

**Legge and the Development of Chinese and Western
Comparative Philosophy:
Centered on Legge's interpretation of *the Tao Te Ching***

HAN, Zhenhua

ABSTRACT:

In 1880, James Legge, a British Protestant Missionary, conducted a series of spring lectures Chinese religion: Confucianism, Taoism, and Their Comparison with Christianity for the Presbyterian Church in England. This paper focuses on analyzing the third lecture, section 14, “Fallacies in the interpretation of Tao Te Ching” and the second half of section 15, “Does *Tao Te Ching* acknowledge the existence of God?”, and considers that when interpreting *Tao Te Ching*, Legge adopted a fundamental key of ‘Western superiority over China’ although his thinking and verifying methods were academically rigorous when he engaged in dialogue with students of *Tao Te Ching* in the scholarly world in the then West. What is particularly worthy of attention is that his discussion of the religious elements contained in *Tao Te Ching* touched upon some deep-seated issues in the cross-cultural comparison of Chinese and Western languages and theology, such as the relationship between Being(or être) and the God, the evolution of worship to secularism, which remain hot topics in comparative philosophy to this day. Standing on the height of contemporary academics, it's still an unfinished work to re-examine the unique reference significance of James Legge for the dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophy & theology.

KEYWORD: James Legge, *Tao Te Ching*, the turn of linguistics, the pivotal period

Foreword

Tao Te Ching did not occupy an important role in the thought dialogue between China and the West during the Ming and Qing dynasties, but in the first half of the 19th century, it underwent a “promoting” movement in Chinese thought as understood by Westerners. In the “effective history” (Wirkungsgeschichte) of this movement, British Protestant missionary James Legge (1815-1897) interpreted *Tao Te Ching*. His interpretation touched upon in-depth issues in the fields of Chinese and Western languages and comparative theology, thus profoundly influencing some of the hot topics in comparative philosophy between China and the West this day. By exploring the hermeneutical event of Legge’s interpreting *Tao Te Ching* from the perspective of “historicity” (Geschichtlichkeit), we can gain a coherent understanding of missionary sinology, academic sinology, and even the current Chinese-Western comparative philosophy.

1. Context for James Legge’s Interpretation of Taoism¹

It is well known that from the beginning of Western Christianity’s² entry into China in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, there were differences in missionary strategy. Today, the “accommodation strategy” mentioned by scholars of Chinese-Western cultural exchange refers exclusively to the strategy supported by part of the Catholic Jesuits [e.g. Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730), and Francis Noël (1651-1729)]. However, even the Society of Jesuits itself saw a disagreement over missionary strategies, for example, Nicolas Longobardi (1559-1654), Ricci’s designated successor, did not agree entirely with Ricci’s accommodation strategy. Such a strategy was certainly aimed at the Chinese culture as a whole, but since the Jesuits gradually realized that the missionary efforts achieved limited effects when targeting the grassroots, with uncivilized people being either “stubborn” or

¹ “The philosophy of Taoism” and “the religion of Taoism” are utterly different in the modern Chinese context, but are not explicitly distinguished in the classical Chinese language. Similarly, these two translated versions in Western languages are not distinguished in terms of morphology, so D[T]aoism as indicated by Western people is translated as “道家/道教”. D[T]aoism derives from transliteration of “Tao” at the highest level in *Tao Te Ching*, and is initially found in Western people’s works published in the 1830s.

² “Christianity” in this paper refers to the Christianity in a broad sense, including Catholicism and Protestantism, rather than Protestantism alone.

“inconstant”, while the efforts targeting the upper class could achieve immediate results with half the effort. Therefore, a great part of the energy was directed to the middle- and upper-class government officials who had been familiar with the Confucian classics since childhood,³ hence making China's Confucianism-dominated elite culture a specific target for this strategy. At that time, Confucianism and Christianity were both competitors and collaborators, especially when attacking and degrading Taoism and Buddhism. It is fair to say that with Taoism and Buddhism being targets of attack by missionaries, they were not the most valued opponents. Therefore, it is easy to understand that the Taoist works did not attract enough interest from the missionaries at first.

However, the Society of Jesuits has not always been praised by Vatican Catholic Churches. Developments in the rite controversy were accompanied by disputes between Catholic orders; in July 1773, Pope Clemens XIV issued an edict dissolving the Society of Jesuits, creating a huge change in Chinese-Western religious exchange. Despite Pope Pius VII's order to restore it after 40 years, the Society at that time had already lost its past glory. Today, many scholars boasting historic nostalgia at home and abroad still reminisce the scenes of Chinese-Western thought exchange at the peak of the Society of Jesuits visiting China and lament the unrealized vision for ideological integration.

However, as history cannot be assumed, the purpose of this paper is not to objectively and comprehensively assess the results of intellectual and cultural exchanges achieved by the Society of Jesuits in China, rather to argue that the decline of the Society and the slowdown of the so-called “Chinoiserie” in Europe during the same period provided the ideological and development space for the birth of academic sinology and the abandonment of various forms of “intention-first” pseudo-scholarship such as figurism and analogy in professional sinology in the early 19th century. At the end of 1814, the Lectures on Chinese and Tatar-Manchu languages and literature (Chaire de Langues et littératures Chinoises et Tartares-Mandchoues) were established by the Collège de France. Sinologist Jean Pierre Abel Rémusat (1788-1832)

³ In addition to the “Three Pillars of Chinese Catholicism”, Xu Guangqi (1562-1633), Li Zhizao (1571-1630) and Yang Tingjun (1562-1627), the small court established in the Reign of the Yongli Emperor in the Southern Ming dynasty abounded with baptized people, and the Jesuit Michal Boym (1612-1659) was sent to Europe to ask for political aid.

presided over this chair, starting a “French tradition” characterized by a “solid textual bibliography and a purely theoretical critical attitude” in sinology (Girardot 122). At this time, the Western study officially launched on Taoism and Buddhism. Even though the Protestant missionaries who came to China afterwards still regarded Confucianism as the most important object of understanding, Taoism and Buddhism became inevitable ones.

It is particularly noteworthy that the birth of academic sinology represented by “French Sinology” took place against the backdrop of the emergence of “philosophy departments” in European higher education, as well as the idealistic integration of “history of philosophy” and “European personality”. Early Jesuits found sufficient “natural reason” in Confucianism from a position of Deism, and thus called Confucius “the Chinese philosopher”;⁴ however, at the beginning of the 19th century, the building of “European personality” by the philosophy departments at European universities was no longer based on universality of religion (Christianity) but on universality of philosophic reason. As a result, the doctrine of Confucius was no longer deemed as “philosophy” in the eyes of G. W. Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and others, but only “good, honest, moral teachings” uttered by a “practical statesman of the affairs of man”. At the same time, the philosophical consciousness contained in the classical Taoist texts was affirmed as never before (Cheng 15-22).

As a Protestant missionary, James Legge certainly served his missionary purpose by translating the Taoist classics on the premise of identifying similarities and differences. However, in contrast to his Jesuit predecessors, Legge brought a large number of Taoist classics into his “Chinese Classics” series, which was another product of the larger intellectual context mentioned above. The translation of *Tao Te Ching* came after his return to England in the 1870s as Professor of Chinese Studies at Oxford University, which followed his winning of the Prix Stanislas Julien (named after Stanislas Julien, a disciple of Rémusat), the highest scholarly award in the circle of Western sinology, which made sure that the

⁴ *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (Confucius, Philosopher of the China) was compiled and published by Jesuit Couplet Philippe (1623-1693) and others in 1687. Jesuits’ translation of the Confucian classics showed a strong tendency toward rationalization, which was in fact a “legacy” of late medieval scholasticism – “a combination of the ideas of Saint Thomas Aquinas and other scholasticists created a complete harmony between Christian reason and faith in the Christian world”, and “Jesuits’ tendency toward scholarship was more pronounced than toward religious mysticism”. See David 309.

academic characteristic of French sinology further influenced Legge from then on.

2. Focus on comparison, refusal of farfetched analogy

The most important achievement of Legge's translation of *Tao Te Ching* is surely its English translation included in *The Sacred Books of the East* edited by Orientalist F. Max Müller (1823-1900) in 1891. However, I do not intend to examine and evaluate the quality of this translation version from a perspective of philology in this paper, but rather to examine the conceptual and methodological characteristics in Legge's dialogue with Taoist researchers in the Western academia, as revealed in the spring lecture series "The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism Described and Compared with Christianity"⁵ delivered by James Legge for the Presbyterian Church in England in 1880. Discussion on this subject will be found later in this paper.

The third lecture in the 1880 series is devoted to Taoism. If, on the whole, Legge's reading of Confucius emphasized his status as a "religious teacher", then in his reading of Taoism, he clearly stated that Taoism is both a religion and a philosophy. In order to narrow down our discussion, this paper treats Section 14 of this lecture, "Errors in the Interpretation of *Tao Te Ching*", and the second half of Section 15, "Does *Tao Te Ching* Recognize the Existence of God?" as the main object of analysis.

With only about 5,000 Chinese characters contained in *Tao Te Ching*, the text is archaic and difficult to read. Three examples of Westerners' misinterpretation of this book were given in Legge's lecture.

First, at the beginning of the 18th century, Catholic missionaries such as Joseph de Prémare (1666-1736) searched *Tao Te Ching* for content similar to records in the *Bible*, and used the method of "figurism" to find God's trace in it – an idea that continued till the beginning of the 19th century. In 1808, the Italian Sinologist Antonio Montucci (1762-1829) claimed in *Chinese Studies* that *Tao Te Ching* explicitly expressed the existence of "the Most Holy Trinity", and those who had read this book would not doubt that the Chinese used this to

⁵ When making these serial speeches, Legge should have completed his translation of *Tao Te Ching*, which had not been published. Therefore, he mainly referenced the French version (1842) translated by Stanislas A. Julien (1797-1873) and the English version (1868) translated by John Chalmers (1825-1899).

get a glimpse of the mystery of the Trinity five hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ.⁶ Legge believed this to be completely nonsense.

Second, if Montucci and others mentioned this point generally, then the French Jesuit Jean Joseph Marie Amiot (1718-1793) confirmed this statement, believing that the first paragraph of Chapter 14 in *Tao Te Ching* expressed the three persons of the Trinity. Regarding the original text of this paragraph, “視之不見名曰夷，聽之不聞名曰希，搏之不得名曰微”， Legge converted Amiot’s translation into English as follows:

He who is as it were visible and cannot be seen is called Khî (should be Î); he whom we cannot hear and who does not speak to the ears is called Hî; he who is as it were tangible, but whom we cannot touch, is called Weî (*The Religions of China* 210).

The learned Rémusat continued this “insight” by matching Î, Hî, and Weî with the Hebrew word Je-ho-va (Jehovah), and announced his discovery in his *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-tseu* (Memoir on the Life and Opinions of Lâo-tsze)⁷ in 1823. Legge came across this statement as early as in 1838 and followed it for a time, but Stanislas Julien’s translation of *Tao Te Ching* published in 1842 broke Rémusat’s illusion, which naturally pushed Legge to Julien’s camp. To Legge, the object discussed in Chapter 14 of *Tao Te Ching* is “*Tao*”, rather than a “personal being”.

Third, the fourth lecture of *Introduction to the Science of Religion* was written by Max Müller, compiler of *The Sacred Books of the East* and a comparative religionist. He quotes the famous Chapter 25 of *Tao Te Ching* to prove “exalted sentiments” harbored by the Chinese about religion and morality, were the same as in Christianity and other religions. “有物混成，先天地生” was translated by Müller as “There is an infinite Being, which existed before heaven and earth” (Müller 55), where the word “Being” corresponds to the word “*Tao*道” in

⁶ Legge saw this description in Stanislas Julien’s Latin translation of *Tao Te Ching*. See Julien 4.

⁷ In this title, Rémusat treated Lao-tseu as a Chinese philosopher in the 6th century B.C., arguing his opinions were similar with those of Pythagoras (c. 580-500 B.C.), Plato (427-347 B.C.) and their disciples. This book selected some chapters from *Tao Te Ching* for translation.

Tao Te Ching. However, Legge reviewed this as a mistranslation; in his view, the character “*Wu*物” here should be translated as “thing” rather than “Being”. Müller had translated this passage from Stanislas Julien’s French version of the original, and was hence misled by him and distorted his original meaning. Julien translated “有物混成” as “Il est un être confus”, with “物” translated as “être”⁸, and Müller translated the French word “être” into the English word “being”. Julien mistranslated the word in the first place and Müller made further mistakes on top of the mistranslation. Meanwhile, Müller’s translation of the French word “confus” to “infinite” was his own comprehension error. In this regard, the “thing” in Lâo-tsze’s mind was falsely elevated to a supreme, Platonic “idea”.

In fact, what Montucci, Amiot, Rémusat, Julien, and Müller share is that, based on a logical premise that “language” can present “ideas”, they vaguely saw the corresponding properties of Christian theological ideas in the records of *Tao Te Ching*, and hereby consciously or unconsciously theologize *Tao Te Ching* in the sense of Christianity. The crux is that they all projected the linguistic attributes attached to Christian theology into Chinese language: Montucci, Amiot and Rémusat made over-imagination from the perspective of pronunciation and word formation, while Julien and Müller misplaced the notion of ontology, unique to Indo-European languages and closely related to Christian theology, in Chinese language.

Despite its temptation, the imaginative identification of Montucci and others proved only a mistake and a misunderstanding. In contrast, Legge consciously separated himself from this concept, showing his research focus on rigorous comparison rather than farfetched analogy. The difference between the “comparative method” (比較法) and the “analogy” (比附法), revealed by Zhang Dongsun (1886-1973) in 1947, can be used to describe Legge’s conscious choice to some extent.

In general, the so-called comparative method refers to comparing two or more objects to know their differences and similarities, but those who use this method tend to

⁸ “être” derives from a Medieval French word “estre”, while the latter is a combination of Latin verbs “stāre” (“stand”) and “esse” (“be”).

concentrate more on their similarities than the differences. In my opinion, comparison is more important when aimed to find differences, as comparison to find similarities is close to analogy. It is worth noting that the comparative method is not analogy, since comparison is a method of investigation, while analogy is a method of inference. (Zhang, Dongsun 457)

However, this seems only part of the issue. Regarding “Does *Tao Te Ching* Recognize the Existence of God?”, Legge disagreed with the negative opinion held by Sir Robert K. Douglas (1838-1913). As a professor at King’s College London, Douglas published *Confucianism and Taoism*⁹ in 1877, claiming that “Lão-tsze knew nothing of a personal God”, because “indeed a belief in such a being would be in opposition to the whole tenor of his philosophy” (Douglas 211). But to Legge, the fact is far from clear, because in ancient Chinese people’s eyes, the Chinese word “*T’ian*天” (sky / heaven) refers to the visible, physical sky, as well as the invisible Supreme Power. “*T’ian*天” occurs five or six times in *Tao Te Ching* identical to the sense of personal god in the *Shu Ching* (Book of History) or the *Shih Ching* (the Book of Songs).

Chapter 1 of *Tao Te Ching* describes *Tao*道 as “*Tao*, (conceived of as) having no name, is the beginning of heaven and earth; and (conceived of as) having a name is the mother of all things無名，天地之始；有名，萬物之母”， as well as Chapter 6 says “the door of the abyss-mother is the root of heaven and earth玄牝之門，是謂天地之根”， but this does not mean that Lão-tsze made his *Tao*道 prior to the Supreme Power. This is because and the combined term have different meanings: the single term “*T’ian*天” has a double meaning (as mentioned above), while the combined term “*T’ian-Ti*天地” denotes the totality of material existences, rather than the “Supreme Power”. When mentioning *Tao*道 as “the beginning of

⁹ It is worth noting that from the 1870s to the early 20th century, a large number of works appeared in the West that focused on the whole picture of China (especially focused on Confucianism and Taoism), explored the differences between Chinese and Western religions, and attempted to analyze the differences between Chinese and Western development paths in terms of religious differences. In addition to Douglas and Legge, this book list also includes authors such as: Carlo Puini (1839-1924), Joseph Edkins (1823-1905), Thomas Watters (1840-1901), Hampden C. Du Bose (1845-1910), George Thomas Bettany (1850-1891), George Monro Grant (1835-1902), Ernst Faber (1839-1899), Paul Carus (1852-1919), James Dyer Ball (1847-1919), Edward Harper Parker (1849-1926), Horace Grant Underwood (1859-1916), W. Gilbert Walshe, Jan Jakob Maria de Groot (1854-1921), Herbert A. Giles (1845-1935), William Edward Soothill (1861-1935), Max Weber (1864-1920), etc.

T'ian and *Ti*天地之始” and “the root of *T'ian* and *Ti*天地之根”, *Tao Te Ching* always mentions “*T'ian*天” and “*Ti*地” together, instead of reviewing *Tao*道 as the “beginning of *T'ian*天” or the “root of *T'ian*天”. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that *Tao*道 has priority over “*T'ian*天” as the Supreme Power.

Douglas thought “there is no room for a Supreme God” in Chapter 4 of *Tao Te Ching*, while Legge believed that the “*Ti*帝” in “it might appear to have been before God象帝之先” in this chapter denotes the personal name of “*T'ian*天” as the ruling Power. This chapter can, at its best, prove that Lâo-tsze makes God posterior, and so inferior, to his *Tao*道, but cannot infer a conclusion that “Lâo-tsze does not believe in God”. Furthermore, he only said *Tao*道 “might appear to象” be before God, instead of clearly confirming that it had been so. In fact, *Tao*道 has no positive existence of itself, making it unable to be described; Chinese people in prehistoric times probably felt such quality of “being inexplicable” in the processes of nature that gave rise to the ideas of God, and led to the use of the name for heaven as the personal *Ti*帝. After long musing, Legge's mind found rest in such interpretation of this chapter.

In sum, after all the falsification or *apoha*, combined with bits of imaginative reasoning, Legge voted yes on the question “Does *Tao Te Ching* Recognize the Existence of God?” Then, how should we evaluate his opinion? Seemingly, he returned to the Jesuits figurist camp, mistaking “*T'ian*天” and “*Ti*帝” in the ancient Chinese language as the Christian God. However, a careful deduction of his thinking reveals that Legge's reasoning process and conclusions are hugely prudent. Setting aside the complex question of whether the “God” in the ancient Chinese texts and that in the *Bible – Old Testament* are the same, it is fair to say that the classical Chinese texts, including *Tao Te Ching*, *the Shu Ching* and *the Shih Ching*, themselves entail room for Legge's interpretation, while he only made full use of such room by providing prudent, positive statements in the fields where the sage “occupies his thoughts but does not discuss about anything存而不論” “outside the limits of the world of men六合之外” (*The Writings of Chuang-tze: The Adjustment of Controversies*莊子·齊物論). Regarding his conclusions, I do not think it proper to treat them as fabrication and over-interpretation, which would overly simplify this issue.

3. Two Extended Discussions

Strictly speaking, James Legge is not a scholar of comparative philosophy boasting value neutrality. Although his interpretation of *Tao Te Ching* touched upon some interesting comparative philosophical issues, he did not develop them further. I would like to extend a discussion on two aspects, hoping to reveal the complexity of the issues and their relevance to contemporary academic topics.

(1) The Limitation of Language

The inquiry into Being was originally the root of ancient Greek metaphysical thinking, but from the 2nd to the 4th century CE, Christian theologians, who were gradually getting rid of the Jewish tradition, began to use the language of Greek philosophy as the main discourse in their theological discussions when dealing with the two major issues – “the relationship between the worship of Jesus Christ and monotheism in Old Testament”, and “the relationship between pneumatology and the Christian view of God”. When Jesus Christ began to speak the language of Parmenides of Elea (c. 515 - c. 450 BC) and Plato, the Christian view of God, the late-coming theology of Trinity, adopted Greek philosophy (especially metaphysics), and the two became inextricably intertwined and inseparable ever since (Zhang, Xuefu).

The term “être” (being), entangled with Christian theology, was thoughtfully revisited by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) in the 20th century; in particular, Being was further linked to the idea of “truth”. This ancient-Greek-style return of contemporary philosophy was called by later historians of philosophy an important manifestation of the linguistic turn.¹⁰

Back to the issue about the translation of *Tao Te Ching*, Legge made an unspoken point in his criticism of Montucci and others that the Christian view of God, the Trinity, could not find a strict counterpart in *Tao Te Ching*. In his criticism of Julien’s and Müller’s mistranslation of “有物混成”, he also made an implicit point that “être” (being) in European language could not find a strict equivalent in Chinese language. Such an understanding was finally confirmed by contemporary French sinologist Jacques Gernet (1921-2018).

¹⁰ Richard Rorty’s (1931-2007) book *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (1967) propelled the prevalence of the term “the linguistic turn”.

In his most famous work, *Chine et Christianisme* (1982), Gernet argues that “the uniqueness of the Chinese way of thinking” is closely related to the “linguistic qualities” of the Chinese language, which “has no grammatical categories distinguished by a morphological system,” i.e., nouns have no gender, number, or case, while verbs have no inflections such as conjugation (tense, morpheme, etc.); moreover, “there is no word for ‘being’ in Chinese, or something that can be used to convey the notion of existence or essence”. In the West, “being” can denote something beyond phenomenal world in the sense of “eternal existence” and is therefore of fundamental importance in Western philosophical and religious thinking, while “being” is incomprehensible to a Chinese speaker. Chinese is an “isolating language” (in Humboldt’s term), one without inflections, whose “meaning is created the way words are organized”, giving birth to “Chinese concepts of the unity of opposites and complementarity”, and “a fundamental relativism plays a dominant role in philosophical thinking”. In contrast to the Western philosophical tradition that relies on “abstract ideas concerned with stability and considered as categories of general concepts”,

The Chinese way of thinking recognizes only the classification of functions and the law of equivalence. It is not concerned with “yes” or “no”, being or not being, but with the opposite things that mutually succeed, unite and complement; it does not care about eternal existence but the momentum of ups and downs. It does not want a concept of law as an immutable rule, but prefers to formulate a pattern or a schema for development.

Gernet believes that language provides the basic structure for the mind to recognize the characteristics of things, and that the particularity of language plays a subtle role in human reasoning, supporting certain mindsets. In Europe, the “opposition between essence and contingency” has been fundamental, and it was on the basis of this logic that the Jesuit Matteo Ricci proved the absolute autonomy of the spirit and the existence of a rational soul, while “this play on the concept of essence and the Platonic-style concept would certainly confuse

many Chinese people” (Gernet 238-247).¹¹ Therefore, the above-mentioned differences between Chinese and European languages made it difficult for the missionaries visiting China to communicate with their audience on the highest spiritual level during the Ming and Qing dynasties. That is, the unsuccessful missionary work was already determined at the linguistic level.

In fact, Gernet’s interpretation of the nature of the Chinese language did not surpass the understanding of previous Western sinologists, nor was he the first Western sinologist to “view” the Chinese thought and way of thinking through the lens of linguistic characteristics of the Chinese language. As early as 1826, the German linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), who was influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803),¹² wrote two articles, “On the Grammatical Structure of the Chinese Language” and “On the Generality of Grammatical Forms and the Particularity of the Chinese Language (A Letter to Mr. Abel Rémusat)”, based on Rémusat’s *Éléments de la Grammaire* (1822). Humboldt, an advocate of the idea that “language shapes thought”, believed that “the style of the Chinese language fetters the development in formal expressions in a surprising manner”, while “in languages whose structure is opposed to that of the Chinese language, thought acquires more abundant and delicate treatment” (Humboldt 121). Although he emphasized the humanistic aspect in terms of the origins of language, his comments on the Chinese language tend to be a Eurocentric theory of linguistic superiority or inferiority.

In general, when interpreting *Tao Te Ching*, Legge basically did it for the purpose of it, without going too far on the issue of performance of Chinese language, but his analysis entails this inevitable issue. Following the “linguistic turn” as displayed in the 20th-century Western philosophy, “the relationship between linguistic differences and philosophical/mindset differences” remains a hot topic in Chinese and Western academia till today. Considering its

¹¹ It is interesting that in the 2012 reprint of *Chine et Christianisme* published by the Societas Verbi Divini’s publisher, Gernet removed some harsh judgments about the Chinese language. However, we should value his previous views and the causes behind them.

¹² In *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* published in 1772, Herder argued that “our human languages developed on a single basis” and “all related to the evolvment of human spirit has derived from the same basis”, because “the grammars of all nations around the world are almost formed in the same way”, with “the only important exception being the grammar of Chinese”. Nevertheless, he did not specify the differences of this grammar. See Herder 105.

complexity, I would not give a simple answer in this paper but provide details in another paper instead (“Chinese Philosophy Construction” 22-39).

(2) Philosophical Breakthrough at the Axial Age

Does *Tao Te Ching* recognize the existence of God? What is the relationship between the “*T'ian*天” and “*Ti*帝” in the pre-Qin texts and the Christian “God”? From the Jesuits in the 17th century to the Protestant missionaries in the 19th century, and to the Western academic sinology in the early 20th century, the debate has never stopped. A keyword genealogical analysis of these words would certainly help to solve the mystery, but a purely philological approach tends to lead to the substitution of “source” for “flow”, and some key aspects of the issues may be simplified. Therefore, a holistic vision of thought is still necessary.

For a long time, scholars of Chinese history have often emphasized the transition of the Chinese culture from “witchcraft” (religion) to “history” (humanism) at the time of late Shang and early Zhou dynasties. The disintegration of the times and the “collapse of rituals and music” generated an overall change in the landscape of thought. From the perspective of world history, the theory of the Axial Age (*Achsenzeit*), originally proposed by German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), has added an unprecedentedly broad vision to this topic.

The “Axial Age”, a concept introduced by Jaspers in his 1949 book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (The Origin and Goal of History), has a core idea that, as the old certainty had lost its legitimacy and the new one had not yet been established, human beings in the regions of ancient Greece, the Middle East (Iran, Palestine), India and China all became “conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations” in the period 800 B.C.-200 B.C. Having experienced the horror of the world and the weakness of the self, mankind began to inquire into fundamental, universal questions. The axial age reflects the creativity of human philosophy and thought (humans began to think about transcendent, universal questions) and a certain profound synchronicity (political divisions, wars, tyranny, natural disasters, economic recessions and other crisis factors were “prerequisites”).

Although Jaspers proposed the “Axial Age” theory as early as in 1949, it did not cause an immediate impact. This theory slowly gained popularity 25 years later, when American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) revisited it in his “Introduction” for the English translation of Max Weber’s *Religionssoziologie* (The Sociology of Religion) and other papers. Recent developments include the 2011 book *Religion in Human Evolution* by Robert N. Bellah (1927-2013), a disciple of Parsons and a sociologist, and in the 2012 book *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, co-edited by Bellah and Hans Joas (1948-). The meaning of “axial change” is also discussed in an entire chapter of Part III “Themes of the Secular Age” of *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* by Charles Taylor (1931-), published in 2011. In Chinese academia, Yu Yingshi (1930-2021) published his new book *Between Heaven and Man: An Essay on Origins of the Chinese Mind in Classical Antiquity* in 2014, which also uses the framework of the “Axial Age” as a whole. The reasons for his adoption of such a theory described in his preface are worthy of reference.

The best example of combining the theory of the “Axial Age” with a sophisticated and novel analysis of pre-Qin Chinese philosophy (ethics) is, in my opinion, the German sinologist Heiner Roetz (1950-). In his book *Die chinesische Ethik der Achsenzeit. Eine Rekonstruktion des Durchbruchs zu postkonventionellem Denken*, published in the early 1990s, Roetz places pre-Qin philosophy and ethics, including Confucian ethics, in the context when traditional conventional ethics collapsed, emphasizing that they are the product of a response to a social and cultural crisis: the collapse of traditional certainties (especially of ethics) is the fundamental problematic context in which Chinese moral philosophy was formed. The intellectual construction of the pre-Qin scholars were in the midst of “a new era of early enlightenment with a world-historical orientation”. Compared to the previous ones, they achieved a “major intellectual breakthrough” in “loss of substantiality and of the closedness of life by reflection and transcendence, the overcoming of mythos by reason, the discovery of the individual, the questioning of everything previously accepted, the deliberation of the most contradictory alternatives, spiritualization, consciousness of history, etc.” (*Confucian Ethics* 25).

By combining the “Axial Age” theory with the cognitive-developmental theory of American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987), Roetz built an overall framework for interpreting Chinese thought in the Axial Age. The overall framework for interpreting Axial-Age Chinese thought. The thoughts of Yang Zhu, Lâo-tsze, and Chuang-tze are in the $4\frac{1}{2}$ stage between stage 4 (law and order-oriented) and stage 5 (relativist and utilitarian social contract-oriented) in Kohlberg's phylogenesis, i.e., the post-conventional “adolescent rebellion”: traditional customs became false pretensions in the eyes of the Taoists, while the pre-conventional state of innocence and simplicity featuring the pursuit of nature, life, and individual enjoyment became an ideological and behavioral rebellion against the tyranny of custom convention (*Confucian Ethics* 14C, and Bellah & Joas 257).

From the standpoint of the “Axial Age” theory, we may say that although the words “*T'ian*天” and “*Ti*帝” are often found in *Tao Te Ching*, the *Shu Ching* and the *Shih Ching*, among other pre-Qin texts, people at that time no longer eagerly sought ultimate grounds for real life from the transcendent God or Heaven as they did in the “Pre-Axial Age”.¹³ Although *Tao Te Ching* has religious aspects in the eyes of Legge and others, we must say that those aspects are mainly remnants of the religious legacy and beliefs from the “Pre-Axial Age”. As a Protestant missionary, James Legge interpreted and explored *Tao Te Ching* from the perspective of religion and faith, which counted as, though not entirely fallacious, a deviation from the right path.

4. Conclusion

When delivering his lecture on “The Religions of China” in 1880, James Legge already became the first professor of sinology at Oxford University. As an academic sinologist of missionary origin, Legge's interpretation of Chinese thought featured a transition from missionary sinology to academic sinology. In a time when scientific research in the modern

¹³ Similarly, “*Tao* 道” in Confucianism is proactively fostered by people, rather than being positioned by criteria of any heaven (religious argument) or ontology (metaphysics). This is also a reason why Roetz criticized Tu Weiming. See “Confucianism between Tradition and Modernity” 367-380.

sense was gradually being separated from religion and ignorance, this dual role of missionary and sinologist made him a common target of criticism and denunciation to both the missionary camp and the modern academic camp (Han “From Religious Debate to Philosophical Discussion” 156-166).

However, the above analysis reveals that the problematic perspective in his analysis and discussion of Chinese thought, especially his discussion of the religious element in Chinese thought, has actually touched upon in-depth issues in the field of linguistic and theological comparison between China and the West, which are still hot topics in Chinese-Western comparative philosophy this day. In this regard, from the standpoint of contemporary scholarship, it is still an unfinished task to re-examine the unique reference significance of Legge for Chinese and Western philosophical and theological dialogues today.

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