



On the English Translation of the *Tao Te Ching* from the Perspective of Translation Aesthetics

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How to cite this paper: Yan Du. (2025). On the English Translation of the *Tao Te Ching* from the Perspective of Translation Aesthetics. *The Educational Review, USA*, 9(2), 192-198.
DOI: 10.26855/er.2025.02.007

Received: January 12, 2025

Accepted: February 9, 2025

Published: March 6, 2025

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the challenges and strategies faced by the translation of *Tao Te Ching*, an ancient Chinese philosophical classic, from the perspective of translation aesthetics. By comparing and analyzing the English translations by sinologists such as Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall as well as David Hinton, this study reveals the effectiveness of different translation strategies in conveying the philosophical ideas and aesthetic style of the original work. The research focuses on cultural differences, language expressions, conveyance of imagery, and literary techniques, aiming to propose a translation method that can be faithful to the spirit of the original text while showcasing its unique aesthetic appeal. Through the analysis of specific examples, this paper not only provides useful references for the further study of English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, but also opens up new perspectives for the study of the English translation of Chinese classical texts.

Keywords

Translation Aesthetics; English Translation of Chinese Classics; The *Tao Te Ching*; Translation Strategies

1. Introduction

As a treasure of ancient Chinese philosophy, the *Tao Te Ching* not only holds a pivotal position in Chinese culture, but its profound philosophy and rich cultural connotations have also attracted widespread attention from the international academic community. However, due to significant differences in cultural backgrounds, language expressions, and ways of thinking between the East and the West, the English translation of the *Tao Te Ching* faces many challenges. How to accurately convey the philosophical conception and aesthetic style of the original work while maintaining its spirit has become an urgent problem to be solved in the translation world. Internationally, many scholars have expressed strong interest in the English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. American sinologists Roger T. Ames and British sinologist David Hinton attempted to translate the *Tao Te Ching* into English from different perspectives. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall focus on reflecting the philosophical ideas of the *Tao Te Ching* in their collaborative translations. By deeply analyzing the philosophical connotations of the original work, they strive to reproduce its essence in the target language. David Hinton pays more attention to the literary value of the translation, using rich literary techniques to convey the original ideas while also presenting a unique literary beauty. In China, many scholars have conducted in-depth research on the English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. For example, Xu Li (2024) clarified the four modes of trans-hermeneutics of the *Tao Te Ching* based on the philosophical reflections on hermeneutics and the three climaxes and the fourth wave of the English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*; Deng Xi (2024) explored how ordinary English readers accept and understand the English translation of the *Tao Te Ching* based on the grounded theory, and reflected from readers' comments on what they expect from the quality and effect of the translation, thus constructing a model on the dynamic interactive relationship

between readers and the text. Deng Lin (2023) conducted a systematic study on the English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, focusing on conveying the philosophical ideas of the original work while remaining faithful to it, providing valuable references for later researchers. Fu Rong and Peng Qiao (2022) analyzed the English translation of James Legge's *Tao Te Ching* and found that his translation had a wide influence in the academic community, providing important references for later researchers. Zhou Qiang, Wu Yali, and Wu Hui (2021), taking the English translation of Arthur Wiley's *Tao Te Ching* as an example, discussed strategies of defamiliarization used by the translator in the process of translation from two perspectives of translating material and translating rhetoric, trying to point out that defamiliarization strategies in translation can not only bring readers novelty and aesthetic enjoyment, but also contribute to the realization of literariness. Zhao Yanchun and Lv Lirong (2019), on the other hand, take the English translation of *Tao Te Ching* by Foreign Languages Press as an example to analyze the literariness required in the English translation of Chinese classical works. These scholars' research not only delves into specific issues in the process of translating the *Tao Te Ching* into English, but also provides valuable translation strategies and ideas. Their research results indicate that when translating ancient Chinese classics such as the *Tao Te Ching*, cultural differences, language expressions, and philosophical ideas should be fully considered, striving to reproduce its unique philosophical and aesthetic style while remaining faithful to the original work. This study aims to explore the strategies and methods of translating Chinese classical works into English from the perspective of translation aesthetics, taking Roger T. Ames' and David Hinton's English translations of the *Tao Te Ching* as examples. By analyzing the specific problems faced in the process of translating classical works, such as cultural differences, complexity of language expression, conveyance of artistic imagery, and handling of puns and literary techniques, this study aims to provide new perspectives and ideas for the translation research on classical texts. At the same time, this study also hopes to provide useful references and guidance for the English translation practice of ancient classics such as the *Tao Te Ching*.

2. Cultural Differences and Translation Strategies

2.1 Differences in Cultural Backgrounds and Comprehension in Translation

The differences in cultural backgrounds between the East and the West are first reflected in the understanding of the core concepts in the *Tao Te Ching*. Taking the "Tao" (Chinese: Dao) as an example, it is the core concept of the *Tao Te Ching* and has profound philosophical connotations. In Chinese culture, "Dao" is understood as the origin and laws of all things in the universe, and is an abstract and profound existence. However, in Western culture, there is no direct corresponding concept of "Dao", so translators face enormous challenges when translating. David Hinton chose to translate "Dao" as "A Way", such as his translation of "A Way called Way isn't the perennial Way", emphasizing the meaning of "Dao" as a path and method; Roger T. Ames chose to translate it as "Way-making (dao)", such as translating the same sentence as "Way-making (dao) that can be put into words is not really way-making", retaining the transliteration of the original word while also conveying the uniqueness and mystery of "Dao" to a certain extent; Both of these translation methods reflect the translator's different understanding of "Dao" and also reflect the influence of cultural differences on the comprehension of the original texts in the translation process.

2.2 Cultural Differences and the Selection of Translation Strategies

Faced with cultural differences, translators need to adopt appropriate translation strategies when translating the *Tao Te Ching* to narrow the understanding barriers caused by cultural differences. On the one hand, translators can adopt domestication strategies to transform cultural elements in the original text into cultural elements familiar to the target readers, in order to enhance the readability and acceptability of the translation. For example, when dealing with the sentence in Chapter 4 of the *Dao Te Ching* "WU BU ZHI SHUI ZHI ZI, XIANG DI ZHI XIAN", David Hinton translated it as "whose child could it be? Apparently, it precedes gods and creators" so that Western readers can more easily understand the meaning of "DI". On the other hand, translators can also adopt the strategy of foreignization to preserve cultural elements and expressions in the original text, in order to showcase its uniqueness and cultural charm. For example, when translating "GONG SUI SHEN TUI, TIAN ZHI DAO YE" (Chapter 9), Roger T. Ames chose to translate it as "To retire when the deed is done, Is the way (dao) that tian works." in which the Chinese character "TIAN" was rendered in its Chinese spelling as "tian", so as to retain the sentence structure and original meaning of the original text, while providing explanations and clarifications to help readers better understand its connotation.

2.3 Cultural Differences and the Rendering Effects of Translation

Cultural differences not only affect the choice of translation strategies, but also the rendering effects of the translated text.

In the English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, translators need to fully consider the cultural background and reading habits of the target readers in order to present a translation that is both faithful to the original work and easy to understand. For example, when translating the line “ZHI DA GUO RUO PENG XIAO XIAN” from Chapter 60, the *Tao Te Ching*, Roger T. Ames rendered it as “Bringing proper order to a great state is like cooking a small fish.” while Hinton had the version of “Govern a great nation as you would cook a small fish.” By comparison, it can be seen that Roger T. Ames used rhyming rhetorical devices to maintain the rhythm of the original text and make the translation more vivid and interesting. At the same time, translators can also add annotations and explanations appropriately to help readers better understand the meaning and background of the original text just as what Roger T. Ames had done in his translation by adding much more paratexts, including preface and acknowledgements, historical introduction, historical context, philosophical introduction, glossary of key terms, commentaries, notes and appendices. Translators also need to pay attention to the fluency and naturalness of the translation, avoiding stiff translations and mechanical correspondences, such as simply translating “dao” as “way” or “path”. Instead, they should choose the most appropriate translation method based on the context to ensure that the translation can accurately convey the ideas and aesthetic style of the original work.

3. The Complexity of Two Linguistic Expressions

As a treasure of ancient Chinese philosophy, the language of the original work of *Tao Te Ching* is concise and profound with great richness in philosophy, which makes it a major challenge to accurately convey this linguistic feature in the process of its English translation. Different translators, such as Roger T. Ames and Hinton, have adopted vastly different translation strategies to address this challenge. Roger T. Ames emphasizes literal translation and strives to be faithful to the literal meaning of the original work; Hinton, on the other hand, tends to use free translation and emphasizes conveying the overall artistic conception of the original work.

3.1 Language Simplicity and Translation Challenges

The language of the *Tao Te Ching* is known for its simplicity, often expressing profound philosophical ideas in just a few words. However, this simplicity poses a significant challenge in English translation. Due to significant differences in grammar structure and vocabulary usage between English and Chinese, simple Chinese expressions may require more complex sentence structures and vocabulary to be accurately conveyed in English.

Taking the example of ‘WU SE LING REN MU MANG; WU YIN LING REN ER LONG; WU WEI LING REN KOU SHUANG’ (Chapter 12), this sentence expresses in concise language that colorful colors dazzle the eyes; noisy tones deafen the ears; and sumptuous food leaves the tongue unaware of taste by using three function words “WU SE, WU YIN, and WU WEI”. When translating, David Hinton may pay more attention to literal correspondence, translating it as “The five colors blind eyes. The five tones deafen ears. The five tastes blur tongues.” Although this translation is faithful to the literal meaning of the original work, it may cause some misunderstandings for common readers who have little knowledge of Chinese language and culture because “FIVE” in the original text doesn’t specifically refer to only five kinds of color, tone and taste. In fact, “FIVE” here is an empty word, covering all categories of color, tone and taste in Chinese culture, a cultural representation of mankind, indicating humans’ unsatisfied desires for sex, sound and food. The challenge for the translator should be how to render the cultural connotations and explain the relationship between “WU SE, WU YIN and WU WEI” and the thought of “WU YU (no desire)” advocated by Laoze. As for this, Roger T. Ames translated it as “The five colors blind the eye; the five flavors destroy the palate and the five notes impair the ear.” with three notes added to explain “the five colors, the five flavors and the five notes”. Another example is “SHANG SHAN RUO SHUI. SHUI SHAN LI WAN WU ER BU ZHENG.” (Chapter 8), which is rendered as “The highest efficacy is like water. It is because water benefits everything (wanwu)” in Roger T. Ames’s translation. Hinton, on the other hand, adopted a more paraphrasing approach, translating it as “Lofty nobility is like water. Water’s nobility is to enrich the ten thousand things and yet never strive.” This translation not only retains the original imagery, but also vividly conveys the nourishing and undisputed qualities of water through expressions such as “enrich” and “strive”, making it easier for the target readers to understand and feel the philosophy of the original sentence.

3.2 How to Convey Profound Philosophy in the Translation

The philosophy in *Tao Te Ching* is often profound and subtle, requiring readers to carefully savor it in order to comprehend it. How to accurately convey these philosophies in English translation is a major challenge. The translator not only needs to accurately understand the meaning of the original work, but also needs to express it in appropriate language so that the target readers can feel the philosophical charm of the original work.

Taking the example of “DAO SHENG YI, YI SHENG ER, ER SHENG SAN, SAN SHENG WAN WU (Chapter 42)”, this sentence expresses the philosophical idea of the Tao giving birth to all things and the unity of all things. When translating, Hinton may pay more attention to literal correspondence and logical clarity, translating it as “Way gave birth to one, and one gave birth to two. Two gave birth to three, and three gave birth to the ten thousand things.” Although this translation is logically clear, it may lack some philosophical flavor. Roger T. Ames, on the other hand, may focus more on conveying the philosophical atmosphere of the original text, translating it as “Way-making (dao) gives rise to continuity, Continuity gives rise to difference, Difference gives rise to plurality, and plurality gives rise to the manifold of everything that is happening (wanwu)”. Through the use of words such as “continuity”, “difference”, “plurality” and “the manifold of everything that is happening (wanwu)”, this translation vividly expresses the process of the Tao giving birth to all things, clearly explaining the philosophical connotation of “one”, “two” and “three”, making it easier for the target readers to feel the philosophical charm of the original work.

3.3 Conversion of Cultural Imagery in the Translation

The *Tao Te Ching* is full of rich cultural imagery, which is often closely linked to traditional Chinese culture and philosophical thought. How to accurately translate these cultural images into a form that the target readers can understand is another major challenge in their English translation.

In Chapter 62 of *Tao Te Ching*, Laozi said “GU LI TIAN ZI, ZHI SAN GONG, SUI YOU GONG BI YI XIAN SI MA, BU RU ZUO JIN CI DAO.” Here, “GONG BI” in Chinese means a large Yu disc (bi) that necessitates the use of both hands to hold in a reverent manner while “YU” symbolizes moral integrity and esteemed social standing in Chinese culture. In ancient China, “Yu” (jade) was frequently employed as a metaphor for “the virtues of a nobleman”, as documented in *The Book of Rites · Qu Li Xia*: “A ruler shall not part with his Yu without just cause.” As early as 3000 BCE, China had begun using Yu as ceremonial adornments, imbuing it with ritual significance. This is exemplified by the record in *The Rites of Zhou · Chun Guan · Da Zong Bo*: “A green bi (ceremonial Yu disc) was used to venerate heaven.” Consequently, Yu also carries the metaphorical connotation of “sacredness” in Chinese culture. However, translators who lack awareness of the unique cultural reverence accorded to Yu in China may unintentionally create cultural inequivalence in their renditions. Both Roger T. Ames and Hinton translated “GONG BI” as “jade discs” or “discs of jade”, which achieves surface-level equivalence. However, when examining deeper cultural connotations, the semantic values of “jade” in English and “Yu” in Chinese are fundamentally incongruent. According to *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, the metaphorical meanings of “jade” in English include: a broken-down, vicious, or worthless horse; a disreputable woman; a flirtatious girl. Thus, from a cultural equivalence perspective, the English connotations of “jade”—associated with frivolity and decadence—stand in stark contrast to the Chinese “GONG BI”, which embodies notions of beauty, nobility, and sacredness. Without proper contextualization, this semantic disparity risks significant interpretive distortion.

3.4 Treatment of Puns and Literary Techniques

As a treasure of ancient Chinese philosophy, the language of *Tao Te Ching* is not only concise and profound, but also full of puns and literary techniques. These elements are often difficult to correspond directly in the process of English translation, requiring a high degree of linguistic sensitivity and creativity on the part of the translator.

Pun is a common rhetorical device in *Tao Te Ching*, which makes use of the feature of double meanings of a word or sentence to achieve the effect of conciseness and deep meaning. In the process of English translation, the translator needs to accurately understand the double meanings of puns and find suitable expressions in the target language to reproduce the puns in the original. For example, in the phrase “DA ZHI RUO QU, DA QIAO RUO ZHUO”, Hinton translates it as “The greatest straightness seems crooked; the greatest skill seems clumsy”. Here, “straightness” and “crookedness”, “skill” and “clumsiness” form a sharp contrast, and at the same time contain a deep philosophy. Hinton succeeds in reproducing the puns in the original text through his clever use of words and syntax. He chooses the word “seems” to express both superficial appearance and inner substance. At the same time, he also translates “DA ZHI” and “DA QIAO” as “the greatest straightness” and “the greatest skill”, which emphasizes their extreme nature and contrasts sharply with the later “crooked” and “clumsy”, thus highlighting the philosophy of the original text. The original philosophy is emphasized by the contrast with the following words “crooked” and “clumsy”.

In addition to puns, the *Tao Te Ching* also employs a variety of literary techniques, such as metaphors, symbols, and parallel structures. The use of these techniques makes the language of the original more vivid, figurative and infectious. In the process of English translation, the translator needs to accurately understand the use of these literary techniques and find suitable expressions in the target language to reproduce the literary beauty of the original. Taking metaphors as an example, the *Tao Te Ching* often expounds philosophies through metaphors, making abstract concepts concrete and

palpable. In the process of English translation, the translator needs to accurately understand the ontology and metaphor of the simile, and find a suitable simile in the target language to express the same meaning. For example, the sentence “ZHI DA GUO RUO PENG XIAO XIAN” is a typical metaphor that compares governing a large country to cooking a small fish. In the process of English translation, the translator needs to understand the meaning of this metaphor accurately and find an appropriate way to express it in the target language. Some translators may choose to translate it as “Governing a large country is like cooking a small fish”, which retains the metaphorical form of the original text but may not be intuitive to Western readers who are not familiar with the Chinese culture. Therefore, the translator may also consider adopting the free translation as “Governing a large country requires delicate handling, just as cooking a small fish needs careful attention”, which retains the original meaning, not only preserving the metaphorical intent of the original text, but also making the translation easier to understand.

4. Rendering of Artistic Conception and Emotions

As a treasure of ancient Chinese philosophy, the artistic conception and emotions contained in the text of the *Tao Te Ching* must be carefully handled during the translation process. Translators such as Roger T. Ames focus on reflecting the philosophical ideas of the original work in their translations, and deeply analyze the artistic conception of the original work, striving to reproduce its essence in the target language.

4.1 Reproduction of Artistic Conception

The profound and unique artistic conception in the *Tao Te Ching* is an important component of the ideological essence of the original work. When translating, the translator needs to deeply understand the artistic conception of the original work and adopt corresponding translation strategies to reproduce this artistic conception. Roger T. Ames chose a combination of literal translation and free translation when translating “ZHI ZU BU RU, ZHI ZHI BU DAI, KE YI CHANG JIU.” into “Knowing contentment, one avoids disgrace; knowing when to stop, one avoids danger, and thus can endure”. This translation not only preserves the literal meaning of the original work, but also accurately conveys the philosophical conception of contentment and moderation in the original work through expressions such as “knows contentment” and “knows when to stop”. In order to more accurately reproduce the artistic conception in the *Tao Te Ching*, translators can also use vivid language to guide readers into the original artistic conception by depicting specific scenes or images; Rhetorical techniques such as metaphor and personification can also be used to enhance the expressive power of the translation, allowing readers to more deeply feel the artistic conception of the original work; Or add annotations or explanations appropriately to help readers better understand the artistic conception and background of the original work.

4.2 The Transmission of Emotions

The emotional expression in the *Tao Te Ching* is delicate and profound, which is also an important component of the original work’s ideological charm. When translating, the translator needs to accurately grasp the emotional tone of the original work and convey this emotion through appropriate language expressions. For example, when translating “DA ZHI RUO QU, DA QIAO RUO ZHUO, DA BIAN RUO NE”, the translator can convey the seemingly contradictory but profound philosophical emotions in the original work by choosing appropriate vocabulary and sentence structures. At the same time, translators can also use punctuation marks such as mood particles and exclamation marks to enhance the emotional expression of the translation, allowing readers to more deeply feel the emotional charm of the original work. To accurately convey the emotions in the *Tao Te Ching*, the translator also needs to have a deep understanding of the emotional connotations of the original work, ensuring that the translation can accurately convey the emotional tone of the original work; Pay attention to the rhythm and cadence of language, adjust sentence structures and vocabulary choices to make the translation more fluent and natural, thus better conveying emotions; Pay attention to the impact of cultural differences on emotional expression, ensuring that the translation can conform to the cultural background and reading habits of the target readers.

4.3 Integration of Artistic Conception and Emotion

In the process of translating the *Tao Te Ching* into English, the integration of artistic conception and emotion is a major challenge. The artistic conception and emotions in the original work are often intertwined, together forming the unique ideological charm of the original work. Therefore, in translation, translators need to comprehensively apply various translation strategies and methods to achieve a perfect integration of artistic conception and emotion.

In order to achieve this goal, firstly, the translator needs to deeply analyze the artistic conception and emotions of the original work to ensure accurate understanding of it; Secondly, in the process of translation, attention should be paid to the rhythm and beauty of language, and appropriate vocabulary and sentence structures should be selected to make the translation more beautiful and fluent; The third is to pay attention to the integrity and coherence of the translation, ensuring that the translation can accurately convey the ideas and emotions of the original work; The fourth is to pay attention to the impact of cultural differences on artistic conception and emotional expression, ensuring that the translation can conform to the cultural background and reading habits of the target readers. Fifthly, translators also need to possess rich cultural literacy and translation experience to cope with various challenges that may arise during the process of translating the *Tao Te Ching* into English. For example, when facing the complex philosophy and profound artistic conception in the original work, the translator needs to use their knowledge reserves and translation skills to accurately understand and convey the ideas of the original work; When facing understanding barriers caused by cultural differences. Besides, translators need to flexibly use translation strategies such as domestication and foreignization to narrow the understanding gap caused by cultural differences.

5. Comprehensive Evaluation from the Perspective of Translation Aesthetics

Translation aesthetics, as an important branch of translation studies, focuses on aesthetic issues in the translation process, aiming to explore how to preserve and reproduce the aesthetic style of the original work in translation. In the practice of translating the *Tao Te Ching* into English, the perspective of translation aesthetics provides us with a unique evaluation dimension.

5.1 Balance Between Loyalty and Creativity

Loyalty is one of the fundamental principles of translation, which requires translators to accurately convey the information and intent of the original work during the translation process. However, in the English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, fidelity does not mean a simple literal correspondence, but rather a creative transformation based on a deep understanding of the original philosophical ideas and aesthetic style. This creativity is not only reflected in the choice of vocabulary and sentence structures, but also in the accurate conveyance of the original artistic conception and emotions. For example, the sentence “Way-making (dao) that can be put into words is not really way-making, and naming (ming) that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming.” in the *Tao Te Ching* has a profound philosophical conception and concise yet rhythmic language. In the process of English translation, translators need to accurately understand the philosophical meanings of “dao” and “ming”, and find suitable expressions in the target language. Some translators may choose to translate directly, retaining the vocabulary and sentence structure of the original text, but this may make the translation appear stiff and obscure. And other translators may choose to paraphrase, using smoother and more natural language to express the original intention. In this case, the translator needs to find a balance between fidelity and creativity, accurately conveying the information of the original work while also making the translation conform to the aesthetic habits of the target language.

5.2 Reproduction of Aesthetic Style

As a classic work of ancient Chinese philosophy, the *Tao Te Ching* is concise and profound in language, rich in philosophical and aesthetic values. In the process of English translation, translators need to fully consider the aesthetic style of the original work, striving to reproduce its unique literary value and philosophical conception in the target language. Firstly, the translator needs to accurately grasp the language style of the original work. For example, sentences in the *Tao Te Ching* are often short, concise, and rhythmic. In the process of English translation, translators can reproduce the language style of the original work by selecting concise and clear vocabulary and sentence structures, as well as appropriate punctuation and layout. Secondly, the translator needs to delve into the philosophical and aesthetic connotations of the original work. For example, the ideas emphasized in the *Tao Te Ching*, such as “governing by inaction” and “following the law of nature,” have profound philosophical significance and aesthetic value. In the process of English translation, translators need to accurately convey these ideas to the target readers through precise vocabulary selection and sentence structure construction. Thirdly, translators also need to consider the aesthetic habits and cultural background of the target readers. Due to cultural differences between the East and the West, translators need to make appropriate cultural transformations and aesthetic adjustments during the translation process to make the translation more in line with the aesthetic expectations of the target readers.

6. Conclusion

In summary, from the perspective of translation aesthetics, conducting in-depth research on the English translation of the *Tao Te Ching* not only helps us better understand the philosophical ideas and aesthetic style of this ancient classic, but also provides new ideas and methods for its English translation. In the future, much more attention should be paid to explore translation strategies and methods suitable for the English translation of ancient Chinese classics, and contribute to cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries. At the same time, attention should also be paid to the important role of translation aesthetics in the English translation of classics, striving to maintain the aesthetic charm and philosophical conception of the original work in the translation process.

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