

A Comparative Study of Three Translations of the *Tao Te Ching* at Different Stages of Dissemination

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The *Tao Te Ching* is not only a treasure of Chinese civilization, but also a crystallization of ancient Chinese wisdom. The dissemination of the *Tao Te Ching* in the West began as early as the 18th century, and it has continued to develop through the centuries, and the philosophical wisdom in it has benefited all mankind. This paper selects the English translations of three translators as the object of study and tries to compare them with specific translations and analyze the differences between each translation.

Keywords: cultural dissemination, *Tao Te Ching*, translation

Introduction

As the pace of Chinese culture is gradually accelerating, the *Tao Te Ching*, as an important part of our traditional culture, also plays a very important role in the spread of Chinese culture. As one of the greatest texts in China, the *Tao Te Ching* is known as the “King of All Scriptures”. As the most translated and widely distributed Chinese text, the *Tao Te Ching* has a long history of dissemination in the West, with thousands of translations in more than 20 languages. Since there are many criteria for dividing the periods of dissemination, this paper mainly divides the dissemination of the *Tao Te Ching* in the English-speaking world into three stages based on the criteria of Wu Zhiyong and Liu Zixiao (2020) and selects the English translations of the *Tao Te Ching* by three representative translators in each of the three stages, namely, James Legge, Lin Yutang, and Xu Yuanchong, as the objects of study. This paper attempts to interpret the specific characteristics of translations from different periods in the context of specific translations and apply theories related to translation strategies to conduct a comparative study of the translations of the three translators.

Stages of the Dissemination of the *Tao Te Ching* in the English-Speaking World

The first phase was from 1868 to the beginning of the 20th century, when more and more missionaries from English-speaking countries entered China after the end of the First Opium War (Wu & Liu, 2020), wanting to summarize the *Tao Te Ching* from different perspectives for missionary purposes. The period from 1919 to 1972 was the second phase when the outbreak of World War I and World War II caused a huge impact on Western culture and values, and the first and second industrial revolutions brought about a series of problems, such as unemployment and poverty that made social thinking complex and varied, and Laozi's ideas resonated with the anti-war sentiment of Western society at that time. In the third phase, from 1973 to the present, when energy

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shortage and ecological deterioration threatened the world and social conflicts intensified, scholars in the English-speaking world became skeptical of the values they believed in and began to pay attention to the *Tao Te Ching* and Laozi's thought, expecting to find a way out of their problems (Wu & Liu, 2020). The unearthing of the *Tao Te Ching* on silk at Mawangdui Han Tomb in 1973 also initiated the third translation climax in the English-speaking world.

Reasons for Choosing the Three Translations of the *Tao Te Ching*

The reasons for choosing the translations of James Legge, Lin Yutang, and Xu Yuanchong for this paper are as follows:

Firstly, according to the time division of the dissemination of the *Tao Te Ching* in the English-speaking world, all three translators are highly representative translators of their time. As an early sinologist, James Legge was well-versed in Chinese culture and played an important role in the translation of the Chinese classic book and the exchange of Chinese and foreign cultures. His translation was once considered to be the most authoritative version of the English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. As a scholar with a background in both Chinese and Western cultures, Lin Yutang's mastery of both Chinese and English was perfect. His experience of being born and raised in China, his later interest in Chinese culture, and his in-depth understanding of Taoist culture also helped him develop his own unique insights into the Taoist classic *Tao Te Ching*, as well as his understanding and translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. Xu Yuanchong was a well-educated Chinese translator who put forward his own theory of "Three Beautifulness" on translation standards, believing that faithfulness and beauty are not conflicting, and that trying to achieve "phonetic beauty" when translating and paying attention to rhyme when translating poetry is characteristic of Xu Yuanchong's translations. He believed that fidelity and beauty were not in conflict.

Secondly, the cultural backgrounds of the three translators are different. James Legge has a Western cultural background, Lin Yutang is the bridge between Chinese culture and Western culture, and Xu Yuanchong is rooted in China and has studied both East and West. All three of them have a deep understanding of Chinese culture and at the same time have their own characteristics.

Finally, although all three translations are derived from the *Tao Te Ching*, they are influenced by the background of the times and the evolution of the language and are somewhat comparable.

Comparison of the Three Translations of the *Tao Te Ching* at Different Stages of Dissemination

Example 1:

道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。 (*Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 1)

The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao.

The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. (James Legge) (Liu, 2019)

The Tao the can be told of

Is not the absolute Tao;

The Names that can be given

Are not absolute Names. (Lin Yutang) (Lin, 2021)

The divine law may be spoken of,

but it is not the common law.

Things may be named,
but names are not the things. (Xu Yuanchong) (Xu, 2003)

“道” can be expounded, but what is described is not the true “道”; “道” can also be named, but what is named is not the true “道”. In this chapter, there are two versions of the translation of the Taoist term “道” at the lexical level. Both James Legge and Lin Yutang used the strategy of foreignization to translate it as “Tao”. Xu Yuanchong, on the other hand, used a naturalized translation strategy to translate it as “divine law”. The word “divine” means “of (from or like) God; (like) God”, and its original meaning is more related to Western religion. “道” in Taoist culture is an abstract concept, “道” is not only the mother of heaven and earth, the beginning of all things, but also the law of the world, and is the core concept of *Tao Te Ching* and even the whole Taoist culture, which has different interpretations under different circumstances. As a term full of oriental characteristics, linking it superficially with Western religious terms and explaining its meaning from a Western perspective is beneficial for Western readers to understand, but it also loses part of its oriental characteristics.

In contrast, the word “道” is directly transliterated as “Tao” not only retains its oriental characteristics but also makes it a proprietary term that does not need to be changed in the later text according to different interpretations, thus avoiding inconsistencies in the translation. James Legge also adds the adjective “enduring and unchanging” in front of “Tao” to explain the meaning of “Tao” in this context. This does not lose its original meaning but also enables Western readers to better understand the word “道” in this context.

On the level of syntax, both James Legge and Lin Yutang have handled the translation neatly matched, and both Lin Yutang and Xu Yuanchong have retained the form of four short sentences in the original text, so that the original text and the translation can correspond to each other structurally, and also reflect the original refined and rhythmic syntactic characteristics of the *Tao Te Ching*.

Example 2:

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物。

万物负阴而抱阳，冲气以为和。 (*Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 42)

The Tao produced One;

One produced Two;

Two produced Three;

Three produced All things.

All things leave behind them the Obscurity (out of which they have come),

and go forward to embrace the Brightness (into which they have emerged),

while they are harmonized by the Breath of Vacancy. (James Legge) (Liu, 2019)

Out of Tao, One is born;

Out of One, Two;

Out of Two, Three;

Out of Three, the created universe.

The created universe carries the yin at its back and the yang in front;

Through the union of the pervading principles it reaches harmony. (Lin Yutang) (Lin, 2021)

One is the child of the divine law.

After one come two, after two come three,

after three come all things.

Everything has a bright and a dark side, co-existent in harmony. (Xu Yuanchong) (Xu, 2003)

This chapter is about the creation of the universe: Everything turns to “阴” and “阳”, “阴” and “阳” intersect to form the harmony. Laozi connects the seemingly opposing “阴” and “阳” to the creation of the universe. All things in this world have “阴” and “阳”, and the concepts of “阴” and “阳” are opposed and unified in the Taoist cosmology, relatively independent and yet inseparable.

At the lexical level, the word “生” in this chapter means to produce, but all three translators have adopted different expressions. James Legge translated it as “produce” directly, which is faithful to the original text, but less explanatory of its meaning. Lin Yutang’s use of the word “born” not only explains the relationship between the two but also emphasizes the “nurturing” function of “Tao” as the mother of all things. Xu Yuanchong translates it as “the child of”, using the noun structure to illustrate the relationship between the two, which directly expresses “birth” as a simple ethical relationship. Although there are limitations in the expression of the meaning, it helps the reader understand. The relationship between “一”, “二”, “三”, and “万物” is more similar in the three translations.

Two other important words, “阴” and “阳”, appeared in this chapter. “阴” and “阳” are also important concepts in traditional Chinese Taoist philosophy. Legge translated them as “Obscurity” and “Brightness”, explaining “阴” and “阳” by the dimness and brightness of the light to preserve the cultural and philosophical connotations of the source text and to combine it with “sun”, to preserve the cultural and philosophical connotations of the source text and to spread profound ideas to the West. Xu Yuanchong translated it as “a bright and a dark side”; the interpretation of it not only has profound symbolic meaning but also explains the dialectical philosophical connotation of one light and one dark. Lin Yutang’s translation of “yin” and “yang” adopted domesticating translation strategy, using pinyin. Based on his full understanding of Taoist philosophy, Lin Yutang believes that the “yin” and “yang” here are no longer the original meaning of sunlight, nor are they simply two kinds of “气”, but a power born from the source of all things, which is a very abstract concept. In contrast, the translations of “阴” and “阳” by Legge and Xu Yuanchong narrow their scope and make them figurative. Lin Yutang presents this abstract but distinctive philosophical concept in the form of a phonetic translation.

Example 3:

天地不仁，以万物为刍狗；

圣人不仁，以百姓为刍狗。 (*Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 5)

Heaven and earth do not act from (the impulse of) any wish to be benevolent; they deal with all things as the dogs of grass are dealt with.

The sages do not act from (any wish to be) benevolent;

they deal with the people as the dogs of grass are dealt with. (James Legge) (Liu, 2019)

Nature is unkind: It treats the creation like sacrificial straw-dogs.

The Sage is unkind: He treats the people like sacrificial straw-dogs. (Lin Yutang) (Lin, 2021)

Heaven and earth are ruthless,

they treat everything as straw or dog.

The sage is ruthless,

he treats everyone as straw or dog. (Xu Yuanchong) (Xu, 2003)

In Example 3, “天地不仁” means that heaven and earth, as objective material beings, do not have human emotions; everything in heaven and earth follows the rules of nature, not love and hate, as people think. All feelings toward material things are subjectively given by human beings. “刍狗” is a dog that is tied with grass

and used as an offering during the festival. Legge translates “仁” as “do not act from any wish to be benevolent” which fits the definition of it. It is worth noting that in the Oxford Dictionary, “benevolent” is used as an adjective “especially of people in authority”, which means especially those in power, and Legge chose this word in his translation to highlight the supremacy of “天地”. Lin Yutang’s direct translation of “不仁” as “unkind” is less severe, and although it is far from “不仁”, it conveys the style of the original text in a better way. Xu Yuanchong’s translation of “不仁” as “ruthless” is deeper than Lin’s and more concise than that of Legge. Xu Yuanchong’s four short sentences not only reflect the unique sense of rhythm in the original sentences, but also emphasize the beauty and rhyme in the translation, which is an excellent experience for readers.

Conclusion

Traditional Chinese culture is an important part of China’s cultural soft power, and understanding the Chinese classic *Tao Te Ching* is an important way to appreciate the charm of Chinese culture. The translation of the *Tao Te Ching* has played an important role in spreading Chinese culture and promoting it to the world. The translation and dissemination of the *Tao Te Ching* began as early as the 18th century and has never stopped through the centuries, with each translation having its own unique significance. Each translator, from the early sinologists to the later Chinese, has incorporated his or her own understanding of the *Tao Te Ching* into the translation. With his Western identity, James Legge focused on the reader’s understanding when translating; with his deep understanding of ancient Chinese philosophy, Lin Yutang devoted himself to spreading Chinese philosophical thought to the West, even if the phonetic translation was faithful; Xu Yuanchong, as a modern translator, not only did not depart from traditional Chinese culture but also incorporated his own style into his translations to give readers a unique feeling.

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