

A Study of English Translation of Culturally Loaded Words in LAOZI from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

Ye Feng

*Department of Foreign Language, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, China
fengye1@sxu.edu.cn*

Abstract. Against the backdrop of globalization, China is committed to constructing a culturally distinctive discourse system and enhancing its influence in international communication. As one of the most eternal classics in the history of Chinese philosophy, Laozi's translation plays a crucial role in promoting Chinese culture's global dissemination. Based on the three principles of Skopos Theory, and combined with the five cultural classification systems of material, social, ecological, religious, and language, this paper studies the translation of the Chinese-English version of Laozi's Chinese version of the Library of Chinese Classics. Through the analysis of specific translation examples, this paper concludes that this translation starts from the cultural cognition of the target reader, gives priority to the use of free translation to ensure the accurate transmission of the original connotation, and reconstructs the word order with foreignization, domestication, and literal translation to adapt to the target language's idiom. It also proves that Skopos Theory has a high applicability in the study of culturally loaded words.

Keywords: Laozi, Culturally Loaded Words, Skopos Theory, Translation

1. Introduction

Driven by the wave of globalization and China's "going global" strategy, cross-cultural communication has become a vital channel for promoting mutual understanding among civilizations. With its long history and rich cultural heritage, the Chinese nation aspires to present its cultural classics to the world through accurate and effective translation. As a classic work of Chinese Taoism, Laozi reflects the social changes and philosophical speculation of the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, and further carries the unique cognition of Chinese civilization on nature, ethics and politics. Its core concepts, such as "governance by non-interference" and "the Tao follows its own course" [1], encapsulate the governance wisdom and ecological vision of ancient China, serving as an essential window for global audiences to access traditional Chinese culture. Between 1868 and 2010, more than 160 English versions of the Laozi were published [2]. Classic translations by sinologists such as Arthur Waley and Lin Yutang have sparked widespread discussion and far-reaching influence in both Chinese and Western academic circles with their distinctive cross-cultural perspectives and creative translation strategies [3], proving its global value as a cultural bridge.

Chinese government launched a grand translation project “Library of Chinese Classics” (LCC) in 1994, playing an indispensable role in the dissemination of Chinese literature and culture [4]. The Chinese-English version of Laozi in the Library of Chinese Classics adopts the English translation of Arthur Waley, a sinologist and translator known for his translation and research of Chinese and Japanese classical literature. Waley believed that the profound thoughts contained in the book are most crucial, and what translation aims to do is to accurately reproduce what the original asserts [5]. This concept has effectively promoted the Western understanding of Taoist thought [5], which is highly consistent with the mission of the Library of Chinese Classics to enhance the international discourse power of Chinese culture. Therefore, this thesis studies the Chinese-English version of Laozi from the Library of Chinese Classics.

However, there is still a pronounced preference focusing on the current academic research on Laozi: existing studies primarily focus on interpreting its philosophical ideas. For example, Bhandari interpreted Laozi’s thought based on existential philosophy [6], and Sankheangaew revolved around how Laozi’s philosophy guides individuals to achieve a peaceful life [7]. In contrast, the multi-dimensional and systematic analysis of the content of the English translation of Laozi has not yet formed a comprehensive and in-depth investigation, and the research perspective is significantly limited. Even in the research related to the English translation of Laozi, the existing results have not covered the key research dimensions. For example, Yao noted that although Waley’s translation of the *Daodejing* is certainly outstanding, the interpretive framework built upon the various paratexts on which his translation is based (such as prefaces and notes) is still obviously inadequate—this conclusion is drawn by combing through the academic discussions between Qian Xuexi and William Empson on Waley’s translation [5].

He analyzed the role of different English translations in promoting the overseas dissemination of Laozi from the perspective of communication study [3]. Although the above studies have their own focuses, they do not touch on the core difficulty in the English translation of Laozi—the systematic translation analysis of culturally loaded words.

Culturally loaded words are the key carriers that carry the cultural connotation and thinking quintessence of Laozi. The current research ignores this dimension, which leads to a fault in the transmission of Chinese information in the translation, and even may create barriers to understanding for target-language reader. It is difficult to meet the core requirements of cross-cultural communication for “cultural accuracy”, which has become the main bottleneck restricting the deepening of the research and practical application of Laozi’s English translation research.

Guided by the three core principles of Skopos Theory, the study investigates the translation of Laozi’s culturally loaded words, focusing on the strategies employed in English versions of the text, the reasons behind these strategies, and the functional appropriateness of the translation. In order to answer the above research questions, this study adopts an analytical framework based on the five cultural categories of material culture, social culture, ecological culture, religious culture and linguistic culture, and applies it to the Chinese-English version of Laozi in the Library of Chinese Classics. This study uses the authoritative Library of Chinese Classics translation as its analysis object, aiming to explore the key challenges inherent in the translation process of culturally loaded words, particularly those stemming from cross-cultural differences and potential semantic gaps.

This study combines the research framework of Skopos Theory and Taoist philosophical translation to enrich the research on the translation of the Laozi’s culturally loaded words under the guidance of functionalist theory. This approach preserves the openness of philosophical concepts, and more notably, ensures that target readers have a reading experience similar to that of source-language readers, thanks to Skopos Theory, which enhances readability and helps international

readers grasp the deep logic and social and historical context of Chinese philosophy, ultimately enhancing the influence and soft power of Chinese culture.

2. Skopos theory

Skopos Theory was proposed by Vermeer, one German translation theorist, in the 1970s and is regarded as the cornerstone of functionalist translation studies. In *A Framework for a General Theory of Translation*, Vermeer articulated the central principle that the method of translation is determined by its Skopos, and regards translation as a cross-cultural communication behavior rather than a simple language conversion [8]. Vermeer's Skopos Theory places translation in the category of human behavior theory, proposing that translation is a human behavioral activity, breaking through the limitations of traditional "equivalence" theory [9].

Since its introduction, Skopos Theory and its three core principles—the Skopos rule, the Coherence rule, and the Fidelity rule—have been extensively applied in translation research and practice across literature, law, and journalism. Ali examined how Skopos Theory-based translation affected the spread of Abdullah Al Faisal's *Revolution of Doubts* [10]. An and Sun used this theory to explore the translation strategies of Chinese law [11]. While Jiang and Zhao applied Skopos Theory to study the culturally loaded words in *Wolf Totem* [12]. Similar to *Laozi*, *Wolf Totem* contains abundant cultural elements, demonstrating the effectiveness and feasibility of Skopos Theory in translating culturally loaded words. Therefore, this study uses Skopos Theory to study the translation of these words in the Chinese-English version of *Laozi* of the Library of Chinese Classics.

2.1. Skopos rule

The Skopos rule holds that the overall process of translation behavior, including the choice of strategy and methodology, is determined by the intended purpose of translation [9]. Vermeer puts forward the Skopos rule as the highest criterion, emphasizing that the top priority of translation is to reach the desired functionality of the target language reader, rather than the mechanical pursuit of equivalence with the source text. Foreignization, domestication, literal translation and free translation are all translation strategies that can achieve this principle. Tian contended that the Skopos rule in translation acknowledges the translator as an expert, thereby affirming their subjectivity and creativity [9]. For example, in the movie *Flipped*, the subtitles translate "It did not take long to realize this girl could not take a hint" as "I quickly discovered that this girl was not interesting at all." The foreignization strategy is used to translate the English idiom "take a hint" as "不识趣" (a lack of situational awareness or tact) rather than literally translated as "接受暗示" (recognize and appropriately respond to indirect cues), which retains the irony of the original text and conforms to Chinese expression habits. The Skopos rule provides a new perspective for analyzing the translation strategy of *Laozi*'s culturally loaded words. For instance, when dealing with core concepts like the "Tao", the translator's strategy choice should give priority to the translation purpose of "allowing the target reader to understand its philosophical connotation".

2.2. Coherence rule

The rule stipulates that a translation must be coherence between the target text and source text (intratextual coherence)—that is, it should be readable, logical, and meaningful within the target language and culture, as well as appropriate to the communicative context in which it is used [13].

This principle has been widely and deeply applied in translation practice, especially in dealing with texts with rich cultural connotations. For example, when translating the Chinese ancient book Laozi, “曲则全,枉则直”, which is translated as “To remain whole, be twisted! To become straight, let yourself be bent” [1]. Guided by the Coherence rule, fully considering the cultural background, language habits, and cognitive logic of the target reader, adjusting the expression to satisfy target audiences’ understanding demands and lower the obstacles to their understanding.

2.3. Fidelity rule

The Fidelity rule refers to the constraints of the principle of Skopos and Coherence to judge whether the source text’s form and function meet the requirements of the target language [11]. It emphasizes the maintenance of intertextual coherence between the original and translated texts, requiring the establishment of a meaningful relationship between the two. The aims of translation would affect the fidelity, and it is necessary to accurately convey technical terms in legal translation, such as the “不动产统一登记制度” in Chinese law is translated as “Unified registration system with respect to immovable property”, while literary translations can be appropriately adjusted to preserve the artistic effect. For the translation of Laozi’s culturally loaded words, the Fidelity rule requires the translator to give priority to retaining the original imagery rather than replacing it with equivalent symbols in Western culture. For example, when translating the “企” (stands on tip-toe) in “企者不立” (He who stands on tip-toe, does not stand firm) the correlation between the metaphor of action and the natural law should be maintained to avoid the rupture of philosophical logic [1].

3. Culturally loaded words

Culturally loaded words refer to words, phrases, or idioms that are rooted in the regional and historical context of a specific society and can express unique entity or core concepts to a certain culture. These words hold profound cultural connotations and historical significance, embodying the distinct way of life, language characteristics, and thought patterns that have developed over time in a nation. They differ from other civilizations and serve as direct reflections of a nation's history and culture within its language system [14]. Xu systematically proposed and expounded the core concept of “culturally loaded words” in English for the first time in his paper Culturally Loaded Words and English Language Teaching [15]. In this thesis, he argued that cultural connotations embedded in certain words often cannot be completely conveyed in the target language due to essential differences between cultures, which is why they are referred to as “Culture-Connotative Words” or “Culture-Bound Words,” and are vividly likened to a “Lexical Gap.”

American translation theorist Eugene Albert Nida proposed five cultural classification systems, namely ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture, and linguistic culture [16]. His method has been widely recognized by the international community [14], is one of the more authoritative classifications. Hence, this paper divides the culturally loaded words in Laozi into five categories according to Nida’s classifications. With the in-depth implementation of the global civilization initiative and the continuous promotion of the “Chinese culture going global” strategy, culturally loaded words have become a key carrier in cross-cultural communication. At present, the systematic discussion of translation strategies and methods has become the most concentrated topic in the study of culturally loaded words, as researchers strive to balance preserving cultural characteristics with adapting to the target language through various methods, including literal translation, free translation, transliteration, and semantic translation.

3.1. Material culturally loaded words

Material culturally loaded words refer to the material culture words created by a certain ethnic group in production and life practice. This type of vocabulary encompasses daily life items like clothing, food, and utensils, as well as material civilization carriers such as production tools and labor results, which reflect people's unique lifestyle and material creative ability in a certain cultural background [14]. As a classic with the background of the times and Chinese cultural characteristics, Laozi has a wealth of material culturally loaded words, such as “橐籥” (bellows) and “筹策” (counting-slips) [1].

3.2. Social culturally loaded words

Social culturally loaded words encompass social activities, customs, units of measurement, and other aspects, which are closely associated with the non-material facets of social life, reflecting the cultural characteristics and thought patterns of a particular social stage [17]. Laozi was written during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, an era when the feudal system was developing, the Zhou monarchy was in decline, and vassal states were vying for supremacy, which serves as a profound reflection of the social conditions and characteristics of the turbulent Pre-Qin society. For example, “夫物芸芸,各复归其根” (See, all things pass over the flourish, return to the road from which they grow), “以奇用兵” (battles can only be won if rules are broken) [1], all contain strong social characteristics and national wisdom.

3.3. Ecological culturally loaded words

This kind of words are composed of geographical environment, ecological environment, climate characteristics and other factors, reflecting the unique ecological characteristics of a nation or region [17]. Marx emphasized the three major contents of social being in the Historical Materialism—geographical environment, demographic factors and the mode of material production. Sun and Tian also claimed that ecology reflects the characteristics and conditions of the natural geographical environment and climate where a nation lives [14]. Owing to variations in the natural environment, distinct cultures hold differing understandings and perceptions of the world. “凶年” (a year of dearth) is a unique concept formed by China's agricultural civilization under ecological pressure [1], which profoundly reflects the dependence of traditional agricultural society on the natural environment.

3.4. Religious culturally loaded words

Religious culturally loaded words are vocabulary that reflect the religious beliefs, moral codes, myths, legends, folk beliefs, and religious teachings of different ethnic groups [17]. These words are often closely related to the philosophical thoughts and spiritual world of a nation, such as “万物负阴而抱阳” (These ten thousand creatures cannot return their backs to the shade without having the sun on their bellies) and “自然” (Self-so) in Laozi contain the philosophical concept of unity of opposites and return to the origin [1].

3.5. Linguistic culturally loaded words

These terms are words or phrases that carry unique cultural connotations in a specific language framework, such as idioms, sayings, proverbs, dialects [14], and their grammatical structure,

rhetorical methods and metrical rhythms often reflect the uniqueness of the language. For example, the “惚兮恍兮” (Incommensurable and impalpable) in Laozi makes the rhyme loop and the sense of rhythm is significantly enhanced through the clever use of the modal particle “兮” [1].

4. Translation strategies for culturally loaded words

According to Skopos Theory, the selection of translation strategies for culturally loaded words in Arthur Waley’s English translation of Laozi is primarily driven by the purpose of translation, and can be adapted flexibly based on the target reader’s cultural background, acceptance, and text function, which aims to achieve the intended effect in the target language culture. Yao argued that Waley aims to convey the original meaning of the book in the process of translating the Daodejing [5].

4.1. Translation strategies for material culturally loaded words

Laozi contains a multitude of material culturally loaded words, which vividly represent the material life landscape of the Chinese nation in the Pre-Qin period and carry a unique cultural code. For example:

Example 1

Source Text: “天地不仁,以万物为刍狗”

Target Text: “Heaven and earth are ruthless; To them the Ten Thousand things are but as straw dogs.”

Taking the culture-specific item word “刍狗” as an example, the translator literally translates it as “straw dog” through the strategy of retaining the original image, which completely conveys the material form of the ancient sacrificial dog-shaped sacrifice used for grass sacrifices.

However, the lack of necessary cultural background supplements has created obstacles for the target readers’ understanding of the philosophical metaphor of “Heaven and Earth are ruthless” implied by the image, which symbolizes transience and the ruthlessness of natural laws as a sacrificial tool in ancient China.

Example 2

Source Text: “虽有舟舆,无所乘之”

Target Text: “There might still be boats and carriages, but no one would go in them.”

Similarly, “舆”, as a material cultural word describing ancient transportation, is translated as “carriages” by literal translation, which accurately corresponds to the original meaning of its “a passenger-carrying section of a vehicle”, and enables the accessible transmission of cultural information through the meaning of words, taking into account the dual demands of text understanding convenience and the Fidelity rule.

These translation strategies maintains the integrity of the material imagery of the original text while building a bridge for cross-cultural readers to understand ancient Chinese material civilization.

4.2. Translation strategies for social culturally loaded words

Laozi contains unique words that reflect the social system and life form of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. For example:

Example 3

Source Text: “小国寡民”

Target Text: “A small country with few inhabitants.”

“小国寡民” refers to the state of small territory and sparse population of the country, which is Laozi’s ideal social form. According to Waley’s approach to “unearthing the original meaning of a text through 'historical translation'” [3], “小国寡民” are free translated as “a small country with few inhabitants”. By interpreting the meaning of words, we can get rid of the constraints of the original form and give priority to conveying the core meaning, which can effectively solve the expression barriers caused by cultural background differences.

Example 4

Source Text: “是以圣人常善救人,故无弃人”

Target Text: “Therefore the Sage, is all the time in the most perfect way helping men, he certainly does not turn his back on men.”

He pointed out that the image of the sage constructed by Laozi is both a wise man and an enlightened person [3]. Thus, for the translation of “圣人”, Waley did not choose “saint”, which has a strong Western Christian color, but chose “sage”, which is often used to represent wise men and philosophers. For example, Dyson mentioned that Plato, by contrast, fashions the Sages after Socrates [18]. According to the domestication strategy and the Fidelity rule, Waley chose words in English that are similar to Laozi’s “圣人” to be close to the English readers’ cognitive habits of wise leaders, so that the translation can be naturally integrated into the target language.

Whether using foreignization or domestication, Waley places the translation of social culturally loaded words in the context of a specific era, focusing on cultural connotations. This historical translation preserves the emotional intensity and furthermore avoids the controversy caused by religious and cultural differences.

4.3. Translation strategies for ecological culturally loaded words

A large number of nature-related images in Laozi are not simple depictions of scenery, but contain profound philosophical metaphors. For example:

Example 5

Source Text: “无’,名天地之始”

Target Text: “It was from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang.”

“天” and “地” have the dual meaning of natural space and cosmic order. During the translation, Waley adopted the foreignization strategy, translating “天” and “地” as “Heaven” and “Earth.” This translation retains the sense of substance of “天地” as a natural thing through the form of capitalization of the initials, and further retains the philosophical meaning of proper nouns. He also mentions Waley’s interpretation of “天地” mainly revolves around the ancient people’s worship of ancestors, trying to reproduce the primitive beliefs of ancient society in the translation [3]. Through the philosophical framework of “道法自然” (the ways of Tao by the Self-so), the natural imagery in Laozi sublimates ecological phenomena into concrete expressions of the laws of the universe, forming a unique system of using nature as a metaphor.

Waley’s translation highlights the philosophical meaning of the natural imagery in Laozi, and reflects the concrete expression of ecological phenomena sublimated into the laws of the universe through the theoretical framework of “the ways of Tao by the self-so” in Laozi.

4.4. Translation strategies for religious culturally loaded words

There are many creative philosophical concepts and words about folk beliefs in Laozi, and He noted that Waley tried to reduce the original text to a historical period when divination and ancestral sacrifice were prevalent [3].

Example 6

Source Text: “道可道,非常'道”

Target Text: “The Way that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way.”

In the translation process, Waley started with the meaning of the philosophical core word “道” and translated it as “the Way”, retaining some meanings of “Tao” to take into account cultural communication and reader cognition [3].

Example 7

Source Text: “道'法自然”

Target Text: “The ways of Tao, by the Self-so.”

However, Waley gradually discovered that although Laozi's “道” has certain similarities with some Western concepts, there is no suitable English word that can fully express the meaning of “道”. So after completing the translation of the first twenty-five chapters, Waley replaced “Way” with the transliteration “Tao” [3], preserving the uniqueness of the source-culture. Regarding the “自然” in “道法自然”, Waley uses semantic translation, using the compound word “Self-so”, which is faithful to the original form and the author's purpose, and retains the cultural depth of the original text.

From the Skopos Theory perspective, Waley's translation aligns with the principles of Skopos and Fidelity, balancing “reader-friendliness” with “cultural fidelity”.

4.5. Translation strategies for linguistic culturally loaded words

The condensed and rhythmic language arts of Laozi, with its unique writing technique, embodies the literary value of the Pre-Qin period and profoundly reflects the wisdom of the Chinese nation. For example:

Example 8

Source Text: “谷神不死, 是谓玄牝”

Target Text: “The Valley Spirit, never dies. It is named the Mystery Female.”

“谷神不死” is a metaphor, not referring to a specific god, but to “the change of the void never stops”, Waley literally translates it as “The Valley Spirit never dies”, where “Valley” represents the ability to encompass all things like a valley, “Spirit” signifies the unpredictable function of Tao, like an mysterious power, and “never dies” emphasizes eternity.

This translation seems to directly correspond to English vocabulary with the literal Chinese meaning, but in fact it leaves room for readers to think and explain abstract philosophy with concrete existence in reality.

Example 9

Source Text: “绵绵若存, 用之不勤”

Target Text: “It is there within us all the while. Draw upon it as you will, it never runs dry.”

“绵绵若存” describes the state of existence and operation of “Tao”, and Waley uses the strategy of free translation to translate as: “It is there within us all the while”, showing the profound dialectic of “Tao” as if it is there or not, but has infinite effects.

Also translating linguistic culturally loaded words, Waley uses two different strategies (literal translation and free translation), taking into account both phonological aesthetics and philosophical profundity, so that the world can further understand the linguistic habitus and cognitive intelligence of China in the Pre-Qin period.

5. Conclusion

As the core classic of the Taoist School in the Pre-Qin period of ancient China, Laozi contains numerous of culturally loaded words, with religious cultural loaded words being the most. This study discusses the translation strategies corresponding to each culturally loaded word in the Library of Chinese Classics version of Laozi from the viewpoint of the Skopos Theory, verifies the applicability of Skopos Theory in translating culturally loaded words, and emphasizes its role in the selection of translation strategies. According to the meaning and role of culturally loaded words in the original text, Waley's translation takes the cultural cognition of the target reader as the starting point, and gives priority to the use of free translation to achieve dynamic equivalence to ensure the accurate transmission of the original connotation. Supplemented by foreignization to retain cultural characteristics, domestication to reduce the barrier to understanding, and literal translation to maintain formal correspondence. Through word order reconstruction to adapt to the idiomatic usage of the target language, the dialectical unity of faithfulness and coherence is finally achieved.

This study focuses solely on Arthur Waley's translation in the Library of Chinese Classics, which limits the generalizability of its findings — future research could compare multiple versions, like Lin Yutang's and James Legge's, to identify cross-version patterns in strategy selection. Additionally, the classification of culturally loaded words could be refined to avoid potential overlap, and quantitative methods, such as reader reception surveys, could be adopted to verify the effectiveness of translation strategies in cross-cultural communication. It is expected that this research will provide new theoretical perspectives and methodological enlightenment for the translation research of culturally loaded words in Chinese cultural classics, and promote theoretical innovation and practical breakthroughs in cross-cultural communication.

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