Differentiations and Transformations

Existed in the English Translation of *Tao Te Ching*

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中文摘要：本论文简要地讨论了在《道德经》的几个代表英译版本中所存在的措辞区别与变化。尤其是针对《道德经》英译中对一些核心概念的处理，如“道”、“一”、“二”、“三”以及“生”等，不同时代不同译本的理解和诠释明显地展示了不同译者的哲学立场与意识形态。

1. Significant position of *Tao Te Ching* in cultural communication

As one of the most influential Chinese books, *Tao Te Ching* is a short text of around 5,000 Chinese characters in 81 brief chapters, which are divided into two parts, the *Tao Ching* (chaps. 1-37) and the *Te Ching* (chaps. 38-81).[1] It covers subjects comprehensively ranging from philosophy, history, politics, ethics, to cultivation of man’s mind, etc. with the concepts that have been shaping the ideas of Chinese spirituality, art and science, philosophical system and dialectic thoughts for years. The written style is laconic and poetic, with few grammatical particles, frequent ambiguities, occasional rhymes, and thought-provoking paradoxes. Therefore, it can be safely said that it is a book that says the most with the least. All through the centuries, *Tao Te Ching* not only has ever been exerting a great impact upon the Chinese culture but also has been attracting the interests of many foreigners, both from the west and from the east. Therefore, it is the second most translated book in history, next only to the Christian Bible. Due to its mystical and obscure language, there are hundreds of translations to indicate the various interpretations from different translators throughout the years and all over the world. Besides, its alluring language is full of mazes and puzzles, which has been magnetizing almost every translator to feel an urge to find the “most exact” rendering. The abounding translated versions have been enriching and
enlarging the channels to understand and communicate between Chinese culture and the cultures from other countries.

2. Comparison among the representative translated versions

Being one of the richest, most suggestive, and most popular works of philosophy and literature, the enigmatic verses of the *Tao Te Ching* have been inspiring numerous missionaries, diplomats, artists, philosophers, poets, religious thinkers, and general readers to produce new translations in order to capture the beauty, depths and nuance of the original work. Ever since its western debut in the late 16th century, *Tao Te Ching* has been vigorously used and adapted ever since. Among the major early English versions, the one done by British missionary John Chalmers (1825-1899) appeared in 1868. After that, countless English versions followed and this translation trend is still in the ascendant for the 21st century. Therefore, the comparative study on the different English versions of its essential concepts means significantly for the systematic research of English translation of *Tao Te Ching*.

2.1. Differentiations of wordings

The word “道” appears in *Tao Te Ching* repeatedly for 74 times although the connotation of “道” may vary a lot linguistically and philosophically. The following 5 different versions will demonstrate the different understandings of this basic concept from different translators.

**Chapter 77:** 天之道，其犹张弓欤？高者抑之，下者举之；有馀者损之，不足者补之。

天之道，损有馀而补不足。人之道，则不然，损不足以奉有馀。

**Version 1:** May not the Way (or Tao) of Heaven be compared to the (method of) bending a bow? The (part of the bow) which was high is brought low, and what was low is raised up. (So Heaven) diminishes where there is superabundance, and supplements where there is deficiency.

It is the Way of Heaven to diminish superabundance, and to supplement deficiency. It is not so with the way of man. He takes away from those who have not enough to add to his own superabundance.

—Tr. J. Legge (1891)

**Version 2:** Heaven's way is like the bending of a bow. When a bow is bent the top comes down and the bottom-end comes up. So too does Heaven take away from those who have too much, and give to those that have not
enough. But if it is Heaven's way to take from those who have too much and give to those who have not enough, this is far from being man's way. He takes away from those that have not enough in order to make offering to those who already have too much.

—Tr. Arthur Waley (1934)

Version 3: Bending the Bow

The Tao (way) of Heaven,
Is it not like the bending of a bow?
The top comes down and the bottom-end goes up,
The extra (length) is shortened, the insufficient (width) is expanded.
It is the way of Heaven to take away from those that have too much
And give to those that have not enough.
Not so with man's way:
He takes from those that have not
And gives it as tribute to those that have too much.

—Tr. Lin Yutang (1948)

Version 4:

Is not the way of heaven like the stretching of a bow?
The high it presses down,
The low it lifts up;
The excessive it takes from,
The deficient it gives to.
It is the way of heaven to take from what has in excess in order to make
good what is deficient.
The way of man is otherwise: it takes from those who are in want in
order to offer this to those who already have more than enough.

—Tr. D. C. Lau (1963)

Version 5:

As it acts in the world, the Tao is like the bending of a bow.
The top is bent downward; the bottom is bent up.
It adjusts excess and deficiency so that there is perfect balance.
It takes from what is too much and give to what isn't enough.
Those who try to control, who use force to protect their power,
go against the direction of the Tao.
They take from those who don't have enough
and give to those who have far too much.

—Tr. Stephen Mitchell (1988)

From the various versions above, the word “道” is interpreted in different ways which announces the diversity of translators’ understanding. Beside “action”, “existence”, “law” and “guide”, the most popular translation is “Way”, which actually reveals the influence of Christianity on the translators because “Way” is a noble and holy concept in Bible. However, this translation fails to convey the profound meaning of “道”, therefore the transliteration “Tao” came into being. The English word “Tao” can be traced back as early as 1736 and its definition can be found in many English dictionaries.

Version 1 was created in the 19th century when the archaic wording and elegant style were preferred. Therefore, many bulky literary words were rendered such as “superabundance”, “diminish” and “deficiency”. However, the repetition of those words, which intended to follow the original word order, actually destroys the brevity and rhythmic beauty of source language (SL). Significantly inspired by the holy Bible, J. Legge capitalized the words like “Way”, “Heaven”, and “He” in order to preserve the profundity of this book so that it can be paralleled with Bible.

Version 2 was made in the 20th century and it is probably the most influential version because it is natural, direct and colloquial. However, the SL is highly rhetorical, terse in its wording, symmetrical in structure, and musical in its rhythm and rhyme, while in the target language (TL), due to its domestic translation, redundant wording and paraphrasing, most of the stylistic beauty is lost.

Version 3 is concise and expressive because it was interpreted by the bilingual scholar—Lin Yutang. In order to clarify the topic of each chapter, he supplemented 81 subtitles to further illuminate the different themes of Taoism. Still, the choice of verbal phrases degrades the SL, for instance, “comes down” for “抑”之; “goes up” for 下者“举”之; “take away” for“损”不足; and “give to” for“有餘”, which eliminates the original gracefulness and cultivation.

Version 4 was translated in a form of philosophic poem without specific rhymes. Obviously, the influence of Bible is greatly reduced because the words such as “way” and “heaven” are no longer capitalized. Beside, the word “it” is adopted instead of the theocratic words “God” or “He” for 天”. The combination of short and long sentences creates an alternation of tension and relaxation which is more readable and more
rhythmic.

**Version 5** was rendered in the late 20th century, so there is an obvious inclination of linguistic modernization. The wording like “world”, “perfect”, “balance”, “control” and “power” is very much influenced by avant-garde but the aesthetic effect and suggestive implication of SL are greatly reduced. Because the original concise and philosophical language is full of riddle-like similes and parables, it is enviable that the TL always intents to paraphrase or add clarifying expansions. As a result, the TL is greatly enlarged with more words.

### 2.2. Transformations of wordings

The understanding of Taoist concepts may be a total challenge for many western translators. Their religious and ideological background will definitely impact on their rendering of these essential concepts such as “一”, “二”, “三” and “生”, etc.

**Chapter 42**: 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物。

**Version 1**: The Tao produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced All things.

—Tr. J. Legge (1891)

**Version 2**: Tao give birth to the One; the One gave birth successively to two things, three things, up to ten thousand.

—Tr. Arthur Waley (1934)

**Version 3**: The Violent Man

Out of Tao, One is born;
Out of One, Two;
Out of Two, Three;
Out of Three, the created universe.

—Tr. Lin Yutang (1948)

**Version 4**: The way begets one;
One begets two;
Two begets three;
Three begets the myriad creatures

—Tr. D. C. Lau (1963)

**Version 5**: The Veils of the Tao

The Tao formulated the One. The One exhaled the Two.
The Two were parents of the Three. The Three were parents of all things.

(Tr. A. Crowley)
Version 6: Generating Things
A guide generates "one."
"One" generates "two."
"Two" generates "three."
"Three" generates the ten-thousand natural kinds.

Version 7: Mind
The Way bears sensation,
Sensation bears memory,
Sensation and memory bear abstraction,
And abstraction bears all the world;

Version 8: The Way gave birth to unity,
Unity gave birth to duality,
Duality gave birth to trinity,
Trinity gave birth to the myriad creatures.

In this chapter, the repetitive verb "生" personifies the power of the transcendent Tao, which was translated into "give birth to", "be born", "be parent to", "produce", "formulate", "exhale" and "generate" etc.. The three numbers, "一", "二", and "三" were rendered as "One", "Two" and "Three" except for version 7, which literally explicated them as "sensation", "memory" and "abstraction". However, this kind of oversimplified translation does not reveal the Taoist unfathomable ideas toward politics, statecraft, cosmology, aesthetics, and ethics so that the translators have to use quotation marks or capitalize the first letters of those special words in order to grant them new meanings. (See version 1 to 6) Moreover, this chapter exemplifies and transfers the western Christian interpretations into the eastern philosophical category, such as in version 8 the rendering of "unity", "duality" and "trinity", which drew many parallels between the New Testament and Tao Te Ching. In fact, the flexible and inclusive nature of this book makes it an ideal interfaith text worth the whole human to study over the course of lifetime and still its richness of meaning would not be diminished.

3. Conclusion
It is unavoidable to adapt the interpreting strategies in the process of classic translation. Therefore, it is natural for Tao Te Ching translators throughout the years to
employ differentiations and transformations of wordings in order to clarify their own understandings as well as their various philosophical and ideological standings.

Note:
[1] This is the traditional classification of *Tao Te Ching* based on Heshanggong's *Lao Zi's Chapters and Sentences* in Han Dynasty. However, the order is inverted according to the silk *Laozi* excavated from Ma Wang Dui in 1973.

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