

# Three English Translations of Chapter One of the *Tao Te Ching*: Reading Cultural Translatability through Intercultural Communication

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## **Abstract:**

This paper cites three English translations of chapter one of the *Tao Te Ching* by three translators from three distinct cultures, namely Arthur Waley from the UK, R. B. Blakney from the US, and D. C. Lau from Hong Kong, China while it examines relevant readings of cultural translatability through theories in intercultural communication and doctrines in the Holy Bible. It also examines the English translation of the Chinese word “道”(Dao or Tao) through the cultural adaptation in intercultural communication while analyzing renditions of the Chinese original into English, hence the English translations make the target texts culturally equivalent and relevant to the Chinese source text in terms of displaying its cultural translatability. Through a probe into the cultural backgrounds reflected in these three English translations, the translations of the second sentence in chapter one of the *Tao Te Ching* are analyzed through the speech codes in intercultural communication and doctrines in the Holy Bible. These translations helped to bridge cultural differences in translations and translatability by adopting the shared speech codes and exemplifying their cultural translatability.

**Keywords:** Tao Te Ching, English translations, Cultural Translatability, Intercultural communication, Holy Bible

## 1. Introduction

The *Tao Te Ching* is a Chinese Taoist classic frequently translated and thought to be secondary in numbers of translations compared to the Holy Bible in the West (Waley and Fu H. S., 1994, pp. 5-6). The *Tao Te Ching* was written about 2,500 years ago by Lao Tsu, or Lao Dan, in the Zhou Dynasty in the Warring States period. It is considered a short book, with only about 5,000 Chinese characters, but its influences can be traced back from its fruition to the present day and will continue to exert its impact on both Chinese and Western thought in the years to come.

The texts of the *Tao Te Ching* are divided into two books in one volume as *Tao Ching* and *Te Ching*, all of which Lao Tsu wrote at the request of the Keeper of the Pass. The standard Wang Pi version is considered to be the authoritative Chinese version of the *Tao Te Ching*, on which many foreign translations are based. In 1973, the silk manuscript found in a tomb of Han Dynasty in Hunan Province was authenticated to be the version A and B of the *Tao Te Ching*. The silk manuscript of the *Tao Te Ching* provided scholars and anthropologists with more convenient research on the classic.

The research goals of this paper are about to examine chapter one of the *Tao Te Ching* in three English translations to probe a different yet shared reading of cultural translatability through theories of intercultural communication. The first English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, published in London, was completed by F. H. Balfour in 1884 (Ibid, pp. 14-15). James Legge's translation of the texts, one of the renowned versions, was published in Oxford in 1891. Mr. Arthur Waley's English translation of *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought*, also published in London, played an important role in spreading Lao Tsu's thoughts in the West. *The Way of Life: Lao Tsu, A New Translation of the Tao Te Ching*, was written by R. B. Blankney and published by The New American Library, 1955. A Chinese scholar from Hong Kong, Professor D. C. Lau's translation of *Lao Tsu: Tao Te Ching*, Penguin Books, 1972, was considered to be a remarkable translation of the *Tao Te Ching* by critics at home and abroad. Mr. Arthur Waley was a renowned English sinologist and translator who had translated many Chinese and Japanese classics into English, and his translations have had an important influence in spreading Chinese and Eastern Asian culture in the West. R. B. Blakney was an American missionary and professor who had stayed in China in the 1920s. Mr. D.C. Lau

was a professor of Chinese language and culture in the Chinese University of Hong Kong, who translated numerous Chinese classics into English and played a remarkable role in the translation of Chinese classics in the English-speaking world.

## **2. Research Methods**

The research methods in this paper is a combination of qualitative research and case studies, the first of which is utilized for the analysis of the translation subjects and the second of which are displayed in examples of cultural translatability in the rendition subjects. These two research methods are complementary in terms of illustrating the cultural translatability in chapter one of the *Tao Te Ching* in three translations.

## **3. Cultural Adaptation, Speech Code, and Cultural Translatability**

The meaning of cultural adaptation can be described as “the theory of cultural adaptation attempts to explain the cultural aspects of human society within the context of evolutionary biology” (Burns, 2021). The cultural adaptation can also be applied to the translations of different classics or canonical texts in terms of the social learning or adaptation for the linguistic and stylistic equivalence between the source language text and the target language text or the relationship between the translator and the reader. When rendering a foreign language text into the target language, both the translator and the reader experience cultural adaptation as the former tries to encode the source text into the translation and the latter attempts to decode the target text. In translation studies and intercultural communication studies, cultural adaptation is a major concept that needs to be emphatically addressed in terms of translation criticism, linguistics-based translation studies, and intercultural communication.

Gerry Philipsen, the father of the speech codes theory, conducted ethnographic studies to determine what meanings are shared within a culture (Valentine, 2000). After the research, he defined speech codes as “a system of socially constructed symbols and meanings, premises, and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct” (Philipsen, 1997, p. 122-156). The Speech Code Theory can also be applied to the research regarding the shared speech code in two or more different cultures with shared or similar cultural connotation.

As in translation studies, there are “shared” notions as indicated in different languages of the same linguistic family, such as French, Spanish, and Italian, which are all Romance languages. Despite huge cultural and linguistic differences between English and Chinese, there are similarities regarding the meaning of *Tao* or *Dao* and *Way* as indicated in the religious and philosophical connotations described as the following sections.

Translatability is commonly understood as the communicative possibilities of a text, and has in recent years expanded to embrace the possibilities of cultural communication per se (Budick and Iser, 1996, pp. 113-114). Cultural translatability is deemed as possible and relevant between the source text and target text in terms of cultural translation or its issues in the literary or canonized text translation.

Some Christian doctrines in the Holy Bible are applied herewith for the analysis of the translation subjects in the paper.

#### **4. The Analysis for Three English Translations of Chapter One of the *Tao Te Ching***

The Chinese original word 道 (*Dao*, or *Tao*) in the first sentence is translated as *the way* here in all three English translations, but they are varied in the capitalization of the word *Way*, hence the capitalized word *Way* carries distinct and special cultural connotation. The capitalized *Way* may refer to the natural Way or the Way of the Lord God. It is observed that three translators from three distinct cultures have used the same target word *way* to express the meaning of the Chinese word 道(*Dao*) because in these three cultures there are ways in these cultural codes and signs which might share some similarities, albeit their distinct differences.

In English culture, there are numerous ways in values, core beliefs, social behavior, and other characteristics such as punctuality. The English are calm, reasonable people who believe in fair play, good manners, old traditions, the monarchy, cricket, soccer, rugby, tennis, and the Church of England... (Lewis, 2003, pp. 53-54). These are the cultural traits of the English, or the English way. Using the word *way* to translate the Chinese word 道 (*Dao*) is not only semantically equivalent but also culturally appropriate since different cultures have shared or similar ways. More importantly, Lao Tsu wants to emphasize that the entire way, whatsoever can be seen or told, is not the constant way or Unvarying Way. Therefore using the word *way* to

translate道(*Dao*) can evoke the similar or shared cultural connotation in the English readers so as to achieve a culturally dynamic equivalence in the rendition. Hence the cultural translatability is displayed between the source text and the target text. The word *way* also leads to an impression that the readers will consider what a constant way or an uncharted way really is. Is it the English Way, American Way, Chinese Way, or the any other Way that can be thought of by the readers? The simple word *Way* prompts our imagination and intellectual pursuit to investigate the real meaning of the Chinese word 道(*Dao*); though in the minds of English readers, it is their own Way or way of understanding to the Chinese word *Dao* or *Tao*. It is interesting to note that the Chinese word道(*Dao*) has not been transliterated as *Dao* or *Tao* in all of these three English translations, but has been done so in other versions, one of whose renowned translations is translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English.

In the American culture, imbued with the frontier spirit, Americans work hard, play hard, move fast, and are pragmatic, optimistic, and future-oriented. Americans seek equality and individual liberty in a land where honest toil makes anything possible and where anyone can become President...or the American Dream (Ibid. pp. 60-61). The American translator, R. B. Blakney, a missionary and professor, was well familiar with the American Way and the Christian Way as the New Testament says: "I (Jesus) am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John, 14, p. 6).<sup>1</sup> The way here refers to the teaching of Jesus Christ, or the Good News, as a means of redemption. Therefore R. B. Blakney translated the Chinese word 道(*Dao*) as *the way* due to the cultural, lexical, and religious adaptation he adopted in the rendering process. It is no doubt that the invisibility of the translator is made visible by his rendition of the source texts in a way that indicated his spirituality or even his cultural traits. From these three English translations it can be learnt that we read different cultures while browsing through different translations by different translators. Eugene Nida says, "Translation is intercultural communication" (1993, p. 102). The English and American translators used the translation of the *Tao Te Ching* to achieve the goals of intercultural communication between the English, the American, and the Chinese.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible*-Authorized King James Version, 1987. International Bible Society. pp. 793-794.

In Chinese Confucian culture, the Chinese way means 三纲五常 (*sang gang wu chang*, or a system in which the subordinates (officials) show obedience and respect to the superiors (or the King); the son to the father, the wife to the husband, the younger brother to the older brother, but friends (or co-workers) show respect to each other.) and 天人合一 (*tian ren he yi*, or the *harmony between the Nature and the Humans*). But according to some Chinese scholars (Xu & Liu, 1991, pp. 5-6), the *Dao* or *Tao* proposed by Lao Tsu is a philosophical norm and concept, which contains more objectivity and a further development in the Heavenly Tao Concept initiated in the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty in the Warring States period. On one hand, the idealized proposal of the Dao is significant in its objectivity and atheist ideas. On the other hand, the overall fuzziness of the nature of the Dao leads to the vagueness and ambiguity in the peoples' understanding of the Dao as well as myriad levels in the understanding (Fu, 2000, pp. 5-6). But Lao Tsu's Taoist way is not limited to the philosophical realm, but can also be put into practice in reality, hence inducing the principles wherefrom to deal with social problems and life issues. Lao Tsu emphasizes naturalness and spontaneity in order to rule in a state of nothingness, and to return to the truth so that a harmonious, peaceful, and wonderful society can be established. Lao Tsu is also against the patriarchal clan system and feudal ethic codes, war, and looting, as well as greed and luxury seeking (Ibid. p. 6-7). These are the ways proposed by Lao Tsu in his *Tao Te Ching*, somewhat different from the English or American way, but the translators from these two cultures found it appropriate to translate the key word *Dao* as *the Way* or *the way* to illustrate the natural principles proposed by Lao Tsu. The Chinese translator, D. C. Lau, also used the same word in an attempt to capture the cultural connotation and semantic meaning of the English word *way* to illustrate what Lao Tsu really means. The difference in the capitalized way or Way also indicates the God's way for natural way in a Christian culture, in which the English and American translators, Arthur Waley and R. B. Blakney, were born and raised. But a Chinese translator might come from an agnostic Chinese culture, thus rendering the *Dao* as the non-capitalized word *way*. From this peculiar difference, we can see the cultural differences a translation might impart to the readers by means of the diction or the choice of a culturally similar, or connotative word.

The Chinese original in the second sentence in chapter one of the *Tao Te Ching*, 无名，天地之始(*wu ming, tian di zhi shi*), is translated by the afore-

said translators respectively as *it was from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang* (Arthur Waley), *nameless indeed is the source of creation* (R. B. Blakney), and *the nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth* (D.C. Lau). Arthur Waley and D. C. Lau literally translated the Chinese phrase 天地 (*tian di*) as *heaven and earth*, although Arthur Waley capitalized the words *Heaven and Earth* in the noun phrase. The capitalized words have meaning different from the non-capitalized ones as they have cultural and religious connotations. In Chinese mythology, the heaven and the earth share similarities with the Christian ideas of the Heaven and the Earth, even the story of Creation by the Goddess Nü Wa is similar to the Creation described in the chapter one of Genesis in the Old Testament. But there surely are contrasting and dramatic differences between the story of creation in the Chinese and Christian culture; however, both cultures share the notion that something came from nothing. As recorded in the Old Testament, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:1-2).<sup>1</sup> Regarding the Creation, the *Tao Te Ching* says in chapter 42: “Tao gave birth to the One; the One gave birth successively to two things, three things, up to ten thousand. These ten thousand creatures cannot turn their backs to the shade without having the sun on their bellies, and it is on this blending of the breaths that their harmony depends” (Waley and Fu, 1994, pp. 99-100). In Christian culture, God created the Heaven and the earth; whereas Chinese mythology says that the Goddess Nü Wa created the earth. In the Taoist teaching, the 气 (*Qì*), or literally translated as *the breath*, plays a critical role in the creation. The breath is also important in the Creation in Christian culture. “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul (Genesis 2:7).”<sup>2</sup> From the aforesaid quotation, it is observed that there are similarities in the Chinese and Western culture, whose likeness can be used to bridge the cultural gap between these two cultures as it did in the translation of the Chinese word 气(*Qì*) into *the breath*. Another example of this gap is 天地(*tian di*), literally translated as *the Heaven and earth*, as it shows dramatic differences in terms of the cultural connotation and religious interpretation, even

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible*-Authorized King James Version, 1987. International Bible Society, p. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible*-Authorized King James Version, 1987. International Bible Society, p. 2-3.

through some of its similarities exist. The Chinese word 天(*tian*), described as *the heaven* in the Chinese classical novel, *The Journey to the West*, also shares some similarities with the New Testament of the Holy Bible in terms of the material description. The New Testament describes Heaven as, “gar-nished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald... And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; street of the city was pure gold, as it we-re transparent glass. And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it” (Ibid. pp. 917-918) (Revelation 21: 19, 21-22). Through these quotations, it is observed that the theory of cultural adaptation as promulgated by intercultural communication can be used in translations to bridge the cultural differences while indicating the cultural translatability between translations and the source text.

#### 4. Findings and Observations

It is found that the Chinese translator, D. C. Lau, has successfully applied the cultural adaptation techniques of intercultural communication in his rendition of the *Tao Te Ching*. Because D. C. Lau has an excellent understanding of both Chinese and English culture, he adopted the cultural adaptation to translate the Chinese words 道(*Dao*) and 天地(*tian di*). This is a shining example for why a translator must have not only a good command of both the source and target language, but also an intercultural competence of both these languages. But it is sometimes difficult to find a biased or inexact translation of the key terminology, such as the case with R. B. Blakney, who translated the 天地 (*tian di*) in the *Tao Te Ching* as *creation*, reflecting his Christian understanding. If he were careless, he might translate it as *the new Heaven* and *new earth* as literally and directly transposed from the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. In fact, the notion of creation and 天地 (*tian di*) are different in terms of who the Creator is and what the Creation is in the *Tao Te Ching* and the Holy Bible, and likewise, it is also different regarding the definition of Heaven and earth in the *Tao Te Ching* and the Holy Bible. While researching these translations closely, it is found that the English and American translator tended to confuse or misunderstand the ideas in the *Tao Te Ching* with the Holy Bible. It is no doubt that the Western translators were educated and reared in the Christian culture. This background might have been included in their rendition, or perhaps they might



cater to the common knowledge of their fellow Western readers for the sake of readability. It is sure that the cultural adaptation theory of the intercultural communication can be utilized in the translation of classics or whatsoever genre of the source language materials.

From the examination of these three translations, it is also found that the Speech Code Theory can also be applied in the translational practices, especially in the translation of classics or canonized texts. The Speech Code Theory states that in every culture there is a speech code, which contains the culturally characterized psychological, social, and rhetoric contents. Just as the Chinese phrase 天地 (*tain di*) has its special psychological, social, and rhetoric contents for a Chinese reader, likewise *the heaven and the earth* has the same for an English reader. But in fact there are some shared speech codes in two or three cultures, such as the word *Creation* as well as the *heaven and the earth* in the Chinese, English, and American culture. As in the aforesaid translations, the insertion of the source language texts into a shared speech code, as in the phrase *the heaven and the earth*, will facilitate the understanding of the target language texts by its readers. However, although there are some shared speech codes, there remain some differences in their cultural connotations, such as the different understanding of *Heaven* and *earth* among the English and Chinese. The use of the shared speech code can bridge the cultural differences to help make the translation accessible to the target language readers despite the fact that potential misunderstanding might be induced from these shared speech code. Therefore, the Speech Code Theory will provide the translator with a reference in the process of translation.

Reading the quotations of the Chinese original and translations of the *Tao Te Ching* is like reading different cultures in different speech codes for different cultural, psychological, social, and linguistic connotation and interpretation while seeking the cultural translatability. It is observed that with the conscious or unconscious adaptation and utilization of the shared codes in theories of intercultural communication in the translating practices, the translator can help to bridge cultural differences and make the rendition accessible and readable to the target language readers so that the goals of intercultural communication are accomplished through the joint efforts of the translator(s) and the reader(s).

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper lists three English translations of Chapter one of the *Tao Te Ching*, for research and reference in order to read cultural translatability among these three renditions through intercultural communication and Christian doctrines. It is found that cultural translatability in three English translations of chapter one of the *Tao Te Ching* is realized by three translators from three distinct cultures who have consciously or unconsciously applied the cultural adaptation and the speech code theory in intercultural communication as well as doctrines in the Holy Bible.

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