

Translation of *Daodejing* in English: its place and time

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Abstract *Daodejing*, one of the Chinese Classics, has the second largest translated versions in the world, second to the Bibles. Since the 1st English version translated by John Chalmers in 1868, there are different retranslations in western countries, typically in the US and the UK. *Daodejing* gets its “rebirth” or “rewriting” in different places through different times. Different time and places constitute different historical, social and cultural context. This paper focuses on the translation and retranslation of *Daodejing* by James Legge in the nineteenth century, Arthur Waley in the twentieth century and Roger Ames and David Hall in the twenty-first century, which context is respectively featured by Christian background, western culture centralism and the co-existence of multi-cultures. This paper reveals the differences of the interpretation and translation of *Daodejing* by the above mentioned translators. Some key vocabularies such as “*Dao*”, “*De*”, “*Tian*”, “*Wu Wei*” etc. are analyzed, meanwhile their different translations are illustrated in terms of vocabulary. In the meantime, the contemporary retranslation of *Daodejing* by Roger Ames and David Hall will be shed light on. They interpret the traditional Chinese natural cosmology via the focus and field theory. In this philosophical translation of *Daodejing*, the gerund and “language cluster” are applied in accordance with the Chinese vocabularies in the original text of *Daodejing* to illustrate a holistic, dynamic Daoist cosmology. As an open text, *Daodejing* has been rooted in the alien places and has gained its niche in the delineation of translated texts in different periods of time. The after-life of the original text of *Daodejing* therefore, bridges the dialogue and cooperation between the east and the west based on the pursuit of harmonious development for the mankind via the translated works of the Chinese classics.

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Introduction

Daodejing(道德经) was born in the spring and war period in ancient China. Its author is known as Lao zi, or Lao Dan. The whole text of *Daodejing* is normally divided into 81 chapters, including 37 chapters delineating *dao* (道) and 44 chapters delineating *de* (德). Since its birth, *Daodejing* as a Chinese Classics travels through the long Chinese history with the changes of different dynasties. There are different editions of *Daodejing* including its Chinese commentaries, among which two are of importance, one edition is interpreted and commentated by He shanggong (河上公) in Han dynasty and the other is by Wang bi (王弼) in Three-kingdom Period. It is not only passed generation upon generation in China but also gets its rebirth in the western countries. There are more than 5000 and less than 6000 characters contained in the text, and it has been translated into different languages, with the second largest translations versions in the world, second to the Bibles. The first translation into the western language was done by the Roman Catholic missionaries in Latin and it was presented to P. Jos. de Grammont in England on the 10th, January 1788 (Legge 1962, p. 12). Since the 1st English version translated by John Chalmers in 1868, there are different retranslations in western countries, typically in the USA and the UK and the differences not only exist in translated texts itself but the translated titles. *Daodejing* gets its “rebirth” or “rewriting” in different places through different times. Different times and places constitute different historical, social and cultural context. I will focus on the translation of *Daodejing* by James Legge in the nineteenth century, Arthur Waley in the twentieth century and Roger Ames and David Hall in the twenty-first century, which context is respectively featured by Christian background, western culture centralism and the co-existence of multi-cultures.

Translation is kind of rewriting of the source text, which is unavoidably imprinted with characteristics in different period of time at different locations. The study of its translation or rewriting is more of importance in the aspect of concepts, genres, devices etc. in different centuries. In the general editors’ preface of the Contemporary Translation Theories (Gentzler 1993), we can see the following statement:

All rewritings whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is a manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society. Rewriting can introduce concepts, new genres, new devices, and the history of translation is also of literary innovation, of shaping power of one culture upon another ...

As a representative masterpiece of Chinese Daoism, the translation of *Daodejing* is more complicated than other literary classics. *Daodejing* is not simply a literary work, it involves the Daoist religion and Daoist philosophy. It conveys the Ancient Chinese wisdom, covering nature, morality and politics. The Daoist cosmology in Chinese philosophy is dynamic, holistic and in process, which is just described as “the inseparability of one and many” by Tang Junyi. On the contrary, the western philosophy emphasizes more on dualism and its opposition of dualities since Plato, and it focuses on “one behind the many” metaphysics (Ames and Hall 2003). This paper will reveal the differences of the interpretation and translation of *Daodejing* by the above mentioned translators. Some key vocabularies such as “*dao*(道)”, “*de*(德)”, “*tian*(天)”, “*wu wei*(无为)” ect. are analyzed, meanwhile their different translations are illustrated in terms of vocabulary and what we can find behind these differences.

Different interpretations and rewritings in the dynamic axis of place and time

When we talk about travel, normally the subject refers to a person or an animated creature. In fact, the non-creatures do travel a lot even farther and faster than the living creatures, such as the knowledge, the techniques, and even the texts etc. The text of *Daodejing* (sixth century BCE) has traveled across the borders through periods of time since more than 2500 years ago via its readers and its translators. Time and place build up a certain context where translators interpret and translate the original texts. Gentzler (1993, p. 150) in his Contemporary Translation Theories states that:

According to Foucault, the author’s work is not the result of spontaneous inspiration, but I tied to the institutional system of the time and place over which the individual author has little control or awareness.

It is the same with the translators who are translating and rewriting the original text, time and place coordinately construe a network in which the translators work is spread and extended. Traced back to the nineteenth century, it is the time that the western missionaries trying to convey their Christian belief to the rest of the world. Though a prudent sinologist James Legge is, the languages he used in his translation is closely related to its belief in God, not the Daoist language itself. After a century when the World War II ended, people were facing a hard time. What people need urgently is something that can heal the wound both physically and psychologically. Arthur Waley, another great sinologist retranslated *Daodejing* where still exists the shadow of God in its translated text.

In the current world, the human beings are facing a rapid progress in science and technology, which brings not only the progress and convenience for daily-life but pollution and new diseases etc. as its by product. What we need more is the spiritual assurance to slower the fast pace of the ongoing development in our routine life and keep a kind of balance and harmony in life and work. The Daoist philosophy acts as somewhat therapy for the current anxieties of humans in the rushing society. Upon the urge of the times and the recovery of the archaeological manuscripts of

Daodejing, Roger Ames and David Hall translated *Daodejing* and let the Daoism speaks its own languages in its own discourse. They have very deep interpretation of the Daoist concepts in the source language and deliberate its equivalence in the target language where the meaning resonance can be found between Chinese and English, such as the employment of the gerund for the expression of the Daoist ongoing process. They set up a set of terminologies in Chinese classics translation which is really helpful to the readers. Most of the translated works are framed by the structure of “introduction Glossary of key terms translation”, typically for the translation of *Daodejing*, we can also see both the historical and philosophical introduction besides the introduction to translation. Additionally, the historical context, and the commentary after translation of each chapter, and the thematic index is reader-friendly.

Admittedly, each translator has contributed a lot to the transmission of *Daodejing* to other parts of the world in different period of times. For the last 25 years of the nineteenth century it is recognized as James Legge’s time in the field of sinology studies in Great Britain, even for the whole European, bridging the East and West cultural communication. Arthur Waley is famous for his translations of the Chinese literatures, his translations in twentieth century made the Chinese literature known in both Europe and America. Obviously, their contributions were great in history. However, more or less there is the mark of time when they lived and limitation of the understanding of the source text in Chinese. It is the right time to let the world know what is the real Chinese cosmology and Chinese philosophy including Daoism, Confucianism.

Let’s first take a look at the James Legge’s version. *The Tao Teh King* [*Daodejing*] or *the Tao and Its Characteristics* [the *Dao and Its Characteristics*] is in part of his translated book *the Sacred Books of China: the Text of Daoism*, which is first published by the Oxford University Press in 1891. In the introduction part, he stated that Laozi is the author of *Daodejing* whose birthday was probably 604BCE and his death was not recorded and introduced the state and social condition when Laozi wrote the *Daodejing*. The main parts are his translation and comments of the 81 chapters. In terms of his interpretation and translation of *dao*(道), Legge (1962, p. 15) expressed it as follows:

The Tao therefore is a phenomenon; not a positive being, but a mode of being. Lao’s idea of it may become plainer as we proceed to other points of his system. In the meantime, the best way of dealing with it in translating is to transfer it to the version, instead of trying to introduce an English equivalent of it.

Legge (1962, p. 14) interpreted *Dao* in one of his notes:

道 is the equivalent to the Greek $\tau\rho\acute{o}\pi\omicron\varsigma$, the way. Where this name for the Christian system occurs in our revised Version of the New Testament in the Acts of the Apostles, the literal rendering is adhered to, Way being printed with a capital W...

Legge did try to interpret Chinese Daoist in its own position, but with the limitation of his belief in God, he translated *dao* as “Way” with the capital letter of

“W” or “Tao [*dao*]” in Wade-Giles Romanization, and “天道” as the “Way of Heaven”, which is in the discourse of transcendentalism and idealism, not in the Daoist discourse.

Having a closer look at Legge’s translation of the 1st chapter of *Daodejing*, the vocabulary he used can further reveal his interpretation of *dao* and *tian*. Here are the source text and Legge’s translated version (1962, p. 47):

道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名。无名天地之始，有名万物之母。故常无欲以观其妙；常有欲以观其徼；此二者，同出而异名，同谓之玄。玄之又玄，众妙之门。

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.
2. (conceived of as) having no name, it is the originator of heaven and earth; (conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things.
3. Always without desire we must be found,
 If its deep mystery we would sound;
 But if desire always within us be,
 Its outer fringe is all that we shall see.
4. Under these two aspects, it is really the same; but as development takes place, it receives the different names. Together we call them the Mystery. Where the Mystery is the deepest is the gate of all that is subtle and wonderful.

In his translation *tian* is “heaven” that belongs to the Christian vocabulary lists. Legge (1962, p. 47) also wrote in his explanations of the first chapter’s translation:

Par. 3 suggests the words of the apostle John, ‘He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.’

Such para-texts of the translation give us another glimpse on his bringing his identity of missionary into his translation work, which is not the reflection of the Daoist philosophy.

Arthur Waley’s translation of the first chapter (Waley 1997, p. 1) also contain the words of “Way” and “heaven”:

The Way that can be told is not an Unvarying Way:
 The names that can be named are not unvarying names.
 It is from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang;
 The named is but the mother that rears the ten
 thousand creatures, each after its kind.

... ..

On the interpretation and translation of “*dao* 道”, we can see that both James Legge and Arthur Waley use the word “Way” with its capital letter, which signifies as a meaning of transcendence and Divine, the worldview of the western people whose tradition is closely related to their belief in God. In Chinese tradition, the

Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism have intangible relations, we sometimes can detect the Daoist elements in the Zen Buddhism, such as the spontaneity manifestation. Though they hold different opinion, the Confucianism and Daoism are sheltered in the Chinese cosmology, where the human beings are part of *dao*. The expression of “*Chengji chengwu* 成己成物” in *Zhongyong* (中庸) indicates that one is creating oneself when he is creating the world. Obviously, there is no idea of God in the ancient Chinese philosophy or tradition. So the “Way” is not Daoist vocabulary, it is the vocabulary belongs to the western Abraham tradition.

When Arthur Waley translates *Daodejing* as “*the Way and its Power*”, that is a God model, the Way is his Way, God’s Way; and its Power is God’s power of creativity. And when “the Way and its Power” is illustrated, the creative possibilities are put on the side of the independent source of truth as suppose to the Chinese philosophy of the unity of *tian*(天), *di* (地) and *ren*(人). The human being is not the object of God’s creativity but the human being is involving in the process of constructing the cosmos.¹

Ames and Hall (2003, p. 13) render *dao* and *de* as *this focus* (*de* 德) and *its field* (*dao* 道) based on both the title and the content of this Chinese classical work, that has the connotation of “feeling at home in the world”. In the philosophical interpretation and highlighting of the human factors in the Daoist cosmology, Ames and Hall translate the title of *Daodejing* as *Daodejing “Making This Life Significant”: A Philosophical Translation*. They assert that in Daoist correlative cosmology it is the processual events instead of things that all the particular things are related to each other, and “each event distinguishes itself by developing its own uniqueness with the totality (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 21)”. The human being are not passive participants but actively optimize their experiences and get the most out of it. Thus, the *Dao* is interpreted and translated as “way-making”, a gerundive expression, which shows its processual and dynamic power. In Chinese *Wenyanwen* (ancient Chinese characters 文言文), the word “*dao* 道” is cognate to “*dao* 导”, a leading forth that implies its fluidity, reflexivity and processual.

De in the source text has its meanings variations based on different contexts in Ames and Hall’s translation. In some cases “*de* 德” has more of the sense of “potency” like in chapter 28 in *Daodejing* “知其雄守其雌, 为天下谷, 为天下谷, 恒德不离”, and other cases “*de* 德” has the sense of the “virtuosity”. but the word *virtuosity* and the word *potency* really have the same root in the English language. According to Ames,² they are not translating individual characters but the meanings. Characters expressed meaning, It is like what Wang Bi (王弼) talks about relationships between “*yan* 言”, “*xiang* 象” and “*yi* 意”, characters and meaning are combined together. Ames and Hall use virtuosity instead of virtue which are different in meaning. What Ames (2011) states is that “virtue” is a character that belongs to a person independent of his or her conduct, “virtuosity” is a quality of conduct, is a narrative understanding of a person. In the Taoist tradition and the Taoist cosmology persons are narratives who are stories;

¹ The viewpoint is based on an interview of Roger Ames on his perspective of the translation of Ancient Chinese Classics, the interviewer is Qing Chang. Related viewpoint can be found in the article published in *zhongguo fanyi* 中国翻译 (Chinese translators Journal) 37, no. 4:87–92 (2016).

² Ibid.

they are different from the persons in a platonic model who are independent discrete existences and have actions in the world. When we think of “*daode* 道德” even in the modern Chinese language what it has comes first is the word “virtuosity”, a kind of optimally meaningful way of behaving in the world according to Ames. That means that “*de* 德” really has to do with the quality of conduct, so virtuosity is an attempt to capture that idea.

There is another key word in *Daodejing* need to be mentioned is “*wu* 无” and “*wuwei* 无为”, which appears in 40 chapters as follows:

2,3,7,9,10,16,17,19,20,21,22,24,28,29,32,34,43,45,47,48,50,51,52,55,56,57,60,63, 64,66,67,68,69,71,73,75,77,78,79,80.

Taking these two sentences as an example “故有无相生”, “为无为,则无不治”, Legge translated them as: “so the existence and non-existence give birth the one to (the idea of) the other (Legge 1962, p. 48)” and “when there is this abstinence from action, good order I universal (Legge 1962, p. 49)”. Waley’s translation were “for truly being and non-being grow out of one another (Waley 1997, p. 2)” and “yet through his actionless activity all things are duly regulated (Waley 1997, p. 3)”. Roger Ames and David Hall put *pinyin* (拼音) along with the English equivalent vocabulary, the two sentences are respectively translated as “Determinacy (*you*) and indeterminacy (*wu*) give rise to each other (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 79)” and “it is simply in doing things noncoercively (*wuwei*), that everything is governed properly (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 81)”.

Ames and Hall interpret the traditional Chinese natural cosmology via the focus and field theory. As Roger Ames asserts in his book *Confucian Role Ethics: a Vocabulary* (Ames 2011), the creativity is spontaneous and gradually formed in this Daoist worldview, and the self-creativity and the co-creativity is kind of spontaneous emergence, which has the contextualized tendency. In this philosophical translation of *Daodejing*, the the gerund and “language Group” are applied in accordance with the Chinese vocabularies in the original text of *Daodejing*. And for some words which has no equivalents in English, they use Chinese *pinyin*, like the word “天” is translated as “*tian*” instead of “heaven”. More interpretation and translation of the key characters in *Daodejing* like “*he* 和”, “*qi* 气”, “*wanwu* 万物”, “*ziran* 自然” etc. are described in the glossary of key terms in their book. Ames and Hall write both the historical introduction and philosophical introduction to illustrate the nature and applications of the *Daodejing* and its cosmology. They set a series of Chinese discourse with a cluster of terms that put certain relationship to each other with coherence, which makes the philosophical grammar and translational discourse pattern. It is kind of Chinese narrative in which the the voice of Chinese philosophy or tradition is heard.

The interpretive context of the contemporary retranslation

I had an interview on Roger Ames about his perspective on the contemporary translation of the Chinese classics. In Ame’s opinion,³ there are three reasons for the retranslation in this generation. China now is experiencing an enormous

³ Ibid.

reconstruction and taking a new look in the world stage. With the archeological materials like bamboo scrolls were found in the ancient Chinese tombs, precious texts are available for scholars in different areas, which is 1300 years older than the text of last generation, some of which are virtually new rather than textual differences, such as the earliest Daoist cosmology *Taiyi shengshui* (太一生水). New historical resources ride the translators to go through the space and time tunnel for a better reading and understanding of the source text of the Chinese classics. The second reason for re-translating is for the correction of some improper interpretation and translation of the Chinese cultural tradition. Several hundred years ago, the missionary culture both the Jesuits and the protestants in their encounter with the Chinese culture were motivated to close the gap between the two different tradition with one model of the western worldview. Therefore, the translation vocabularies like “Way” were employed and they are reinforced in many ways by recent translations, some of them even are deposited into the dictionaries, which is a fundamental distortion of the Chinese tradition. In such situation, some translations overwrote Chinese culture with the importance of western culture not of their own. The third reason is closely linked with the western modernity. The vocabulary of the western modernity is applied to the interpretation and translation of the Asian languages. In the last half of the nineteenth century, the technical vocabulary of western modernity was freighted and insinuated into the languages of Japanese, Chinese and Korean, based on which a set of new academic vocabulary were restructured and brought into these Asian languages. Though Chinese, Japanese and Korean still use their own parole, their own vernacular language in many aspects have strongly influenced on their langue, or the conceptual structure of these languages. In most of the translations of the Chinese classics, the western language modernity of principles, concepts and terminologies have been redefined by the Ancient encounter with western modernity.

According to Ames,⁴ the traditional western philosophy up till twentieth century was heavily theological, meaning that something in the beginning produce the design of a blueprint, in which the world should unfold. So we meet the vocabularies of God or rationality or absolute spirit, the Christianity, Plato, Hegel. The path of the human experience was predetermined, there is something we got in Plato called Eidos. Eidos is an assumption that some kind of formal, unchanging substance that grounds the human experience. It is the substance ontology, and it is the idea that there is a ground and a foundation which is unchanging in human experience. Until the time of Darwin this notion of Eidos in western was challenged and make problematic. Then in the twentieth century people like Heidegger who think phenomenology talks about the rejection of theo-ontological thinking; John Dewey talks about “*the philosophical fallacy*”; Derrida talks about logocentrism, the language of presence; Whitehead talks about misplaced concreteness and the retrospective fallacy, where you list something out and make a foundation. So all these different ways are expressing the sustained internal criticism within the western philosophical narrative, where we can find the resonance with the Chinese process cosmology. This is the right time for a translator and philosopher to

⁴ Ibid.

interpret and re-translate the Chinese classics in order to ease the misreading or misinterpretation of the Chinese classics in the longstanding existed history.

Obviously, the misreading or misinterpretation is rooted in the words or vocabularies. We know that vocabularies not matter it is the languages of the source text or the translated text are bound with cultural and historical connotation. In the above mentioned examples we can see the different translations in different times. Ames (2011) explains it as rooting in different interpretive context, or “*chanshi yujing* (阐释域境)” in Chinese. Any texts both in source languages and target languages belong to a certain place and a certain time, so we have to try to locate them within their own interpretive context in order to understand them.

Conclusion

Just as the deconstructionists argue: “the original texts are the constantly being rewritten in the present and each reading/translation reconstructs the source text (Gentzler 1993, p. 149)”. Also it is the nature of both the source text and the target text in translation to grow in time and it is natural that we can find lost and expanded of meanings in translation. As an open text, *Daodejing* has been rooted in the alien places and has gained its niche in the delineation of translated texts in different periods of time. The original text should be respected in its priority and be viewed as the base of any translations, and the translated texts also should be respected in terms of its interpretation and translation in specific historical situation. However, taking the translation of *Daodejing* as an example, what we’ve seen in James Legge and Arthur Waley is they have taken a Chinese text and transplanted into soil that is not its own. So the translation of *Daodejing* in western languages belongs to a common sense that has a long tradition from Plato down to the present. It is the right time now to celebrate the appropriate retranslations of the Chinese classics. The contemporary interpretation and philosophical translation of *Daodejing* by Roger Ames and David Hall has rejected Platonism or a kind of metaphysical realism and lets the Chinese classics speak its own languages. In this way, the Chinese philosophical texts return to the core of the Chinese cosmology that is different from the polarizing dichotomies of the western tradition. Therefore, the after-life of the original text of *Daodejing* bridges the dialogue and cooperation between the east and the west based on the pursuit of harmonious development for the mankind via the translated works of the Chinese classics.

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