

Roger T. Ames' Translation of Concept Words in *Dao De Jing* from the Perspective of Translation Ethics of Difference

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Abstract: According to the theory of translation ethics, translators should respect the differences and enrich the target culture. The concept words in *Dao De Jing* embody complex meaning, representing the essence of Chinese philosophy. These words are hard to understand, but crucial to the interpretation of *Dao De Jing*. The concept words such as “Dao”, “Wuwei”, “Tian” and “De” are chosen to discuss their translations in this article. Roger T. Ames advocates translation has to be transformed into culturally creative interpretation in order to be faithful to the thought and way of expression. In the translation process of concept words in *Dao De Jing*, Roger T. Ames analyzes the meaning of concept words from their cultural background and adopts strategies of transliteration, creative translation and polysemy, attempting to keep the differences between Chinese and Western philosophy. Roger T. Ames translates the key words from the perspective of contrastive philosophy. Through discussion of the translation of Roger T. Ames and his cooperator, it is found that the strategy of showing the differences in translation may be hard for target readers to understand, but an effective way to intercultural communication in the long run.

Keywords: Roger T. Ames, Translation Ethics, *Dao De Jing*, Concept Words

1. Introduction

Daoism is the essence of traditional Chinese culture as well as the treasure Chinese nation has created for the world. Although *Dao De Jing* only contains nearly 5000 Chinese characters, it embraces various aspects of life ranging from philosophy, military, history, society, politics to building up one's mind and behavior in the real world [1]. The whole book concentrates on the philosophical concept of Dao to explain the origin of things in the world, their ways of existence, rules of development, social contradictions and solutions and so on. The whole 81 chapters of *Dao De Jing* are divided into two parts. The first 37 chapters are called Dao Jing, and the rest 44 chapters are called De Jing. As the classics of Daoism, *Dao De Jing* has attracted generations of scholars to interpret and translate it. The translation of Dao De Jing began when missionaries came to China. It was the first time that westerners have an opportunity to approach *Dao De Jing* and traditional Chinese culture. Their original purpose was to help the Bible to be accepted widely in China. In order to translate

Bible into Chinese, they need to have a deep understanding of Chinese language and its culture. As the representative work of traditional Chinese culture, *Dao De Jing* was chosen by missionaries as the reference to translate the Bible. And the translation of *Dao De Jing* into English is often accompanied with “the problem of Eurocentrism” [2].

The various interpretation of *Dao De Jing* has great relationship with its openness. The openness of *Dao De Jing* comes from the following three factors: first, because of lack of background information and logical cohesion, the meaning of text can be interpreted from different perspectives; secondly, the instabilities of ancient Chinese grammar results in the different interpretation of sentences; thirdly, words can have different meanings due to its conciseness and polysemy. In *Dao De Jing*, there are many concept words such as Dao, De, Wuwei, Tian. These concept words have coherent but different meanings, which can not be interpreted by one word even in modern Chinese. These common but important concept words are the most difficult part in translating Dao De Jing.

2. Translation Ethics of Difference

In *The Dictionary of Ethics*, ethics is defined as “a set of moral principles and conventions formed in a specific situation to guide the relationship among people” [3]. Ethic, different from moral, is the search of human for the ultimate value. Moral is the norm which adjusts a series of human activities. The word “ethic”, originated from Greek word “ethos”, means “essence”, “human character”, “custom”, “habit”. It discusses the human relationship involving every activity and every field.

In the late 1980s, ethics began to attract much attention in the translation field. It was Antoine Berman, a French literary translator, translation theorist and philosopher, who first advanced the concept of translation ethics. In 1984, Antoine Berman first pointed out the concept of translation ethnics, criticizing nation-oriented translation ideas centered on the reproduction of meaning dominating in the western translation field for a long period. He holds “the task of translation is to enrich language and develop the complicated culture” [4]. The core of translation ethics is respecting the differences of languages and cultures in order to enrich the target language and culture. Anthony Pym in his *On Translator Ethics* (2012) and other essays developed his thoughts on translation ethics, arguing that “they, largely in an intercultural space, translate for exchange on an immediate basis while for intercultural cooperation in the long run” [5].

American deconstructionist Lawrence Venuti learned from Antoine Berman and derived into ethics of difference. He believes in essence translation is race-centered, so it is absolutely not an equal communication. And the function of translation is to absorb the differences. Good translation should strive to keep differences of languages and cultures, which is called ethics of difference. In his book *The scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethnics of Difference*, he thinks “the purpose of translation ethics is against sameness and cultural colonialism” [6]. Translation ethics of difference advocates foreignization to keep the differences of languages and cultures, which is not to avoid domestication and rewriting foreign texts in target cultural terms. The key is to change ethnocentrism. Venuti further deconstructed ethnics of difference and pointed out theory of adjustment of measures to local conditions.

Ethics of difference is advanced by Venuti. It requires that a translator should keep a critical distance from his domestic cultural norms when he is conducting a translation practice. Translators motivated by an ethics of difference will inform their domestic readers of foreign philosophy. Their translation works will cause the readers to consider a new way of thinking which differs sharply from that of their own. If translators want to keep a distance from the domestic norms, they have to choose a strategy which abandons the traditional way of translating and shows the otherness in the original text. They will inform their readers of unfamiliar culture and language. Consequently, they will establish the readership that is more tolerant toward linguistic and cultural difference.

Pym argued that “translation study has gone back to the question of ethics” [7]. He put forward his own view of

translator’s ethics which was based on values. He insisted a translator should hold ethics in their practice. Pym’s words indicated that translator’s ethics involved a translator’s responsibility to the cultures and languages concerned. “Translators’ exertion on subjective initiative will be restricted and influenced by their own values” [8]. Since translators are the major agents in translation activities, they should follow the norms and be guided by the ethical values.

Even before Venuti the famous Chinese writer and translator has formed his ideas on differences in translation. He upgraded the ethnics of difference into the politics of literary and cultural reconstruction. He advocates the introduction of uncommon expressive ways to enrich Chinese and raise Chinese revolutionary awareness, so as to save the country through literature. Chinese contemporary scholars have studied on how to treat cultural foreignness. Lianyun Shen (2008) thinks in face of cultural foreignness, translator should seek differences and respect differences instead of seeking sameness [9]. Seeking differences is to respect the completeness of the world described in the text. Seeking sameness is to search for what is needed and realize its own purpose by making use of translation. Respecting differences means respecting others. YiFeng Song and Bo Cao put forward that “translation ethnics means translators should be faithful to the original text and respect the meaning of the original text, avoiding unlogical expressions” [10].

In the background of postmodernism, the inequality between cultures has made translation ethics more and more important. Translation ethics of difference reflects scholars’ judgments on the humanistic value of translation.

3. Translation of Concept Words

The cultural concept words are hard to understand but crucial to the translation of *Dao De Jing*. In the following paragraphs, the translation of “Dao”, “Wuwei”, “Tian” and “De” will be discussed to show Ames’ selection from the perspective of translation ethnics of difference.

3.1. Translation of “Dao” (“道”)

The key point of philosophy in *Dao De Jing* is Dao. There is no definition of Dao in the text, but description of it from different levels using metaphors. It possesses character, and the source of cosmos. There are different versions of Dao: God, Way, Tao, Dao, Existence and so on. In 1895, George Gardiner Alexander interpreted the text from the perspective of Christian doctrine in *Lao-Tsze, The Great Thinker with a Translation of His Thoughts on the Nature and Manifestation of God*, and translated “道” into God. Taoist philosophy is replaced by religious philosophy. D. C. Lau translated “道” into “way” in his translation *Tao Te Ching* [11]. The word “way” means place or walking, travelling, path, road, street. And it also means method, style or manner of doing something. Arthur Waley translated “道” into “Way” with the first capital character, in *The Way and its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and its Place in Chinese Thought*, focusing on the holy way [12]. Many translators have realized “道” is a

unique concept word in Chinese culture, and it is hard to find an equivalent one, so “道” is transliterated into “Tao”. Now “Tao” has been one of the terms in *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* and *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary*. Target readers depend on the context to understand the specific meaning of “Tao”.

Roger T. Ames translated “道” into “way-making”. [13] He first analyzes the meaning of “道” from etymology. The Chinese character “道” includes two parts: the head (首) and the foot (乚). The word “首” means the head, implicating leading and directing. The foot (乚) means passing through. So “道” possesses gerund, processing and initiation. Ames thinks “Dao” is firstly used as a verb, then has the meaning of road, method, doctrine. Secondly, in *Dao De Jing*, “Dao” has three relative meanings: development direction; active power and the mobility and uncertainty of seeking “Dao”. Thirdly, Ames thinks if “Dao” is translated into “Way”, then “道” has the meaning of transcendence and God, and Chinese classics will be the reflection of Christian thought. For western readers, these familiar words imply the cultural integration. Ames notices “the conflicts between Western philosophy and Chinese one, and tries to solve it in his own special way” [14]. In Chinese context “道” is not only the way, but also the action of making the way. Consequently “道” is translated into “way-making” by Ames.

3.2. Translation of “Wuwei” (“无为”)

Daoism emphasizes the use of “Wuwei” (“无为”) and makes “Wu” (“无”) the holiest character. “Wu” is the basis of all existence and provides unlimited opportunities for the emergency of being. In the process of cosmos, “You” (“有”) offers the objective and convenient basis, but “You” (“有”) must be combined with “You” (“无”) to create new and useful things. “Dao” has no name, no desire and no form. In a negative way Daoism indicates the differences between “Dao” and phenomena world, and points out “Dao” is to returned to the natural state.

Example 1: 是以圣人之治也，虚其心，实其腹；弱其志，强其骨。恒使民无知无欲也。使夫知不敢弗为而已。为无为则无不治矣。(Chapter 3 *Dao De Jing* [15])

Translation:

It is for this reason that in the proper governing the sages:

They empty the hearts-and-minds of the people and fill their stomachs,

They weaken their aspirations and strengthen their bones,

Ever teaching the common people to be unprincipled in their knowing (无知)

And objectless in their desires (无欲)

They keep the hawkers of knowledge at bay.

It is simply in doing things noncoercively (无为)

That everything is governed properly. (Translated by Ames, Roger T. & Hall, David L.)

According to Pangpu, “Wu” has three different meanings, firstly it means existing then disappearing; secondly, it appears not to exist but exist; thirdly, a kind of state opposite to “You” “有”. [10] So in the Taoism “Wu” (“无”) is absolutely not void, and “无为” means no interference in the virtual action,

tolerant and natural. In this way Ames thinks it is not successful to translate “无为” into “no action” or “non-action”. A wise government can tolerate and accept differences and varieties and admit the complication of community to establish and maintain a peaceful state. Similarly, “无知” does not mean no knowledge, but knowledge not decided by ontology. It is irrational cognition. Ames translated “无知” into “unprincipled in their knowing”, focusing on accepting the world at ease. “无欲” does not mean no desire, but desire relative with Taoist sensitivity and shaped by admire and appreciation. It is based on the noncoercive relationship and unprincipled knowing. In this phenomena world, desire should be matched with personal ability at the certain stage. So “无欲” is translated into “objective desire”.

3.3. Translation of “Tian” (“天”)

In the context of traditional Chinese culture, the meaning of “天” is ambiguous. Ames analyzes the meaning of “天” from the relationship between human and context. First, in ancient times there is an indivisible relationship between “天” and mythology. “天” represents the character and spirit of the ancestors. In the Zhou dynasty, the request for “天命” is a strategy to legalize state power. Secondly, “天” has a strong relation with natural environment and communicate with the respectable people without words. Ancient Chinese cosmology holds various orders depend on each other. Once one kind of order in human society runs in trouble, the natural environment will respond immediately. As “天” is not the mechanical rules and it has natural wit and human sense, “Nature” is considered as an insufficient translation. If “天” is translated into “Heaven”, it will arouse imagination relative with Abraham tradition, which has no relation with Chinese experience. As “天” implies rich cultural connotation, “天” is transliterated into “tian”.

3.4. Translation of De (“德”)

In Ames' translations, most of the concept words keep one translation. But few concept words depend on context to explain the meaning. If translators try to find the equivalent word in western philosophical catalogue, the translation maybe has resolved the question of ambiguity, but with the polymorphism at cost. In the process of translating polysemous words, the textual context is the vital factor in choosing the right word. Ames analyses the subtle differences of the same Chinese concept word in the text according to the context, then use linguistic cluster to solve this problem.

Example 2: “同於德者，道亦德之；”

Translation: Those who are committed to character (德) in what they do

Achieve this character.

Example 3: “道生之，而德畜之，”

Translation: Way-making (道) gives things their life, And their particular efficacy (德) is what nurtures them.

Example 4: “夫两不相伤，故德交归焉。”

Translation: It is because the ghosts and sages do not harm.

That their powers (德) combine to promote order in the world.

(Translated by Ames, Roger T. & Hall, David L. [11])

In *Dao De Jing*, “德” has several different meanings in cognition, morality, aesthetic and spirit: the excellent character of individuals; the governing strategy and efficiency; the symbiosis between cosmos and environment. After the deep interpretation of the original text, Ames translated “德” into “character”, “efficacy” and “power” according to the specific meaning of “德” in textual context.

4. Conclusion

As the key concepts represent the cultural difference between Chinese and English and offer a way to understand the source text well to some extent, translators need to pay special attention to the key concepts involved in the classical work—*Dao De Jing*. In the process of translating concept terms, Roger T. Ames and his cooperator David L. Hall understand the terms from the background of Chinese culture, comparing the differences between Chinese philosophy and Western one. Then they take the meaning of *Dao De Jing* into consideration and pay special attention to the different meanings of the same term in different sentences of the text. While choosing the English words to translate concept words, they attach great importance to the implied meaning of English words. Different translation strategies are adopted, such as creative interpretation, transliteration and polysemy. No matter what translation strategy is adopted, Roger T. Ames hopes these translations could remind Western readers of the original Chinese philosophy, and then Western readers can study Chinese to get a deeper and better understanding of Chinese concept words. So from the perspective of translation ethics of difference, Roger T. Ames' translation of *Dao De Jing* is of great significance.

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