

Original Paper

A Study on the Translation of Cultural Loaded Words in *Tao Te Ching* from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics - Taking Xu Yuanchong's English Version as an Example

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Abstract

With the emergency of the study of ancient world classics in the world, the translation research of classics has received wide attention. As a civilizational state, China has a large number of ancient classic works, attracting a large number of scholars to study ancient Chinese classics. The translation of cultural-loaded words in classic works is a direct means of classic study. This paper takes the English translation of the cultural-loaded words in the ancient Chinese classic work Tao Te Ching as a case, and analyzes the translation methods and existing problems of cultural-loaded words from the perspectives of social and religious dimensions. After analyzing Xu Yuanchong's translation practice of Tao Te Ching, this paper explains how the translator translates cultural-loaded words to balance cultural fidelity and the acceptance of the target readers. This translation approach is expected to enrich the theoretical perspective of classic translation of Chinese works, help overseas readers understand Chinese classic works, and facilitate cultural communication and mutual learning among civilizations.

Keywords

Classical masterpieces, reception aesthetics theory, cultural loaded words, Tao Te Ching

1. Introduction

Ancient classics are the essence of human civilization. They record the origin and evolution of each civilization, and shape the spiritual background and value orientation of different ethnic groups. In the times of the unprecedented global changes, the re-examination of classical civilizations has become a consensus among all countries. China is a civilized country with a long history with a large number of ancient classic works. Each classic work is a condensed history, and every cultural-loaded word is a key to this history. As one of the

Chinese classic works, *Tao Te Ching* records the important sources of Taoist philosophy, and solidifies the spiritual pursuit of the Chinese nation through a large number of cultural-loaded words. Therefore, the English translation of *Tao Te Ching* is of vital importance in the exchange of world civilizations.

Cultural-loaded words such as “道”, “无为” and “自然” with highly characteristic Chinese features contain highly condensed blank structures, which poses great challenges to the translation work. (Li Ying, 2025) The theory of Reception Aesthetics emphasizes the positive role of readers in the acceptance and appreciation of literary works, and attaches importance to the “meaning blanks” of literary works. Therefore, the theory of Reception Aesthetics is of great significance for the translation of *Tao Te Ching*. Previous studies on the translations of *Tao Te Ching* mainly focused on the text, without changing the perspective to focus on the target readers, and there are relatively few studies exploring the translation of tourism texts from the perspective of Reception Aesthetics. Based on Xu Yuanchong’s English translation of *Tao Te Ching*, this study aims to analyze the translation methods and existing problems of cultural-loaded words from the perspective of Reception Aesthetics theory, improve translation quality, and promote the exchange of world civilizations.

2. Reception Aesthetics Theory

2.1 The Foundation and Development of Reception Aesthetics

The mainstream literary research methods in the West were mainly dominated by two schools for a long time. They were positivism and formalism. Positivism focused only on the author’s life and social background, while formalism only concerned the language structure of the text. Both of them ignored the role of the reader. (Fish S, 1981) In the late 1960s, the theory of Reception Aesthetics was jointly initiated by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser at the University of Konstanz in Germany. This theory shifted the research focus from the author and the text completely to the reader, which marked a revolutionary breakthrough in the field of literary theory. The theory of Reception Aesthetics was integrated into the field of translation, and provided a new theoretical framework for translation practice. This study selects two core concepts from it for analysis: horizon of expectations and calling structure.

2.2 Horizon of Expectations

Hans Robert Jauss, a theorist of the Constance School in Germany, proposed the core concept of the horizon of expectations in reception aesthetics. The horizon of expectations refers to the “pre-structure” formed by a reader’s life experiences, aesthetic experiences, knowledge reserves, cultural background, and historical context before reading a work. (B. D P, 1983) Different reader groups possess different horizons of expectations, and the success of a translation largely depends on its ability to effectively interact with the horizons of expectations of the target audience. Readers are influenced by their horizons of expectations when reading a work. When a work completely meets the reader’s expectations, it may lack originality and fail to leave a deep impression; when a work moderately exceeds the reader’s expectations, it can bring “positive disappointment”, prompting the reader to

adjust and broaden their horizons; when the gap between the work and expectations is too large, it may lead to the reader's rejection.

2.3 Calling Structure

Wolfgang Iser, a German literary theorist, proposed the calling structure that is a core concept in the theory of reception aesthetics. There is a structure of blankness within literary works to envoke readers. (T. D O, 1979) This structure will trigger curiosity in readers, and constantly call for readers to participate in the construction of the text's meaning. (Jauss, 1982) Excellent translation does not fill all the blank spaces, and retains an appropriate aesthetic distance to stimulate the imagination of the readers. The calling structure emphasizes that when the author is creating, they should leave specific undefined areas within the reader's receptive capacity to force the readers to use their imagination and draw on their personal experiences to fill these blanks. The text will be meaningful.

3. Cultural Loaded Words

Cultural-loaded words refer to those words that carry specific cultural connotations. They are not merely a symbol at the surface level; behind them lies the unique history, society, customs, values, lifestyle or way of thinking of a certain ethnic group or language community. Linguist Eugene Nida classified culture into ecological culture, material culture, language culture, religious culture, and social culture. (Nida E, 2015) According to Nida's classification, cultural-loaded words are divided into ecological culture-loaded words, material culture-loaded words, social culture-loaded words, religious culture-loaded words, and language culture-loaded words.

The numerous cultural-loaded words covered in *Tao Te Ching* reflect the traditional Chinese social culture, material culture and historical culture. Relevant scholars classified the cultural-loaded words in *Tao Te Ching*, and found that social culture-loaded words accounted for the highest proportion, at 37.4%; religious culture-loaded words came second, accounting for 25.4%. (Gao Wencheng, 2025) According to the classification standard, this article selects the cultural-loaded words from Xu Yuanhong's English translation of *Tao Te Ching* as the research text to analyze the translation methods of social culture-loaded words and religious culture-loaded words under the guidance of the reception aesthetics theory.

4. Translation Analysis of Cultural Loaded Words in *Tao Te Ching* from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics

4.1 Social Cultural Loaded Words and Translation Analysis

Social cultural loaded words refer to the words related to social systems, customs and lifestyles, including names of people, festivals, customs and habits, and recreational activities, etc. These words carry rich cultural connotations and reflect the social characteristics and interpersonal relationships within a specific cultural background. (Lei Pengfei, 2025)

Example1

ST: 天地不仁，以万物为刍狗；圣人不仁，以百姓为刍狗。

TT: Heaven and earth are ruthless, they treat everything as straw or dog. The sage is ruthless, he treats everyone as straw or dog.

Analysis: “天地不仁，以万物为刍狗；圣人不仁，以百姓为刍狗。” means that nature and sages only follow objective principles and show no favoritism to anyone. The key is “不仁”，which means fairness. “刍狗” refers to dog-shaped sacrificial offerings woven from straw. They are disposable ritual implements and symbolize unimportant things. In *Tao Te Ching*, “刍狗” is used as a metaphor for a state without any subjective feelings or biases.

The translator translates “不仁” as “ruthless”, and “刍狗” as “straw or dog”. straw is used as an agricultural by-product to represent something worthless, and dog also carries a negative connotation to express contempt in Western culture. The translator attempts to convey the cultural concept of “刍狗” by splitting it, and translates it into the two basic words straw and dog that Western readers are familiar with, in order to provide a minimum consensus for understanding the text and lower the reading threshold for readers.

Such a translation will make the readers of the target language believe that “nature and the sages are cold-hearted and treat everyone as their inferior status”. For readers who are familiar with the original text, they know the allusion to “刍狗”, and when reading “straw or dog”, they might feel that the translation is too stiff or absurd. They expect the translation to reflect the philosophical depth and cultural thickness of the original text, but this kind of literal dissection-style translation might make them feel disappointed. For readers without a Chinese cultural background, when reading “straw or dog”, they might have two interpretations. One is that nature and sages treat all things as two different types of items (straw or dog), and the other is that nature and sages deal with all things as casually as they do with straw and dog. Both of these interpretations deviate from the core philosophical meaning of the original text.

The term “刍狗” mentioned in *Tao Te Ching* is a typical example of an evocative structure with a complex aesthetic image. It symbolizes insignificant things, and is used to describe a state without any subjective emotions. It invites the reader to contemplate the background. This associative process is a part of the aesthetic experience. The translation that makes this inseparable cultural image of “刍狗” into two independent nouns lose the integrity of the specific cultural image. When readers read “straw or dog”, they may think of two unrelated things rather than a complete image, so the translation reduces the space for aesthetic imagination and weaken the evocative effect.

Example2

ST:故立天子，置三公，虽有拱璧以先驷马，不如坐进此道。

TT: Therefore the emperor is enthroned and the three ministers installed. Though a chariot of four steeds preceded by jades may be presented, it is not so good as to proclaim the law divine.

Analysis: “故立天子，置三公，虽有拱璧以先驷马，不如坐进此道。” means that as the emperor ascends the throne or appoints important officials, there are grand ceremonies that is not as valuable as “道”. “三公” is a

term from ancient Chinese political and cultural systems. It refers to three official positions with a higher rank. It is a concept of official positions with rich connotations in ancient Chinese culture, and the meaning of “三公” varied in different periods.

Most readers in the target language lack a systematic understanding of ancient Chinese official systems and etiquette. The concept of “三公” is beyond their cultural cognitive framework. When reading *Tao Te Ching*, they usually have expectations of Chinese philosophical thought, but not the history of ancient Chinese political systems. They expect the translation to convey the essence of the thought, rather than the specific historical details. The translator translates “三公” into “the three ministers” and uses the most common and easily understood concept of minister in English political culture, thus lowering the reading threshold. Without further elaborating on the connotations of this official system, the translator allows readers to quickly grasp the power structure of monarch and senior ministers. So, readers can quickly understand the essence of the thought without understanding the specific details of ancient Chinese official systems. Thus, their expectations are satisfied.

In the original text of *Tao Te Ching*, the term “三公”, with rich connotations, invites readers to contemplate the ancient Chinese official system, power structure, and etiquette norms, and makes them to reflect on the philosophical implications. The translation “the three ministers” has a high recognition in English-speaking cultures and can evoke the basic understanding of the political role of ministers among Western readers. “三公” is a highly condensed cultural symbol in the original text. However, the translation, an explanatory approach, replaces the highly cultural concept with a universal expression. Although this satisfies the cultural expectations of readers, it reduces the openness and appeal of the text. Although readers can grasp the basic meaning without deep cultural association, they lose the opportunity for a more in-depth exploration of the ancient Chinese official system.

Example3

ST: 是以大丈夫处厚德，不居其薄；处其实，不居其华，故取此去彼。

TT: Therefore a true great man refers the thick to the thin, the substantial to the superfluous. He rejects not the former but the latter.

Analysis: “大丈夫” is a typical term in traditional Chinese culture. “大丈夫” refers to a moral exemplar in *Tao Te Ching*. In Western culture, the image of “man” differ significantly from the Chinese image of “man” shaped by Confucian tradition.

“大丈夫” is translated into “a true great man”, which satisfies the reader’s philosophical expectations. The translation makes the reader realize that “大丈夫” is not gender roles or physical characteristics in *Tao Te Ching*, but a philosophical personality. The addition of the word “true” guides the reader into a philosophical thinking. It suggests that “great man” is a quality that needs to be identified and pursued, rather than something that everyone possesses naturally. This breaks conventional cultural expectations and prompts the reader to consider the true meaning of “great man”.

In Western culture, “great man” has a distinct focus on achievements. But, “大丈夫” in *Tao Te Ching* is a moral exemplar. Although the translation emphasizes “great man” as a value judgment rather than a

simple physiological or gender description by adding the word “true” to guide the reader into philosophical reflection, the translation “great man” easily leads readers into pre-existing cultural biases to make them associate it with “great figures” (such as leaders or heroes), which is quite different from the deeper connotations of “大丈夫”. This cultural difference may cause readers to misunderstand the core ideas of the original text. The appeal of the translation has dropped from a highly philosophical image to a more generalized moral model.

4.2 Religious and Cultural Vocabulary and Translation

Religious cultural loaded words arise in a specific religious cultural context and carry unique religious doctrines, rituals, symbols or values. It is difficult for translators to find exact equivalents in another language or culture. The connotations of these words go far beyond the literal meaning and are deeply rooted in specific belief systems and traditions.

Example1

ST: 道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名。

TT: The divine law may be spoken of, but it is not the common law.

Analysis: For target language readers, *Tao Te Ching* is a philosophical classic. They lack a deep understanding of the specific connotations of “道”, and need a cognitive point into the text. The translator translates “道” into “the divine law” and “the common law”, which provides an comprehensible point for the readers. In Western countries, the divine law is associated with religion, and it refers to the law revealed by God, which is a higher law above natural law. Readers have a broad understanding of these concepts. When faced with the word divine, they have an understanding of religious culture. The translation incorporates “道” into the legal cognitive framework that is familiar to readers. This translation meets their expectations and allows them to quickly establish a basic understanding of “道”.

“道” is a symbol with multidimensional connotations in the original text. Different schools of thought interpret “道” in various ways. And different branches within the same school offer different explanations. This diversity of interpretations is the core characteristic of “道” as a calling structure. It is not a closed definition, but an open symbol that invites readers to participate in the construction of meaning. However, the Western religious concept of the divine law has replaced the Chinese philosophical concept, and the word law may lead readers to understand “道” as an external law, which deviates from “道” in *Tao Te Ching*. “道” in the original text is an open concept full of undefined points, and different readers can fill in the meaning from different levels such as philosophy, cosmology, ethics, and politics. The translation the divine law fixes this open concept to the single dimension of religious law, which can’t correctly introduce the cultural element of “道” to the readers. This greatly reduces the space for readers to freely imagine and interpret, making it difficult to inspire readers to think about the multiple meanings of “道”, and preventing readers from truly appreciating the depth and uniqueness in *Tao Te Ching*.

Example2

ST: 谷神不死，是谓玄牝。

TT: The vale spirit never dies. It is the mysterious womb.

Analysis: “谷神” is a concept from *Tao Te Ching*. It is used to refer to “道”. “谷” is derived from a mountain vale, which symbolizes inclusiveness and nurturing of all things. “神” is not a personified deity and describes the changeable and mysterious function of “道” with inexhaustible creative power. Readers have expectations and a willingness to accept these mysterious concepts in *Tao Te Ching*. They expect to gain an aesthetic experience and intellectual inspiration different from Western philosophy.

The translator translates “谷神” as “the vale spirit”. In Western culture, vale is often associated with natural landscapes, which evokes images of profound tranquility and inclusiveness for the target language reader. This has a certain correspondence with “谷”. And spirit evokes a sense of mystery, which resonates with the original term “神”. The translator replaces the Chinese cultural imagery with Western cultural imagery. This cross-cultural resonance helps readers understand certain characteristics of “谷神” within their existing cognitive framework and help them fulfill expectations.

The translation “vale” retains the sense of emptiness and profound space. This spatial imagery evokes the vastness and ethereal nature of “道”. Spirit refers to a spiritual entity in Christianity. Target readers may misunderstand the translation the vale spirit in two ways. They might interpret spirit as a deity of the valley, or they might confuse vale with valley, which will associate it with the specific image of the “vale of tears” in Christian culture. “谷神” is not a personified deity in the usual sense, but a mysterious function of “道”. The multiple evocative function of “谷神” in the original text are simplified in the translation to a static deity in a valley or a sacred spirit, which weakens the evocative power of the text.

Example 3

ST: 万物负阴而抱阳，冲气以为和。

TT: Everything has a dark and dark side, co-existent in harmony.

Analysis: “阴” and “阳” are the core concepts in Chinese philosophy. In Western culture, the translation “yin” (阴) and “yang” (阳) has gained some popularity as a core concept of Chinese philosophy, but its meaning is often understood merely at the level of opposition and balance. The translator does not transliterate “阴” and “阳” as symbols from a foreign culture, but adopts an adaptation strategy. The translation replaces “yin and yang” with “bright and dark”, which makes readers to quickly know the text without understanding Chinese philosophy. With the lowest common understanding for interpreting the text, the translator lowers the comprehension threshold and meets the expectations of English readers. This approach is attractive to ordinary readers who are new to *Tao Te Ching*.

In Chinese culture, “阴” and “阳” do not have fixed definitions. Readers need to repeatedly interpret the cultural significance contained within them. Although “bright and dark side” is easy to understand, it simplifies the philosophical and cultural connotations of the original text. Moreover, “bright and dark side” implies binary opposition. The translator filled the meanings of “阴” and “阳” with this binary opposition concept, which weakens the calling structure of the text and reducing its openness. It fails to stimulate readers to explore new cultural concepts, and it is hard for readers to ponder: in Chinese culture, what is “dark”? and what is “dark”?

5. Conclusion

Cultural-loaded words carry rich information and possess strong cultural characteristics. This study analyzed the translation of cultural-loaded words in Xu Yuanchong's English translation of *Tao Te Ching* from the social and religious dimensions based on the two core concepts of horizon of expectations and calling structure from the theory of reception aesthetics.

The study finds that the translator pays great attention to the horizon of expectations of the target readers. When translating cultural-loaded words, the translator tends to adopt the adaptation strategy to use familiar words or concepts in the target language for substitutional explanation, in order to lower the reading threshold. This ensures that the target readers can quickly understand the text context and their basic cognitive expectations can be met. This approach effectively enhances the readability and initial understanding of the text.

This attempt to cater to the horizon of expectations weakens the calling structure and leads to the loss of cultural connotations. The research analysis shows that while literal translation or adaptation can provide the lowest consensus for understanding, they fail to fully convey the unique image construction and profound philosophical connotations of cultural-loaded words in the source language. This compresses the openness of the text. Readers don't need to activate deep cultural cognition and imagination to fill in the meaning gaps and lose the opportunity to deeply explore China's unique cultural philosophy.

In conclusion, the translation practice reflects an effort to balance cultural fidelity and the acceptance of target readers. The path is more inclined towards the latter, and there are deficiencies in the spread of culture. Precise translation of cultural-loaded words should allow readers to understand the culture, and expand the readers' horizon of expectations. The calling structure of the text should be retained to guide readers to cross cultural differences and appreciate the unique charm of the source language culture. Future classic translation research and practice should explore how to build a balance between readability and fidelity under the guidance of reception aesthetics. More effective strategies should be made to present the profound implications of Chinese classics to the world, which truly achieves deep cultural communication and mutual learning of civilization.

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