

## Cross-cultural Travelling of *Daode Jing* in the U.S. and Its Filtering and Variation

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### Abstract:

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The travelling of Daoist classic *Daode Jing* in the United States has constituted an important part in the Sino-US cultural communication. Along with the historical changes of Sinology studies in the U.S., the book experienced four main travelling periods. The paper introduced the translation history of *Daode Jing* in the U.S. and had a case study of two American translators' English translations, i.e. Stephen Mitchell's and Thomas Cleary's aided by corpus-based analysis. It points out that due to cultural filtering and variation, translators' styles are different to a large extent even they were published at the same period, which were subject to both idiosyncrasies and social "norms". *Daode Jing* has gained even more attentions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and become an indispensable cultural element in Chinese Studies in the United States.

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**Keywords:** *Daode Jing*; medio-translatology; corpus; variation

### 1. Introduction

The wheel of history is rolling and the dialogue between civilizations is frequent. The Bible was introduced into China by Catholic Jesuits at the end of Ming Dynasty, which had a great influence Chinese on ideology and culture, especially the notion of science. Correspondingly, *Daode Jing* 道德经 (or *Tao Te Ching, Book of the Way and Virtue*), a Chinese classic, also had dialogues with different civilizations in the world. *Bible* and *Daode Jing* are two diamonds in the west and east. Inwardly, Chinese culture hugged other religious scriptures for more than one thousand years, like Buddhist sutra and Christian holy book. Outwardly, Chinese classics had been introduced and spread to other countries also for more than one thousand years, such as the Sanskrit rendering of *Daode Jing*.

Among the dialogues, there were "chemical reactions" or "sparks", through the way of both accepting and rejecting. Such dialogues are transnational, cross-linguistic, and cross-cultural in different civilizations, which are significant for communication of philosophical believes and social practices. A lot of foreign sinologists, Chinese scholars, translators and different translations were involved. The study of this ancient Chinese text has almost never ceased, especially in China with so many commentaries in different dynasties, dating from Han Dynasty (B.C 202-A.D 220) to the present. In fact, in the United States, major translations of *Daode Jing* included Paul Carus's (1852-1919) version in 1896, Giafu Feng's (1919-1985) in 1972, Stephen Mitchell's in 1988, Victor Mair's in 1990, Thomas Cleary's in 1991, David Hinton's in 2000, and Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall's in 2003 with separately different source texts, thoughts and language features.

At present, in China there are some discussions and in-depth studies on the overseas translation and introduction of the *Daode Jing* (Xin, 2008; Yang, 2016), but specific regional and national studies, especially for the translation and transmission of *Daode Jing* in the United States, are not enough. There are many discussions on the translation strategies of *Daode Jing*, but few on the history of translation, the original author Laozi's image and the "nationalization" of literature from the perspective of comparative literature and Translation Studies. Taken together, it is of positive significance to strengthen the study of the translation and introduction of *Daode Jing* in the United States and to explore some effective ways for the cross-cultural communication of Chinese culture.

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## 2. Translation Studies of *Daode Jing* in the U.S. from Medio-translatology View

### 2.1 General Description of Sinology Development in the United States

Xie Tianzhen puts forward his definition of Medio-translatology in his monograph, saying that

From the perspective of media in comparative literature originally, Medio-translatology now studies translation (especially literary translation) and translated literature from the perspective of comparative culture... It is a literary or cultural study... It is concerned about the loss, distortion, addition and expansion of information in the process of transformation, and about the unique value and significance of translation as a practical activity of human intercultural communication. (Xie, 2007: 9-10)

Medio-translatology pays attention to the recreation of literary translation, affirms the value of translation and the position of translators, and lists a new concept of “the history of translated literature”. Comparing Medio-translatology with Translation Studies, they are similar and both descriptive rather than prescriptive. Medio-translatology can be seen as the inevitable fruit of the “cultural turn” in translation studies and expands the translation research field within traditional linguistic paradigm. It may shed light on the study of Chinese studies in the United States.

Generally, American Sinology has undergone four stages. The first professorship of Sinology was set up in Yale University in 1877, which was the first stage of the early study of missionary Sinology. The representative figures are Elijah C. Bridgman (1801-1861), Samuel W. Williams (1812-1884), William A. P. Martin (1827-1916) and so on.

The second stage was from 1877 to 1928, the initial stage of professional sinology. During this transitional period, according to existing data, Paul Carus (1852-1919), a German-American scholar in comparative philosophy, first translated and published *Daode Jing* in the United States in 1896, which was the beginning of the translation and introduction of *Daode Jing* in the U.S.. Later, in 1928, the Harvard-Yenching Institute was founded.

The third stage witnessed the rapid development of professional sinology, which lasted from 1929 to 1955. The focuses of Sinology were on traditional sinology studies such as language, history, literature and religion. Until 1955, the Harvard Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies was established.

Since 1956, the fourth stage of Sinology in the United States has been transformed into the period of broad Chinese Studies. The research extends to many fields such as military, economic, diplomatic issues and Chinese customs, ideology and so on. To some extent, it serves the international strategic needs of the United States after World War II, constructing a complete system of contemporary American Chinese studies, because it also takes social, historical and cultural factors into consideration in Chinese Studies.

### 2.2 Translation Stages of *Daode Jing* and Major Translations in the U.S.

The translation and introduction of *Daode Jing* in the United States were closely related to Sinology, and it could be divided into four stages. Firstly, before the 20th century, there was only one English translation in the first stage of missionary sinology. In 1896, the first translation of *Daode Jing* in the US by Paul Carus was published in the second volume of *The Monist*.

In the second stage, with the rise of professional Sinology in the United States, from the beginning of the 20th century to the publication of Chinese-American Wing-Tsit Chan's *The Way of Lao Tzu* in 1963, thirteen English versions of the *Daode Jing* were published in the United States.

In the third stage, from the late 1970s to the end of the 20th century, the unearthed silk book of *Laozi* A and B (c. 250 BC) in Han Tombs at Mawangdui in Changsha City, Hunan Province, China in 1973, and the discovery of Guodian Chu bamboo slips (c. 300 BC) in 1993 received much attention of scholars from both home and abroad. Although the underground cultural relics which were incomplete, they are significant for the philological and relevant researches, the study of *Laozi* aroused an upsurge. And no less than 59 English versions of the *Daode Jing* were published in the United States. During this period, Chinese studies in the United States were developed and deepened, with more books and studies related to Taoist thought, and the quotation of Laozi's classical sayings was more frequent. In the fourth stage in the 21st century, Sino-US cultural exchanges became more significant and multifaceted, and the publishing industry also developed quickly.

According to the latest statistics by Lucas (2016: 9-10), more than 10 different English versions of the *Daode Jing* had been published annually in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; for example, there were at least 14 new translations in 2014, and the number of translation is generally second only to that of Bible in a whole. By 2016, the total number of English translations of the *Daode Jing* has reached to as high as 380.

According to factors of history, author, collection, sales, readers' comments and book reviews, the following important translations are listed:

Firstly, Paul Carus's translation of *Daode Jing* was firstly named as *Lau-tszze's Tau-teh-king, The Old Philosopher's Classic on Reason and Virtue* (Carus, 1896), and it has been reprinted for many time, for example published by Open Court in Chicago in 1898 with the tile of *Lao-tse's Tao-te-king*, and Carus's rendering has been welcomed by readers at different times.

Secondly, American Poet Witter Bynner (1881-1968) published his translation of *Tao Te Ching* in New York, in which he described his version of *Daode Jing* is not "occult, complex, pontifical, and archaic", but "open, simple, lay and current". (Bynner, 1944). Bynner had been to China and collaborated with Chinese scholar for the translation of Tang Dynasty poems, from which he understood Chinese culture deeply. Indeed, it is a reader-friendly version which reflected his unique style of translation.

Thirdly, in addition, after the unearthed manuscripts of *Laozi*, Giafu Feng and Jane English co-translated *Daode Jing* in 1972, and the translation gained popularity with more than a million copies sold. It has been reprinted for many times for its fluency and clarity of translation, which combined Tao with western discourse successfully.

Fourthly, American writer Stephen Mitchell's translation in 1988 also has been reprinted and well-received, such as reprints in 1999, 2006, 2011 and 2015, and as an American poet who barely understands Chinese characters, his translation was also sold nearly one million copies. (Lucas, 2016: 2)

Fifthly, American sinologist Victor H. Mair's rendition was published in New York, named *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way*. (Mair, 1990) And in his version, the word "Tao" or "Dao" was not chosen, instead, "Way" was used for 71 times, and four years later, Professor Mair edited and published the *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* by Columbia University Press.

Besides, *Daode Jing* was translated and published by Thomas Cleary (1991) and as an independent scholar, he translated many Chinese religious classics, such as Sun Tzu's Art of War (1988). Cleary graduated from Harvard University and for a long time focused his attention on the introduction and translation of Asian classics.

Moreover, David Hinton, an American poet and translator graduated from Cornell University, also translated *Daode Jing* in 2000 and he managed to translate other important ones, like *Zhuangzi*, *The Analects of Confucius*, *Mencius* and many Chinese poems.

### 3. Case Study: Filtering and Variation of Laozi's Image in Two Translations

Laozi's image in the United States was changeable along with time. The number of translated versions of *Daode Jing* is the highest in Chinese texts, but Laozi's images are different at different times. The following is a corpus-based analysis and interpretation from two main angles: variation of Laozi's images and narrative perspectives.

#### 3.1 Taoist Philosophy and the Variation of Images

The English translations of certain key words, such as "Tao, Virtue, Non-being, and Way", bear the translators' subjective interpretation of Daoism. From Mitchell's translation (Mitchell, 1999), "She welcomes both saints and sinners." was chosen in the English version for the original Chinese text "yi baixing wei chugou 以百姓为刍狗". It shows that his translation abandoned the Chinese image of "chugou 刍狗 (straw dog)" in the original text and didn't offer readers the cultural background of "straw dog" which is related with religious sacrifice in ancient China, but replaced the original meaning by "sage" and "sinner" which are the typical images in Christian culture, so as to achieve the easy-reading or popular effect. This causes losses of Chinese image and can be regarded as cultural filtering.

From Table 1 below, we can quantitatively draw a conclusion that is consistent with the above analysis. Mitchell's translation of the core philosophical concepts can be regarded as reader-friendly. As a novel writer, his translation reflects his "creative" thinking and unique translation style.

In addition, because he does not know Chinese characters, his understanding of the original text is varied and even distorted on the basis of existing versions, such as some German, French and English translations, especially with the help and reference of Pual Carus's version of literal translation.

**Table 1. Translations of Core Images in *Daode Jing* in Comparison**

Translators	Translation and Frequency of Keywords			
	<b>Dao 道</b>	<b>De 德</b>	<b>Wu 无</b>	<b>You 有</b>
Mitchell, S.	Tao/80	Power/11; powerful/6	Unnamable/2; non-being/7	Naming/1; being/30
Cleary, T.	Way/74	Virtue/31	Nonbeing/5	being/29
	<b>Sheng ren 圣人</b>	<b>Tiandi 天地</b>	<b>Buzheng 不争</b>	<b>Ren, yi 仁, 义</b>
Mitchell, S.	master/48	Tao/80; earth/5	don't compare or compete/4	kind/1, morality/3 ; ritual/2
Cleary, T.	sages/31	heaven and earth/24	non- contention/4	humanity/4 , duty/5

Thomas Cleary is an independent American scholar. He holds a Ph.D. degree from Harvard University, who translated many works of religion and literature about East Asia. His interpretation of Laozi's philosophy is based on the original Chinese books. Cleary's rendering does not seek the intentional "visibility" of the translator, especially for the translation of Laozi's images, but keeps Chinese original culture in his translation.

In 2000, Cleary translated four volumes of Taoist classics and published five volumes of Buddhist scriptures, as well as other religious and philosophical texts, such as Muslim and Confucian classics. Taoist translation by Cleary belongs to "research-oriented" translation, which is similar to other sinologists' translations in the United States at the same time.

### 3.2 Variation in Narrative Perspectives.

From the perspective of discourse, the different personal references and the wording of the core ideas can be used to deduce the translator's interpretation and construction of Laozi's image. In terms of narration, Mitchell often uses the second person in his translation of *Daode Jing*, in which "you" appears 156 times and "your" 55 times.

While in contrast, in Cleary's translation, "you" only appears 77 times and "your" 16 times, and the sentence subject were omitted frequently. Generally speaking, the most common personal perspective in literary texts is the third person, with the advantage of beyond limitation of time, place, etc., and the expression is thus more objective.

However, the American writer Mitchell intentionally uses the second person to narrow the "reading distance" between the reader and the text, leading readers to be more "immersive" and then the target language is more acceptable and reader-oriented. For instance:

Example 1. Source Language (SL): Gu chang wuyu, yi guan qimiao; chang youyu, yi guan qijiao 故常无欲，以观其妙；常有欲，以观其徼 (Chapter 1, *Daode Jing*)

① Mitchell's translation: "Free from desire, **you** realize the mystery. Caught in desire, **you** see only the manifestations."

② Cleary's: "Always passionless, **thereby observe** the subtle; ever intent, **thereby observe** the apparent."

In addition, in the use of the third person, Mitchell uses the female personal pronoun "She" for 41 times, and the third person plural is less used, with "they/their/them" a total of 93 times. Thus, the women images of "Yin" or "Softness" are in harmony with Laozi's philosophy. In Cleary's translation, "they/their/they" were used 169 times, but female person "She" was not used even once to refer to Laozi. For instance:

Example 2. SL: Shengren buren, yi baixing wei chugou 圣人不仁，以百姓为刍狗 (Chapter 5, *Daode Jing*)

③ Mitchell's: "The Master doesn't take sides; **she** welcomes both saints and sinners."

④ Cleary's: "Sages are not humane; **they** see all people as straw dogs."

#### 4. The Historical Influence of Daoism in the United States

“Culture or literary theory can be transformed under certain historical and cultural conditions. This kind of transformation can be regarded as Nationalization” (Cao, 2005: 10). The “nationalization” of *Daode Jing* in the United States reflects the transformation of different cultures and ideas between China and the United States.

Nationalization of literature refers to the deep variation of a country’s literature after it is disseminated to other countries through translation, cultural filtering and acceptance. The cultural rules and literary discourse of foreign literature itself are fundamentally assimilated by the receiving country, thus becoming a part of the literature of other countries. (Cao and Zheng, 2011: 111) Exploring the nationalization of *Daode Jing* in the theoretical system of variation can deepen the understanding of cultural exchanges and make a reasonable prediction of the future.

The “nationalization” of *Daode Jing* and Daoism in the United States refers to the integration of them into the field of American Sinology and literature after its translation and cultural filtering and variation, which had a great influence to both creative writing and translation. *Daode Jing* reflects Laozi’s philosophical viewpoints on philosophical ontology and epistemology. “Dao” is the source, and everything is born from “nothing”. One generates two, and two generates three and then to all things in the world. The idea is welcomed and adopted by some America literati.

Daoism inherits the idea of Yin-Yang transformation according to the *Book of Changes*. Daoism advocates non-contention, and by its influence, the philosophy of maintaining harmony between man and nature is widely accepted by no matter the monarch of the state or common people in the long history of China. By imitating the gentleness of Yin 阴, Daoist thoughts hold that “the supreme good is like water, which resides at where people disgust.” (Chapter 8, *Daode Jing*) Daoist believes also gained its place among American scholars and masses, for example Tai Chi and the idea of yangsheng 养生 (self-cultivation) are widely practiced.

The Daoist philosophical thought pioneered by Laozi is not only the root of the big tree of Chinese civilization and society, but also accepted and respected by many American politicians, writers, poets, sinologists and translators since the 20th century. “Ruling a big country is like cooking a small fish” (Chapter 60, *Daode Jing*) was quoted by the leaders of China and the United States.

The American poet Witter Bynner and many other translators had no Chinese foundation, but they also translated *Daode Jing* on the basis of their predecessors’ versions and of other translations in various languages. This is an organic part of the process of “nationalization” and canonization of *Daode Jing* in the United States. The influence of Chinese poetry can be found in Bynner’s poems. And in turn Bynner influenced others. “When American poet Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982) was a young man in Chicago, he was affected by Bynner’s enthusiasm, and thus admired Chinese masters for life, and Bynner became the intermediary of influence.” (Zhao, 2003: 92)

Stephen Mitchell, an American writer, not only translated *Daode Jing*, but also integrated Daoist thought into his works. David Hinton, a contemporary American poet, translated *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, and Daoist images were often found in his poetry collections. In China, great poet Li Bai (701-762) in Tang Dynasty (618-907) was well versed in Daoism. In Li Bai’s poems about immortals, Daoist cultural images and thoughts such as “Dao”, “tranquility”, “non-contention” and Daoist palaces are often embedded. The English translation of Li Bai’s poems brought native Chinese thoughts to US. The philosophy of Zen also exerted great influence to American poetry, such as the poems written by the poet Han Shan 寒山. And Zen surely intakes Daoist thoughts and has its “nationalization” process in the literary field in the United States.

“Up to now, some American literary poets still like to try their hand at translating the mysterious sentences of *Daode Jing*. They don’t even need to understand Chinese. The number of variants in the translated version is sufficient as a basis for the source text.” (Zhao, 2003: 92) American sinologists deepened their research on Taoism after WWII. For example, Professor Livia Kohn, a well-known scholar on Daoism, worked in Boston University for many years and specialized in Daoist meditation, philosophy and salvation concepts, and edited the *Daoist Handbook* (2000). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Daoism still occupies an important position in Chinese Studies and especially religious studies in the United States.

Another important reference book in Daoist research, *The Encyclopedia of Taoism* (2008), was published in the United States by the editor-in-chief, Fabrizio Pregadio, who has been studying Taoist Neidan and relevant thoughts on Chinese alchemy for decades.

In the United States, Taoism and its ideological studies had played an important part in Chinese Studies, for example, Stephen R. Bokenkamp had an in-depth study of medieval Chinese Daoism, focusing on the early religious scriptures of Daoism. Compared with other traditional Chinese books, the number of English translations of the *Daode Jing* is the largest in the US. Therefore, the elements influencing cross-cultural communication of Taoist thought should not be neglected or overlooked.

### 5. Factors Influencing Overseas Communication of Chinese Culture

*Daode Jing* has become the “front-runner” of Chinese cultural classics in the United States. As for overseas collections in different libraries, through the examination of on-line book retrieval system, the American scholar Thomas Cleary’s translation *Tao Te Ching: Zen teachings on the Taoist classic* (2011) has been collected by 106 libraries in the world, ranking the first. William Wilson (2012) translated and published *Tao te ching: an all-new translation*, which is held by 97 library in the world.

In addition, the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), one of the largest providers of documentary information services in the world, published a list of 1,000 “widely-collected books” by libraries. Among which, *Daode Jing* ranks 53rd on the list, which is the first Chinese book on the list, followed by *The Analects of Confucius*, *Sun Tzu’s Art of War* and *Mencius*, etc.. However, in the light of the new characteristics in a digital time, we should also strengthen the study and understanding of the patterns and ways of cultural exchanges.

From the perspective of cultural communication, cross-national dialogue needs to conform to the effective rules in communication. The factors affecting the effect and results of communication can be analyzed according to the 5W communication theory proposed by Harold D. Lasswell (1902-1978), an American political scientist. His important theories of communication, such as three functions of communication, effective communication, etc., are elaborated in *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society* (Lasswell and Trans. He, 2012), which includes five dimensions of communication, i.e. “who”, “to whom”, “what channel”, “what” and “what effect”.

Firstly, translation of *Daode Jing* is concerned with different academic areas, requiring knowledge of history, Chinese literature, and translation skills, etc., the translators’ subjectivity also in translation practice is diversified. Translators of the *Daode Jing* in the United States included scholars who emigrated to the United States, Chinese and American scholars who cooperated in translation, and Chinese translators. Different translators are needed at different historical stages, who will exert an influence to the followers.

Secondly, target readers are different and need to be considered during translation. In the United States, there were “serious” versions of the *Daode Jing*, which manifested strong academic quality and are mainly aimed at researchers. However, there were also “creative”, fluent and reader-friendly versions, which “betrayed” the original language and images either out of the lack of Chinese knowledge or intentionally or unintentionally, but the dissemination effect was not bad to some extent, due to different expectation of various readers. The fluent versions were more popular with the public in the specific cultural environment, and they adopted domestication or TL-oriented strategy in translation.

Thirdly, multilevel communication channels are necessary to be expanded. Due to the great differences in reader’s aesthetic, cognitive, cultural background and market mechanism, paying more attention to sub-text information might bring communication success, such as publishing procedure, book cover, illustrations and so on. In addition, in terms of the content of communication and exchange, the types of works that have been accepted abroad are worth noticing, so as to find out more important ancient and contemporary works for cultural exchanges.

Finally, in terms of acceptance and influence, it is closely related to the needs of other countries because of the differences in philosophical concepts, ideological traits, religious tradition and so on. Patience and time are needed during the process. At the same time, more high-quality foreign books and other forms of cultural products, such as video, audio, comic products, etc., also need to be introduced and studied.

### 6. Conclusion

The Taoist philosophical thoughts contained in *Daode Jing* are not only limited to China, which are actually cherished almost all the time by people in the world. As one of the most important Taoist classics, its translation and introduction in the United States had been through various stages, which were closely associated with cultural, historical and social developments. Some scholarly translations usually tried to maintain and represent the original expression and image of the source language.

There are also biblical interpretations, which stimulated the readers' original "schema" in their mind, facilitating their understanding, and thus they integrated into the local culture. Besides, reader-oriented translations might had strong public acceptance, high sales and influence.

The translation and communication of *Daode Jing* in the United States had made Daoist philosophy shine brighter to a broader heterogeneous culture, and it had become one of the representatives of Chinese culture in the United States. However, although popular, as a philosophical cannon, there is still large space for translators to interpret *Daode Jing* in the new era, such as from the perspective of people's daily life or from the angle of environmental protection. Beside, "collisions" and "disputes" are not uncommon during cultural communication, and current dialogues between China and the United States need to be strengthened rather than be conducted in the opposite way.

To achieve effective and mutual-respected exchanges, a deep understanding of the history and elements of the cross-cultural communication is required, which may serve as a memorandum for retrospection and consultation. From this point of view, it is of great both academic and practical significance to deepen the study of communication of both Chinese and American philosophical and literary classics.

Undoubtedly, there are still some limitations in this paper. For example, limited comparative corpus data is presented with only two versions of translation, and the analysis at the cultural level of exchange between China and the United States could be deepened by detailed illustration. Taken together, this article made some reflections on Sino-US cultural exchanges, holding that it is necessary to take history as a mirror, to remember the past, cherish the present, and look forward to the future of world literature.

### Acknowledgments

Supports: The research is supported by the Center for American Studies, Southwest Jiaotong University, Sichuan with the project of "English Translations and Communication of *Daode Jing* in the United States" under grant No. ARC2018026.

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