

Translation of Terms in Chinese Philosophical Classics Based on Eco-translatology: A Case Study of Wang Rongpei's English Version of Zhuangzi

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Abstract. In Chinese philosophical classics there are plentiful terms constructing a whole system of ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts. These terms are regarded as an important content of translating Chinese philosophical classics. In the meantime, they are also considered as a great difficulty in the translation process, since many of them are featured by semantic vagueness, multiplicity and even vacuity resulting from time distance, linguistic evolution and cultural differences. The concept of three-dimensional transformation, a key notion of Eco-translatology, provides the translator with enlightening significance in handling these recondite terms. By analysis from the perspective of three-dimensional transformation, we can find that when translating terms in *Zhuangzi*, Wang Rongpei selected adaptively some translation methods, especially the method of adding footnotes, in order to reach a satisfactory balance among three dimensions of language, culture and communication. By the case study on Wang Rongpei's English translation of *Zhuangzi*, the paper aims to explore appropriate strategies and methods for translating terms in Chinese philosophical classics.

Keywords: Chinese philosophical classics; terms; three-dimensional transformation; Eco-translatology; Zhuangzi

1. Introduction

“Chinese Classics” refer to the literatures and materials recording the ideas about nature, humanities and other various fields, and those recording important laws and regulations in ancient China. “Chinese philosophical classics” mainly include the ancient books and texts about Hundred Schools of thoughts, especially Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, such as the Four Books, the Five Classics, Xunzi, Daodejing, Zhuangzi, Mozi, etc. Chinese philosophical classics cover abundant terms some of which are abstract and vague in meaning or unique in Chinese culture. How to express these terms appropriately in English is always a great difficulty in translating Chinese philosophical classics. Eco-translatology is a translation study theory developed from the theory of “adaptation and selection” in Darwin's biological evolutionism. It aims at exploring mutual relations, relevant mechanisms, basic features and laws of the translator's adaptive and selective behaviors in a translational eco-environment. It suggests a translation method of “three-dimensional transformation” which focuses on adaptive and selective transformations in linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions based on the laws of multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection (Hu gengshen, 2011:8). This paper aims to discuss the strategies and methods in translating terms in Chinese philosophical classics, by taking Wang Rongpei's English translation of *Zhuangzi* for example, with a view to promote dissemination and reception of Chinese philosophical classics and thoughts in the English-speaking world.

2. Definition of Terms in Chinese Philosophical Classics and the Roles of Their Translation

“Terms” is an aggregation of titles representing various concepts in a particular field. They are important constituents of vocabulary of a special-purpose language, namely a language used for

communication by professionals in the same or adjacent knowledge areas. The terms in Chinese philosophical classics belong to a representation form of language symbols embodying the core thoughts and concepts in these classics, involving such factors as representation of knowledge systems, construction of discourse systems and dissemination of philosophical ideas. The terms in Chinese philosophical classics not only possess common properties of technical terms, but also unique characteristics of Chinese philosophical terms. "The building of a terminology system plays a supporting role in establishment of a subject. In a sense, the terminology system of Chinese philosophy constitutes Chinese philosophy." (Cheng Zhihua, 2007:14). Translation of the terms in Chinese philosophical classics is an important content in classics translation, with a direct effect on the quality of translation of Chinese philosophical classics. A good translation of Chinese philosophical classics can deepen understanding of Chinese philosophical classics by the Western philosophical circles and enhance the worldwide influence of Chinese philosophical thoughts, thus contributing to dialogues and exchanges between Chinese and Western cultures. Therefore, translation of terms is a critical factor which concerns whether Chinese philosophical classics can be introduced and spread to the Western world or not and whether the philosophical ideas and Chinese people's wisdom contained in them can be understood and accepted by the target readers or not.

3. The Reasons for Difficulty in Translating Terms in Chinese Philosophical Classics

The large number of terms significantly increases the difficulty in translating Chinese philosophical classics. It is not a surprise for a translator to spend 60 to 70 percent of all translation time in understanding and translating those unfamiliar or recondite terms. For example, some Confucian terms are very abundant in meaning although they probably consist of only one Chinese character, such as "仁" ("Ren" in Chinese Pinyin, which is near to benevolence), "义" ("Yi", righteousness), "信" ("Xin", integrity), "理" ("Li", morality) and "孝" ("Xiao", filial piety). As a result, it is sometimes difficult for a translator to express their meaning completely with one or two English words. The difficulty in translating philosophical terms can be generally attributed to the following factors:

3.1 Semantic Vagueness

Having gone through a long time, some terms become semantically vague, abstract and incomprehensible for modern people. Chinese classics refer to the books and texts originated before the imperial unification by the Qin dynasty in 221 BC. Temporal distance forms an insurmountable barrier before the translator. The barrier is embodied in three aspects. Firstly, constant linguistic evolutions took place in the long history so that some terms have become obsolete or their meanings have changed remarkably. Secondly, the original works of some Chinese philosophical classics and important background information have been lost forever so that the meanings of some terms cannot be traced or testified. Thirdly, a Chinese classic often has many editions of commentaries and translations divergent in explaining the same term sometimes, which adds uncertainty to the meaning of a term.

3.2 Semantic Multiplicity

Repeated interpretations and circulations in a long time tend to cause multiplicity and complexity in meaning of some core terms. They are interpreted by different scholars or translators in the same age or in different ages, multi-dimensional dynamic changes may occur to their intrinsic meanings. Therefore, many terms in Chinese philosophical classics possess multiple meanings. For instance, Confucius thought that "中庸" (Zhongyong) meant "impartiality", but Zisi, Confucius' grandson, thought it as a metaphysical word, meaning "equilibrium". Another example is "气" (Qi) which was understood differently as breath, air, steam, vapor and vitality, etc. Therefore, a translator needs to

understand a term from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives, considering its historical and contemporary meanings at the same time.

3.3 Semantic Vacancy

Semantic vacancy of philosophical terms is mainly caused by cultural gaps. Many terms are unique in Chinese philosophy or culture, so they do not exist in the cultural environment of English-speaking societies. Naturally, no equivalent words or concepts in English can correspond with them. For example, “道” (Dao) was translated as “the way”, “nature” or “the doctrine”, but these translations fail to cover extensive connotations completely. It was also translated to “Tao” or “Dao” according to its sound, but the method of transliteration has a disadvantage of imposing a cultural concept on other culture so that the readers usually need a long time to understand or accept such a translation.

The factors above cause difficulty in understanding and expressing the terms. How to overcome this kind of difficulty requires the translator to place the terms into a translation system consisting of the levels of language, culture and communication, etc. and seek a balance among various translation factors.

4. Eco-translatology and the Concept of “Three-dimensional Transformation”

Eco-translatology is a theory of translation studies proposed by Hu Gengshen, a professor at Tsinghua University, based on an ecological perspective. He put forward that translation is adaptation and selection, by combining the basic principles such as “natural selection” and “survival of the fittest” in Darwin’s theory of biological evolution, with the classic ideas such as “harmony between man and nature” and “moderation and harmony” in the ancient Chinese philosophy. According to Eco-translatology, translation is a process of constant selections ranging from choice of source texts to application of words and sentence patterns. The translator may make adaptive selections to translation strategies through transformations from linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions, in a translational eco-environment consisting of various factors such as language, authors, culture, society, readers and communication intention, etc., in order to create a translation of the highest “holistic degree of adaptation and selection”.

The translation method of transformations from linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions means that the translator should pay close attention to the forms of the source language and target language, to the cultures the two languages belong to respectively, and to whether the communicative intentions of the source text are realized in the translated text. The translation activities from three dimensions are dependent and mingled mutually. The transformation from linguistic dimension means that the translator should make adaptive selection and transformation to language forms from different aspects and at different levels. The transformation from cultural dimension means that the translator should be sensitive to the cultural differences between the source language and target language, and focus on expression and interpretation of cultural connotation. The transformation from communicative dimension means that the translator should focus on whether the communicative intentions in the original text are manifested in the translated text or not. Only by conducting three-dimensional transformation, the translator can obtain translation versions with enduring vitality.

5. Analysis of Wang Rongpei’s English Translation of *Zhuangzi* from the Perspective of Three-dimensional Transformation

The translation method of three-dimensional Transformation is conducive for the translator to select suitable translation strategies to convey cultural connotation and philosophical thoughts carried by the terms and finally fulfil communicative intentions of the source text. With abundant philosophical terms, profound philosophical ideas and colorful cultural content, the Chinese classic *Zhuangzi* is regarded as a marvelous collection about language, literature, ethics, philosophy and

politics, etc. Therefore, this paper takes *Zhuangzi* for example to analyze application of the theory of three-dimensional transformation into English translation of terms in Chinese philosophical classics.

Zhuangzi, also called *The Holy Canon of Nanhua*, is a Taoist classic written by Zhuangzi and his descendants. There were 52 chapters totally in it, but there are only 33 chapters remaining today, consisting of 7 Inner Chapters, 15 Outer Chapters, and 11 Miscellaneous Chapters. It gained a great popularity among readers at home or abroad due to its profound and unique philosophical thoughts and literary charms. It was translated successively by some western translators, such as Frederic Henry Balfour, Herbert Allen Giles, James Legge, Burton Watson and Angus Charles Graham, and Chinese translators including Feng Youlan, Lin Yutang and Wang Rongpei. There have emerged more than 20 English versions of *Zhuangzi* so far. Regarded as excellent and authoritative, Wang Rongpei's translation was collected into the *Library of Chinese Classics*, the most large-scaled translation project of Chinese classics launched by Chinese governments. From the perspective of Eco-translatology, his translation behavior can be understood as an active adaptation to the translational eco-environment where Chinese governments fulfil the national strategy of promoting "going out" of Chinese culture by launching a series of translation projects. Through transformations from linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions, professor Wang adopted adaptive translation strategies to convey philosophical thoughts and cultural connotation contained in *Zhuangzi* to the greatest extent, and make his English version more understandable and acceptable to the Western readers.

5.1 Transformation from Linguistic Dimension

Linguistic dimension focuses on narrowing linguistic gaps by transformation in terms of word, sentence pattern and structure, rhetoric, punctuation and so forth. Term translation mainly involves transformation at lexical level. The translator should try his or her utmost to find the most natural and appropriate words in the target language to correspond with those terms. Professor Wang often translated literally or liberally some terms to convey their meanings in a simplest way. For instance, he translated "仁" (Ren) to "humaneness", "廉" (Lian) to "integrity", "义" (Yi) to "righteousness", "知" (Zhi) to "knowledge", and "无为" (Wuwei) to "inert" or "non-action".

However, some terms become obscure or diverse in meaning, after a series of changes in a long time, which causes a great difficulty in understanding or choice of meanings. When translating this category of terms, professor Wang tried to figure out their different meanings, including their basic meaning, historical meanings as well as other meanings forming in their developing process. He selected the correct one according to the specific context to satisfy the requirement of linguistic faithfulness. Some terms appear repeatedly in *Zhuangzi*, but they differ in meaning. When translating this kind of terms, he attempted to seek their deep meanings according to the context, instead of giving them the same translation. Let's take the philosophical terms "阴" and "阳" for example.

Example 1: 阴阳之气

Analysis: Wang translated "阴阳之气" to "the vital breaths of yin and yang" (Wang Rongpei, 2021: 159) by the method of transliteration, since "阴" and "阳" has too abstract and broad meanings here.

Example 2: 事若成,则必有阴阳之患

Analysis: Wang translated "阴阳之患" to "Mixture of anxiety and overjoy" (91) according to the context, because "阴" here means "worry and fear coming from somebody's failure in doing something"; "阳" means "happiness felt after something has been fulfilled".

Example 3: 且以巧斗力者,始乎阳,常卒乎阴,泰至则多奇巧。

Analysis: he translated "阳" to "fair play" and "阴" to "foul play" (94), because "阴" here means "conspiring on the sly" and "阳" means "fight or struggle openly".

5.2 Transformation from Cultural Dimension

Chinese philosophical classics contain distinctive traditional Chinese thoughts and culture. The point to translate the terms in them does not lie in pursuing mechanic lexical correspondence or superficial faithfulness, but conveying cultural connotation to a great degree. Due to cultural vacancy, the translator needs to focus on remaining cultural factors contained in the terms. In the process of translating *Zhuangzi*, Wang often conducted transformation from cultural dimension, by adaptive methods such as interpreting or adding footnotes, in order to reduce loss of cultural connotation.

5.2.1 Interpretation

There are some terms which do not exist in English language and culture. Interpretation can be adopted to convey cultural information completely. This method can be often seen in Wang's English translation of *Zhuangzi*. For instance, he translated “气” (Qi) to “the vital energy” (87), “六气” (Liuqi) to “The six vital elements of yin, yang, wind, rain, darkness and brightness” (11), “天均” (Tianjun) to “a peaceful and harmonious life” (39); “六合” (Liuhe) to “six realms of Heaven and Earth, East and West, North and South” (47), “七窍” (Qiqiao) to “seven apertures with which to hear, to see, to eat and to breathe” (197). In summary, Wang gave relatively detailed explanations about some terms to convey cultural information in the original texts and deepen the Western readers' understanding of Chinese culture.

5.2.2 Adding Footnotes

Footnotes are very effective in giving further explanations to make translation more complete and informative, without an influence on reading fluency. They are usually used as an auxiliary way of specific translation methods, such as transliteration, literal translation and liberal translation.

Transliteration is often used to translate some terms with abundant and unique Chinese cultural connotation since it is very difficult to find corresponding English expressions for them. The method of transliteration is conducive to retain cultural traits carried by the philosophical terms. However, the method is an obvious barrier to non-professional readers' understanding abstract and complicated meanings of the terms. To overcome the disadvantage of transliteration, professor Wang added plentiful footnotes to his English translation of *Zhuangzi*. For instance, he translated “道” to “Tao” by transliteration. Meanwhile, he added footnotes “The specific term for the universal law” (33) or “Magical wonderland of perfect harmony” (173).

Due to similarities in human's languages and philosophical thoughts, some terms possess completely corresponding expressions in English. In translating this kind of terms, Wang adopted the method of literal translation. There are other terms in Chinese philosophical classics, without equivalent words in English, which requires the translator's explanation. Wang used the method of liberal translation, but he often used as few English words as possible. Meanwhile, Wang realized that these two methods would cause loss of cultural information. To solve this problem, he added plentiful footnotes to his translation to display traditional Chinese philosophical and cultural system constructed by these terms (specific examples are shown in the following tables).

Table 1 Literal Translation + Footnotes

No.	Chinese Term	Pinyin	Translation	Footnote	Page
1	心斋	Xinzhai	Fasting of the mind	Self-disciplined mentality	87
2	造化	Zaohua	Creator and transformer	The supernatural power	163
3	坐忘	Zuowang	Sit and forget	Let go of everything	179
4	欺德	Qide	False virtue	Ignoble quality	185
5	天德	Tiande	Virtue of heaven	The natural operations and the inevitable ordinance	391
6	真人	Zhenren	True man	The man who complies with the natural disposition and dictation	391

Table 2: Liberal Translation + Footnotes

No.	Chinese	Pinyin	Translation	Footnote	Page
1	逍遥	Xiaoyao	Absolute Freedom	Both the state of mind and the lifestyle are not confined to confounded by worldly opinions.	3
2	天机	Tianji	Natural gift	Inborn talents	140
3	混沌	Hundun	Chaos	The indivisible murky whole	197
4	无方	Wufang	The land of obscurity	Unknown boundless places in the universe	267
5	混冥	Hun Ming	Chaotic darkness	Unfathomable profundity of obscurity and ignorance	301
6	两行	Liangxing	Live and let live	Making a choice is good, choosing the way of co-existence is better.	39

Note: the examples in the tables above are cited from Wang Rongpei’s English version of *Zhuangzi* published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House in 2021.

5.3 Transformation from Communicative Dimension

The degree of the target readers’ reception to translation version has a direct influence on the communicative effect of translation activity. Therefore, the translator should not only attempt to comply with faithfulness principle at linguistic level, but also take the target readers’ reception into account. Translation of terms in Chinese philosophical classics is in essence to spread the concepts and ideas in traditional Chinese philosophy and culture. Many of terms seem too recondite for most of general Western readers, far beyond their cognition scope and reading capacity. If the translator

wants to make his or her translation enter the readers' heart to realize communicative intention, he or she needs to consider the target readers' reception level, reading experience and expectation horizon and thus make an appropriate compromise or balance in conveying cultural information. Considering this point, professor Wang tried his best to simplify some complicated Taoist terms and concepts to make his or her translation more readable and acceptable to the readers (the specific examples are as follows).

Example sentence: 在太极之先而不为高,在六极之下而不为深。

Analysis: this sentence was translated by Wang to "it is above the zenith but does not seem high; it is beneath the nadir but does not seem low". The term "太极" (Taiji), an important Taoist concept, refers to the origin of everything in the universe; "六极" (Liuji) is equal to "六合" (the translation is above-mentioned). According to the context, whether the two concepts are explained in detail has no substantial influence on the target readers' understanding of the whole sentence, instead, detailed explanation may increase a burden to them so that communication effect is damaged. Wang gave priority to the readers' reception while expressing the meaning of the whole sentence correctly, by simplifying "太极" to "zenith" and "六极" to "nadir". Meanwhile, he explained the two terms simply as "something inaccessible and unfathomable" (151) in the form of footnote, to help the readers to understand the two Taoist concepts easily, instead of giving detailed explanation about their origin and connotation.

When no existing words in the target language can match with the original term, the translator can also take advantage of the linguistic and cultural resources of the target language creatively, such as remolding some words or applying some expressions in the cultures. That's to say, the translator may make his or her translation more familiar and acceptable to the readers so that the readers gain a sense of identification. In tackling some terms in *Zhuangzi*, Wang sometimes adopted a translation method favorable to decrease their foreignness, narrowing the gap among the author, the translator and the readers. When a translation version is consistent with the readers' expectation horizon, it can be accepted by them easily and thus the communication intension of the original text is realized. Take "神人" (Shenren) in Chapter 12 "The Heaven and the Earth" for example. Wang translated it to "the godly man" first and then added a footnote "Behave like a holy spirit" (307). "Holy spirit" is a Christian term very familiar to the Western readers, meaning "the third person of the Trinity or God as spiritually active in the world". Wang's further explanation to "神人" can increase intimacy and sense of identification to the readers and make them more willing to accept Chinese culture.

6. Conclusion

Translation of terms in Chinese philosophical classics is in essence a cross-cultural communication. It is a process of construction of a system of Chinese philosophical thoughts in English language and culture. This process requires the translator to make adaptive selections and compromises at linguistic, cultural and communicative levels. The concept of three-dimensional transformation in Eco-translatology is favorable to guide the translator to seek a balance among the requirements of linguistic reproduction, cultural conveying and realization of communicative intention. Through three-dimensional transformation, Wang Rongpei selected adaptively various translation methods to display various meanings and cultural information of the terms in *Zhuangzi* and thus realize communicative intention of introducing Taoist concepts and philosophical ideas to the English-speaking readers. From the example of Wang's English translation, we can conclude that applying Eco-translatology into translation of terms can contribute to translation of Chinese philosophical classics and dissemination of Chinese philosophical quintessence and splendid Chinese culture.

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