

# **A Study of the Influence of Mencius' Interpretation Theory on James Legge's Translation and Hermeneutics**

**Zhang Ping**

*School of Languages and Cultures, Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai, China*

**Abstract:** "Meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding," a hermeneutical theory put forward by Mencius, has exerted a profound and enduring influence on the academic development of subsequent generations. The widespread acclaim of James Legge's translations in the West can be attributed to his extensive, profound, and meticulous exploration of ancient Chinese culture, as well as his adept application of this Mencian principle in the translation of *The Chinese Classics*. This paper undertakes a comprehensive analysis of James Legge's comprehension of ancient Chinese culture during the translation process and delves into the significant impact of Mencius' hermeneutical theory on Legge's translation practices and hermeneutical perspectives.

**Keywords:** "Meeting the Intention of the Writer with Sympathetic Understanding"; *The Chinese Classics*; Hermeneutics

## **1. Introduction**

In the history of cultural exchanges between China and the West in the 19th century, James Legge (1815-1897) stands as a prominent figure, renowned as a Scottish scholar and missionary, and acclaimed as a translator of Chinese classical literature. He played a pivotal role in bridging the cultural divide between the East and the West. Since his arrival in Hong Kong in 1843, Legge dedicated several decades to the painstaking translation of ancient Chinese classics. His masterpiece, the complete translation of the 13-volume Confucian Classics, sets an unrivaled standard that endures to this day, serving as a benchmark for all subsequent English translations. In the mid-19th century, Legge's literary output was prolific, with his translations spanning the gamut of major Chinese literary and philosophical classics, thereby presenting a panoramic view of the profundity and expanse of Chinese culture and attesting to his erudition (Bowman, 2016).

A meticulous examination of his translation

methodology reveals that Legge consistently adhered to the principle of "meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding," an approach that traces its roots to Mencius' hermeneutical paradigm for interpreting Confucian classics. Mencius championed a holistic understanding of the ideological essence of a poem. Legge grasped the essence of this principle and incorporated it into his research and translation, thereby laying a solid foundation for the dissemination of Chinese culture in the West (Deng Xinhua, 2002).

## **2. Mencius's Theory of "Meeting the Intention of the Writer with Sympathetic Understanding"**

The phrase "meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding" first appeared in the works of Mencius, where it is stated, "Do not insist on one term so as to do violence to the general scope. Use your thoughts to meet that scope, and then you will apprehend it" (Legge, 1861). Here, Mencius proposed an interpretive method for appreciating poetry. He suggested that when interpreting texts, we should start from the whole and grasp the author's intentions. Interpretation should not be "out of context," focusing merely on the superficial meaning of the text, but rather by understanding the author and their original intentions. In this way, the correct understanding of the text's theme will not be distorted by individual phrases, ensuring that the interpretation remains true to the author's profound intentions. This approach allows for objective and fair interpretation, minimizing subjective biases.

Mencius's interpretation can be analyzed through three key terms: "sympathetic understanding" (yi), "meet" (ni), and "intention" (zhi).

### **2.1 the Essence of "intention" (yi)**

Is the Potential "sympathetic Understanding" within the Mind of the Interpreter, Rather than the "meaning" Explicitly Expressed by the Author in the Text. There Are Two Main Perspectives. One Is from Zhao Qi (108-201

A.D.), a Scripturist in the Eastern Han Dynasty. Zhao Qi Believed That Understanding This "meaning" Should Be the Interpreter's Own Mind. "Meaning Is the Mind of the Scholar," He Said. by Reading Extensively from the Author's Works, the Interpreter Attempts to Comprehend the Creator's Intentions (Zhao, 1998). This Approach Has Been Widely Accepted. for Instance, Zhu Xi (1130-1200 A.D.) Stated, "One Sentence Should Not Harm the Original Intention of the Author; One Should Cater to the Author's Original Intention with the Reader's Own Intention" (Zhu, 2007). the Second View, Held by Wu Qi (1615-1675 A.D.), Is That "meaning" Is the Author's Mind. Most Contemporary Scholars Respect the First Interpretation, Which Aligns Closely with Mencius's Concept (Zhou, 2003).

### **2.2 the Term "meet" (ni)**

Involves Experiencing the Creator's Heart with the Interpreter's Heart. "Meet" Represents a Fusion of Two Senses, Where the Interpreter's Mind Is Used to Speculate and Experience the Author's Mind, Inferring past Situations from the Present. This Involves Tracing the Author's Mood Back to the Interpreter's Existing Emotional Environment. Therefore, It Is Essential for the Interpreter to Adopt This Method to Bridge the Historical and Cultural Gap during Translation.

### **2.3 the "intention" (zhi)**

Refers to the Poet's Evaluation of Social Life When Creating, a Kind of Thought Possessed by the Poet. It Evolves from the "poem Expressing the Will" in the Doctrine of the Mean and the "will" in Confucius's "Who Knows Its Will." It Represents the Thoughts and Emotions That Poetry Creators Wish to Express. "Intention" Is Also the Essence of Poetry and the Realistic Meaning That Poetry Tends to Convey. When Translating, Interpreters Need to Carefully Understand the "intention" Expressed in Poetry to Provide an Accurate Interpretation.

Mencius's interpretive approach has significantly influenced subsequent generations and has greatly contributed to the development of Chinese hermeneutics. Readers should not interpret texts according to their own will, adding excessive subjective meanings, or simply understanding the text superficially out of context. Instead, they should focus on the whole of the text, considering the author, the background of creation, and the original intention, moving from the outside to the inside to grasp the main purpose of the author's

creation.

### **3. James Legge's Translation of The Chinese Classics**

From 1861 to 1872, James Legge translated and published five volumes of Chinese classics, including the Four Books (The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, Confucian Analects, The Works of Mencius) and the Five Classics (The Book of Songs, The Book of History, The Spring and Autumn Annals, and The Bamboo Annals). Legge's translation work was challenging, with many of his translations being the first of their kind, and his contributions to subsequent translations were enormous. Legge's translations facilitated the spread of Chinese culture to Western countries and built a bridge for cultural exchange between China and the West (Yue, 2004). Meanwhile, his translations were deeply influenced by Mencius's interpretation of "meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding."

### **4. The Integration of Western "Fusion of Horizons" and Chinese "Meeting the Intention"**

Western translation of Chinese classics is essentially a process of collision and integration of Chinese and Western cultures. Where they don't fit, they collide, and where they are the same, they merge. According to Gadamer's view of horizon integration, (Gadamer, 2013) the representative of Western hermeneutics, when people interpret other authors' texts, they will have their own understanding, based on their current situation, and they want to collide with the "horizon" of the text writers when they write the text, so as to reveal the meaning of the text. The text we are trying to interpret, or the writer of the text, is real in the present or history. We can't go back to the situation in the past or stand in the situation when the author writes the text again, so there will be someone's own understanding and situation in the process of translation. But what we can do is to grasp the original meaning of the author to the greatest extent, so as to achieve the fusion of the vision of the translator and the original author. Such a process is called horizon fusion. (Gadamer, 2013)

It is necessary for the interpreter to guess and cater to the original author's "will" with his own "will" when interpreting the original author's text. It means that when the interpreter is reading the text, he can fully understand the potential meaning of the text. According to the interpretation of the interpreter, he can show the

meaning the text author tends to express and turn it into practical significance. It coincides with the Western interpretation of "fusion of horizons". They have a lot in common, all of which require the interpreter to contact the situation and the original intention of the creator when interpreting the text. There is a little difference in emphasis between "meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding" and "fusion of vision", which emphasizes the interpretation of the author's original meaning. One word, or one sentence can't destroy the "aspiration" that the text creator wants to express. It should be based on the whole. Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" emphasizes that the interpreter and the text creator should be the same. They should have their own horizons as well as the vision of the text creator, and finally make the interpretation. (Gadamer, 2013)

Mencius's theory of "meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding" coincides with the western theory of "fusion of horizons", which also proves that James Legge's recognition of the interpretation of "meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding" has a strong foundation. Thus, we can see these two kinds of interpretation views shown in James Legge's translation of Chinese Classics. For example, on the title page of the five volumes of James Legge's translation of The Chinese Classics quotes Mencius's saying, "do not harm the words, do not harm the will by words, and disobey the will is to gain". (Wang, 2003) This is Mencius's interpretation theory. There are many similarities between this view of interpretation and Western "fusion of horizons". James Legge translated this passage of Mencius into: "Do not insist on one term so as to do violence to a sentence, nor on a sentence so as to do violence to the general scope. Use your thoughts to meet that scope, and then you will apprehend it. (James Legge 1861:1)

From the translation of this passage, we can see James Legge's attitude towards Chinese culture: inclusive, open and positive. And this sentence is put at the beginning of the paper, which fully reflects that James Legge always reminds himself to keep it in mind when translating, and to cater to the author's "intention" with his "meaning". It is not difficult to find that the interpretation theory of "meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding" has a profound influence on James Legge's translation and hermeneutics.

## **5. James Legge's Hermeneutics and the**

### **Hermeneutic View of "Meeting the Intention"**

#### **5.1 "Meeting the Intention" in James Legge's Translation**

The classics of China translated by James Legge is regarded as the top work of Sinology in Europe in the 19th century. No matter its evaluation or its position in the field of Sinology, the classics of China is very high. It is not difficult to find out that in the process of translation, the top principle adopted in James Legge's translation is "meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding".

The title paper of each volume of The Chinese Classics translated by James Legge is Mencius's view that "it is for the sake of getting, not for the sake of words, not for the sake of ambition." In James Legge's view, the psychological process of the ancients in their creation is difficult to be realized. As a translator, he can only feel the creator's "ambition" with the translator's own "will". This is the premise for the translator to translate the text. According to Legge, the language of the translation needs to infuse the whole meaning of the words and sentences of the original text, as well as the creative purpose and motivation of the creator. In this process, the translator should also show the "meaning" that the translator understands and feels and the "meaning" that the creator of the original text intends to express. Although the text translated by the way of interpretation of "meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding" can't get the real meaning of the will, it can be infinitely close to the meaning of the ancients. From James Legge's translation of Chinese classics, we can see his practice of this view.

James Legge's treatment of "Zhi" and "Ni" is unique and creative. In the concept of James Legge, the "Zhi" expressed by the creator is not a transient whim, nor a fleeting idea. "Zhi" should be a small world view with a certain time and space, which can have unlimited possibilities. We can see the situation of the original author at the previous stage of creation in "Zhi", and we can also see the virtue of the creator in "Zhi". At the same time, it may also be a kind of "ambition" constructed by the poem creator in a certain situation, event or person. The possibility of "Zhi" exists in many ways, but no matter which form it is, it cannot be static and constant, so "Zhi" is dynamic.

James Legge's understanding of "meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding" is very thorough, for this kind of understanding and thinking of the original text

with the translator, go back to that historical environment to feel the original author's "will", this kind of translation method is exactly what James Legge uses most in the following translation of Chinese classics. In the process of translation, James Legge's view of interpretation is fully in line with the basic thinking of Chinese hermeneutics. In practice, it is very appropriate to use "meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding", which plays an important role in the history of Western Chinese translation. We can learn from James Legge that "No harm is done to words. Don't harm your mind with words. In the understanding of the idea against the will is to get it," this paper analyzes James Legge's understanding of the idea against the will.

It is translated as: "Do not insist on one term so as to do violence to a sentence, nor on a sentence so as to do violence to the general scope. Use your thoughts to meet that scope, and then you will apprehend it." (James Legge 1861:1)

In his translation of Mencius's passage, "Wen" is translated into "term" and "Ci" into "sentence." In ancient Chinese, "Wen" originally meant tattoo or special symbols on the body; later it was applied to the symbols of the Chinese language. In English, the word "term" refers to a special meaning or a professional term, rather than a literal translation of "word." Thus, when Legge translated Mencius's text, he noticed that the meaning of "Wen" had a professional connotation. For "Ci," he translated it into "sentence." In ancient Chinese, the original meaning of "Ci" is litigation, later extended to the words of litigation, and finally to general words or a literary carrier. In Mencius, "Ci" represents words and sentences used to form a complete sentence. Thus, Legge's translation of "sentence" is based on this consideration. It can be seen that Legge does not stick to word-for-word translation but uses words to optimize and adjust the translated sentence reasonably to ensure overall smoothness.

In the translation of "do not harm the will with words," "the will" is translated into "scope." In ancient Chinese, the original meaning of "Zhi" is the direction of aspiration and heart, as described in Shuo-wen jiezi. In Mencius, "Zhi" refers to some kind of emotion or social phenomenon, so Legge translated "Zhi" into "scope" rather than "meaning." Comparatively speaking, the words used by Legge are more accurate and reflect the thoughts and feelings expressed by the author (Duan, 2005). Legge translated "try with their thoughts to meet that scope and then we shall approve it" (Legge, 1861). From the literal

meaning of English, it means "try to think about the original work from the perspective of the original author, and you can realize the meaning." Legge translated "meaning" into "thought." The translated word, in modern Chinese, means "thinking, reasoning, and understanding," but not literal translation. It is precisely because the meaning of "meaning" translated by Legge is more extensive, including the meaning of the translator, the announcer, and the work itself, rather than the literal meaning.

### **5.2 the Practice of "Meeting the Intention" in James Legge's Translation**

By combing The Chinese Classics translated by James Legge, we can see that his translation is a process of recreation. In his early years, he adhered to strict translation and tried to translate the Chinese text "facts" as faithfully as possible without long-term English paraphrasing, even if he was able to write eloquently. At the same time, he understood that simple English classical style might interfere with simple meaning, so his notes were extensive, used to explain and enhance the meaning of Chinese text when the originals were extremely mysterious (Bowman, 2016).

For Legge, the basic principle of his translation was "faithfulness," that is, not destroying the original meaning. However, it is not difficult to find innovation in Legge's interpretation. For example, in the Confucian Analects, the translation of "xian xian yi se" is rendered as: "If a man withdraws his mind from the love of beauty, and applies it as sincerely to the love of the virtuous." Note: "'se' has a different meaning from that in the 3rd chapter. Here it means 'sensual pleasure.' Literally rendered, the first sentence would be, 'esteeming properly the virtuous, and changing the love of woman,' and great fault is found by some, as in The Corrections on Four Books with Chu Hsi's interpretation which I have followed" (Legge, 1886:264). In the translation of the original text, "se" is rendered into "lustful," and "yi" into "change," which are explained in the annotation. From this, it can be found that Legge's translation is based on understanding and has made a second creation.

There are also contradictions between Chinese and Western meaning, that is, the differences between the meaning of the text and Christian doctrine. The contradiction between Mencius' theory of "good nature" and Christianity's theory of "original sin" is one example. We can take a sentence translation from Mencius as an example:

Original text: Teng Wengong is a son of the world. He saw Mencius after the Song Dynasty. Mencius is a man of good nature, so he must be called Yao and Shun.

Translated text: When the prince, afterwards Duke Wen of Teng, had to go to Chu, he went by way of Song, and visited Mencius. Mencius discoursed to him how the nature of man is good, and when speaking, always made laudatory reference to Yao and Shun (Legge, 1861:315).

Here, Legge translated "xing" into "the nature of man," and "shan" into "good," instead of literal translation into "perfect" or "perfection." From the words used, it can be found that Legge avoided the translation of "good," because in his Christian doctrine, Jesus Christ can be called "the best," while in Mencius' text, the subject of "good" is human. Therefore, for the translation of "goodness," Legge did not use other people's comments for reference and translated Mencius' "goodness" into "supreme goodness." In the process of translation, Legge deals with the same part of Mencius' doctrine and Christian doctrine by integrating Western doctrine into it. For different parts, Legge shows his own views, willing to find a balance point with Christian doctrine.

It is not hard to see that in the process of translation, Legge makes full use of the interpretation of "meeting the intention," and at the same time, his translation always reveals Christian thought, which is full of religious color. He regarded the "meaning" of "meeting the intention" as the meaning of the readers, the "will" as the author's "will," and the translator as the combination of the two to produce a new meaning, which can be translated only by understanding.

### **5.3 the Practice of "Meeting the Intention" in James Legge's Classical Annotation**

"Faithfulness" has always been the basic principle of James Legge's translation. From the linguistic point of view, there is a contradiction between the faithfulness of the translated text and the beauty of the language; sometimes only one of which can be chosen. Legge holds the principle that the greatest principle is to express the willingness of the original text and help the target readers comprehend it in various ways. On this basis, it will, definitely, damage literary and language aesthetics. It can be found from many Chinese works translated by Legge that his translation has a very significant feature, that is, the prolegomena and notes. In translating Chinese Classics, Legge made full use of the way of "focusing on classics." Its scope covered

introduction, interpretation, textual research, demonstration, and evaluation. For example, Tao Te Ching, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, and Confucian Analects all have a large number of introductions. In the notes and introductions, Legge fully expressed his recognition of Chinese classical literature and his standpoint of reading it. These notes provide background information, explanations, a discussion of any problems caused by certain characters, and references to similar ideas in Latin, Greek, European, and British writers that were printed in the original language rather than translated. These annotations provided many clues for us to study the influence of Mencius' hermeneutic view on James Legge's hermeneutics.

For example, in the Confucian Analects, "Do what you don't want to do to others, do not to others," Legge translated as "not to do to others" and "what you do not want done to yourself, do not to others" respectively (Legge, 1886:213). The situation of the two translations is different. One is what Confucius said when he explained "benevolence"; the other is when he said "forgiveness." There is no difference between benevolence and forgiveness if they are simply understood literally. But when Legge is translating "benevolence" into "perfect virtue" and "forgiveness" into "reciprocity" (Yang, 1980). The interpretation of the word "perfect" in Western Christianity cannot be achieved by ordinary people. When Legge translated the sentence "lose virtue and then benevolence," he used the word "benevolence" instead of "perfect virtue" used in the Analects. So Legge translated, intending to remind the readers that "do not do to others what you don't want to do to others." The answer "benevolence" here corresponded to the "golden law" in the Bible and the "benevolence" in Laozi's Tao Te Ching. When "benevolence" was translated into "perfect virtue," the latter translation of "forgiveness" was not the opportunity for ordinary people, but the "grace" that ordinary people could bear. Legge was committed to connecting Chinese culture with Western culture. From the perspective of Confucius, we can understand the meaning that Confucius tended to express when he created the text, and then express that meaning according to the characteristics of Western culture. In this process, the language expression of Confucius was fully respected, not simply translating from the literal meaning of the words, but deeply digging the context of the words used by Confucius in his creation and the real meaning that Confucius wanted to express,

so that the translated version was more consistent with Confucius' meaning.

For another example, Legge's translation of the Confucian Analects reflected the translation of "repay the resentment with virtue" and "repay the resentment with honesty." To help Westerners understand the meaning of Confucius more intuitively, Legge quoted "how much is the size, repay the evil with the good" in Tao Te Ching. The original version: "What is it like to requite good for evil? Confucius said: how to repay virtue? The master said, 'With what will you recommend kindness? Recommend justice with justice, and recommend kindness with kindness.'" Legge's translated version: "Someone said, 'What do you say concerning the principle that injury should be recompensed with kindness?' The Master said, 'With what will you recompense kindness? Recompense injury with justice, and recompense kindness with kindness'" (Legge, 1861:210). This translation is quite direct, but after the translation Legge added many comments to help the West understand the meaning of Confucius. In the annotation, instead of using the translation of the original text, he used "good for evil" to express "requite evil with good," and "justice for evil" to express "direct complaint." According to the good and evil of Western Christianity, it corresponds to Confucius's "repay evil with good." There are corresponding expressions in the Old Testament or Leviticus of Western Christianity, but they are not consistent with the original meaning of Confucius. Therefore, Legge did not use directly corresponding words in the translation or in the annotation. Instead, he used his own understanding of "meaning" to explain in the annotation according to the understanding of "ambition" that Confucius wanted to express. When translating and annotating this passage, Legge clearly understood Laozi's Tao Te Ching and Confucius' The Book of Rites about "repay resentment with virtue" and "repay resentment with honesty." In the annotation, the different views in Tao Te Ching and The Book of Rites are also listed.

In his annotation, Legge had such a translation of the Tao Te Ching. The original text was "for inaction, for nothing, for tasteless, for how much, for good, for evil." It was the way of the Tao to act without (thinking of) acting; to conduct failures without (feeling the) trouble of them; and to consider what was small as great, and a few as many. Lao-tzu's view was consistent with the Western Christian logic of "taking the small as the big" and "taking the last as the first." Legge was deeply influenced by Mencius'

interpretation. In the process of translation, we should interpret the text from the perspective of the whole understanding, not only from a word or a sentence, but also from the specific context of the text creator when he created the text. It reflected the profound influence of the interpretation of "meeting the intention" on Legge and his deep understanding of it.

#### **5.4 the Influence of Zhu Xi's Hermeneutic View on James Legge's Hermeneutics**

In The Book of Songs, Mencius put forward the idea of "meeting the intention." Zhu Xi (1130-1200 A.D.), a leading Neo-Confucian philosopher in the Southern Song Dynasty, had full interest in this view and developed it further. He divided the interpretive process into four steps: "arouse, experience, master, and rise." Under these four steps, the interpreter is "aroused" with the understanding of the creator of the original text by reading a lot of the original text, and deeply understands and experiences the mood of the creator at the time of creation. In this process, the "meaning" of the interpreter and the "will" of the original author are perfectly integrated, and finally transformed into a new understanding of the original text. Combing these four steps, it is not difficult to find that this is the process of Mencius' "meeting the intention." Zhu Xi's understanding is more focused on the process from "master" to "rise," meaning that the interpreter, with a deep understanding of the original creator, integrates with the original creator's "will," and finally sublimates the "will" that the original creator intends to express. Zhu Xi further optimized Mencius' interpretive thought and integrated it with his own Neo-Confucianism, making great contributions to the formation of traditional Chinese classical hermeneutics (Deng, 2002).

In the process of translating Chinese Classics, James Legge referred to a large number of annotations of Chinese classics. Zhu Xi was one of the most far-reaching influences on him. According to Legge, "Zhu Xi, undoubtedly, is the greatest scholar in Song Dynasty" (Legge, 1861). His style is elegant and clear, which has an unparalleled influence on Chinese literature. It can be seen that in Legge's mind, Zhu Xi was highly valued. He was deeply influenced by Zhu Xi in the process of translation, and so was his view of interpretation. In the general continuation of the translation of Chinese classics, Legge expressed the difficulty of finding the most accurate meaning when he was looking for the will of the original text, but after reading Zhu Xi's annotation, he found the

accuracy of Zhu's analysis of Chinese classics, his in-depth thought, and his ability to express the willingness of the original author, and fully accepted Zhu Xi's translation interpretation and thought. From this aspect, Zhu Xi's hermeneutics has a profound influence on James Legge.

Meanwhile, Legge has many explanations for the translation, including Chinese scholars' interpretations and his own relatively new views. But from the overall perspective of the Chinese classics, most of Legge's interpretations are based on the interpretation of Chinese scholars. For the sake of the accuracy of the translation, Legge tried to avoid subjectivity and subjective deviation from the original. He maintained a high degree of consistency with Zhu Xi in the concept of interpretation. He strived to interpret the original meaning and connotation of the text. This is not only the study of James Legge on Zhu Xi's hermeneutics but also the expression of the influence of the hermeneutic view of "meeting the intention."

## 6. Conclusion

James Legge, a renowned European translator in the 19th century, conducted a comprehensive study and translation of Chinese classics. His translations of The Chinese Classics have played a significant role in the academic world. This paper has focused on analyzing and exploring these translations, aiming to uncover the influence of the ancient Chinese interpretive concept of "meeting the intention of the writer with sympathetic understanding" on Legge's hermeneutics. By examining Legge's English translations, this study delves into the entire psychological process of translation. The process of recognizing, respecting, and translating Chinese classics has profoundly influenced Legge's work. Through a comparison of the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western interpretive perspectives, this paper has elucidated the characteristics of Legge's translation of the Chinese Classics. It has highlighted the expression of the interpretive view of "meeting the intention" in his translation annotations and explored the influence of Zhu Xi on Legge's interpretive approach. The study demonstrates that Mencius' interpretive view has had a far-reaching impact on Legge's interpretive studies. This influence not only enabled Legge to achieve an exceptionally high level of translation for Chinese classics but also

facilitated the dissemination of Chinese culture through his works.

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