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A Study of Mistranslations in James Legge's English Version of the *Tao Te Ching*

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Abstract

As a representative work of early English translations of Chinese classics, James Legge's rendition of the Tao Te Ching exerts a profound influence in the Western world. Nevertheless, constrained by the uniqueness of classical Chinese as well as Legge's own cultural background and cognitive framework, his translation contains numerous mistranslations stemming from misinterpretation of vocabulary, misunderstanding of sentence structures and inappropriate expression in target language. Taking Legge's English translation of the Tao Te Ching as the research subject, this paper conducts analysis on typical cases from the three aforementioned dimensions to reveal the causes and categories of mistranslations. It is hoped that this research can offer references for the English translation of Chinese classics and facilitate more accurate global dissemination of brilliant traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords

James Legge, Tao Te Ching, English translation, mistranslations, translation of Chinese classics

1. Introduction

It strikes the author that it is nothing short of a marvel for a Chinese classic compiled over two thousand years ago to have been translated into dozens of languages with hundreds of different editions. As the foundational masterpiece of Taoist ideology, *Tao Te Ching* occupies an irreplaceable position in the history of Chinese philosophy, whose influence has long transcended national borders. Among a wealth of its English translations, James Legge's version undoubtedly serves as the most systematic and academically rigorous representative of early renderings (Wang, H., 2003). This Scottish sinologist spent decades translating and introducing Chinese canonical texts with an ascetic level of rigor. Up to the present day, his English translation of *Tao Te Ching* still functions as a key reference work for Western academic communities.

Nevertheless, translation has always been regarded as a variety of transformation under cultural

restrictions. Though blessed with profound scholarly competence, James Legge was still fundamentally an interpreter from an alien cultural background. He had to tackle the distinctive linguistic mechanism of classical Chinese culture, such as the unfixed word classes, frequently omitted sentence subjects, and the predominance of parataxis over hypotaxis. This is a linguistic framework largely incompatible with the syntactic logic of the English language (Zhao, Y. C. & Kuang, Y. W., 2021).

Furthermore, *Tao Te Ching* itself is celebrated for its profound maxim “玄之又玄”. Beneath its literal meaning lie multiple implicit connotations, which have triggered constant disputes among Chinese annotators across successive dynasties, not to mention a Scottish missionary like Legge. Under such constraints, his translation inevitably contains regrettable interpretive deviations. Some scholars have pointed out that even the most authoritative English renditions, namely versions completed by Lin Yutang, James Legge and Liu Dianjue, are fraught with inconsistencies and contradictions, including minor defects, misinterpretations and even serious translation blunders (Chen, X., 2024).

According to what has mentioned above, the author has no intention of making an outright negation of Legge’s translation, because such an overall denial would be neither academically impartial nor rationally sound. On the contrary, precisely owing to the remarkable academic achievements of his translated work, it is more imperative for researchers to conduct a rigorous inspection of its advantages and disadvantages. Based on that, this paper explores several debatable renderings in James Legge’s English translation of *Tao Te Ching* from three dimensions: lexical comprehension, syntactic analysis and target language expression (Yuan, C., 2011).

2. Mistranslations Caused by Biased Lexical Comprehension

Vocabulary in classical Chinese can be likened to a deep well: it may appear crystal clear on the surface, yet its depths remain unfathomable. A single term can carry vastly divergent meanings when situated in different contexts. The *Tao Te Ching*, renowned for its concise and compact meaning, for a slight misunderstanding of one character may lead to drastically distorted interpretations. When tackling several pivotal terms in the text, James Legge inadvertently fell prey to such interpretive pitfalls.

2.1 “道常无名” : Misunderstanding Triggered by a Negative Word

When it comes to the renowned line “道常无名” from Chapter 32 of *Tao Te Ching*, the author was genuinely astonished by James Legge’s rendering: “The *Tao*, considered as unchanging, has no name” (Legge, J., 1959). This translation is interpreted to mean that the “道” perpetually possesses no name.

Revisiting the opening paradox of the *Tao Te Ching* -- “道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名”，or, “The *Tao* that can be spoken is not the eternal *Tao*; the *name* that can be named is not the eternal *name*” -- one might question whether the standard reading above genuinely captures Laozi’s underlying intent. If the “道” is indeed amenable to being articulated and designated, then by that very logic it should not be wholly averse to bearing nomenclature. In fact, scattered across the text, Laozi does not shy away from furnishing it with numerous alternative titles: “谷神”，“玄牝之门”，“天地根”，“无” and “大” -- each of these plainly refers back to the very same “道”. Given these textual realities, the assertion that the “道”

remains perpetually nameless becomes difficult to defend on purely logical grounds.

Then, where does the real trouble lie? The present author suspects that James Legge's fundamental oversight rests not in philosophy itself, but in his mishandling of Chinese syntactic ordering -- specifically, his inappropriate treatment of the negative character “无”. From the universal perspective of grammar in metaphysics, a negative term like this one does not necessarily anchor itself to a rigidly fixed positional slot.

In natural languages, negatives may appear before or after the modified constituent, or be embedded within it. In Chinese, negatives are generally placed upfront. For instance, the combination of “无” and “常名” (meaning constant name) normally forms “无常名”. Nevertheless, this rule is not absolutely applied in various situations. A negative particle can also be inserted between the both characters of “常” and “名”, as seen in the phrase “常无名” in this case. The modern Chinese expression “睡不着” (meaning cannot fall asleep) serves as a parallel example.

When annotating the *Tao Te Ching*, Ho-shang Kung pointed out long ago: “道能阴能阳，能弛能张，能存能亡，故无常名也。” Consequently, “常无名” should be parsed as “无常名” rather than “常” plus “无名”, signifying that the “道” has no fixed and everlasting name. Following English modes of thinking, Legge misplaced the negative particle “无” and consequently reversed its original semantic meaning. Therefore, an appropriate rendering would read: “The *Tao* has no constant name.” It is truly a regrettable oversight that Legge misconstrued “无常名” to mean “possessing no name whatsoever”.

2.2 “无为” : A Core Concept Unduly Narrowed

Centering on the pivotal notion of “无为”, Laozi's philosophy finds one of its most contested translation entries in James Legge's choice of “non-action” (Legge, J., 1959). Superficially unproblematic though this rendering may seem, the casual reader is often tempted to reduce “无为” to a bare prescription for inertia -- that is, simply refraining from any deliberate act whatsoever.

And yet, taken on its own philosophical terms, Laozi's conception of “无为” carries a load considerably denser than what Legge's lexical choice admits. Instead of denoting passive quietism, it actualizes precisely the principle enshrined in “顺物自然而无容私焉” -- that is, following the inherent dynamism of all things while deliberately setting aside any arbitrary human interference. By settling on an expression of “non-action”, Legge's version stands to mislead the Western readers towards a flat image of sheer inertia about this vocabulary. However, this statement fundamentally collapses the dialectical tension embedded in the signature Taoist paradox: “无为而无不为”.

Awkward as Legge's “non-action” may read, it does perform one modest service: it properly marks “无为” off as a term belonging to the overall philosophical discourse. The real shortcoming, however, lies less in what it says than in what it withholds -- namely, the very quality of spontaneous and unforced agency that lies at the heart of Laozi's usage. Later translators' attempts -- such as “non-assertive action” and “effortless action” -- indeed move perceptibly closer to that core. Yet to judge Legge too harshly is to overlook the lexical straitjacket that Victorian English imposed on him. The term “inaction” sounded altogether too inert; by contrast, “spontaneity” carried a distinctly modern flavor that would have been

felt jarringly out of place at that time. What we now read as clumsy translation, then, owes less to Legge's individual inadequacy than to a structural dilemma that translators working across such vast civilizational distances are simply fated to inhabit.

3. Mistranslations Stemming from Biased Syntactic Comprehension

Lexical decisions may underpin the translator's enterprise, yet it is syntactic structuring that ultimately validates or undermines that enterprise. Classical Chinese, by virtue of its distinctive syntactic norms, tends to dispense with overt subjects and predicates, thereby causing logical relationships largely inferential rather than explicitly transcribed. By negotiating such syntactically compressed constructions -- a recurrent challenge for Legge -- his translations occasionally exhibit a hermeneutic lapse, the specific manifestations and consequences of which the following subsections will examine through selected textual evidence.

3.1 “有物混成” : *Where Is the Subject?*

The Chapter 25 of *Tao Te Ching* opens with the line: “有物混成，先天地生”. James Legge translated it as: “There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before Heaven and Earth.” (Legge, J., 1959)

A closer scrutiny of the above reveals an explanatory predisposition that merits critical attention. The question arises whether Laozi's locution “有物混成” is principally intended to posit the objective existence of a discrete entity. Wang Bi's gloss -- “混然不可得而知，而万物由之以成” (i.e. subsisting in an undifferentiated and unknowable state, from which the myriad things derive their formation) -- points emphatically to the primacy of an undivided condition conveyed by the expression “混成”, rather than to any ontological existence attributable to a particular entity. In opting for the existential expression “there was something”, Legge effectively transmutes what is in essence a generative process of cosmic unfolding into a set of static descriptive propositions, thereby effacing the quality of emergence that the phrase “道生一” sets in motion.

Interestingly, Legge himself registered a critical stance against earlier translators on this specialized issue, insisting that the character “物” in “有物混成” ought to be translated as “thing” rather than “Being” (Chen, X. Z., 2011). Yet for all his stated corrective gesture, his own translation practice remains captive to the conceptual apparatus that Western ontological traditions impose upon classical Chinese thought.

3.2 “故立天子，置三公” : *Cultural Dislocation in Official Titles*

In addition, another case originates from Chapter 62: “故立天子，置三公”. Legge's translation read: “Therefore the sovereign appoints the three ducal ministers.” (Legge, J., 1959)

The word “三公” refers to three supreme assistant ministers, namely the “太师”, “太傅” and “太保”. Legge employed the term “ducal ministers” as an equivalent. Nevertheless, the adjective “ducal” is related to describe the dukes in European nobility. The definitions of “三公” in both cultural backgrounds are fundamentally distinct: the former denotes official positions within the bureaucratic system, while the latter refers to feudal noble ranks. By adopting the household concepts of noble titles in Western

culture to interpret Chinese official positions, Legge created a sense of familiarity to Western readers with the strategy of Domestication, yet such comprehension was built upon misunderstanding. Other translators such as Arthur Waley adopted a more appropriate approach. He transformed the term as “the three officers of State” and supplies annotations elaborating the respective duties of the “太师”, “太傅” and “太保”.

4. Deviations in Target-Language Expressions Originated from Differences of Cultural Backgrounds

If lexical and syntactic infelicities may be ascribed to the translator’s incomplete command of the source language, then divergences rooted in culture implicate a more deeply seated determinant: the translator’s own cultural formation. James Legge was first and foremost a devout missionary, and then a sinologist - and his translation choices were pervasively conditioned by the conceptual apparatus of Christian theology, no matter how tacitly that apparatus may have operated. As some scholars have noted, British sinologists of Legge’s era, constrained by their evangelical identities and a doctrinal mindset, tended to produce translations marked by conspicuous Christianization, which in turn generated systematic cultural distortions within their editions (He, X. H., 2012). This ideological conditioning, while perhaps functioning below the threshold of Legge’s explicit self-awareness, nonetheless left discernible traces on his lexical selections and exegetical paraphrases.

4.1 “天地不仁” : The Misread Meaning of “不仁”

The celebrated verse “天地不仁，以万物为刍狗” appears in Chapter Five of the *Tao Te Ching*. James Legge translated this sentence as: “Heaven and earth do not act from (the impulse of) any wish to be benevolent; they deal with all things as the dogs of grass are dealt with.” (Legge, J., 1959)

The crux of this translation lies in the term “benevolent”. Legge interpreted “仁” as a conscious act of compassion while understands “不仁” as the absence of any impulse to be virtuous. However, this deviates from Laozi’s original intention. Rather than suggesting that there is no compassion among this world, “不仁” is intended to describe the objective operation rules of this world. They abide purely by nature, treating all things without discrimination, meanwhile embodying a state of absolute objectivity and impartiality.

Moreover, “刍狗” carries no derogatory connotation, which refers to several dog-shaped figurines woven from grass for ancient Chinese sacrificial rites. Prior to ceremonies, they are treated with great reverence; once the ritual ends and their function is fulfilled, they are cast aside. This exactly demonstrates that the world shows no partiality to any creature: they grant no special favour, nor do they inflict intentional harm. Thereby, “不仁” bears no hint of emotional closeness or distance. Influenced by his presupposition derived from the Christian tenet that God loves all humanity, Legge interpreted “仁” through the perspective of “benevolent”. Consequently, he failed to fully apprehend the wisdom of the Taoist maxim as “天道无亲”.

Simultaneously, however, it should be noted that despite he brought the missionary presuppositions to

his work, Legge did not deliberately Christianize the *Tao Te Ching* generally throughout his translation. A comparative analysis on the English editions by Legge and Lin Yutang reveals that when interpreting core notions such as “道” and “德”, Legge adopted the methods of comparison, comprehension and adaptation to avoid Christian misunderstanding of the Taoist classic following the principles of cultural understanding and intercultural hermeneutics (Guan, E. S., 2020). His translation and textual interpretation maintained a delicate balance between philosophy and religion, reason and faith, as well as seeking similarities and identifying differences. Eventually, such a balance occasionally broke down and the mistranslation of “天地不仁” serves as one of such representative cases.

5. Conclusion

What needs to be emphasized at this point is that identifying these deviations in Legge’s translation is not aimed to dismiss his academic achievements. On the contrary, precisely because his edition is accomplished and painstakingly produced, every detail within it deserves careful scholarly research. Legge’s English version of the *Tao Te Ching* occupies an irreplaceable pioneering position in the history of Western Sinology (Wang, H., 2003). His translation and introduction of Chinese classics have opened a gateway for countless readers and researchers to access Chinese philosophy for generations.

Nevertheless, the cross-cultural interpretation has never been an easy undertaking. Legge was confronted with the expressive system of classical Chinese, which differs drastically from English, as well as the Taoist modes of thinking that go beyond the categories of Western philosophy. What’s more, he approached his work with cultural presuppositions shaped by his missionary identity (Deng, L. 2023). Under such circumstances, deviations within his translation were almost inevitable.

From the author’s perspective, our brief analysis of mistranslations in Legge’s work today is not driven by nitpicking, but by a desire to gain deeper insight into the consensus and collisions emerging from the encounter between Chinese and Western cultures. Legge’s translation remains worthy of intensive reading and scrutiny precisely because it stands as both an outstanding rendition and a mirror. It reflects the confusion, endeavors and creativity arising when two great civilizations come into contact. Future translations of ancient classics may build upon Legge’s experiences and lessons to advance further and more steadily (Yuan, C., 2011).

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