10]. Between 1841 and 1842, he recognized the imperative to translate the "Four Books and Five Classics" (regarded as China's Gospels and equivalent to the Pentateuch) into English. Legge envisioned these annotated translations as standard texts for foreign students of Chinese literature and general readers interested in Chinese philosophy, religion, and ethics. Although implementation was delayed for eighteen years, this ambitious plan had already taken root in Legge's consciousness by the early 1840s.

The 1876 revised edition of *Shijing* resulted from collaboration between Legge and Trübner & Co. Publishers. Following Legge's return to Britain in 1873, growing public interest in Eastern classics particularly accessible editions for British and American general readers rather than academic specialists—prompted this initiative. The emergence of pirated abridgments of *The Chinese Classics* in America catalyzed Trübner's proposal for a popular edition. Legge conscientiously undertook this task, dedicating himself to producing a metrical translation of *Shijing* [11].

The 1879 edition emerged through the initiative of Max Müller and Legge. As editor of *The Sacred Books of the East*, Müller, a renowned Cambridge scholar, deemed *Shijing* comparable to Indo-European classics in literary value, religious insights, and moral philosophy. He strategically positioned *Shijing* alongside *The Confucian Analects*, *Shangshu (The Book of History)*, and *Xiaojing (The Classic of Filial Piety)* as foundational Chinese texts in the series. Müller contended that "if Chinese scholars could present this ancient literary work to demonstrate its enduring relevance to our common humanity, Chinese studies would shine alongside Indo-European, Babylonian, and Egyptian scholarship". In 1879, Müller specifically commissioned Legge to contribute *Shijing (The Shih-King or The Book of Poetry)* to this landmark collection.

As can be seen from the above description, James Legge's three versions of *Shijing* originated from distinct initiators, with three different core actors having motivated the development of this translational endeavor.

3.2. Translation Production Process

In the 1871 translation, James Legge was involved in more affairs than typical translators, such as fundraising, "personally supervising the printing and binding of his translations, and corresponding with England regarding printing paper and ink" [11]. In 1871, *Shijing (The Book of Poetry)* was published as part of the Chinese Classics series, marking its status alongside

English translations of *The Confucian Analects*, *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean* (1861), *The Works of Mencius* (1861), *The Shoo King* (1865), and *The Ch'un Ts'ew, The Tso Chuen* (1872), providing British readers with invaluable resources for understanding Chinese thought. In 1862, Chinese scholar Wang Tao fled to Hong Kong due to political reasons and met James Legge, then principal of the Anglo-Chinese College. The two established a collaborative partnership dedicated to translating The Five Classics. Wang Tao assisted in translating *Shijing* (*The Book of Poetry*), with the initial draft completed in the 1860s, though it was not published until 1871 as Volume IV of Chinese Classics. While Legge criticized Alexander Lacharme's Latin translation extensively, Lacharme's version remained his primary reference. Additionally, he consulted two other translations: those by Stanislas Julien and Victor von Strauss.

The 1876 version constitutes a retranslation of James Legge's 1871 *Shijing* (*Book of Poetry*). The primary motivations for Legge's retranslation stemmed from three interrelated factors: a shift in his professional identity, heightened consideration for general readership, and adjustments in his poetic philosophy. In this revised edition, excepting the prefaces and introductory materials, Legge systematically adopted English poetic forms characterized by conciseness, rhythmic liveliness, and regular rhyme schemes. The translation notably incorporates distinct elements of Scottish poetic tradition, manifesting what scholars have termed "Anglicized poetic normalization" [12]. While maintaining the foundational principles of the 1871 edition, particularly its reliance on Zhu Xi's *Shi Ji Zhuan* from the imperial compilation *Qinding Shijing Chuanshuo Huizuan* supplemented by auxiliary sources, the 1876 version achieved groundbreaking significance through its comprehensive integration of Confucian exegetical authority. This systematic incorporation established crucial cognitive frameworks for interpreting the text as a canonical Confucian classic [13]. Notably, Norman J. Girardot, Legge's biographer, observes: "Over three-quarters of the final translation remained Legge's own work, resulting in a text displaying marked stylistic dissonance, an amalgamation of his former rigid formality with elements of Scottish doggerel and occasional lighthearted metrical patterns" [11].

In 1879, at Max Müller's request for *The Sacred Books of the East*, Legge adapted his 1871 translation into an anthology published in Volume III. This edition comprised 114 pieces prioritizing religious content: it repositioned Shang Songs (originally concluding the classic) as the opening section, followed by Zhou Songs, selected Lu Songs, excerpts from Minor and Major Odes, and curated Airs of States. Editorial modifications included consolidating religious elements through restructured prefaces, particularly an independent Hymns Preface, and systematic annotation of ritual significance throughout translated verses.

3.3. Translation Dissemination Process

Following the completion of textual editing, the translation entered the stage of publication and distribution. A comprehensive actor-network does not conclude with the act of translation itself but must encompass the broader process of dissemination. The successful circulation of a translated work depends not only on static factors such as textual fidelity and translator expertise but also on the dynamic participation of actors who actively facilitate its promotion and reception. In China, Wang Yanhua (2016) conducted research on the canonical transmission pathways of *Shijing*. Drawing on André Lefevere's theoretical framework, she examined the roles of professionals (including translators and critics) and patrons (such as publishers and academic institutions) in this process. The current section expands upon Wang's foundational study by proposing that in the dissemination of James Legge's three English translations of *Shijing*, the network of actors extends beyond these categories. Specifically, the patronage system might encompass additional human actors like individual sponsors and government entities, as well as non-human actors that contribute to the translational ecosystem.

In 1871, Trübner & Co., a long-established London publisher, and Lane, Crawford & Co. of Hong Kong concurrently published James Legge's translation of *Shijing* (*The Book of Poetry*) as part

of his Chinese Classics series. Legge's English rendition, renowned for its philological precision, continues to be regarded in the West as the "standard reference translation" and remained in print as late as the 1970s [14]. Widely circulated in Western academia, this version became the most authoritative gateway for European and American audiences to engage deeply with traditional Chinese culture. The publication of the Chinese Classics series sparked significant scholarly interest, offering systematic access to China's intellectual heritage.

In 1876, Legge's metrical translation of *Shijing (The Book of Poetry)* was published by Trübner & Co. This version prioritized linguistic fluency in the target language and emphasized reader accessibility. Concurrently, Clarendon Press (Oxford) and Oxford University Press (London) expressed interest in *Shijing (The Book of Poetry)*, reflecting its growing scholarly and cultural resonance in Britain. Also in 1876, James Legge was awarded the inaugural Stanislas Julien Prize for Chinese Literature by the French Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres, in recognition of his exceptional contributions to translation and Sinology. This honor not only affirmed Legge's scholarly work but also heightened British academic interest in Chinese studies. In the same year, Oxford University appointed Legge as its first Professor of Chinese, an unprecedented decision that enabled him to further promote and interpret Confucianism. Over the following two decades, Legge mentored numerous scholars and advocates of Confucian studies, making significant contributions to the dissemination of Confucian thought in the West.

In 1875, Max Müller initially formulated the publication plan for this book series, yet funding remained unresolved. The following year, with the full support of Oxford University and the Indian government, the publication plan materialized. Scholars previously commissioned began their translation work. In 1879, the first three volumes were published. Over twenty Oriental scholars, including Müller himself, participated in the English translation of the *Sacred Books of the East*. James Legge (1815-1897) was responsible for translating Chinese texts, compiling his contributions under the title *Sacred Books of China*, which encompassed key Confucian and Daoist classics. The Confucian corpus included *the Book of Documents (Shujing)*, the religious portions of the *Book of Poetry (Shijing)*, the *Classic of Filial Piety (Xiaojing)*, the *Book of Changes (Yijing)*, and the *Book of Rites (Liji)*. The Daoist collection comprised the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Treatise on the Response of the Tao (Taishang Ganying Pian)*. In 1879, Clarendon Press published the third volume of Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East series*, featuring James Legge's selected translations of the *Book of Poetry*. This translation was later issued as a standalone edition by the same press, with a second edition released between 1893 and 1895 and a second printing in 1899.

In the dissemination process of James Legge's *Shijing (The Book of Poetry)*, not only did initiators and publishing houses play significant roles, but sponsors, critics, and university curricula also contributed substantially. For instance, the publication costs of Legge's Chinese Classics were described as "astronomical" yet they were fortunately subsidized by British opium merchants such as Joseph Jardine, Robert Jardine, and Dent. Legge noted in his correspondence: "Through the generous support of Mr. Dent, I have arranged for missionaries—whether Protestant or Roman Catholic—to procure my translated works at half price (this arrangement will remain effective until the funds provided by Mr. Dent's benevolence are exhausted)" [11]. Post-publication critiques from renowned scholars further amplified its influence. For example, following the release of Legge's 1871 English translation of *Shijing*, *The China Review* published an analytical article highlighting the text as "China's most ancient patriotic ode, revered by emperors and commoners alike" [15]. In academic curricula, the University of Oxford established the Chinese Studies Chair in 1876, appointing Legge as its inaugural professor. Norman J. Girardot's *The Victorian Translation of China: James Legge's Oriental Pilgrimage* meticulously documents Legge's instructional activities at Oxford, revealing that *Shijing* was incorporated into his regular course offerings starting in 1886. Course records

indicate: “1886: January 29th (Elementary Readings): Zhu Xi’s Philosophy; The Fortunate Union; Shijing; Chinese Poetry; Selections from the Four Books”; “1886: April 5th (Elementary Readings): Master Zhu Xi; The Fortunate Union; *Shijing*; Xuanzang’s Records of the Western Regions”[12]. Furthermore, as bellwethers of higher education, institutions such as the University of Oxford, University of Cambridge, University of Edinburgh, and University of London all included *Shijing* in their curricula, setting a precedent for other academic institutions to emulate. The inclusion of the *Shijing* in these prestigious universities’ programs—after rigorous evaluation—underscored its scholarly impact and cultural value. The institutional platforms provided by these educational establishments ensured foundational support for the continued research and dissemination of *Shijing* [16]. All these actors have made immortal contributions to the dissemination of *Shijing* (*The Book of Poetry*).

Based on the above discussion, the actor-network of James Legge’s three translations of *Shijing* can be roughly outlined as shown in the following Fig.1.

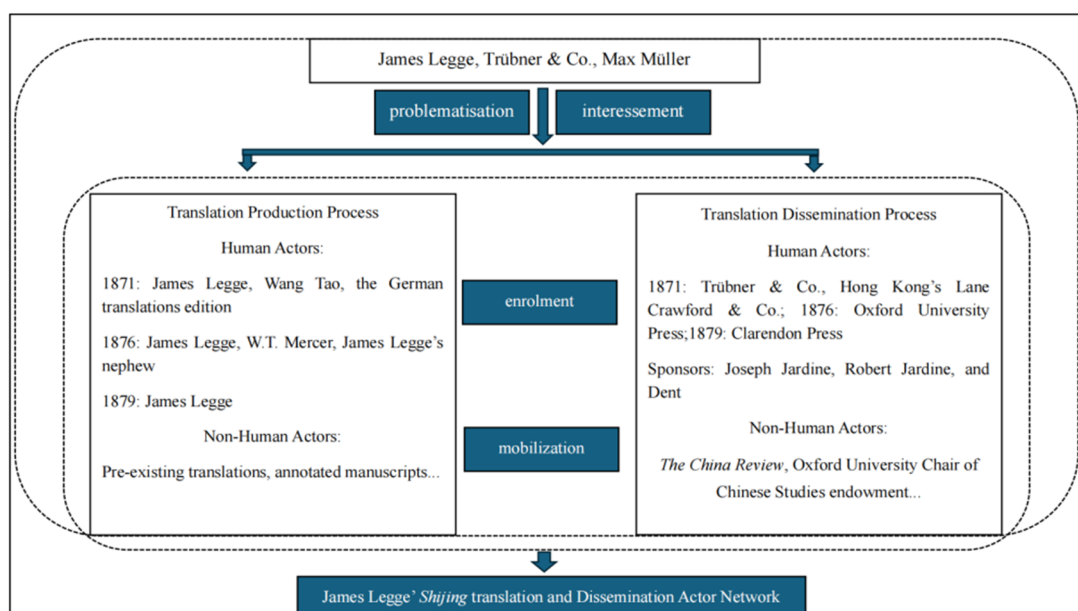


Figure 1. James Legge’s *Shijing* translation and Dissemination Actor Network

Guided by Actor-Network Theory, James Legge’s three *Shijing* versions (1871-1879) demonstrate dynamic co-construction between human and non-human actors. Translator James Legge played an indispensable role across all four stages. His interactions with other actors collectively shaped the translation, production, and dissemination of the three *Shijing* (Book of Poetry) versions, making a monumental contribution to the introduction of Chinese classical texts to the Western world.

4. Conclusion

This study primarily examines the initiation, production, and dissemination of James Legge’s three English translations of *Shijing* through the core concepts of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). It analyzes key actors involved and concludes that the entire process was woven by translator James Legge in collaboration with other human and non-human actors. The study represents an innovative attempt to apply Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in examining *Shijing*, with a focus on uncovering its underlying generative mechanisms. However, this research has certain limitations, particularly in its insufficient exploration of ideological dimensions and non-human actors. Future studies could employ more digital humanities methodologies to conduct more

comprehensive investigations into both internal and external factors influencing the dissemination of *Shijing*, as well as the diverse range of actors involved in this network.

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