

# Comparison of Keyword Translations in *Tao Teh Ching* From the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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*Tao Teh Ching*, which is commonly regarded as the greatest book of Taoism in China, is rich in meaning and profound in annotation. In spite of its limited length, it has a great impact on Chinese philosophy. Due to its great popularity, the number of its translations remains increasing, and the translations by different translators vary from each other. The authors make comparison between James Legge's and Lin Yutang's translations of some keywords in *Tao Teh Ching*. By studying the two translators' personal experiences and basing on the Skopos Theory, they find out that the translators apply different translation strategies because of their cultural backgrounds and translation purposes.

*Keywords:* *Tao Teh Ching*, Skopos Theory, cultural background, translation purpose

## Brief Introduction of *Tao Teh Ching* and Its English Versions

*Tao Teh Ching*, also known as *Tao Te Zhen Ching*, *Lao Tzu*, or *Five Thousand Words*, is a Chinese classic book traditionally credited to the 6th century BC sage Laozi. As a Taoist classic, *Tao Teh Ching* is an important philosophical work in ancient China. It has a great impact on Chinese philosophy and religion, including Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. In spite of the limited length, it covers broad fields, such as astronomy, geography, military, politics, economy, ethics, natural laws, social development, etc.

*Tao Teh Ching* has been translated into more than 40 languages and over 1,000 versions, with the number larger than all the other Chinese books. There are 270 English versions and the earliest translations can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty when a large number of missionaries entered China and started the work of translation. Therefore, the early translations of *Tao Teh Ching* were characterized by "Christianization" at the very beginning. *Tao Teh Ching* first entered the English-speaking world in the 18th century when the Protestant missionary John Chalmers officially published his translation *The Speculation on Metaphysics, Polity and Morality, of the Old Philosopher, Lau-Tse*. This edition was the first complete English translation of *Tao Teh Ching*. Since then, English translations of *Tao Teh Ching* have continuously set new records.

In 1891 James Legge's translation the *Daoist Classics: Tao Teh Ching* was published by the Oxford University Press. It was a classic representative of the western English translations. James' version is not only a translation of the original text, but it also contains preface, annotations, explanations, and so on. In 1934, Arthur Waley published his translation *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Teh Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought*. This translation includes preface, introduction, appendix, text, supplement, notes, index, etc.

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Fund project: On English Translation of Public Signs in Tourist Areas of Liaoning Province (Supported by Educational Department of Liaoning Province, Project No.: LJKR0454).

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In 1948, Lin Yutang's English translation of *Tao Teh Ching* was published and highly celebrated in the academic society. After that, other Chinese translators published various English versions of *Dao De Jing*. Chen Rongjie (or Wing-tsit Chan) published his version *The Way of Lao Tzu* in 1963. In the same year, Liu Dianjue published his version *Tao Teh Ching*. In 1991, Wang Rongpei, coordinating with William Puffenberger, published another English version *Laotae*. In 2018, Xu Yuanchong published his version *Laws Divine and Human*.

Due to the translators' different social, historical, and cultural backgrounds, their English versions present different characteristics in terms of translation strategy. In general, the English translations of *Tao Teh Ching* have the following features: (1) It was the Missionaries and Sinologists who started translating the book, but later philosophers, scholars, and poets followed them; (2) Translation strategies have been diversified, starting from domestication or foreignization to multiple strategies; and (3) Translators have been racing to publish English versions of *Tao Teh Ching* and actively spreading them to every part of the world.

### Comparison of Keyword Translations by James Legge and Lin Yutang

*Tao Teh Ching* contains some keywords with profound meanings and abundant connotations. This study randomly picks 30 chapters (Chapters 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 16, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 35, 36, 43, 46, 48, 51, 63, 65, 67, 69, 73, 75, 76, 79, and 81) from the book and selects four typical keywords that embody the core ideas of *Tao Teh Ching* to study—"道 (dao)", "德 (de)", "自然 (zi ran)", and "无为 (wu wei)". The study compares the different translation strategies applied by James Legge and Lin Yutang, and tries to figure out the reasons that cause the differences.

#### 道 (Dao)

"道" is the most important keyword of *Tao Teh Ching* and one of the core concepts of Taoism. Its original meaning is "the way", "the path", or "the means". Later it has extended to other meanings, such as "the rule", "the law", "the principle", etc. Its appearance in *Tao Teh Ching* has made a big change in the meaning of the character. Laozi was the first person who defined "道" as something mysterious, eternal, and indescribable.

In the selected 30 chapters, "道" repeatedly appears, and its translations by James Legge and Lin Yutang are different. Here are the original sentences with "道" and their translations:

(1) 天下有道，却走马以粪。天下无道，戎马生于郊。(Chapter 46)

James: When the Tao...When the Tao...

Lin: When the world lives in accord with Tao...When the world lives not in accord with Tao...

(2) 古之善为道者。(Chapter 65)

James: The ancients who showed their skill in practising the Tao.

Lin: The ancients who knew how to follow the Tao.

(3) 功遂身退，天之道也。(Chapter 9)

James: When the work is done,...is the way of Heaven.

Lin: Retire when your work is done, such is Heaven's way.

(4) 天之道，不争而善胜。(Chapter 73)

James: It is the way of Heaven not to strive,...

Lin: Heaven's Way (Tao) is...

(5) 天之道，利而不害；圣人之道，为而不争。(Chapter 81)

James: ...the way of Heaven...the way of the Sage...

Lin: The Tao of Heaven...The way of the Sage...

Studying the above examples can lead us to see that both of the two translators translate “道” into “Tao”. It is an intangible Taoist term with broad meanings and annotations, so it is really hard to find an English word to match it in all the varied contexts. In this case, cultural implantation is a good choice. Transliteration is a commonly applied means to fill cultural vacancy (Savory, 1957, pp. 150-158). That is probably the reason for both of the two translators to apply transliteration, yet they have different translations of “天之道” and “圣人之道”. James Legge translated the two expressions into “the way of Heaven” and “the way of the Sage”. Lin Yutang translated “天之道” into “Heaven’s Way (Tao)” in Chapter 9, “Heaven’s Way (Tao)” in Chapter 73, and “the Tao of Heaven” in Chapter 81. As for “圣人之道”, his translation remains “the way of the Sage”.

### 德 (De)

“德” is another important keyword, which is closely related to “道”. “道” is the origin or source of things, and “德” refers to something that comes from “道”. “德” is something embodied while “道” is something intangible (Chen, 1984). In a sense, “德” can be defined as the nature of things. On the other hand, “道” also refers to a person’s quality or personality (Chen, 1984).

Here are the sentences with “德” and their translations:

(1) ……德畜之， ……贵德。 ……德之贵， ……德畜之。 ……是谓玄德。 (Chapter 51)

James: ...operation...operation...operation...Tao...mysterious operation.

Lin: ...Teh (character)...The...The...The...the Mystic Virtue.

(2) 常知稽式， 是谓玄德。 玄德深矣， 远矣， 与物反矣， 然后乃至大顺。 (Chapter 65)

James: ...mysterious excellence (of a governor)...mysterious excellence...

Lin: ...is called the Mystic Virtue...Mystic Virtue becomes clear, far-reaching...

### 自然 (Ziran)

“自然” is another important concept in *Tao Teh Ching*. Laozi believed that everything should be going in its own way, and no outside interference should be allowed. This is the proper way of the universe. In *Tao Teh Ching*, Ziran does not refer to any concrete object. It is simply a feature of Tao (Chen, 1984). Please look at the following sentences and their translations by James Legge and Lin Yutang.

(1) 功成事遂， 百姓皆谓：“我自然。” (Chapter 17)

James: ...“We are as we are, of ourselves!”

Lin: ...“We have done it ourselves.”

(2) 人法地， 地法天， 天法道， 道法自然。 (Chapter 25)

James: ...The law of the Tao is its being what it is.

Lin: ...Tao models itself after Nature.

(3) 道之尊， 德之贵， 夫莫之命而常自然。 (Chapter 51)

James: ...but always a spontaneous tribute.

Lin: ...but is so of its own accord.

Both of the two translators gave the word different expressions in different contexts: James translated it respectively into “of ourselves” (Chapter 17), “being what it is” (Chapter 25), and “a spontaneous tribute” (Chapter 51); Lin translated it respectively into “ourselves” (Chapter 17), “Nature” (Chapter 25), and “of its own accord” (Chapter 51). James added some extra words to make his translation more complete. Obviously, he

applied domestication for the sake of the readers' understanding. Lin Yuntang focused on the source text and attached more attention to the original meaning, so he applied foreignization as his translation strategy.

### 无为 (Wuwei)

“无为” is another important keyword in *Tao Teh Ching*. Laozi repeatedly used this word to describe a state in which everything goes freely and fluently without any interference. He lived in a turbulent period of wars and chaos when feudal rulers fought for power and position; therefore, Laozi strongly advocated that rulers should govern the country through “无为”. But he did not mean that governors should do nothing at all. What he indicated is that governors should not take too much actions and make too much interference. Here are the sentences with “无为” and their translations.

(1) 是以圣人处无为之事，行不言之教。 (Chapter 2)

James: ...without doing anything...

Lin: ...without action...

(2) 为无为，则无不治。 (Chapter 3)

James: ...abstinence from action...

Lin: ...action without deeds...

(3) 吾是以知无为之有益。 (Chapter 43)

James: ...advantage belongs to doing nothing (with a purpose).

Lin: ...the benefit of taking no action.

(4) 损之又损，以至于无为。无为而无不为。 (Chapter 48)

James: ...till he arrives at doing nothing (on purpose)...non-action there is nothing which he does not do.

Lin: By continual losing one reaches doing nothing...by doing nothing.

(5) 为无为，事无事，味无味。 (Chapter 63)

James: ...without (thinking of) acting...

Lin: Accomplish do-nothing...

“无为” in *Tao Teh Ching* means “no interference” or “no trouble making”. It indicates a kind of peaceful life in tranquility. James Legge translated this term into different words or expressions in different contexts. For example, in Chapter 2 he translated it into “without doing anything”; in Chapter 3 he translated it into “the abstinence from action”; in Chapter 43 “doing nothing (with a purpose)”; and in Chapter 48 “non-action”. In the same way, Lin Yutang also translated “无为” into different expressions. In Chapters 2, 3, 43, and 48, he respectively translated the word into “do-nothing”, “taking no action”, “action without deeds”, and “without action”. As for translation strategy, both of them applied domestication.

### Analysis

Translation strategies applied are not determined by one single but several factors (Gadamer, 1999, pp. 160-180). Among those factors, the translator's personal experience, cultural background, and translation purpose play a very important role. Therefore, we have done some research on the two translators' personal experiences and examined their cultural backgrounds and translation purposes in order to find out the reasons that cause their different strategies.

#### Difference in Cultural Background

James Legge (1815-1897) was born into a Christian family in Scotland. His parents had a close relationship with a missionary family; therefore, he frequently got involved in missionary work when he was young. In 1838,

he joined a church association in London and decided to preach abroad as an overseas missionary. In 1842, he came to Hongkong, China and started his preaching work as a professional missionary. In 1847, he decided to systematically study Chinese and Chinese culture. Before long he began translating Chinese Buddhist scriptures to support his missionary work. At the same time, he was engaged in publishing Buddhist books, articles, and textbooks. Later he returned to England in 1867 and taught Sinology in Oxford University in 1875. During the time when he was teaching, he finished translating *Tao Teh Ching*.

As a Sinologist, James Legge devoted himself to studying Chinese culture. In his translation of *Tao Teh Ching*, he frequently quoted relevant sayings from *Bible* to facilitate the western readers' understanding. As a result, his translation was inevitably influenced by his faith in Christian. For example, he translated “主” into “the lord”, “天下” into “the kingdom”, which is obviously the strategy of domestication.

Lin Yutang was a Christian in the early time of his years under the influence of his family and the school education he received, but later he became interested in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, and developed his own understanding and perspective. After that he began to doubt his faith in Christianity and decided to take humanism as his faith. Later he got very interested in Taoism and turned to believe in it faithfully. As a native Chinese, Lin Yutang also had a western cultural background. The integration of Chinese and western cultural backgrounds gave him a big advantage to comprehend Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Besides, his proficiency in classical Chinese made his understanding of *Dao De Jing* easier and more accurate. Referring to previous translations and peer scholars' remarks and skillfully combining his personal understanding, Lin successfully produced his translation which was full of faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance.

### **Difference in Translation Purpose**

As a faithful Christian, James Legge believed in God and he followed Christian doctrine strictly. As a missionary, he made translation so as to support his preaching work. His translation of *Tao Teh Ching* was oriented in target text. Therefore, he naturally adopted domestication as his translation strategy for the sake of target-language readers' better understanding. On the other hand, Lin Yutang believed in Christianity in his early years, but later he changed his belief to Taoism, as he realized that traditional Chinese culture was more attractive to him than western culture. So, his purpose for translating *Tao Teh Ching* was mainly to spread Chinese culture, and he paid great attention to the source text; therefore, foreignization was adopted in his translation.

Translation reflects the translator's identity and personality, for it is impacted by translator's personal factors, such as cultural background, translation purpose, and so on (Nord, 2001, pp. 88-100). Since James Legge and Lin Yutang had different cultural backgrounds and translation purposes, there is no difficulty to see why they adopt different translation strategies.

### **Conclusions**

Above all, James Legge applied both domestication and foreignization to translate “道”, but he adopted domestication to translate “德”, “自然”, “无为”. So, domestication was his major strategy for translating *Tao Teh Ching*. However, Lin Yutang adopted foreignization for translating “道”, “德”, and “自然”, yet he adopted both domestication and foreignization for translating “无为”. So, foreignization was his major strategy for translating *Tao Teh Ching*. By researching the two translators' personal experiences, we have found out the different cultural backgrounds of James Legge and Lin Yutang. By examining their cultural backgrounds and identities, we have figured out their different purposes for translation.

According to Skopos Theory, translation is a creative communication rather than a simple recoding activity (Savory, 1957, pp. 108-109). The translator's purpose for translation exerts a great influence on his translation strategy (Gadamer, 1999, pp. 62-72). Therefore, it is not that difficult to reason out why they apply different strategies. James Legge adopted domestication as his strategy, because he hoped to facilitate the westerners' reading. On the other hand, Lin Yutang adopted foreignization as his strategy because he was hoped to spread the Chinese culture.

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