



A Comparative Study of Two English Translations of *Mencius* from the Perspective of Gideon Toury's Theory of Translational Norms

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Abstract

Mencius, as a classic work of Confucianism, holds an important position in Chinese traditional culture. Toury's theory of translational norms posits that translators are constrained by preliminary norms, initial norms, and operational norms during translation activities, providing a new perspective for translation studies. From this theoretical perspective, this paper compares and analyzes the English translations of *Mencius* by James Legge and D. C. Lau, exploring the differences between the two translators in terms of text selection, translation tendency, and translation strategy, with the aim of providing some reference for the English translation of Chinese cultural classics.

Subject Areas

Translation Studies

Keywords

Mencius, Translational Norms, James Legge, D. C. Lau, Comparative Study

1. Introduction

Mencius survives in seven extant chapters. It is a compilation of the sayings of Mencius from the Warring States period, recording his debates with thinkers from other schools, his personal instruction of disciples, and his diplomatic lobbying of feudal lords. It was co-compiled by Mencius and his disciples (such as Wan Zhang). As a Confucian classic, *Mencius* documents Mencius's philosophy of state governance and political strategies (benevolent governance, the distinction between the Kingly Way and the Hegemonic Way, people-oriented principles, correction the sovereign's mind, and the concept that "the people are the most im-

portant, the state comes next, and the sovereign is the least important”), as well as his political actions. During the Southern Song Dynasty, Zhu Xi grouped *Mencius* with *The Analects*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean* to form “*The Four Books*”. Since the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, it has been considered a must-read for every household. Today, *Mencius* is one of the *One Hundred Classics of China’s Excellent Traditional Culture* and holds a significant position within China’s outstanding traditional culture. Since the 18th century, *Mencius* has attracted close attention from the English-speaking world, resulting in numerous English translations, including versions by James Legge, Irene Bloom, Leonard A. Lyall, D.C. Lau, and Zhao Zhen-tao, among others. Among these, Legge’s translation is recognized as the standard English version, while Lau’s translation remains the most influential and frequently republished translation abroad [1], earning acclaim as a definitive work in the study of Chinese philosophy among Western scholars.

Currently, domestic scholars have also gradually conducted research on English translations of *Mencius*. Ji (2011) not only introduced different annotated editions of *Mencius* but also explored the history of its English translation over several centuries and provided objective reviews of influential translations from various periods [2]. Liu and Zeng (2011) compared four English translations of *Mencius*. They found that due to linguistic factors, the historicity of understanding, target readership, translation motives, and translation strategies, translators differ significantly in semantic choices, sensitivity to traditional customs, and understanding of Mencius’s thought, resulting in distinct characteristics for each translation [3]. Based on close textual reading and considering Legge’s translation philosophy, identity, and religious background, Ding and Song (2015) analyzed Legge’s multi-dimensional and multi-level interpretation of Mencius’s theory of the goodness of human nature [4]. From an intertextuality perspective, Lou and Zhao (2022) conducted a comparative analysis of the translation of core concepts in *Mencius*, using these as examples to explore the intertextual characteristics of translated conceptual terms [5]. Taking conceptual integration as a perspective and utilizing the Chinese-English parallel corpus of *Mencius*, Zhuang and Chen (2025) investigated the unique meaning construction and underlying reasons for the English translation of “Tianxia”, using the English translations by David Hinton and Luo Zhiye as examples [6]. In summary, domestic scholars have studied specific aspects of the English translations of *Mencius* from various perspectives. However, there is currently no domestic research on the English translations of *Mencius* from the perspective of Toury’s translation norms theory.

The Chinese version consulted by this research is Yang Bojun’s *Notes on the Translation of Mencius*, published by Zhonghua Book Company in 2008. The two English translations compared are James Legge’s *The Works of Mencius*, published by Dover Publications in 1970, and D.C. Lau’s *Mencius*, published by Penguin Classics in 2004. This paper will adopt the perspective of Toury’s translation norms theory, taking Legge’s and D.C. Lau’s English translations of *Mencius* as

research objects. It will analyze the differences in text selection, translation tendencies, and translation strategies between the two translators under the constraints of preparatory norms, initial norms, and operational norms, in order to reveal the specific reasons for the different language styles of the two translations of *Mencius*, enrich the research on the English translation of *Mencius*, provide reference for the English translation of Chinese cultural classics, and contribute to the external dissemination of excellent Chinese literature and culture.

2. Gideon Toury's Theory of Translational Norms

Traditional translation studies focused on core issues such as the nature of translation, translation standards, and translation methodologies. However, since the 1970s, the emergence of the “cultural turn” fundamentally shifted the paradigm of translation studies. Scholars of the cultural school, represented by James Holmes and Gideon Toury, argued that translation is not merely linguistic conversion but also cultural exchange and interaction. They advocated shifting the focus of translation studies from linguistic forms to cultural functions, emphasizing the role of translation in cultural transmission and exchange. They highlighted the cultural dimension of translation activities, considering it a cross-cultural communicative act in which translators are influenced by the target culture.

As one of the founding figures of translation studies as a discipline, James Holmes, in his 1972 paper *The Name and Nature of Translation Studies*, first proposed the concept of translation studies as an independent discipline and outlined its theoretical framework, dividing it into pure translation studies and applied translation studies. Pure translation studies are further divided into theoretical translation studies and descriptive translation studies [7]. Historically, translation studies had failed to give due attention to descriptive research. Toury, a representative of the Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) school and a key figure of the Tel Aviv school of translation theory, saw this deficiency. He pointed out the importance of descriptive research and advocated for the development of the descriptive branch within translation studies towards a comprehensive system, replacing the then-prevailing isolated studies. Traditional translation studies focus on “normativity”, with the original text as the center, attempting to establish a series of norms that translators can follow in translation practice. Toury, however, proposed a target language-oriented approach, studying how translators actually do in their cultural environment, rather than prescribing what they should do. Toury considered translated works as facts of the target culture, refraining from judging their quality and instead providing objective descriptions. Toury continued and developed Itamar Even-Zohar's Polysystem theory and his own earlier research, subsequently proposing a methodology for descriptive translation studies. He defined the object and scope of DTS and pointed out that its goal is to identify the cultural laws governing translation choices, *i.e.*, translation norms.

Toury defines norms as “the translation of general values or ideas shared by a community—as to what is right or wrong, adequate or inadequate—into perfor-

mance instructions appropriate for and applicable to particular situations.” In terms of their “efficacy,” norms are social constraints situated between rules and idiosyncrasies. Rules are (more) objective norms, while idiosyncrasies are (more) subjective norms [8]. Toury believes that, from a socio-cultural perspective, translation is influenced by many factors that go beyond the source text, systemic differences between languages, textual traditions involved in translation, and even the translator’s cognitive abilities. He points out that translation is an activity governed by norms, and in the translation process, translators are inevitably constrained by norms from both the source and target languages, cultures, and societies [8].

Toury classifies norms into three types: preliminary norms, initial norms, and operational norms. Chronologically, preliminary norms are the first to intervene in the translation activity, preceding the actual translation process. They refer to norms that affect text selection, including translation policy and the directness of translation. Considerations of translation policy relate to the determining factors of which texts to choose for translation in a specific language, culture, or period [8], such as which authors, genres, schools, source texts, etc. The directness of translation concerns whether translation occurs through an intermediary language (e.g., translating from Greek into English, and then from English into Dutch). The research questions include whether the target culture allows this practice, which languages are involved, and whether this practice is concealed [8]. Among the three norms, the initial norm is dominant and pervades the entire translation process. It determines the translator’s overall translational inclination, referring to the overarching directional choice made by the translator between the norms of the target culture and those of the source culture. This choice is dictated by the position of translated literature within the literary polysystem. Translated literature does not exist in isolation; rather, it constitutes an independent subsystem within the literary polysystem. Its position dynamically shifts between the “center” and the “periphery”, and this positional change directly influences the norms and strategies of translational behavior. The literary polysystem mainly comprises canonized original literature, translated literature, and other non-canonized subsystems such as children’s literature and popular fiction [9]. Specifically, if translated literature occupies a central position in the literary polysystem, the translator tends to lean towards the source culture, placing more emphasis on the adequate conveyance of the source text’s meaning, thus moving closer to the “adequacy” pole of the continuum. Conversely, if translated literature occupies a peripheral position, the translator tends to give more consideration to the target audience’s needs, focusing more on the acceptability of the translation, thus shifting towards the “acceptability” pole. However, it is crucial to recognize that adequacy and acceptability are not binary opposites but two ends of a continuous spectrum. In practice, every translation inevitably falls somewhere between these two poles, because absolute adequacy (complete fidelity to the source) and total acceptability (perfect naturalness in the target) are both unattainable ideals.

Translators constantly negotiate along this continuum, making context-dependent trade-offs, and the resulting translation always represents a relative positioning rather than an absolute allegiance to one side. Moreover, this positioning is not fixed; it may vary across different textual levels (e.g., more adequacy at the lexical level, more acceptability at the syntactic level) or even shift within the same text depending on the translator's goals. This inherent fluidity means that shifts in translation are not only inevitable but also constrained by norms, which constitutes "the truly universal law of translation" [8]. Operational norms govern the micro-level choices made by the translator during the translation act, dominating the actual choices and technical strategies in the translation process. They are divided into matricial norms and textual-linguistic norms. Matricial norms relate to the completeness of the target text. They determine the specific form in which target language material replaces source language material, its placement and paragraph division within the text, and also dictate whether additional paragraphs or annotations are needed. Textual-linguistic norms govern the selection of target language material, covering words, phrases, and stylistic features. They influence or determine the choices translators make regarding which target language material to use as a replacement for, or as a corresponding expression of, the source language material [8]. Throughout the translation activity, preliminary, initial, and operational norms are not isolated from each other but constitute a hierarchical, progressive relationship, moving from macro to micro, external to internal, and socio-cultural to textual-linguistic. They collectively influence decisions made during the translation process. Preliminary norms define the scope, initial norms set the direction, and operational norms fill in the details.

3. A Comparative Analysis of Two English Translations of *Mencius* from the Perspective of Toury's Theory Translational Norms

Based on Toury's translation norms theory, this paper will compare and analyze Legge's and D.C. Lau's English translations of *Mencius*, investigating how socio-cultural contexts influenced the translators' text selection, their overall orientation towards source or target culture norms, and their specific choices during the translation process.

3.1. Preliminary Norms

Preliminary norms, as the first of the three norms, encompass both translation policy and the directness of translation. Firstly, regarding the directness of translation, there is no difference between Legge's and Lau's translations; both are direct translations from Chinese into English, without involving retranslation through an intermediary language. Secondly, concerning translation policy, significant differences exist between the two versions, primarily due to the distinct historical backgrounds, identities, and translation purposes of the two translators.

James Legge was a 19th-century British sinologist and missionary for the Lon-

don Missionary Society. The first edition of “Chinese Classics” translated by him was published in Hong Kong in 1861. Among them, the first volume includes *The Analects*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, while the second volume is *Mencius*. In terms of historical context, the 19th century marked the peak of British colonial expansion, with increasing conflicts and exchanges with China in politics and trade (e.g., around the Opium Wars). Therefore, for Britain, understanding the ideological foundations of this vast empire was a prerequisite for effective colonial governance and commercial dealings. From the perspective of translator identity and translation purpose, on the one hand, as a missionary, Legge regarded the translation of Confucian classics as a part of missionary activities, with the aim of exploring the similarities between Confucian philosophy and Christian doctrine, thereby promoting the spread of Christianity in China. He firmly believed that it was necessary to carry out this work, because only then could missionaries possess sufficient wisdom and reap long-term and reliable results [10]. According to Ding and Song’s analysis, as a missionary, Legge was deeply convinced that a thorough knowledge of the Confucian classics and their commentaries was a prerequisite for effective missionary work. By familiarizing himself with and integrating into the Chinese classical scholarly tradition, he sought to reduce cultural friction and thereby facilitate the spread of Christianity. The primary readership Legge envisaged was Western missionaries [4]. At the same time, he also admitted that only by having a thorough understanding of the classic works of the Chinese people, personally exploring the moral system constructed by Chinese sages and the foundation of social and political life, can he match his identity and responsibilities [11]. On the other hand, as a sinologist, Legge had a strong interest in Sinology, and his translation work was significantly influenced by his own academic research. Ding and Song also point out that Legge, driven by a scholar’s rational pursuit, hoped to satisfy his own curiosity and understanding of Chinese culture through translation [4].

D.C. Lau was a renowned translator, linguist, and sinologist born in Hong Kong, China. His English translation of *Mencius* was first published by *Penguin Books* in 1970. In terms of historical context, during the mid-to-late 20th century, the post-WWII world order was reshaped, and Asian economies began to take off. The attitude of Western academia towards Eastern thought shifted from curiosity during the colonial period to “serious philosophical dialogue”. People were no longer satisfied with viewing China through the lens of missionaries; they desired direct contact with and understanding of the original appearance of Chinese philosophy. Translation at this time was more for academic exchange and cultural dissemination, emphasizing objectivity and accuracy, rather than serving specific religious or political agendas. Additionally, after World War II, the United States provided strong support for the translation of Chinese cultural texts. Official US organizations and civil society groups established funding programs to encourage teaching Chinese and Japanese language and culture in universities and to sponsor the translation of relevant cultural texts [12]. Concerning his identity and purpose,

Lau was a sinologist and philosopher with profound expertise in classical literature. Unlike Legge, he did not translate for missionary purposes but approached the classics with a purely academic and philosophical perspective. He focused more on the philosophical connotations of the text and the precision of language, aiming to introduce Chinese ancient books as part of the world's philosophical heritage to English readers. In the introduction, he provides a detailed analysis of Mencius' core concepts, including his theory of human nature (xing), the heart/mind (xin), qi (vital force), and the Mandate of Heaven (tianming), while also comparing Mencius' views with those of contemporary or neighbouring thinkers such as Xunzi, Gaozi, Yang Zhu, and Mo Di [13]. This shows that his translation is not merely a linguistic conversion, but rather a systematic presentation of the philosophical coherence and depth of Mencius' thought in a manner accessible to the English-speaking world. Moreover, he devotes considerable space to outlining the historical background, political transformations, and philosophical debates of the Warring States period—such as the goodness or badness of human nature, the relationship between the Mandate of Heaven and destiny, and the distinction between righteousness and self-interest—with the aim of enabling readers unfamiliar with pre-Qin Chinese thought to enter Mencius' intellectual world, rather than reading his sayings in isolation [13].

3.2. Initial Norms

The initial norms, which dominate among the three major norms, determine the translator's overall translational inclination. This inclination is dictated by the position of translated literature within the literary polysystem, leading to translations characterized by either "adequacy" or "acceptability." In this regard, Legge's and Lau's translations exhibit distinct characteristics.

In the 19th-century Anglophone intellectual context, the subsystem of translated Chinese classics within the broader literary polysystem occupied a marginal position. While translated literature as a whole—particularly translations from Greek, Latin, and major European languages—played a central role in British culture's absorption and construction of global knowledge, Chinese philosophical texts like Mencius remained exotic and peripheral. They were largely the preserve of missionary-scholars and Orientalists rather than integrated into mainstream literary or philosophical discourse. This marginal positioning, however, did not simply predict a source-oriented strategy in Legge's translation. The English literary system at the time was confident and expansive, and Legge's project was not intended to fill a gap in English literature but to expand the boundaries of Western knowledge about the East. This context allowed him to adopt a relatively foreignizing approach, preserving the structure, wording, and cultural specificities of the original. He believed that English had the capacity to absorb this strangeness, and his translation thus enriched the expressive range of English while positioning Mencius as a new intellectual resource for scholarly scrutiny within the Anglophone academic system.

By the mid-to-late 20th century, the position of translated Chinese classics within the English-language literary polysystem had undergone a subtle shift. Mencius was no longer viewed merely as an exotic spectacle of the East; it began to be treated as a potential object of serious philosophical study. However, within the subsystem of translated philosophical texts—and indeed within the broader polysystem of English-language philosophy dominated by Western analytic traditions—Chinese philosophy still occupied a distinctly peripheral position. It had to prove its “readability” and “philosophical value” to gain acceptance into mainstream academic discourse. In order to move Mencius from the periphery toward the center of English-language philosophical conversation, Lau had to adopt a highly domesticating strategy. In his translation, he prioritized fluency and readability, restructuring long classical Chinese sentences, clarifying implicit logical connections, and rendering culture-bound terms into accessible English equivalents. His translation thus conformed closely to the norms of contemporary English academic and philosophical discourse, shifting decisively towards the acceptability pole.

3.3. Operational Norms

Operational norms, which constrain the translator’s micro-level choices during translation, include both matricial norms and textual-linguistic norms.

Matricial norms concern the completeness of the target text. They influence the translator’s choice of how to present the macro structure of the text, such as whether the translator chooses a complete translation or a selective translation. At the same time, it also controls the placement and distribution of the translated text in the overall text, affecting paragraph generation, rewriting, position movement, and content addition and deletion. Furthermore, omissions, additions, shifts in position, and manipulations of various segmentation phenomena appearing in paratexts can be determined by these norms [14]. Regarding matricial norms, Legge’s and Lau’s translations share similarities and exhibit differences.

The similarity is that both Legge’s and Lau’s translations of *Mencius* are complete translations. Both preserve the original structure of seven chapters, and each further divided into two parts (total of fourteen sections). In handling the internal structure of the chapters, both strictly follow the order of the original text.

The differences are reflected in the arrangement of the following specific content: Legge’s translation consists of three parts: Prolegomena, translated text body, and Index. The Prolegomena comprises four chapters, covering a general introduction to *Mencius*, an introduction to Mencius’s life, ideas, and his disciples, an introduction to the views of Yang Zhu and Mozi, and a list of works consulted for the translation. The main body consists of three parts per page: the original Chinese text at the top, the English translation in the middle, and translation notes at the bottom. The Index consists of three sections: Index of Subjects, Index of Proper Names, and Index of Chinese Characters and Phrases.

Lau’s translation consists of five parts: Introduction, List of Further Reading,

translated text body, Appendices, Textual Notes, and a Glossary of Persons and Places. Among them, the Introduction is highly valuable. In the preface, Lau introduces Mencius's life and his ideas and points out the importance of studying *Mencius*. The American sinologist David S. Nivison highly praised this introduction, stating, "In this valuable translation, the Introduction alone must be regarded as one of the best publications on the study of *Mencius*" [15]. The Further Reading list includes ten monographs or articles related to Mencius studies recommended by American scholar Roger T. Ames. The Appendices contain five sections: a chronological determination of Mencius's life events, early legends about Mencius, the translator's views on the text of *Mencius*, Mencius's view of ancient history, and the analogies used by Mencius in debate.

Textual-linguistic norms constrain the selection of linguistic materials in the translation, manifesting in the translator's handling of the source text's vocabulary, syntax, and other aspects.

Firstly, in terms of vocabulary processing. The original text of *Mencius* contains a large number of Chinese cultural words. Comparing this aspect, it can be found that the two translators used different translation strategies or techniques when dealing with these cultural words.

Example 1:

孟子对曰：“王！何必曰利？亦有仁义而已矣”。

Mencius replied, "Why must your Majesty use that word 'profit'? What I am provided with, are counsels to benevolence and righteousness, and these are my only topics." (Legge)

"Your Majesty," answered Mencius. "What is the point of mentioning the word 'profit'? All that matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness." (Lau)

This example is from the first chapter of the opening section of *Mencius*, where Mencius responds to King Hui of Liang's question about profit. The term "仁义" (renyi) in the original text is one of the core terms of Mencius' thought. "仁" centers on "loving others", which is a kind of kindness and sympathy originating from the heart; while "义" leans towards judging whether an action is "appropriate" (fitting, proper), serving as a moral code that guides us on how to act correctly in specific situations. Legge translates it as "benevolence and righteousness", and Lau similarly as "benevolence and rightness", accurately and clearly conveying the core connotations. Slightly differently, Legge adds a footnote below the translation explaining that "benevolence and righteousness" were the only topics Mencius discussed with the rulers of his time and the sole principle for making a state prosperous and strong. This helps readers gain a deeper understanding of the concept.

Example 2:

曰：“王如知此，则无望民之多于邻国也。……养生丧死无憾，王道之始也。”

"Since your Majesty knows this," replied Mencius, "you need not hope that your people will become more numerous than those of the neighbouring

kingdoms... This condition, in which the people nourish their living and bury their dead without any feeling against any, is the first step of royal government.” (Legge)

“If you can see that,” said Mencius, “you will not expect your own state to be more populous than the neighbouring states... For the people not to have any regrets over anything left undone, whether in the support of their parents when alive or in the mourning of them when dead, is the first step along the Kingly way.” (Lau)

This example is Mencius’s answer to King Hui of Liang’s question about why his state’s population was not larger than neighboring states. The concept of “王道” (Wang Dao) in the original text is a core concept in Mencius’s political ethics. It refers to the ideal political model in which a ruler, through moral influence and benevolent governance, wins the heartfelt allegiance of the people without resorting to force. Its defining feature is “convincing people through virtue” (以德服人), making the people submit willingly and sincerely—this is what distinguishes it from “霸道” (hegemonic rule) based on coercion. Legge translates “王道” as “royal government,” adopting a familiar Western political term. This choice appears, at first glance, to be a target-oriented domestication strategy, as it maps a Chinese political-philosophical concept onto a readily intelligible Western category. However, the translation also complicates this neat classification: “royal government” conveys a concrete institutional system, whereas Mencius’ “王道” is primarily an ethical ideal rather than a form of governance in the institutional sense. By using a term that emphasizes institutional monarchy, Legge inadvertently narrows the original concept, losing its moral and transformative dimensions. Thus, his translation is neither purely source-oriented (it substitutes a foreign term with a familiar one) nor purely target-oriented (it fails to achieve full acceptability because the resulting concept does not align neatly with Western political realities). Instead, it sits in an ambiguous middle ground, illustrating the difficulty of positioning translations along a simple source-target axis. Lau translates “王道” as “the Kingly way”. The word “Kingly” carries an elevated, almost archaic tone, suggesting an idealized and morally upright ruler—not merely a political sovereign but a figure endowed with virtue and sagely authority. This defamiliarizing choice signals to the reader that the concept belongs to a distinct Chinese politico-ethical tradition, resisting easy assimilation into Western political vocabulary. At first glance, Lau’s strategy appears more source-oriented, as it preserves the foreignness of the concept. However, closer examination complicates this classification: the term “way” in English, while evoking a path or method, does not carry the full philosophical weight of the Chinese “Dao” for most English readers; moreover, the compound “Kingly way” lacks an established usage in Western political discourse, making it less immediately intelligible than Legge’s “royal government”. In this sense, Lau’s translation does not achieve maximal “adequacy” to the source either, because it leaves the English reader with an abstract and somewhat vague notion that requires further contextual explanation. The choice thus resists a clear

source-oriented label, as it does not fully convey the specific ethical content of Mencius' "Wang Dao" (benevolence, moral influence, popular consent) without relying on external commentary.

Secondly, in terms of syntactic processing. The two translators used different translation methods when dealing with the sentence structure of the original text.

Example 3:

“五亩之宅，树之以桑，五十者可以衣帛矣；鸡豚狗彘之畜，无失其时，七十者可以食肉矣；百亩之田，勿夺其时，数口之家可以无饥矣。”

“Let mulberry trees be planted about the homesteads with their five mu, and persons of fifty may be clothed with silk. In keeping fowls, pigs, dogs, and swine, let not their times of breeding be neglected, and persons of seventy may eat flesh. Let there not be taken away the time that is necessary for the cultivation of the farm with its hundred mu, and the family of several mouths that is supported by it shall not suffer from hunger.” (Legge)

“If the mulberry is planted in every homestead of five mu of land, then those who are fifty can wear silk; if chickens, pigs and dogs do not miss their breeding season, then those who are seventy can eat meat; if each lot of a hundred mu is not deprived of labour during the busy season, then families with several mouths to feed will not go hungry. (Lau)

The original text in this example consists of three parallel clauses (“五亩之宅...”, “鸡豚狗彘之畜...”, “百亩之田...”) with similar structures and tone, forming a parallelism that enhances rhetorical force, systematically unfolding Mencius's ideal blueprint of benevolent governance with clarity. Legge translates the three clauses as three coordinate sentences, but their syntactic structures are not uniform: the first is an imperative (Let...be planted); the second begins with a prepositional phrase (In keeping...), becoming a declarative sentence; the third returns to an imperative sentence (Let...not be taken away). While this treatment shows the parallel relationship between sentences, it disrupts the rhythmic effect of the parallelism. Additionally, he uses multiple subordinate clauses (that is supported by it) and passive voice (be planted, be clothed, be neglected), resulting in a more complex sentence structure. This structure directly imitates the legal book style of the Bible (especially *the Old Testament*). It gives people a feeling of “God/saint issuing decrees”, with a very strong and solemn tone, and reads with a Victorian era complexity. Lau's translation, conversely, is more concise, using three perfectly parallel conditional sentences. Each clause begins with “if,” and the main clause is introduced by “then,” creating a strong parallel rhythm that perfectly mirrors the repetitive structure of the original (“... 矣”), reproducing Mencius's layered argumentative momentum. In addition, the “if...then...” structure explicitly presents the implied “只要...就...” logical relationship, enabling English readers to immediately grasp the causal relationships Mencius describes.

Example 4:

“故天将降大任于是人也，必先苦其心志，劳其筋骨，饿其体肤，空乏其

身，行拂乱其所为，所以动心忍性，曾益其所不能。”

“Thus, when Heaven is about to confer a great office on any man, it first exercises his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil. It exposes his body to hunger, and subjects him to extreme poverty. It confounds his undertakings. By all these methods it stimulates his mind, hardens his nature, and supplies his incompetencies.” (Legge)

“That is why Heaven, when it is about to place a great burden on a man, always first tests his resolution, exhausts his frame and makes him suffer starvation and hardship, frustrates his efforts so as to shake him from his mental lassitude, toughen his nature and make good his deficiencies.” (Lau)

The original text in this example begins with five structurally identical verb-object phrases that enumerate hardships (苦其心志，劳其筋骨，饿其体肤，空乏其身，行拂乱其所为). These five expressions form a parallelism that vividly depicts suffering from spirit to body, from personal condition to external actions, powerfully rendering the severity of adversity. Following this enumeration, the clause “所以动心忍性，曾益其所不能” explicitly states the purpose of these hardships—to stir the mind, toughen one’s nature, and supplement one’s inadequacies. Legge tends to use a long main clause, connecting the first four hardship phrases with coordinating conjunctions (exercises... and ... toil... exposes... and subjects...), while treating the fifth (confounds his undertakings) as a separate coordinate predicate. This structure imitates the solemnity of the Bible, with a grand momentum that reads like waves after waves, emphasizing the continuity and irresistible nature of suffering. Furthermore, Legge explicitly uses the conjunction “By all these methods” to introduce the resulting purpose, clearly referring to all the trials listed previously. In contrast, Lau condenses the parallel hardship phrases into a tighter form. He uses stacked verbs (tests his resolution, exhausts his frame and makes him suffer...) and combines “饿其体肤，空乏其身” into “suffer starvation and hardship,” while keeping “行拂乱其所为” as a separate action. This results in a faster pace, aligning better with modern English reading habits, making the sentence appear more forceful and direct, reducing the complexity of classical English. Finally, he uses “so as to” to directly link the last hardship (frustrates his efforts) with its immediate purpose (shake him from lassitude), and then continues with the broader purpose (toughen and make good his deficiencies). This shortens the logical chain and makes the causal relationship more compact.

4. Conclusion

Traditional translation studies primarily focused on the textual-linguistic level, analyzing translations from a micro perspective. However, Toury’s translation norms theory not only encompasses micro-level research but also opens up avenues for research from macro-level perspectives like cultural contexts, making translation studies more objective. This paper, focusing on Legge’s and Lau’s English translations of *Mencius*, examines the application of Toury’s translation norms theory in the field of translating Chinese cultural classics. It compares the

different translational behaviors of the two translators under the constraints of translation norms. Constrained by preliminary norms, different historical backgrounds, identities, and translation purposes determined the translators' text selection. Constrained by the initial norm, the translators displayed different translational inclinations. Legge was oriented towards source culture norms, placing more emphasis on the "adequacy" of the translation, striving for close adherence to the original in both form and content. In contrast, Lau was oriented towards target culture norms, paying more attention to the "acceptability" of the translation, making his version easier for Western readers to understand. Constrained by operational norms, the translators adopted different translation strategies, resulting in distinct textual features at the lexical and syntactic levels. In summary, by applying Toury's translation norms theory, this paper integrates translation with cultural context, describing and interpreting the translator's behavior during the translation activity, aiming to provide some reference for the translation of Chinese cultural classics into English.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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