

How Translations of Ancient Texts Enables or Prevents Understanding: A Case Study of Translations of Daodejing

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Abstract: Given that the vast majority of readers cannot read an ancient text in its original language, translations may be their only source of understanding the meanings of the texts. While letting readers steal glances at the beauty of ancient knowledge, sometimes translations in fact prevent readers from interpreting the text correctly. This paper discusses a case of three different translations of Daodejing in detail. Based on a theoretical framework of the “correct” or “proper” interpretation of the text, the translations are evaluated accordingly. Two conclusions are drawn from a detailed etymological study that give rise to the best translation of the three. Firstly, interpreting the text in its original cultural context automatically prefers some modern interpretations over the others. Secondly, the problem is not limited to Daodejing. Many similar situations have been documented, and a potential systematic solution has recently been found.

Keywords: Daodejing, translation, recontextualization

1. Introduction

Given the vast majority of readers cannot read an ancient text in its original language, translations may be their only source of understanding the meanings of the texts. While letting readers steal glances at the beauty of ancient knowledge, sometimes translations in fact prevent readers from interpreting the text correctly. This paper discusses a case of three different translations of *Daodejing* in detail. Based on a theoretical framework of the “correct” or “proper” interpretation of the text, the translations are evaluated accordingly. Two conclusions are drawn from a detailed etymological study that give rise to the best translation of the three. Firstly, interpreting the text in its original cultural context automatically prefers some modern interpretations over the others. Secondly, the problem is not limited to *Daodejing*. Many similar situations have been documented, and a potential systematic solution has recently been found.

2. Process Reading and Ontological Reading of Daodejing

In his paper *A Process Interpretation of Daoist Thought*, Alan Fox argues that orthodox translations of *Daodejing* (道德经) adopt problematic linguistic assumptions that make the text seem to be filled with irrational claims, incoherent content, and a great number of non sequiturs [1]. Most of these translations tend to interpret term *Changdao* (常道) in the first chapter of the text as implying the

existence of some sort of “eternal Dao.” He terms these “ontological” readings, as opposed to a “process” reading that he supports [1].

Ontological readings of *dao* consider it as a monolithic, fundamentally real, static, abstract, and uniquely ineffable entity [1]. This misrepresentation comes from an unwarranted modification of the linguistic structures of the original text. In ontological readings, translations of *dao* often appear with a definite article and a capitalized letter, in the form “the Dao is” Both of these expressions are unavailable to writers in the time of *Daodejing*. In ancient Chinese, nouns appear alone without definite or indefinite articles. The connotation in modern English when a noun appears with the definite article “the” is that the expression is referring to a group of things or an abstract concept. For example, compare the expressions “apple” and “the apple.” The first expression seems to refer to any ordinary apple. The second expression seems to refer to a particular apple singled out as the target of current conversation or the abstract concept that is constituted by all apples. These connotations do not exist in *Daodejing*, at least, not without additional characters that clearly indicate the extra meanings. In addition, there is no way to capitalize the first letter of words in ancient Chinese. Each word is represented by a single character. In modern English, capitalizing the first letter of words turn them into pure abstractions. For example, “love” may refer to a concrete instance of love between two individuals, whereas “Love” refers to the concept abstracted from instances of love. Although in *Daodejing*, some instances of *Dao* do arguably refer to abstract concepts, such interpretations are not consistent throughout the text. To make matters worse, there is no indicator for parts of speech in ancient Chinese. Thus, it is possible to render the character *dao* as “a *dao*,” “the *dao*,” “some *daos*,” “*daoing*,” or “*daoed*.” To give a proper translation of the text requires deep understanding of linguistic conventions of ancient Chinese and the philosophical traditions of Daoism.

Mistranslations by authors who adopt the ontological reading create significant challenges for readers to understand Laozi’s philosophy. The following section will discuss an example in detail. The failure of translation is, roughly, how to interpret apparent paradoxes. Ontological readings often translate these paradoxes as logical paradoxes, that is, assertions of self-contradictory propositions. Logical paradoxes cannot be resolved. They are generated by the structure of the assertion. For example, consider the assertion “this proposition is false.” There is no way to make sense of this assertion unless one adopts a non-standard logical system. There are a great number of such phrases in *Daodejing*. The phrase *weiwuwei* (为无为) is often translated as “doing without doing.” This translation is a logical paradox under the linguistic conventions of modern English; however, it is not a logical paradox when it is interpreted using the original linguistic conventions of ancient Chinese. Given the vast majority of English readers of translations of *Daodejing* do not speak ancient Chinese or understand how to interpret ancient Chinese texts, the translations in fact prevent them from learning about the true meaning of the text.

The process reading solves this problem for the readers. While ontological readings translate the phrase *changdao* as “the eternal *Dao*,” the process reading translates this phrase as “constant process” or “constant *daoings*.” It translates *dao* as a verb rather than a noun. The process reading implies pretty much the opposite of what ontological readings do. On the process view, *daoing* is pluralistic [1]. The term refers to an infinite number of concrete processes that can be labeled “a *daoing*.” No one *daoing* is the fundamental reality. All of them are equally real. *Daoings* are also dynamic and not static [1]. As processes do, *daoings* move through time. Alan Fox believes that the term *changdao* refers to an “ideal” *daoing*, in the sense of perfect, asymptotic, and normative, totally concrete as opposed to abstract [1].

What translators who adopt the process reading essentially do is disambiguating terms that are represented by the same Chinese character. In the first chapter of *Daodejing*, the sentence 道可道非常道 repeats the character *dao* three times, with them having different parts of speech. The first

dao is the subject of the sentence, which is plausibly interpreted as a noun. Given that there is no specification or modification to the term, it should be translated as a general reference to *daoings*. The second *dao* is the verb in the sentence, and, rather than its particular philosophical meaning, it is better to translate the term as “being told or expressed”, using its common, every-day meaning. As discussed above, the third *dao*, or rather the term *changdao*, refers to the ideal *daoing*. The problematic phrase *wewuwei* can also be disambiguated in this way. Instead of translating both *wei* as doing, the first is translated as “doing with intention” and the second is translated as “the intention to do something.” Then the phrase *weiwuwei* is translated as “doing without intentions.” It still makes little sense in modern English, but the readers no longer have to contend with a logical paradox. Adopting the process reading paves the way for the readers to reach the true meaning of the text.

3. Case Study

This section will examine two common translations of a few lines from Chapter 21 of *Daodejing*, and a third translation that the author regards as the proper translation. After giving evaluations of each of the common translations, a detailed analysis of how the proper translation is obtained will be given.

Here is the original text of the lines from Chapter 21 of *Daodejing* that the translation is based on:

道之为物，惟恍惟惚。惚兮恍兮，其中有象；恍兮惚兮，其中有物；窈兮冥兮，其中有精。其精甚真，其中有信。[2]

The first translation is done by Stephen Mitchell. He produced a translation that was exceedingly popular and well received at his time. The translation is as follows:

The Tao is ungraspable. How can her mind be at one with it? Because she doesn't cling to ideas. The Tao is dark and unfathomable. How can it make her radiant? Because she lets it [3].

Stephen Mitchell's translation makes every mistake that translators adopting ontological readings make. He translates *dao* as “the *Dao*,” adding a definite article and capitalizing the first letter. This translation makes the chapter seem to talk about various qualities of the eternal *dao*. He even goes so far as to attribute properties directly to “the *Dao*,” which implies the assumption that the *dao* is an ordinary object. This could not be further from the original meaning of the text. What's more, his translation omits many parts of the text. The terms such as *huang* (恍) and *hu* (惚) are completely missing. He also ignores the linguistic structure of the original text. The third phrase, *hu xi huang xi* (惚兮恍兮), and the fifth phrase, *huang xi hu xi* (恍兮惚兮), are made of the exact terms, with their order being reversed. This is evidence that, in writing the text way, Laozi intended to convey meaning beyond the bare meanings of words. The subtle difference in sentence structure constitutes an integral part of the lesson in this chapter. As such, translators must not omit this detail in order to convey the complete meaning to the readers. In conclusion, Stephen Mitchell did a terrible job in this translation.

The second translation is done by Robert Eno for the purpose of teaching the text in a course about east Asian cultures and languages at Indiana University. The translation is as follows:

As a thing the Dao is shadowed, obscure. Shadowed, obscured, A thing lies within; Obscured, shadowed, an image lies within. Dark, dim, an essence lies within. So sound is the essence, Full concord lies within [4].

Although Robert Eno also adopts the ontological reading, which can be seen from his usage of the term “the *Dao*” throughout the translation, his translation is closer to the true meaning of the text compared to Stephen Mitchell's. He preserves the original linguistic structure as much as he could. He translates the term *hu* as “shadowed,” and the term *huang* as “obscure.” He faithfully

recreates the mirrored structure of the third and fifth phrase, translating them as “shadowed, obscured” and “obscured, shadowed.” The tradeoff, however, is heavy. His translations do not make sense to an English reader *prima facie*. The fourth and sixth phrase is clear evidence for an apparent paradox. “Shadowed” and “obscured” are two ordinary properties. In modern English, if these two words appear consecutively, the order does not change the meaning of the entire phrase. Thus, the third and fifth phrase essentially means the same. Yet what follows are totally different. The fourth phrase invokes the term “thing,” and the sixth phrase invokes the term “image.” A thing and an image are vastly different concepts in modern English. Things are concrete entities to which properties can be attributed to. Images either, in common everyday usage, refers to a picture or a photo, or, in some philosophical practices, refers to a description of the state of worldly affairs. These two concepts have different ontologies. To assert that they both share the same origin, as Robert Eno’s translation does, violates the law of the excluded middle (a proposition cannot be both true and false at the same time in the same way). Thus, these phrases structurally constitute a logical paradox. This is a common mistake in translators who adopt ontological readings. The proper way of translating apparent paradoxes is, as shown in the previous section, disambiguating the terms. The third translation adopts the process reading, which enables its translator to avoid these problems.

The third translation is done by the author. In producing this translation, the author adopts the process reading, traces back the literary traditions to Laozi’s time, and stays true to the original meaning of the text to the best of his abilities. The translation is as follows:

The two ways that things arise out of *dao* are by the incognizable and the indiscernible. The indiscernible is incognizable, and therein lies appearances of things. The incognizable is indiscernible, and therein lies ontology of things. Unfathomable is the point where a process begins to turn around, and therein lies the essence of things. The essence is so genuine, and therein lies the way things are known [to exist].

This translation avoids the aforementioned problems. Instead of attributing properties to “the *Dao*,” the properties are attributed to a particular process. This process is closely related to, but not identical with, processes that are labelled as *daoings*. The structure of the original text demands it be translated this way. The properties *huang* and *hu* are attributed to the phrase *dao zhi wei wu* (道之为物), as opposed to a single character *dao*. The apparent paradox no longer exists in this translation, because the author disambiguated the third and fifth phrases. Rather than a property, the author takes the first term in these phrases to refer to a class of things, which is indicated by the definite article appearing before an adjective in the translations. Now these two phrases are essentially different. The linguistic structure is that a property is assigned to a class of things, with the class and the property changing places in the latter phrase. This translation preserves the meaning conveyed by how the phrase is structured. The phrases have roughly the same meaning with subtle differences. In conclusion, successful disambiguation is the proper way to understand apparent paradoxes in the original text.

When translating ancient texts, it is not enough to simply look up meanings of words in a dictionary. Translators must study the entire etymology of the word and trace it back to the appropriate time period in order to find the most fitting translation. The key to understand Laozi’s true intention in this chapter is to repeatedly study the etymology of every word. Robert Eno translated *huang* as “shadowed,” and *hu* as “obscure” [4]. To be fair, common dictionary translations of these two terms is exactly what Robert Eno translates them as [5], but there is no noticeable difference between “shadowed” and “obscure” in modern English. Most English dictionaries will treat these two terms as synonyms. However, tracing back the etymology of *hu* and *huang*, they meant vastly different things in Laozi’s time. According to *Shuowenjiezi* (说文解字),

huang means *kuang zhi mao* (狂之貌) [6]. *Kuang* (狂) refers to a rabid dog [6]. *Zhi* (之), in this case, is the possessive preposition [6]. *Mao* (貌) means the face or appearance of things [6]. The phrase *kuang zhi mao*, then, means what a rabid dog appears to be. People in ancient China thought that rabid dogs could recognize things, which was the reason why they tended to bite everything they could lay their mouths on. Therefore, the proper translation of *huang* is what a rabid dog appears to be. Given that cognition is the process for human beings to pick out objects in a continuous stream of sense datum, a fitting adjective that captures the condition of a rabid dog is “incognizable”. According to *Kangxizidain* (康熙字典), *hu* means *wei miao bu ce mao* (微妙不測貌) [7]. *Wei* (微) means minuscule or subtle [7]. *Miao* (妙) means intricate or wonderful [7]. *Bu* (不), in this case, indicates negation [7]. *Ce* (測) means to measure [7]. *Mao* is the same character as before, which means the appearance of things [6]. Thus, the proper translation of *hu* is “what something so subtle, so intricate that it cannot be measured appears to be”. Given that “to discern” often means to notice small details that are really easy to miss, a fitting adjective that captures the definition of *hu* according to *Kangxizidian* is “indiscernible.” This analysis explains why the author translates *huang* and *hu* in the particular way he does. In producing a complete translation, a similar process is repeated for every character of the original text.

Two conclusions can be drawn from the author’s search for etymologies of words. Firstly, modern dictionary translations give significantly different explanations of the text. Since an etymological study brings back the meanings of words to the time when the text is composed, there is no alternative but to regard dictionary translations as being extremely far from the original meaning of the text. Secondly, the author does not consciously follow the process reading when translating the text. The finished translation in fact agrees with the process reading is strong evidence that it agrees with Laozi’s intentions and that it should be preferred over ontological readings.

4. Generalizations

The problems of translation in *Daodejing* are not at all a rare occurrence. Many authors working on a large variety of texts all reported similar concerns. In one of the earliest attempts at systemizing translations of ancient texts, Stuart Gillespie notes the failure of the modern English poetic and dramatic canon [8]. He argues that all translations of ancient texts are mediated by the translator’s cultural backgrounds, so that how to properly interpret ancient texts and what translations count as accurate ones reciprocally influence each other [8]. As such, modern translations will drift further and further from the true meaning of ancient texts, and there will be less and less tool at the translator’s disposal. In *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Religion*, Arie L. Molendijk offers some insight into the works of the German scholar, Friedrich Max Müller, who helped give birth to the 50 massive volumes of the Sacred Books of the East [9]. Müller’s translations have similar problems that can be seen among translators of *Daodejing* who adopt ontological readings. Müller imposes his own framing on the concepts from other religions. His approach to the incongruity between ancient and modern languages is roughly to find modern concepts that roughly matches ancient ones [9]. This method is the opposite of what the author of this paper does in giving his own translation of *Daodejing*. Mapping ancient concepts to modern ones always comes with cultural references, linguistic connotations, and grammatic variations that are not present when the original text is written. As can be seen from the case study of three translations of *Daodejing*, rather than enabling the readers to get a glimpse of the original meanings of the text, translations framed using modern concepts in fact prevents readers from understanding the meanings.

This problem, and its systematic solution, is detailed in the paper *Historico-cultural recontextualization in translating ancient classics: a case study of Gopal Sukhu’s The Songs of Chu*.

Authors of this paper promote what they call a “historico-cultural recontextualization” of ancient texts [10]. They believe that, in addition to give a translation of the text, further information such as context, cultural background, potential associations by the writers and readers at the time the text is written, etc., helps readers develop a thorough understanding of the source text [10]. Providing research details, for instance the etymological study of the terms *huang* and *hu* detailed in the previous section, renders ancient classics accessible [10].

5. Conclusion

Based on the case study of three translations of *Daodejing*, it is clear that method of translation dictates how readers understand the original text. Given that the vast majority of readers cannot read the text in its original language, translations are their only means of getting a glimpse of the wonderful philosophy of Laozi. Ontological readings promote a conception of *dao* that is unwarranted, and contradictory to Laozi’s intentions. The process reading accurately translates Laozi’s philosophy into modern English. The problem with translations is not limited to *Daodejing* alone. Many similar problems have been documented, and its systematic solution has been raised. As more translations of ancient texts appear, hopefully future scholars will resolve this problem.

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