

Study on Back Translation of *Tao Te Ching: The Taoism of Lao Tzu Explained* by Stefan Stenudd

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ABSTRACT

The traditional classic *Tao Te Ching* has aroused widespread attention from overseas sinologists, who have contributed to numerous English translations of *Tao Te Ching*. This paper studied back translation based on *Tao Te Ching: The Taoism of Lao Tzu Explained* by Stefan Stenudd, integrating multiple approaches of back translation to understand how overseas sinologists approach *Tao Te Ching* and explore problems in the translation of classics.

Keywords: *Tao Te Ching*, back translation, overseas sinologists

1. INTRODUCTION

Tao Te Ching is a traditional Chinese classic and an embodiment of ancient wisdom, integrating philosophy, national governance and harmony, which is favored by people all over the world. In the past century, many overseas sinologists have translated and interpreted *Tao Te Ching*, spreading the thought of the classic overseas. Stefan Stenudd is just one of them. In 2011, his sinology translation *Tao Te Ching: The Taoism of Lao Tzu Explained* was published. To better understand how overseas sinologists approach *Tao Te Ching* and explore problems in the translation of classics, this paper back translated part of the book to trace the origin of ancient culture involved in the translation, thus enhancing understanding of back translation.

2. CONCEPT, METHOD AND CLASSIFICATION OF BACK TRANSLATION

2.1. Concept of back translation

At present, there has not been a uniform definition of back translation, which could be accessed from a narrow and

broad sense. In a narrow sense, it is a back translation from the target language to the source language, like translating a Chinese-English work back into Chinese [1]. This kind of translation is also called back translation, which is mainly used to restore the texts of classics. In a broad sense, according to Dictionary of Translation Studies, back translation refers to the process of retranslating a text translated into a target language back into the source language. Back translation, that is, the process of A-B-A', seems to be a textual research activity to trace and restore the text to its original source, which is actually much more complicated. It is impossible for A' and A to be completely equivalent, with the historical and cultural allusions in the need of textual research, making it difficult to restore the texts in terms of narrative and remarks in the original style [2]. In a broad sense, back translation is a retranslation or reverse translation, which requires the translator to focus on the understanding of the original text and retranslate it. Si Guo, a famous translator, believed that back translation is a daunting task. Works in a foreign language can be translated into Chinese no matter how difficult it is, but this is not the case in the other way around. We can translate the meaning, but not the text. Anyone who has the original text can find something wrong in the translation. Sometimes it is not easy to find the original text, though a full copy of the text is usually available [3]. According to the above-mentioned analysis, the back translation consists of procedures as shown in Figure 1

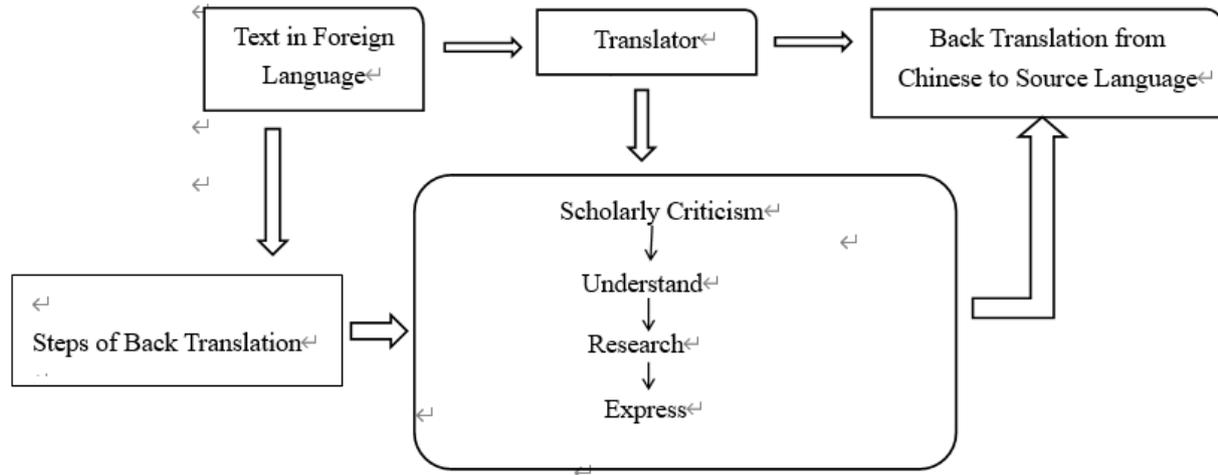


Figure 1 Diagram of Back Translation

Therefore, back translation can not be regarded as a kind of restoration in a narrow sense, but rather an act of retranslation. The so-called reverse translation mentioned above highlighted the essence of “reverse” in the process. It is not only an independent writing, but also an independent backward tracing process that involves comparison, analysis and evaluation. In this process of “reverse”, efforts are made in understanding, searching, expressing and textual research.

Back translation is an arduous task which requires a number of textual research activities to verify the expression of the original text. In some cases, when there is no source to rely on, back translation is a root-seeking translation and recreation activity. According to my personal experience, the methods of back translation include data collection online, literature review, parallel text, cross-study and Deduction, as shown in Figure 2

2.2. Methods of back translation

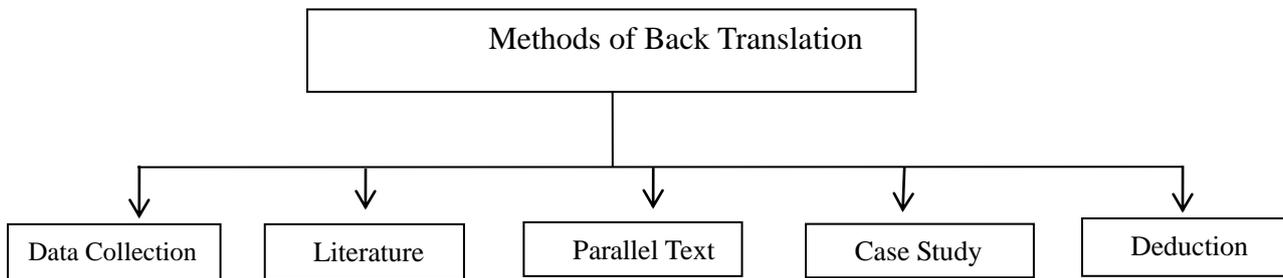


Figure 2 Methods of Back Translation

For example, in his work *Translation Studies*, Si Guo mentioned the translation of a quotation from Buddhism, which literally means the Chinese simply cannot believe that a monk can really abstain from sexual love or from eating the flesh of animals. In order to translate it back, Si Guo used the above-mentioned methods and searched equivalents in Buddhist culture, including “The Five Commandments”, “The Eight Commandments” and “The Ten Commandments”, and finally restored it to: “Chinese people simply don’t believe monks can fully follow the commandments of not committing adultery or killing”, or “Chinese people simply don’t believe monks can keep their purity.” The back-translated text can better reflect the connotation of Buddhist culture, which is “rooted” in the original text.

3. CLASSIFICATION OF BACK TRANSLATION

Back translation can be divided into “reproduction of original text” and “back translation without original text”. Reproduction of the original text refers to directly reproducing the original text without translation, because this part is originally translated into the foreign language [4]. According to my personal experience, reproduction can be divided into two situations, including direct and indirect reproduction of the original text. Direct reproduction of the original text is accomplished mainly by reading references and literature reviews. However,

indirect reproduction is based on understanding and reasoning of the original text, requiring the translator to read references and verify assumptions to restore the text in a step-by-step manner. Professor Wang Hongyin of Nankai University gave a detailed definition of "back-translation without source", which refers to translation without textual basis. It needs to be rooted in the culture (here it refers to the Chinese culture, not general human culture) as its foundation, which the translator should bear in mind in the whole process [4]. This kind of back translation would pose more challenges to the translator as there is no source to rely on, though the translation is spiritually enriched. Therefore, it is not easy to do back translation in this situation.

The production of back translation can be divided into full back translation and meaning-based translation. The former refers to a full restoration of the source text, namely fully back translating the text from top to bottom. Otherwise, the text is not restored to fully display the original essence, which is also called meaning-based back translation. There is only one version of full back translation, but many possibilities of meaning-based back translations [5]. The analysis revealed the fact that the presence of the source text allows a thorough back translation while it is impossible to fully back translate the work without a source text to depend on. The differences between the presence and absence of source text, and between the full or meaning-based translation, whether in Chinese or foreign classics, could serve as the criteria in dividing back translation into three categories: source text-based full back translation, i.e., it is possible to back translate the work to the source language (source text), a category of source text-based back translation; meaning-based translation without the source text as reference, i.e., source text-free back translation into the source language (source culture); meaning-based translation with source text, i.e., back translating the work into the source language without finding an equivalent source text, which is another category of source text-based back translation. Specifically, the three types of back translation require different approaches [6].

4. STUDY ON BACK TRANSLATION OF TAO TE CHING: THE TAOISM OF LAO TZU EXPLAINED

4.1. Source text-based full back translation

Tao Te Ching: The Taoism of Lao Tzu Explained is a work by Swedish sinologist Stefan Stenudd, who translated and explained in detail the 81 chapters of *Tao Te Ching* from the perspective of overseas sinologists. To understand how overseas sinologists approach *Tao Te Ching*, this paper has back translated some of the chapters of this book.

Example 1:

Source Text

The Way that can be walked is not the eternal Way.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth.
The named is the mother of all things.

Therefore:

Free from desire you see the mystery.

Full of desire you see the manifestations.

These two have the same origin but

differ in name.

That is the secret,

The secret of secrets,

The gate to all mysteries.

Back Translation

道可道，非常道；

名可名，非常名。

无名，天地之始，

有名，万物之母。

故常无，

予以观其妙；

常有，欲以观其徼。

此两者，同出而异名，

同谓之玄。

玄之又玄，

众妙之门。

Example 2: When we accept that the **mystery** and the **manifestations** mirror each other, the secret is revealed.

Analysis: The term "manifestation" in back translation is literally similar to the word "display". Utilize the parallel text of Chapter One in *Appreciation of Lao Zi and Chuang Tzu* by Fang Yuan, which offers an explanation: seek the trace of everything from the physical world. The word "boundary" here refers to clue, which is also mentioned in *An interpretation of the Tao Te Ching* by Kai Tai. Therefore, the sentence of Example 2 is back translated into Chinese as: "当我们知道了玄和徼互为映射时，便可以探知到真相 (When we accept that the **mystery** and the **manifestations** mirror each other, the secret is revealed)".

Example 3: Truth is revealed to the one who detaches himself from the world, not tempted by anything in it and not distracted by any of its phenomena.

Analysis: This sentence is related to Buddhist culture, and has been clearly explained in the original text that it comes from Buddhist scriptures. The author found the equivalent scripture in Chapter 44 of the *Diamond Sutra*: "世尊，若富有人得闻是经，信心清静，则生实相，当知是人成就第一希有功德 (World Honored One, if someone after listening to this sutra believes that his mind is clean and pure, he will realize reality.) [7]. Back translation: 金刚经云：信心清静，则生实相 (According to *Diamond Sutra*, people who have a clean and pure mind will realize reality.)"

Above three examples are source text-based full back translation. Example 1 is a restoration of the source text, which is accomplished by referring to the first chapter of *Tao Te Ching*. Examples 2 and 3 are indirect restorations of the source text, involving deductions and verifications at multiple levels to fully back translate the sentence.

4.2. Meaning-based translation with source text

Tao Te Ching: The Taoism of Lao Tzu Explained is full of philosophical statements which require the translator to do a lot of reading in back translation and use multiple methods for this purpose, though sometimes a full back translation is yet to be accomplished.

Example 4: The ancient masters, according to Lao Tzu, knew to renounce nonsense, until only the essence remained.

Analysis: Following Lao Tzu's method, sinologist Stenudd also renounced nonsense, until only the essence remained in order to summarize the qualities of ancient sages. However, it is not easy to find the source text in back translation. The author checked Chinese studies on *Tao Te Ching*, and found that sages feature kindness to other people and prudent behaviors. However, the specific definition of sages by Lao Zi was not found yet. Therefore, the author quoted *The Great Learning* for back translation: “古之圣贤，谨于言而慎于行，修其心而天下平 (Ancient sages, careful in words and cautious in action, cultivated their mind to maintain peace of the world)”.

Example 5: He wanted his readers to return to Tao, thereby recreating the blessed world of old.

Analysis: In the first half of the sentence, Lao Tzu expressed his wishes for people to embrace Taoism, the definition of which was not given in detail. The author checked the parallel text and found that Taoism refers to the embrace of nature, freedom and reality and the inner world of people. In the second part of the sentence, Lao Tzu described the beauty of primitive society, the details of which were not given by the source text, neither. To better restore the text, the author read Chapter Eighty of *Tao Te Ching*, in which the primitive society was depicted as a place where people enjoyed their food, clothes and accommodations, and lived in happiness.” Therefore, the author quoted this lines and back translated the sentence into: “老子意在使读者摆脱自我局限,复归天道的大自由之境,从而再现民皆甘其食,美其服,安其居,乐其俗的小国寡民,无忧无虑的社会 (Lao Tzu encouraged readers to rid themselves of limitations and embrace freedom of nature, a demonstration of an ideal society where people enjoyed food, clothes and accommodation and lived in happiness.)

The two examples above are meaning-based back translation with source text. Translators could find references in *Tao Te Ching* and other classics. However, there is no way to fully restore the essence of the source text, which requires translators to make a summary after checking references. For this type of back translation, translators need to continue seeking for the root and find out the very origin of the text.

4.3 Meaning-based back translation with source text

Example 6: It can be compared to what Jesus said about the meek: They are blessed, for they shall inherit the earth.

Analysis: The sentence comes from the Bible, which is translated in a Chinese parallel text as: “温柔的人有福了，因为他们必承受土地 (Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth)”. Though the reference is a full back translation, it is not completely consistent with the cultural essence of the source text. The word “meek” in *Tao Te Ching* refers to sages who are modest, gentle and blessed, with the spreading of culture as their responsibility. Specifically, the author back translated the sentence into: “这就如同耶稣曾经说低调之人一样：谦虚的人有福了，他们将福满人间 (It can be compared to what Jesus said about the meek: They are blessed, for they shall inherit the earth).”

4.4 Meaning-based back translation without source text

In literature classics, the meaning-based back translation without source text refers to the back translation of “root”. For this type of back translation, the translator needs to make every effort to find an equivalent of the text. If not, the translator should restore the text as much as possible, minimizing deviation of the back translation closer from the source text [5]. The root of the works by English to Chinese sinologists stems from the Chinese culture. The back translation shall restore the soul of such works. Even when there is no way to fully restore it, translators should minimize the gap between the meaning-based back translation and the source text.

Example 7: When we distance ourselves from the world as if we are not at all part of it, then we can see through it.

Analysis: The author analyzed the meaning of the sentence and found equivalence in the poem *Ascending Feilai Peak* by Wang Anshi: “不畏浮云遮望眼，只缘身在最高层 (I have no fear that floating clouds may blur my eyes, for on the topmost storey of the building am I)”. Another line from the poem *Written on the Wall at West Forest Temple* by Su Shi also corresponds to the sentence: “不识庐山真面目，只缘生在此山中 (Why can't I tell the true shape of Lu-shan? Because I myself am in the mountain)”. Though without a source text, the back translation could find an alternative in the source culture. With two versions of meaning-based back translation, the author back translated it into: ①我们有时候之所以“不畏浮云遮望眼”，是因为我们“只缘身在最高层 (Sometimes I have no fear that floating clouds may blur my eyes, for on the topmost storey of the building am I)”。②我们有时候之所以“不识庐山真面目”，是因为我们“只缘生在此山中 (Why can't I tell the true shape of Lu-shan at times? Because I myself am in the mountain)”。

Example 8: There is great power in attaining the wisdom Lao Tzu describes in his book, but anyone reaching that wisdom first and foremost learns the importance of modesty.

Analysis: In this sentence, Lao Tzu described the personalities of sages of wisdom. Though without a source text, there are equivalents in traditional Chinese culture.

The author found a paragraph in *Tan Roots* by Ming Daihong from the Ming Dynasty: “地低成海，人低成王，圣者无名，大者无形。(The earth at a low altitude evolved into sea, and people of modesty became king. The sage cared not about fame, and the hero rid himself of shape) 这句话就是描述那些存有大智慧的人一般都具有这些品质。These words give a description of personalities boasted by people of great wisdom, or in other words, a common “root”. Therefore, the author back translated the sentence into: “老子认为存有大智慧的人都具有“地低成海，人低成王，圣者无名，大者无形”的品质。(Lao Tzu described the personalities of people of great wisdom using the words: The earth at a low altitude evolved into sea, and people of modesty became king. The sage cared not about fame, and the hero rid himself of shape.)

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Understanding of Tao Te Ching by overseas sinologists

In his work *Tao Te Ching: The Taoism of Lao Tzu Explained*, overseas sinologist Stenudd approached the thoughts and wisdom embodied in *Tao Te Ching* from the

perspective of philosophy. His recognition and love for Chinese classics and culture can be seen between the lines. These works have become the media of spreading culture overseas, carrying forward the excellent Chinese culture and promoting the progress of the whole human civilization.

In this book, the author explained the philosophical thoughts contained in *Tao Te Ching*. The spread of this thought will help overseas readers to understand the importance and wisdom of “Tao”, and warn people not to behave “recklessly” against the law of nature, but rather obey the law and rule of nature, because any violation against nature will be punished. This philosophy will contribute to the greater harmony between people and nature. The book also proposed “national governance”, claiming that leaders ruling with kindness and Tao will bring long-term prosperity and stability to the country. Also, it gave the connotation of morality. For individuals, it includes kindness, selflessness, modesty, erudition and benevolence, all of which contribute to spiritual development of people. These thoughts are the essence and wisdom of *Tao Te Ching*, which are summarized in Figure 3.

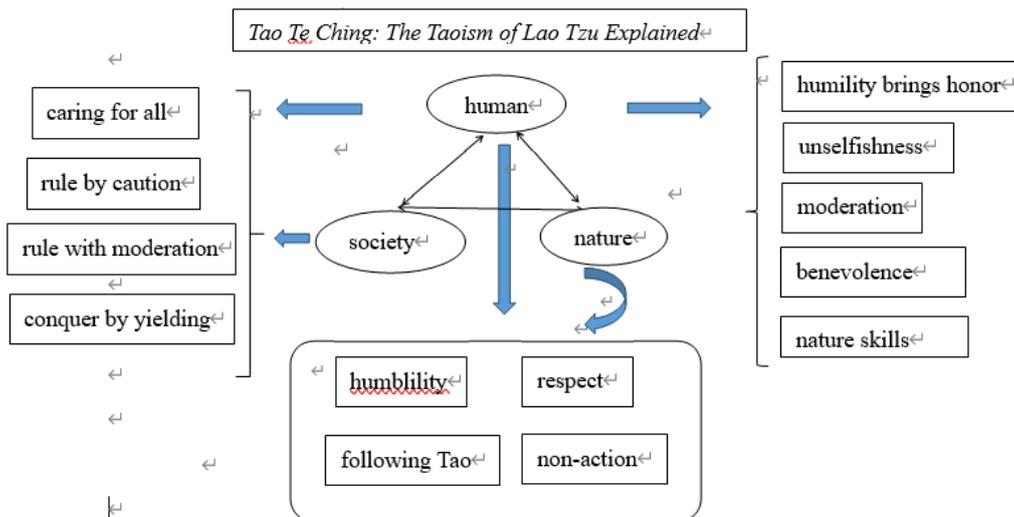


Figure 3 Understanding of Tao Te Ching by Overseas Sinologist Stenudd

5.2 Problems in the translation of literature classics

Tao Te Ching: The Taoism of Lao Tzu Explained reflects that overseas sinologists' interpretation of *Tao Te Ching* is influenced by many factors, such as their own cultural background, cognition and language. There is the possibility that some philosophical thoughts of the ancient books and cultures are inaccessible to the sinologists, and

there are some misunderstandings in the translation and interpretation of *Tao Te Ching*. Back translation, as a means to examine the translated text, can not only test the translator's practical ability, but also examine the translator's translation capability. Back translation is actually a verification of translation from the perspective of the source language, with the two supervising and improving each other. In addition, errors in the translation can be found through back translation [9]. The following three problems were identified in the back translation.

5.2.1. *Mistranslation caused by misunderstanding.*

In Chapter 12 of *Tao Te Ching: The Taoism of Lao Tzu Explained*, there is an explanation of “five colors”: The five colors in the Chinese tradition are green, red, yellow, white, and black. The author checked references, and found that the five colors in the ancient classics refer to blue, red, yellow, white and black.

5.2.2. *Inaccurate definition of terms.*

In Chapter 3 of *Tao Te Ching: The Taoism of Lao Tzu Explained*, Stenudd translated “无为 (inaction)” into “non-action” in English, and interpreted as “Do as little as possible, and only when you absolutely have to”. In back translation, rather than doing as little as possible, the “无为 (inaction)” was found to be a proposal that people should respect nature in awe and avoid reckless behaviors.

5.2.3. *Incomplete interpretation of literature classics.*

In Chapter 13 of *Tao Te Ching: The Taoism of Lao Tzu Explained*, Stenudd didn't explain in detail what it means to be terrified whether granted favors or subjected to humiliation, but focus on thoughts of life and death.

When translating Chinese classics, sinologists receive gifts from Chinese culture. However, when back translating these sinology works, Chinese culture in turn receives gifts from the Western culture. In this way, the identities of the giver and the receiver are constantly exchanged. While accepting the gifts from foreign cultures, local cultures are understood from the perspective of foreigners so that our understanding of local cultures is enriched and expanded, and more values of local cultures are thus discovered [1]. This is a reciprocal process, in which overseas sinologists accept the gift of Chinese culture, bring it to the world and enrich themselves. On the other hand, when we translate these classics back, we also receive gifts from foreign cultures, from which we find problems and examine the similarities and differences between the two cultures from a unique perspective.

From the practice of back translation, the author realized that sinologists transplanted their own culture when interpreting Chinese classics, which could affect the spreading of Chinese culture. Misunderstanding of the Chinese culture may impose difficulties on sinologists in an attempt to explain the "essence" clearly in translation, which is also the loss of culture. Therefore, in the long run, it is necessary to encourage local writers to write in different languages to facilitate the understanding of the essence of Chinese culture among overseas readers. However, in translation, it is necessary to consider the acceptance and cognitive level of overseas readers, which requires local writers and overseas sinologists to learn from each other, to improve the translation of Chinese

classics to accomplish the combination of domestication and foreignization, and to jointly promote the development of Chinese culture and culture all over the world.

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