

# *Semantic Analysis in the Context of Translation of Classics—Taking Tao Te Ching as an Example*

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**Abstract:** The *Tao Te Ching*, written by Laozi, is regarded as the first philosophical work in Chinese history to have a complete system. It has had a significant influence on the development of Chinese political thought and has also garnered widespread attention in the Western academic community. This article focuses on the semantic equivalence in the English translation context of the *Tao Te Ching*, aiming to explore its important insights and reference value for the development of our modern human society. The article provides a brief overview of the numerous versions and interpretations of the English translations of the *Tao Te Ching*. It selects representative translations from three main periods of English translation of the *Tao Te Ching* and combines relevant theories. Through analyzing the uniqueness of the *Tao Te Ching* text and its context, the article summarizes the reasons for the diversity of semantic interpretations in its English translations. The goal is to provide new perspectives and ideas for the translation, appreciation, and research of Chinese classical texts.

## 1. Introduction

According to Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian: Biography of Laozi*, Laozi was a native of Chen State during the Spring and Autumn period, specifically from Li Township Gou in Luxiang County, Henan Province. He was requested by the chief minister Yin Xi to write a 5,000-word book, which became known as the *"Tao Te Ching"* or *"Laozi's Five Thousand Words."* The book is divided into two parts, with the Han Dynasty recognizing it as a classic and referring to it as the *"Tao Te Ching"* or *"Classic of Virtue and the Way."* It consists of 81 chapters, with the first 37 chapters comprising the upper scroll and the remaining 44 chapters comprising the lower scroll. The book revolves around the philosophical concept of the *"Dao,"* elucidating the origin, existence, laws of motion and development, social contradictions, and methods of resolution of all things in the world. The text of the *"Tao Te Ching"* is concise yet profound, filled with intricate meanings, swift language, and paradoxical expressions. For over two thousand years, it has remained an inexhaustible treasure trove of wisdom for readers to explore. The *"Tao Te Ching"* is not a conventional book in the usual sense; it is a collection of aphorisms and commentaries without a clear logical order. These 81 chapters are like a string of smooth pearl necklaces: each pearl stands independently, but when brought together, they create a magnificent and unparalleled effect.

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, feudalism was in decline, and the central authority of the emperor weakened, leading to the collapse of rituals and music. This was the fundamental reason for the rise of various schools of thought among the pre-Qin philosophers. The thoughts of these philosophers covered a wide range of topics, but in terms of political thought, there were mainly four schools: Confucianism, Mohism, Daoism, and Legalism. The thoughts of these four schools either derived from or influenced each other, creating a complex web of interactions. Each school held its own views and sought to save the world. As a result, the great path of the world was divided, and the philosophers observed the heavens from their respective perspectives. However, compared to other schools, Daoist thought appears to be more harmonious and less rigid and narrow. Daoist thought had significant significance for social development during the Spring and Autumn period, with its ideas of "governing by doing nothing" and "the Dao follows its own course" having unparalleled value for contemporary political construction in China.

The profound influence of this work on the development of political thought in our country is self-evident. With the advent of the colonial era brought about by the Industrial Revolution, the book also began to spread in Western countries. It started with a Latin translation by the missionary Jean-François Pons in the 17th century, and the *Tao Te Ching* has been widely translated and studied in the West. It has been translated into 76 languages and has a total of 1576 editions, ranking first among translated Chinese works. "In terms of its long history, wide dissemination, extensive geographical coverage, numerous languages, large quantity, deep influence, high value, and significance, there is perhaps no other work among the pre-Qin philosophers that can compare to it." This shows that there is great potential and value in the translation and research of the *Tao Te Ching*, especially in finding the uniqueness of the text and the diversity of its semantics among numerous translations, which still requires further research.

## 2. An Overview of the English Translation History of *Tao Te Ching*

Since 1868, the translation history of the *Tao Te Ching* in foreign countries has spanned several centuries and gone through multiple stages. There are at least 180 English translations alone. These translations may have significant differences due to being produced in different historical periods. Sometimes, these differences arise from the translators' different interpretations of the original text, while others are influenced by specific historical factors that shape the translators' translation purposes and tendencies.

The earliest Western translation of the *Tao Te Ching* was a Latin version translated by Jean-François Pernetty in the 17th century. Overall, the history of English translations of the *Tao Te Ching* can be divided into three stages. The first stage, known as the "missionary translation stage," was dominated by missionaries. The second stage, which occurred after World War II, saw a peak in translations due to countries reflecting on the devastation of war and paying attention to classical texts like the *Tao Te Ching*, which contains anti-war sentiments. This stage can be summarized as the "anti-war reflection stage." The third stage emerged with the development of economic globalization, as countries introduced foreign cultures for economic and cultural exchanges. As one of the important classics of Chinese culture, the *Tao Te Ching* has been actively translated and introduced abroad, representing the "cultural integration stage." It is important to learn about the core part or key philosophical concepts of *TaoTe Ching* before we move to the translator's subjectivity and the text analysis[1].

### 2.1 Missionary translation stage (1868-early 20th century)

In 1552, the Portuguese missionary Francis Xavier (1506-1552) became the first missionary to set foot in China. Shortly after his arrival, he passed away on Shangchuan Island due to malaria,

which prevented him from widely spreading Christian doctrine. However, he did embody the pioneering spirit that deserves respect among missionaries. Even before that, based on information provided by a Chinese merchant, he wrote a report on the customs and practices of China for the Portuguese Viceroy of India. The report covered various aspects such as the religious habits of the Chinese people, their attitudes towards foreigners, education system, culture, and institutions.

After Francis Xavier, more missionaries set foot on Chinese soil, continuing the mission of spreading Christianity in China. Their purpose was not only to serve the expansion needs of the Western powers, but also to find a way for Catholicism, which was impacted by the religious reform, to save itself from crisis. The relatively strong defense capabilities, developed economy and culture, and active social trends of late Ming and Qing Dynasty China made equal cultural exchange a more "economical" expansion strategy for the Western powers. It was the comparison of political and military strength between the two sides that led missionaries such as Francis Xavier, Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607), and Matteo Ricci to strongly advocate for the integration of Western culture with Chinese culture, in order to solve the problem of integrating Christian doctrine with Chinese culture and promote the maturity of the "adaptive missionary route."

This period marked the first peak of translations of the *Tao Te Ching*. During this time, due to the unfamiliarity of foreign readers with the *Tao Te Ching* and Chinese culture, translations often reflected the translators' intention to explain the semantic meaning of the original text from the title itself. For example, John Chalmers translated it as "The Speculations on Meta-physics, Polity, and Morality, of 'The Old Philosopher', Lao-Tsze," while James Legge translated it as "The Path of Virtue." The latter's attitude towards Chinese religion differed from that of early missionaries in that Legge respected Chinese traditions and conducted systematic research and translation of Chinese religion with a cautious academic spirit. His translation included lengthy prefaces and detailed annotations, which are still one of the focal points of scholarly attention today. However, he was still unable to escape his identity as a missionary. In the introduction to this translation, Legge clearly stated that Christian theory is correct on many key issues, while the thoughts of the *Tao Te Ching* or Laozi are incorrect. This clearly reflects the influence of the missionary's preconceptions on the act of translation, resulting in semantic biases and even a lack of connection with the original text.

## 2.2 Anti-war reflection period (1919-1970s)

During this period, the perception of the *Tao Te Ching* among Western readers underwent a dramatic transformation. It not only became a highly popular Chinese classic in the West but also saw diverse interpretations and studies of its semantic meaning. Moreover, the translators during this period were no longer exclusively missionaries, allowing them to gradually move away from the religious context and offer fresh interpretations of the *Tao Te Ching's* semantic diversity.

During this period, influential translations that had a wide impact included Arthur David Waley's "The Way and Its Power: A Study of the *Tao Te Ching* and Its Place in Chinese Thought" and Lin Yutang's "The Wisdom of Laotse," among others. Waley's translation, in particular, had a significant influence in the United Kingdom and continues to be highly regarded in academic circles. His translation stands out for placing the *Tao Te Ching* within the broader context of Chinese culture and focusing on conveying its philosophical content. As a result, his translations often employ explanatory language and strategies, accompanied by extensive annotations. This translation approach is based on Waley's extensive knowledge of Eastern culture, allowing the translated text to closely align with the original in terms of semantic equivalence.

## 2.3 Cultural integration stage (1980s- present)

According to the statistics in 1993, 250 translations in Western languages have come into being. Since 1990, almost every year, we can read new books about Laozi and Daoism both at home and abroad[2]. During this period, influential translations that had a wide impact included Arthur David Waley's "The Way and Its Power: A Study of the *Tao Te Ching* and Its Place in Chinese Thought" and Lin Yutang's "The Wisdom of Laotse," among others. Waley's translation, in particular, had a significant influence in the United Kingdom and continues to be highly regarded in academic circles. His translation stands out for placing the *Tao Te Ching* within the broader context of Chinese culture and focusing on conveying its philosophical content. Since its introduction into the English-speaking world in the late 19th century, the *Tao Te Ching* has become a canonical text second only to the Bible and the Bhagavad Gita in terms of circulation and number of editions[6]. As a result, his translations often employ explanatory language and strategies, accompanied by extensive annotations. This translation approach is based on Waley's extensive knowledge of Eastern culture, allowing the translated text to closely align with the original in terms of semantic equivalence.

In summary, during this period, translations of the *Tao Te Ching* moved away from a purely religious context. Not only did new translations continue to emerge due to cultural exchange, but the *Tao Te Ching* also gradually became an important subject of overseas Sinology research. Translators during this period generally approached Chinese culture with understanding and respect. In translation history, one can often observe their attention to the differences between Eastern and Western cultures and expressions. However, due to various factors such as background and purpose, translators did not uniformly adopt strategies of "foreignization" or "domestication." Instead, they flexibly handled the text to serve their translation purposes.

## 3. Reasons for Semantic Diversity in English Translation of *Tao Te Ching*

### 3.1 Unique Characteristics of the *Tao Te Ching* Text

Classics are transmitted in the form of texts, and their ideas are contained within characters, words, phrases, and passages. The determination of meaning is inseparable from the textual context. Chinese characters originated from pictographic writing, where ancient ancestors created characters that closely resembled the objects they represented, such as "sun" and "dance." Therefore, in pre-Qin classics, single characters often appeared to convey meaning. However, as society developed, the limited pictographic characters could not meet the communication needs of people. As a result, people based on these pictographic characters and developed more characters by adding radicals and extending meanings. This is also one of the fundamental reasons for the phenomenon of multiple meanings in Chinese characters.

Moreover, before the existence of writing, classics relied on oral transmission, which inevitably led to inaccuracies and inconsistencies. With the advent of writing, people began to record the content of orally transmitted classics using written texts. Due to the nature of oral transmission, the recorded texts of classics often relied heavily on pronunciation. As a result, many characters with the same pronunciation but different meanings appeared in the texts, which is a major characteristic of classics. With the progress of time, the number of Chinese characters and words has gradually increased, and the meanings of characters and words have also changed. Some words have become more nuanced in meaning, while others have disappeared over time. Therefore, when translating, it is necessary to study the etymology of the word, its original and historical meanings, as well as its meanings in contemporary texts. This means considering both the diachronic and synchronic meanings of the word in order to accurately grasp its development and changes in meaning. It is

also important to examine the specific sentences and contextual usage of the word, as well as compare its different usages within the same text.

Although it is traditionally believed that "Laozi" is the author of the *Tao Te Ching*, the historical authenticity of "Laozi" has always been questioned and debated, which has had an impact on the interpretation and translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. Understanding the origin of the *Tao Te Ching* is essential for the study of this classic, as different origins propose different interpretive expectations and influence the way the *Tao Te Ching* is read. In the case of the translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, for example, Jacob and Arthur Wylie did not place the text in the soil where it would have belonged. Thus, the *Tao Te Ching* has been ascribed in the Western language system to the Western cultural tradition since Plato[5]. For example, if the work was written by a single author, people may expect a high degree of consistency in style and content. If the *Tao Te Ching* is a work from the 6th or 5th century BC, people can interpret certain statements based on the circumstances of that time. Due to these uncertainties, there are so many commentaries, interpretations, and subsequent translations.

The aforementioned issue is commonly reflected in the choice of the original text. The translator's different choices regarding the original text and annotations are the fundamental factors that lead to semantic diversity, as the original text serves as the basis for translation. Due to the diversity of historical manuscripts and commentaries on the *Tao Te Ching*, translators must decide which one to follow.

For example, "jue zhi qi bian" is used in the bamboo slips of *Tao Te Ching* while in the same place of the silk manuscripts "jue sheng qi zhi" is used.

Translating modern Chinese literature is difficult, and translating ancient Chinese classical works is even more challenging because of the significant differences between ancient and modern Chinese, not to mention English, which belongs to the Indo-European language family. The understanding and diversity of semantics are caused by many factors, with the first obstacle arising from the linguistic characteristics of the Chinese language. The nature of the Chinese language itself poses difficulties in interpreting this article, as it is ideographic and pictographic, lacking inflectional elements to indicate grammatical categories of characters. In addition to modern Chinese, ancient Chinese has other unique features. At the word level, in the system of ancient Chinese, a character may have more than one meaning. In most cases, a character may have different parts of speech. Sometimes, the pronunciation of a character may vary, resulting in different meanings and different parts of speech. Furthermore, when two characters have the same pronunciation or similar forms, one can be substituted for the other.

The written form of ancient Chinese was not entirely standardized, and sometimes the same character could represent different words.

Example:

"Shan zhe wu shan zhi, bu shan zhe wu yi shan zhi, de shan."(Chapter 49)

Legge: get to be good

Waley: gets goodness

Lau: gain in goodness

Lin: the goodness of Virtue

LaFargue: virtue/Te is kind/good

Gu: obtains goodness

The translation of the character "de" depends on the context. It can be translated as "virtue" as a noun or "to obtain" as a verb. The six English versions mentioned above reveal different interpretations by translators.

### 3.2 Translator's subjectivity

The subjectivity of translators permeates the entire process of translation practice, from text reception to text production. The translator's personal translation purpose, guiding translation strategies, considerations for the target language readers, and personal temperament are all factors that contribute to the diversity of semantic interpretations in translations.

Translation begins with the translator's reading and understanding of the source text. The translator is first and foremost a reader of the source text. In order to convey the philosophical ideas of the *Tao Te Ching*, the translator must first have a thorough understanding of the text.

The semantic meaning of Chinese texts is often difficult to comprehend, and there can be multiple interpretations at times. Scholars have debated the meanings of certain words and chapters in the *Tao Te Ching*, and these debates continue today. Similar to the comments made by Chinese scholars, translations of this classic often reflect the translator's personal engagement with the philosophy behind the text.

The subjective factors that influence a translator's subjective choices when translating the *Tao Te Ching* include translation purpose, guiding translation strategies, considerations for the target readers, personal temperament, and so on. These factors contribute to the diversity of semantic interpretations in translated texts. As follows:

- 1) Translation Purpose
- 2) Guiding Translation Strategy
- 3) Consideration for the Target Readers
- 4) Personal Temperament

## 4. Enlightenment from the Semantic Diversity of Translations of *Tao Te Ching*

### 4.1 The Universal Meaning of Context to Translation

Translation is a cross-cultural communication activity, and the important role of context in translation is evident. It can be said that context is inseparable from translation. Many scholars have recognized the significant role of context in communication and have attempted to incorporate the research findings on context into the field of translation. Steiner believes that in the process of translation, "any grammar book or dictionary is of little help to the translator. Only the most comprehensive linguistic and cultural contextual understanding can determine meaning.[4]" Nida states that "the most serious errors in understanding and reproducing the meaning of discourse often result from not considering the context.[3]" Shen Suru believes that both linguistic and cultural factors play an important role in the understanding process of translating from Chinese to other languages. "In terms of language itself, understanding its surface meaning is not difficult, but understanding its deep meaning, associative meaning, and implied meaning is challenging...". "In terms of cultural connotations, in addition to the relationship between language and culture, there are also issues related to the cultural backgrounds of the original author and the original readers, such as ethnicity, history, geography, and society." The translation of Chinese classics is not only the transformation of literal meanings, but also the cultural knowledge behind the literal meanings. Due to the differences between Chinese and English languages, as well as the characteristics of ancient Chinese, there are all kinds of difficulties in the translation of the classics, and a lot of mistranslations have been caused in the understanding[7].

In summary, foreign scholars have applied the research findings on context in the field of translation, mainly focusing on linguistic context, discourse context, and cultural context. Since translation involves the conversion between two languages, they have conducted detailed categorizations and discussions on the role of context at the level of words, sentences, and other

linguistic elements in the translation process. For example, Catford discusses the transformation in translation, Newmark explores communicative translation and semantic translation, and Nida proposes the principle of equivalence.

The research on translation context in China is mainly conducted by scholars such as Zhu Wenzhen, Zheng Shiding, Li Yunxing, Liu Miqing, and Cheng Yongsheng. Initially, their research focused on language analysis, style analysis, and problem analysis. However, as their research progressed and results accumulated, they elevated the importance of context issues and conducted more systematic and in-depth studies. All of this indicates that research on the role of context in translation has become an undeniable trend. However, whether Chinese or foreign scholars, none of them have introduced the theory of context into the study of English translations of Chinese philosophical classics.

## 4.2 The Significance of Context in Translating Chinese Classics into English

The Chinese classics were written a long time ago, and their contents are relatively difficult to understand[8]. Historically speaking, the concept of context has been inherently linked to the issue of meaning since its inception. With the development of linguistic philosophy and the deepening of theories of meaning, the concept of context has been continuously enriched and expanded. Meaning and context are not binary opposites, but rather they intertwine with each other. Meaning arises within a context and is attributed to that context. Context serves as the foundation of meaning, and in terms of the generation and understanding of meaning, context possesses the highest level of conventionality. Context has an ontological relationship with meaning.

The significance of context in the English translation of Chinese classics lies in its ability to convey the rich cultural and historical background of these texts. By considering the context, translators can better capture the nuances, allusions, and cultural references embedded in the original Chinese texts, thus ensuring a more accurate and faithful representation in the target language. Additionally, understanding the context helps to bridge the cultural gaps between the source and target languages, enabling readers from different cultural backgrounds to appreciate and comprehend the profound wisdom and insights contained within Chinese classics. The essence of cultural translation is to allow different cultures and their values to compete on the translation field through the translator's pen[9].

In Chinese philosophical classics, such as the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Zhuangzi*, the term “dào” is a central concept that can be translated into English as “the Way” or “the Dao.” However, the usage and interpretation of this term may vary among different philosophers and schools of thought. In the *Tao Te Ching*, “dào” refers to the ultimate reality or principle that underlies the universe and governs all things. It is often associated with concepts such as harmony, balance, and naturalness. The Tao is considered ineffable and transcendent, beyond human comprehension. In the *Zhuangzi*, “dào” is also used to describe the natural order of the world, but it emphasizes the idea of spontaneity and non-action (wú wéi). It suggests that by aligning oneself with the natural flow of things and letting go of personal desires and attachments, one can achieve a state of harmony and freedom.

Therefore, while the term “dào” is used in both texts, its specific meaning and usage may differ depending on the philosophical context and the intentions of the author. Thus, it seems that the classic nature of the work, the reading needs of the slogan readers and the translator's preference are important reasons for the translation[10]. Translators need to carefully consider these nuances when rendering the term into English to convey the intended meaning as accurately as possible.

## 5. Conclusion

Reading the *Tao Te Ching* in different contexts can lead to significantly different semantic interpretations. Similarly, reading it at different stages of life conveys entirely different worldviews. In other words, no translation can fully and impartially capture the original text because the classic constantly gains new interpretations through the readings of translators. This article primarily explores the diversity of semantics in the *Tao Te Ching* and its underlying reasons.

When translating the *Tao Te Ching*, translators often employ various strategies to maintain semantic equivalence:

**Contextual understanding:** Translators must thoroughly grasp the historical and philosophical background of the *Tao Te Ching* to accurately capture its intent. This involves studying unique cultural and philosophical concepts in ancient China.

**Interpretation:** Translators may need to explain certain passages to ensure effective communication of meaning in English. This may involve rephrasing or expanding certain concepts to make them more easily understood by English readers.

**Adaptation:** Translators may need to adapt cultural references, metaphors, or idioms to make them relevant to the target audience. This ensures that the translated text maintains its intended meaning while being culturally relevant.

**Sensitivity to poetic and philosophical nuances:** The *Tao Te Ching* is renowned for its poetic and philosophical nature. Translators must strive to preserve the lyrical and profound qualities of the original text while ensuring clarity and coherence in the English translation.

In conclusion, achieving semantic equivalence of the *Tao Te Ching* in a dynamic context requires not only language proficiency but also an understanding of the evolving nature of language and the cultural context in which the text exists. It involves adjusting the translation to make it relevant to modern readers while maintaining the authenticity of the original essence and intent.

The *Tao Te Ching* is a precious intellectual heritage of humanity, carrying profound cultural information. Its value transcends the limitations of time and space. The study of this great classical Chinese literature will not cease but continue. The semantic diversity of the English translations of the *Tao Te Ching* deserves further research. Due to the limited depth of analysis and incomplete discussion in this article, there is still ample room for improvement and exploration.

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