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Reconstructing Cultural Memory: English Translation Journey of *The Book of Chuang Tzu*

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This paper examines the English translations of *The Book of Chuang Tzu* by Martin Palmer under Big Translation Theory, which emphasizes cyclical cultural reconstructions. Focusing on three phases—full translation, abridged adaptation and back translation—the study reveals how cultural and philosophical nuances are reshaped during interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic conversions. Textual analysis demonstrates that Palmer's translations, while enhancing readability for Western readers, distorts some of the core Taoist concepts. While the full and abridged versions lead to cultural reconstructions, the back-translated text reflects that, under Big Translation Theory, such reconstructions help to integrate traditional Chinese cultural memory with Western discourse, forming a new type of collective cultural memory. By associating translation activities with building collective cultural memory, the study reveals the cross-cultural and social attributes in translating classical texts, which secures the communicative and prolonged nature of cultural essence.

Keywords: The Book of Chuang Tzu, Big Translation Theory, Martin Palmer, cyclical cultural reconstruction, collective cultural memory

Introduction

So far, there has been a lack of quality studies on the English translations of *The Book of Chuang Tzu*. There is a decent amount of academic studies on this book's philosophical essence; but how the philosophical essence is communicated through translations is likewise worthy of analysis. The two major frameworks of the existing studies concerning the translation activities of this work center on two key aspects, namely, cultural nuances and translation strategy.

On one hand, scholars tend to make comparative analyses between the efficacy of several translated versions in handling the philosophical and cultural nuances of the original work, and offer more efficient strategies based on their findings. On the other hand, scholars carry out textual analyses to investigate how previous translators address and reshape these cultural nuances. Two of these studies stand out for their creative emphasis on the concept of "para-text" that helps to reconstruct the philosophical image of Chuang Tzu, extending the area of focus from a mere linguistic level to one that includes multimodel analysis, claiming that by adopting both verbal and non-verbal approach, translators are able to give the translated work more hermeneutic potential, thus facilitating the communication of the original work (Lin & Xu, 2022; Yin, 2021).

However, the existing studies, though two of which creatively involve multimodal analysis, have invariably taken on a diachronic perspective, meaning they only make translations by different translators as variables. In

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addition, they failed to uncover the trajectory of the evolving cultural reconstructions as a complete cycle, which is represented by Martin Palmer's translations of *The Book of Chuang Tzu* (Fu, 2025).

In 2006, Penguin Classics revised and reissued the complete English translation of *The Book of Chuang Tzu* by Martin Palmer. Subsequently in 2010, the publisher restructured Palmer's full translation into an abridged pocket edition titled *The Tao of Chuang Tzu*. In the end of this textual evolution, Penguin Classics back-translated this selected edition back into Chinese in 2014, briefly releasing a bilingual Chinese-English version for sale. Thus, the canonical work completed its journey in three distinct phases, including complete translation, abridged adaptation, and reverse translation, through interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic conversions.

This very journey reminds me of the Big Translation Theory advanced by Chinese scholar Luo Xuanmin (2024, p. 2). In its definition, "translation practices involve a combination of synchronic and diachronic perspectives, where multimodal and inter-textual interpretations and cultural reconstructions are performed in a sustained and evolving manner". This makes up a type of translation activities and studies that is methodologically diverse. By putting Palmer's translations under the Big Translation Theory, I argue that it can well bridge the gap mentioned above and generate new insights about the communication of Chinese classical cannons, for it views cultural reconstruction as a cyclical process rather than a one-way export.

Cultural Memory

A core concept of this novel theory is "cultural memory" as the engine of cross-cultural translation and communication. Generally speaking, this term refers to "the dynamic process through which individuals acquire, process and transmit the experiences and historical memories of distinct cultural collectives" (Luo, 2024, p. 4).

In fact, this is not the first time for "collectives" to be associated with "cultural memory". The role of collectives as the subject of memory traces its theoretical origin to Nietzsche's notion of bonding memory (Fu, 2025). Subsequent scholars including Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Jan Assmann progressively redefined and expanded the concept of "cultural memory", transforming it from a static, individualized subject into a cultural framework of shared historic significance and social attributes (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1980; Nora, 2015). In *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, Jan Assmann makes a critical conceptualization of cultural memory:

> We need a term to describe (…) historical changes in the technology of storage systems, in the sociology of the groups concerned (…) in the circulation of cultural meaning(…). That term is cultural memory. It is "cultural" because it can only be realized institutionally and artificially, and it is "memory" because in relation to social communication it functions in exactly the same way as individual memory does in relation to consciousness. (2011, p. 9)

This statement gives the term a sense of continuity. While rooted in the past, it exerts transcendent influence on the present, dismantling temporal and spacial limits. It strives to explore how individual memories are reshaped by the public representation, which mimics "a cultural circuit in which the public and the personal are bound in a mutual and active cycle" (Noakes & Pattinson, 2014 cited by Pennell, Kempshall, & Kupper, 2025, p. 312). It further implies that cultural memory can be molded by a wide range of social actors, which play a significant role of constructing historical remembrance (Winter, 2006). This conceptualization has put cultural memory with collective memory. Following this reasoning, the Big Translation Theory, combining the two paradigms under the name of "collective cultural memory", claims this novel type of memory to be "reconstructive, interactive and in search of recognition" (2024, p. 6).

The paper finds three reasons to justify translation activities as the communication of collective cultural memory. First, the ontological status of cultural memory is, according to Assmann, the "handing down of meanings" (2011, p. 6). The involvement of languages and cultural symbols from the texts constitute the communicative instruments of such process. Second, memory should be handed down with certain ritual, so as to break through temporal limits and form links between the past and the present. Translation can be taken as such ritual, for it focuses more on the afterlife of a specific work, which responds to the continuous nature of collective cultural memory. Third, the memory is collective, for it is communicated from Group A to Group B by members of the "participatory structure" (Assmann, 2011, p. 38). The identities of these members are differentiated by the fields of activities. For translation, the very agency with the ability to exert such power is the translator, who at the same time is influenced by his(her) own cultural memory, thus leading to an interplay of two different cultural narratives. Such interplay is at the center of focus in this paper.

This paper employs textual analysis, and a dual-dimensional examination of verbal and non-verbal implications to comprehensively investigate the translation journey of *The Book of Chuang Tzu*. Focusing on the reconstruction of cultural and philosophical image, it reveals how Martin Palmer inevitably placed Chuang Tzu's philosophical thought within the Western narrative frameworks, endowing it with cross-cultural attributes. The paper argues that this journey reflects the modern transformation of the Taoist thought and promotes the fusion of traditional Chinese cultural memory with Western cultural memory, facilitating better communication and comprehension among international readers. However, three aspects of cultural shifts arising from this fusion are simultaneously highlighted by the paper, including misinterpretations of human agency, simplification of cultural and historical symbols, and distortion of Taoist dynamism.

Limited by the length of research, all of these three sections put the Inner Chapters (Chapters 1-7) at the core of their focus, for these chapters are unanimously believed to be written by Chuang Tzu himself and stand as the epitome of his philosophical ideas. But the paper also refers to the rest of the chapters as they offer important explanatory and supplementary instructions that could facilitate the understanding.

Reconstruction During Interlingual Translation

One notable feature of Palmer's translation journey is that it contains two rounds of interlingual conversion, from Chinese to English and from English to Chinese. Initially, *The Book of Chuang Tzu* underwent a full translation and was rendered in its entirety by Palmer, with an inclination toward preserving the humorous side of Chuang Tzu, aiming at a more popular market. This reflects Palmer's stated mission to share "the truths and insights of Chinese wisdom, particularly the Taoist philosophy", which he believes can "offer alternative ideas to the West, foster cross-cultural dialogue and drive cultural development globally" (Sina, 2024). Later in 2014, the English version was again back translated into Chinese by an unknown translator.

However, a persistent challenge lingers. While Taoist ideas have achieved global visibility, their nuanced essence remains poorly understood in the West. Palmer (Sina, 2024) argues that Western readers are in need of "authoritative and precise translations that authentically integrate Chinese wisdom into the world's cultural discourse, and this must be done under Chinese narrative frameworks". Despite this noble intent, Palmer's translation, like many other popular English renditions, struggles to reconcile public appeal with philosophical accuracy, inadvertently causing cultural reconstructions, which are preserved in the back-translated text.

This is then followed by a question, which this paper feels essential to mention. "Why, the back-translated version indicates little difference from the original content, therefore failing to identify Western interpretations from the traditional Chinese discourse?" This question is raised by Liu Yiqing (2018, p. 10) on the cultural discrepancy arising from back translating Chinese classics, wherein the translation of Chuang Tzu's work is used as a typical case. This paper argues that, having been integrated into the Western discourse system, the back-translated text, though possessing literal resemblance to the original Chinese text, is indeed different in its essential meaning. Whereas in other cases with an evident cultural reconstruction, difference will assert itself in the back-translated version.

Therefore, making textual analysis between the original and the back-translated texts is conducive to testify the potential elements that may cause cultural reconstructions to happen, and to see how the two discourses integrate mutually that forms new collective cultural memory. This is also what the back translator of the book believes:

> Back translating Western translations, particularly of ancient Chinese classics, helps us understand interpretations from Western academic communities and seek reference from them, especially when our own interpretations of these texts are not always consistent. (Fu, 2025, p. 127, citing the translator's remarks)

But before making such analysis, the paper argues that it is equally important to compare Palmer's English translation with the original text to better understand how Palmer misinterprets Chuang Tzu's philosophical ideas. This step is crucial, for it acknowledges the building of collective cultural memory as an evolving process rather than a straight-to-the-end effect. In this sense, this part of discussion comprises two aspects. One is about the cultural reconstructions between Chinese and English in the full-translated text; the other is about how the two interpretive frameworks collapse in the back-translated text.

There is one thing to notice. Since the official back translation published by the Penguin Classics is currently out of print, this paper fails to find the real text. Therefore, I gave prompt to GPT to back translate the English texts into Chinese, under the principle of viewing the English version as the original text—for this is the "source text" to be back translated—to recreate its semantic meanings.

In the Full Translation

With a survey of the full-translated text, this paper observes two aspects of reconstruction, pertaining to human agency and philosophical ideas. For each aspect, the paper provides four cases for textual analysis.

Misinterpretation of human agency. Unlike the Western emphasis on the dominance of human agency, Chuang Tzu advocates a form of agency that transcends narrow anthropocentric perspectives to achieve a state of unfettered unity between physical existence and spiritual liberation. This agency requires individuals to "dissolve any self-centered desires and emotional states that disturb inner harmony, and to deconstruct any ethical norms stipulated by human intelligence", observed by Luo Xiangxiang (2023, p. 43).

In a word, Chuang Tzu believed that there should be an inherent tendency for individuals to live with the natural movement. However, Palmer's interlingual translation generates a notable hermeneutic ambiguity. On one hand, he imposes a sense of *egoism* where the original context underscores *unification* to natural spontaneity. On the other hand, he obscures the text's explicit demonstration of subjectivity by framing it as passive compliance, thus diluting the instructive effect of such content. This dual distortion of *over-asserting unwanted egoism* and *downplaying Chuang Tzu's critical comment* undermines the philosophical coherence of Taoist thought in translation. Here are four examples:

Example 1:

ST: 为是不用而寓诸庸。

TT: Such a person has no need for distinctions but follows the ordinary view.

Example 2:

ST: 夫吹万不同，而使其自己也，咸其自取，怒者其谁邪？

TT: For each is different, using what they need to be, not influenced by any other force!

Example 3:

ST: 犹师心者也。

TT: You are still being guided by your expectations.

Example 4:

ST: 命物之化而守其宗也。

TT: He understands that some things are predestined and therefore holds true to the unchanging.

Example 1 represents an imposition of unwanted human agency. Palmer's translation of "庸" as "ordinary view" misinterprets the term's philosophical essence. In Chuang Tzu's idea, "庸" denotes the *inherent functionality* of things, emerging spontaneously from their alignment with the nature. It is irrelevant to a human-defined "view". In addition, the term "ordinary", synonymous with "commonplace", imposes a normative connotation, reducing the text's emphasis on harmonious *non-interference* with natural movement. This lexical choice transforms Chuang Tzu's dialectical idea of aligning oneself with natural movement into a plain adherence to social norms, thus weakening the strength of *Tao* cherished by the Taoist.

Example 2 likewise represents a false human agency. Chuang Tzu employs "天籁" (the sound of nature) as a metaphorical image in the original text to indicate that everything is different in its functionality but equally in flow with the natural movement. This functionality derives precisely from its flow with the naturalness. However, Palmer misinterprets this natural unity as "using what they need to be", giving it a sense of subjective choice based on the situation. Also, the phrase "not influenced" falsely cuts off the connection between one's innate being with the outer world, making it a purely inward-driven mission.

Example 3 represents a downplaying of the negative egoism. The term "师心" (judgement) derives from a person's rigid judgement concerning the right and wrong[1], and stands as an exemplary critique in the original text. The term "expectations" are not emotionally strong enough to deliver such critical undertone, for it lacks a sense of stubborn subjectivity in its sense. Example 4 represents a passive compliance that is not indicated by the original text. "命物之化" in Taoist idea implies a proactive conformity to the changing natural events, rather than "being predestined", which is associated with the concept of fatalism.

This misinterpretation in Palmer's translation suggests that Palmer did not fully represent the true meaning of uniting physical and spiritual liberation, still drawing lines between one's inner existence and the outer world, deeming one's action to be either a proactive will or a passive submission. This fact leads him to further reconstruct many of the cultural and philosophical essence in the original text that implies the ultimate liberation by Chuang Tzu.

Reconstruction of philosophical ideas. *The Book of Chuang Tzu* embodies profound cultural and philosophical implications centered on the dialectical unity of humanity and nature, and of physical form and

[1] "One imposes judgments of 'right' and 'wrong' without having their heart-mind attuned to the Tao"—from Chapter 2 in *The Book of Chuang Tzu* (Note: The quotations from Chuang Tzu in this paper are invariably translated by the author of the paper into English).

spirituality, thus reaching the transcendent state of "逍遥" meaning unfettered wandering that breaks temporal-spatial boundaries and egoistic attachments. However, Palmer's approach to Chuang Tzu's metaphoricity either flattens the very philosophical density of the original work, or distorts its process-oriented vision into a static, one-dimensional concept. The following examples illustrate this issue:

Example 5:

ST: 至人无己，神人无功，圣人无名。

TT: The perfect man has no self; The spiritual man has no merit; The holy man has no fame.

This translation introduces three reconstructed meanings. "No self" implies a rejection of ontology, whereas "无己" (transcendence of self) implies the need to forsake the "self-other" dichotomy so as to achieve cosmic unity. "Merit" reduces the meaning of "功", which embodies all human interventions, to mere utilitarian outcomes. "Fame" oversimplifies the concept of "名"[2] from a social instrument that corrodes innate nature to superficial reputation. Specifically, the triple use of "no" strays from Chuang Tzu's dynamic transcendence to a sheer rejection, reinforcing the binary logic of the right and wrong. Terms like "merit" and "fame" further impose Western meritocratic values, adding to the translation a goal-oriented undertone that undermines the Taoist vision of non-action and non-contention. Such rendering fails to recreate the deconstruction of dualism or the ultimate ideal of returning to naturalness.

Example 6:

ST: 名者实之宾也。

TT: But fame is nothing compared to reality.

This is another case of the binary logic arising from a sheer rejection. In the original context, "实" refers to the substances not defined by human knowledge, compared to "名" as the instruments defined by human knowledge. By saying this, Chuang Tzu does not aim to call the existence of "名" as nothing; instead, he stresses the importance of eliminating artificial ornaments and going with natural movement. Such a debate is central to the Taoist philosophy, for it is about the ontological relationship of human language, cognition, and existence. Palmer's problem here is that, as usual, he simplifies the concept of "名" as public instruments in its original sense. Also, by rendering "实" as reality, he misplaced "名" from a real substance to a subject opposite to reality, leading to a big conceptual misreading.

Example 7:

ST: 瞻彼阕者，虚室生白，吉祥止止。

TT: Take a look at the room that is shut off, the empty room where true light is born, and there is really contentment and stillness.

In this example, Palmer erases the Taoist metaphorical symbols of "阕" and "虚室"[3] as mental clarity and enlightenment by translating them into "rooms". Both of the terms are supposed to be synonymous with "心斋" (fasting of the heart-mind) rather than geographical spaces. "吉祥"[4], translated as "contentment", is stripped of its Taoist essence as the supreme harmony arising from unity with the *Tao* and nature, and takes on a reductive value of secular satisfaction. Similarly, "止止" in its translation as "stillness" is flattened to a static condition

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[2] "Names are public instruments"—from Outer Chapters in *The Book of Chuang Tzu.*

[3] The former signifies emptiness without egoistic attachment; the latter signifies inner luminosity without secular distractions.

[4] "Auspicious blessings and virtues reside in a tranquil and focused heart-mind"—Cheng Xuanying, *Commentary on the Chuang Tzu* (Note: Due to a lack of English material, the quotations of Cheng in this paper are invariably translated by the author of the paper into English as well).

compared to its origin as a dynamic process of cultivating inner tranquility for felicity. While "true light" captures the physical appearance of "白" (luminosity and enlightenment), it neglects its dialectical relation with "虚" (emptiness), mistakes the text's interplay of emptiness and enlightenment for a single-dimensional narrative. By replacing philosophical metaphor with substantial entities, the translation reduces Chuang Tzu's debate over unity of physical being and spirituality to a plain depiction of spacial and emotional states.

Finally, "逍遥" (unfettered wandering), as Chuang Tzu's most distinctive philosophical concept (Wang, 2021, p. 72), is inaccurately rendered in Palmer's translation. Poetically evocative as it may be, his translation of "逍遥游" as "Wander Where You Will" fundamentally misinterprets Taoist vision, for it makes *it* an act of ego-driven result; and with the word "will", it becomes a predetermined journey, whereas the true meaning of this term depicts a psychological state of being an aimless and spontaneous wanderer and emphasizes the transcendence over external suppression *and* internal possession, so to keep up the rhythm with natural movement.

Example 8:

ST: 野马也，尘埃也，生物之以息相吹也。

TT: It is like the swirling of the dust in the heat, blowing around below the deep blue of Heaven.

This is the wandering state depicted in the original text, exemplified in the images of "野马" (vapor) and "尘埃" (dust), which are metaphors for the aimless flux of natural movement. It suggests the interplay of tangible and intangible forces that mirrors the dynamic equilibrium of nature, implying the connectivity of living creatures. This phenomenon, free from utilitarian purpose or ego-driven control, epitomizes the true spiritual liberation of Taoism. Palmer's translation, however, avoids this fluid, dynamic image and focuses on the heat of the environment, erasing its philosophical meaning.

To conclude, Palmer's reconstruction of Chuang Tzu's cultural and philosophical image largely stems from his result-oriented hermeneutic strategy and simplification of philosophical profundity. His employment of static narrative dissects the fluid consciousness inherent in Chuang Tzu's thought, obscuring the dynamic nature of Taoism and even risk imposing utilitarian logic and dualism into the translated text. The crux of this problem lies in the fundamental discrepancy between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions.

As Hall and Ames (1995, p. 19) wrote, "The Western tradition prioritizes 'substance' over 'process', marginalizing metaphoric and imagistic language". This leads Western interpreters to "either condescend Chinese thought as proto-rational or to struggle for their own deficiency of philosophical instruments that could address process and change". When the *process-oriented perspectives* of Chuang Tzu are forcibly integrated into a *substance-oriented framework*, the translated text fails to recreate the cosmological expansiveness encapsulated in the concept of ultimate freedom, which is a transcendental journey that dissolves spatial-temporal boundaries and ego-consciousness.

In the Back Translation

Based on previous analysis, the paper observes evident distortions of human agency and philosophical misinterpretations within the translated text. These characters arising from the interplay of two discourses have asserted themselves, explicitly or implicitly, in the back-translation process, imbuing the work with unbidden philosophical nuances. The paper offers four examples to illustrate this issue.

Example 9:

ST: 夫大道不称，大辩不言，大仁不仁，大廉不嗛，大勇不忮。

TT(ST'): The great Way is not named, the great disagreement is unspoken, great benevolence is not benevolent, great modesty is not humble, great courage is not violent.

BT: 大道不可名状；至辩无须言辞；大仁不显仁爱；大谦不露卑微；大勇不逞凶暴。

Example 10:

ST: 则夫子犹有蓬之心也夫！

TT(ST'): Your head is full of straw.

BT: 则夫子犹有蓬之心也夫！

In these two examples, the back-translated version (BT) is ostensibly similar to the original Chinese in semantic meanings, but their philosophical meanings undergo some shifts. In Example 9, the five juxtaposed phrases, under the dialectical thinking framework of Taoism, indicate the philosophical concept of transcending superficiality and returning to the natural essence. The so-called "辩" (differentiation), "仁" (benevolence), "廉" (modesty) are indeed norms imposed by human language; and, in Chuang Tzu's belief, these norms are foreign to one's innate nature and should not be advocated in the path toward transcendence. The word "不" (no) in the original context is not a rejection but rather a precondition for achieving dialectical unity. In the back translation, however, the dialectical unity is distorted into a denial of acts by terms such as "不可" "无须" meaning "no need", and "不显" "不露" meaning "not register". Such shifts happen because of the English way of defining things as the mainstream of Western thought postulated, "Words are believed to have a natural relationship with the thoughts or things they mean to express […] Words may have defections, but amply studied and properly used, they can clearly and correctly articulate truth, whatever its nature" (Tang, 1999, p. 14).

This attitude toward the power of language manifests the self-esteem of Western cognition (Heimann, 1937). Thus, in the very back-translated version, the Chinese context has gained a new connotation of human-centrism passed down from its English interpretation.

In Example 10, the two Chinese versions are identical in their formation. This is because the word "蓬" is equivalent to "straw" in their botanic senses; however, the Chinese and English words are different in their metaphorical senses. In English interpretation, "full of straw" is more synonymous with "being empty-minded" or "stupid", whereas in Chinese interpretation, "蓬" metaphorically describes a mind as cluttered as straws, lacking a penetrating, holistic wisdom. In this sense, even though the two sentences are literally the same, their underlying metaphorical indications have experienced a cultural shift.

The following two examples, on the other hand, indicate obvious interpretive gaps.

Example 11:

ST: 无适焉，因是已。

TT(ST'): Don't even start, let's just stay put.

BT: 不如止步当下。

Example 12:

ST: 化声之相待，若其不相待。

TT(ST'): To wait for one voice to bring it all together is as pointless as waiting for no one.

BT: 待一音以齐众心，犹待虚无人，皆枉然矣。

In Example 11, the original Chinese text means that "there is no need to pursue anything; just let things happen naturally". This sentence is likewise the Taoist idea of "following the natural movement". However, having been through the English translation, the back-translated Chinese misinterprets the text as a physical halt, thereby omitting the dynamism embedded in Chuang Tzu's philosophical ideas.

In Example 12, the original Chinese text means that the human-made discourses are seemingly interdependent yet indeed not in their true essence. However, the English translation only takes the term "声" (voice) and "待" (wait) in their literal senses, ignoring their respective implications of "human languages" and "the state of being interdependent". The original philosophical idea is to overcome the "world" constructed by human languages. But in the back-translated version, such proactive realization is again stripped off its subjectivity and takes on a passive undertone of "waiting for" something to happen. This issue is concluded by Liu (2018, p. 9) that, "While Chuang Tzu's work has been introduced to Western readers in a way that resonates more with Western culture, it has simultaneously lost its philosophical characters and been absorbed by Western cultures in a submissive manner".

As shown, Liu exhibits a negative attitude against this cross-cultural outcome, viewing the reconstruction of cultural image as a damage to the original work and a dilemma for the communication of Chinese traditional classics.

In contrast, the Big Translation Theory offers a different analytical perspective. It gives theoretical clarity to the translation journey of *The Book of Chuang Tzu* by viewing it as a dynamic generative process in their cross-lingual journey. Emerging from the traditional paradigm of one-way export, the translation practices have become a continuous process of cultural reconstruction under this theory. Through the proactive interlingual conversion from the original to the full translated text, and the back translation from English to Chinese, the collective cultural memory in the original text is endowed with new philosophical and cultural implications by the translator, forming new memory by an interplay of Chinese-Western discourse. This attests to the cross-cultural nature of translation activities, infusing contextual narratives with multicultural tension. Opposite to Liu's idea, these reconstructions are no longer considered a passive submission to the Western discourse; instead, it is a natural course where the meaning is delivered with the communicative role of languages and cultural symbols, as well as the participatory role of translator.

Reconstruction During Intralingual Translation

The most distinctive feature of Palmer's translation journey lies in his practice of intralingual adaptation, exemplified by his decision to abridge his earlier full translation into a selected edition. According to Huang (2012, p. 64), citing Jacobson's typology of translation, "the rendering of classical texts typically necessitates both *interlingual* and *intralingual* processes". This indicates that the cross-linguistic translation of Chinese classics into modern English entails intralingual interpretation to transmit cultural and historical memory by reworking a text *within the same language* to better fit the recipient.

In the abridged version, the full-translated content is shortened and the chapter order is rearranged. Due to its compact size and condensed narrative, the book gains greater effect of cross-cultural communication and was selected in the "Great Ideas" collection of the Penguin Books in 2010. In this version, the book consists of 14 parts, all of which were named by Palmer himself. The original seven Inner Chapters have been scattered into the first five parts, as Palmer (Chuang Tzu, 2010, p. 158) listed: "Part 1 is from Chapter 2; Part 2 from Chapters 3, 4 and 5; Part 3 from Chapter 6; Part 4 from Chapters 7 and 8; Part 5 from Chapters 1, 5, 17, 18, 24 and 26".

Unfortunately, Palmer did not give explanations for such arrangements; but, in the translator's introduction of his full translated version, Palmer (Chuang Tzu, 2006, pp. 10, 17) puts forward his doubt over a lack of evidence that specifies which parts of the book can be ascribed to Chuang Tzu himself. He also stresses that the chapters cannot be read with logic for they "do not flow sequentially". The paper reasons that these two

statements could be the driving cause. However, this adaptation leads to both positive and unwarranted cultural reconstruction of the work, which is the focus of discussion for this section.

Positive Reconstruction

Building upon the full translation, the adaptation brings greater clarity to the understanding of Chuang Tzu's philosophy by bringing together content with similar philosophical ideas and renaming their themes. For example, Palmer grouped part of the content from Chapters 3 ("Nurturing of Life"), 4 ("Out and About in the World"), and 5 ("Signs of Real Virtue") under the theme of "Perfect Accord", for the three chapters jointly imply the significance of living in harmony with natural movement. This general theme is displayed by the three chapters in discussions concerning the Taoist living code that transcends human-made social norms. In the abridged version, three physically deformed men—Crippled Shu, Shen Tu Chia, and Shu Shan the Toeless—are preserved to exemplify that "only the man of virtue is able to live with any event that happens naturally"[5], providing concrete examples for the otherwise abstract philosophical concept.

This creative strategy is beneficial for educational and communicative purposes. Breaking apart the original divisions of Inner, Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters, Palmer restructures Chuang Tzu's ideas based on his own making of the themes. It omits part of the abstract philosophical discourse, and prioritizes real-life analogies to narrow down cognitive discrepancy. Designed for non-specialist readers, the adaptation helps to delineate essential concepts of the Taoist thought with relatable stories, opening a portal for Western audiences to engage with Chuang Tzu's subtle wisdom.

Unwarranted Reconstruction

While the adaptation practically serves the communication of the original work, it generates three aspects of reconstruction that may endanger the conceptual integrity of Chuang Tzu's thought.

First, a notable overlook of the conceptual density has occurred during the adaptation. The original text is heavily characterized by discussions and aphoristic penetration on the harmonious unity and on debates over the "great" and the "small", alongside many real-life cases worthy of reflective readings. However, this adaptation has substantially condensed these elements in its commitment to conciseness and portability as a pocket edition. Crucially, some of the most essential content that alludes to the philosophical core of Chuang Tzu has likewise been eliminated from the abridged version. This leads to the loss of theoretical and scientific profundity of the original text, reducing it from a philosophical canon to a pro-literary work.

For instance, in Part 2, the stories of the "uselessly" vast tree and Crippled Shu from Chapter 4 are preserved to indicate that there is no absolute boundary between being "useful" and "useless". However, in the complete version of Chapter 4, Chuang Tzu also talks about the concept of "心斋" (fasting of the heart-mind), providing a theoretical interpretation of the term as achieving inner emptiness and clarity[6]. This is an equally important idea of Chuang Tzu that calls for eliminating self-obsession to pursue spiritual liberation as part of his living code delineated in this chapter. But, due to the need of keeping passage condensed, it is dropped off from the abridged version.

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[5] This is the translation of the Chinese quotation, "知不可奈何而安之若命，唯有德者能之"—from Chapter 5 in The Book of Chuang Tzu.

[6] "Make your awareness become one; do not listen with the ears but with the heart; do not listen with the heart but with the *qi*. Hearing stops at the ears; the mind stops at the unity. Emptiness, gathered by the *Tao*, receives all things without bias, enabling the fasting of the heart-mind"—from Chapter 4 in *The Book of Chuang Tzu.*

Second, there is a probability of a simplified portrayal of historical figures in the part "Hui Tzu". In *the original work*, Hui Tzu serves as a catalyst that drives out Chuang Tzu's philosophical revelations rather than an antagonist ready for challenging Chuang Tzu's ideas. Through his logical arguments, Hui Tzu propels Chuang Tzu to employ poetical and allegorical narratives to illustrate the Taoist thought in a manner unparalleled to the intellectual thinkers of his time, thereby unveiling the transcendental nature of the *Tao*.

The dialogues between the two figures follow the pattern of philosophical inquiry rather than unilateral rejection. The dynamic in this process bears resemblance to the Socratic method, where Hui Tzu's role as a persistent questioner mirrors the "straw man" in Socrates' dialogues, raising premises to catalyze epistemological breakthroughs. However, if readers are not cautious in their reading, they "are apt to believe there is a slow-witted thinker who experience difficulty responding to" (Hall & Ames 1995, p. 66) both Chuang Tzu and Socrates' request.

By gathering the scattered dialogues from the original chapters, and by following the repeated pattern of "question and answer", the abridged version is able to better capture the philosophical gist of Chuang Tzu for Western readers, thereby elevating Chuang Tzu's image as an insightful philosophical giant. However, such adaptation has magnified the confronted role of Hui Tzu. The selection of his remarks is defined by prolonged passages of complaining and questioning, making him a negative example against Chuang Tzu's noble ideas and overshadowing his real identity as a critical thinker who contributed to the philosophical boom during the Warring Period of Chinese history.

To conclude, this adaption could be seen as an innovative hermeneutic practice. Its reconstruction of philosophical coherence through restructuring is especially meaningful to facilitate cross-cultural communication, for it proves that cultural narratives can be altered not merely through linguistic prowess but equally through structural reconfiguration, and reveals how collective cultural memory is communicated not just diachronically through conventional interlingual practices, but also with a diversified strategic adjustment that involves textual arrangements to serve either the targeted market, or the translator's own interpretive rationale.

Reconstruction During Intersemiotic Translation

I save this part to the end of the paper not because intersemiotic translation is deemed the least important, but because it only temporarily existed in the initial full-translated version and was omitted in the abridged version. Thus, it has less influence on reconstructing collective cultural memory, compared to the other two approaches. However, such amplification is still worthy to be noted, for it is the non-verbal representation of Palmer's interpretive rationale.

According to Yu (2015), Palmer employs a double-focus illustrative framework: On one hand, there are 22 paintings of ink-wash landscape. Completed by Wang Nianci, a landscape master of the Republic of China, these paintings primarily depict figures enjoying their leisure time in the natural environment, creating a serene and soothing ambience.

On the other hand, there are 11 portrayals of religious figures. Six of them sourced from "玉历宝钞"[7] (*Yuli Baochao*) and five Buddhist images from *The Diamond Sutra* and *Great Compassion Mantra*. This illustrative

[7] The book, purportedly attributed to the Buddhist monk "淡痴" (Danchi), was compiled during the Qing Dynasty. According to philological accounts, Danchi retrieved this text from his spiritual revelation journey to the Chinese underworld.

scheme reveals the translator's dual hermeneutic creativity: One is to emphasize the ultimate freedom through a romantic expression of harmony between human and nature, while the other is to combine Taoism with Buddhism and folk religion to suggest a coalescence of religious diversity.

However, while technically adhering to the oriental artistic conventions, the illustrative framework fails to manage the essence of *Chuang Tzu's* philosophical aesthetics featuring "an *allegorical-discursive style* that engages with grotesque imagery and cunning metaphors" (Yin, 2024, p. 91). Though the visual representation of leisure ostensibly conforms to the liberated state in the *original work*, the pictures of delicate literati gatherings have largely reduced the Taoist notion of self-transcendence, which eliminates secular fixations. Meanwhile, the chaotic and eerie side of Taoist philosophical image is devoid of any visual representation, reducing the polarizing aesthetics of the work into monotonous tranquility.

Moreover, the injection of religious elements implies the cross-philosophical dilemma that involves misappropriating religious connotation in handling the interaction between mortal beings and spirituality in the Chinese classics. For instance, *Yuli Baochao* is a religious folk book that persuades people to serve for benevolence, with its content centered around karmic debt. The paintings of karmic narrative from *Yuli Baochao*, each writing "praising for benevolence" and "punishing for evil deeds", forms a conceptual cliff with Chuang Tzu who advocates "Practice goodness without pursuing name; commit wrongdoings without incurring punishment"[8].

Therefore, the illustrative framework in Palmer's translation mirrors a compromised negotiation between aesthetic appeal and philosophical authenticity. He visually portrays Chuang Tzu as a romantic philosopher of naturalism, with a blending character of religious penetration. This dual image ensures better acceptance of the original text, for "the combination of illustration and written texts helps to sustain the Western readers' interests even when they are confused about the conceptual profundity", Fu (2025, p. 127) cited Feng (2014). However, it also brings down the effects of Chuang Tzu's insightful critique to ornamental cultural symbols due to the inherent contradiction between the philosophical-religious brands.

Conclusion

Since cultural memory aims at handing down meanings among collectives, its continuous nature allows the translated text, which is a product of cultural reconstruction at one stage, to serve as the cultural basis for subsequent stages. This is exemplified by Martin Palmer's translation journey, wherein the cultural symbols underwent two rounds of reconstruction, and the resulted text has become a new collective cultural memory that targets at a wider group of people, and breaks down the boundary of time, space, and social backgrounds.

Such reconstruction is completed largely due to the mediation of translator, whose discretion during the translation process incurs the shift of memory. Once the original collective cultural memory is handed over to the translator, it no longer depends on how source language users articulate it, but rather on the habitual cultural interpretations of target language recipients. In the context of *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, most of the cultural and philosophical reconstructions arise from an absence of Western approach toward metaphorical languages and process-oriented cognition, alongside an emphasis on human-centrism, which are the inevitable interpretive gaps in the cross-cultural communication.

[8] This quotation is from Chapter 3 in *The Book of Chuang Tzu*.

On the other hand, according to the Big Translation Theory, it is not necessarily unpleasant for any occurrence of cultural reconstruction during the translation process, for the theory focuses more on the efficacy of overcoming temporal and spacial limit, which ensures the afterlife of a specific work, than on the fidelity of translated texts. Building upon the interplay of cultural collectives and cultural memory, translation activities are able to explore and leverage the hermeneutic potential of Chinese traditional classics.

By travelling across a cyclical journey from the original Chinese to the end Chinese, the translated work of *The Book of Chuang Tzu* experienced both heterogeneous integration into Western discourse systems and a return to its own narratives. The Big Translation Theory provides this cross-cultural clash with a new significance that reflects precisely the constant renewal of the cultural essence from *the traditional work.* Its philosophical ideas have gained greater relevance with modern life, further facilitating the integration of the philosophical concepts of ancient China into the current global cognitive frameworks. This underlines the fusion of traditional cultural memory with modernity, securing the communicative and prolonged nature of cultural essence.

However, it is still a factual statement that part of the philosophical and cultural images from the original work are altered, and the philosophical essence is obscured, which might risk cultural misinterpretation. Therefore, the paper argues that ethical issues related to cultural integrity brought by this cross-cultural attribute should be further identified and discussed.

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