



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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Comparison and Comments on the English Translation of the Chapter 14 of the *Dao De Jing*

1. Preface

For comparison, I choose the translations by the Arthur Waley (1889-1966), D.C. Lau (1921-2010) as well as Gia-fu Feng (1919-1985) and Jane English (1942-). Their translations are for English readers in a Western context, but there are many differences in their approaches to translation.

Arthur Waley's and D.C. Lau's translations have much in common. Both believe that translation is a service to the original text. They emphasise the accuracy of the translation, so they focus on the verification of words, authors and history. They try to restore the meaning of the text itself, relating the author with the historical conditions of the time. This is why we can see a lot of annotations as well as verification of authors and historical documents in their books. This rigour and professionalism makes their translations very suitable for scholars. At the same time, this kind of translation place the translated texts in rich cultural and linguistic contexts, resist cultural relativism and highlight the heterogeneity and diversity of cultures. It is worth noting that they both choose Wang Bi's commentary as main reference for translation, which makes their translations deserve being compared.

Gia-fu Feng, like D.C. Lau, has a solid grounding in Chinese and Western culture. However, Gia-fu Feng's translation is not an academic study. It means that he does not take advantage of his power of Sinology. Instead, Gia-fu Feng's ambition is to translate *Dao De Jing* in plain language to let the general American public learn about *Daode jing*. Apart from this, Gia-fu Feng is also a practitioner of Taoism. Therefore, his translation is not only easy to understand but also has practical value.

By comparing Gia-fu Feng's translations with those of Arthur Waley and D.C. Lau, we can see the differences in translation methods and the influence of the translators themselves on the translations.

2. Comparison and Comments

The translation of Arthur Waley and D.C. Lao is philological and historical. They serve the original text. Even though their translations are for scholars and very precise, D.C. Lao's

translation is more concise, literary and flexible than Arthur Waley's. However, Gia-fu Feng's translation is hermeneutic. He makes changes and adds his own understanding as well as practical experiences.

2.1 Philological Aspect

In the first line of the chapter fourteen, which describes the image of *Dao*:

Because the eye gazes but can catch no glimpse of it,

It is called elusive.¹ (Trans. Arthur Waley)

視之不見名曰夷

Arthur Waley uses causality to translate the first line. It is like telling readers why the *Dao* (way, 道) is the *Dao* it is. Moreover, he translates one sentence of the original text into two sentences. It means that he does not follow the format of the original text. In other words, he is more concerned with the explanation of the original text, instead of keeping the literariness of the original text.

He uses 'the eye gazes' to explain the character '視 *shi*', and uses 'can catch no glimpse of it' to explain the character '不見 *bu jian*'. Furthermore, the word 'elusive' he uses to explain the character '夷 *yi*', meaning difficult to find, define or achieve, is echo of his previous translation: 'the eye gazes but can catch no glimpse of it'. All these illustrate his emphasis on the accuracy of the explanation of characters and the original text.

Then, it is clear that Arthur Waley's translation points out that the invisibility of the *Dao* itself. Readers can know the meaning of *Dao* directly, because Arthur Waley's translation is a detailed description.

What cannot be seen is called evanescent;² (Trans. D.C. Lau)

視之不見名曰夷

D.C. Lau follows the format of the original text. Besides, It is clear that his translation is more concise than Arthur Waley's. On the one hand, instead of looking for the cause-and-effect relationship, he starts with the word 'what' as the subject of the translation, allowing the reader to enter into the subject of his explanation directly. On the other hand,

¹ Arthur Waley, *The Way And Its Power*. (London:Unwin Paperbacks, 1968), p.159.

² D.C. LAU, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*. (New York: Penguin Books,1963), p.18.

compared with Arthur Waley's word-for-word translation, D.C. Lau does not translate the character '視 *shi*'. Instead, D.C. Lau translates '不見 *bujian*' directly, 'cannot be seen', which is the outcome of '視(*shi*, to see)'. This kind of translation is accord with the speaking habits of modern people, simple and explicit.

The word 'evanescent' is used to explain the character '夷 *yi*'. His translation embodies the dynamic *Dao*, because 'evanescent' means disappearing quickly from sight or memory, which is the process of change. This shows that the essence of *Dao*: being and not-being coexist with each other. By contrast, Waley's translation only shows the essence of *Dao*: not-being, lacking the sense of abstraction of *Dao*. Indeed, D.C. Lau's translation is more consistent with Lao Zi's thoughts.

Look, it cannot be seen - it is beyond form.³ (Trans. Gia-fu Feng and Jane English)

視之不見名曰夷

Gia-fu Feng does not follow the format of the original text. Except for translating one sentence of the original text into two sentences, his translation starts with the imperative sentence, but the original text is a statement. It makes readers feel that they are given orders or requests. Then, Readers will follow the commands in mind unconsciously while reading. This implies that the translator Gia-fu Feng emphasises practice, letting readers feel what the text says.

Gia-fu Feng does not translate the character '視 *shi*', like D.C. Lau, but the subject they use is different. Gia-fu Feng uses the word 'it'. Compared with the word 'what' used by D.C. Lau, 'it' is more single and more specific. For readers, it is easier to focus on one object and to understand *Dao*. By contrast, the word 'what' is more abstract, meaning wider range, which is not suitable for general audience.

According to commentaries and dictionaries, 'it is beyond form' is not the meaning of the character '夷 *yi*'. Not only the character '夷 *yi*', but also the character '曰 *yue*' does not mean 'beyond' translated by Gia-fu Feng. It means that Gia-fu Feng's translation is a kind of interpretation. In other words, Gia-fu Feng emphasises on the meaning behind the word, rather than the original meaning of words. His perspective is similar to what Walter Benjamin said: 'The translator's task is to find the intention toward the language into which the work is

³ Gia-fu Feng and Jane English, *Tao Te Ching*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), p.51.

to be translated, on the basis of which an echo of the original is awakened in it.’⁴ Therefore, Gia-fu Feng is outside the text and faces the text, hearing the echo from the text and translating in foreign language. Then, ‘it is beyond form’ is the intention of the original texts that is found by Gia-fu Feng. Jacob Needleman(1934-2022) said, ‘No linguistic or philosophic analysis of this word can ever capture its essential meaning, because what is being referred to is an experience that can be understood only at the moment it is “tasted” with the whole of our being—simultaneously sensed, felt, and thought’.⁵ Compared with the word ‘call’, the word ‘beyond’ is a better way to feel connected to the concept of *Dao*, which is formless and unimaginative. This is an amazing reader experience. This translation is related to Gia-fu Feng’s empirical evidence.

2.2 Rhyme

D.C Lau is the only one of the three who pays much attention to rhyme. For instance, in the line one, two, three and four:

What cannot be seen is called evanescent;

What cannot be heard is called rarefied;

What cannot be touched is called minute.

These three cannot be fathomed⁶

Each last word has the final ‘/t/’ or ‘/d/’ sound, which are pronounced in the same position.

And in the line fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen:

Hold fast to the way of antiquity

In order to keep in control the realm of today.

The ability to know the beginning of antiquity

Is called the thread running through the way.⁷

Each last word has the same final ‘/ɪ/’ sound.

⁴ Lawrence Venuti, *the translation studies reader*. (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2012), p.79.

⁵ Feng and English, *Tao Te Ching*, p.17.

⁶ LAU, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, p.18.

⁷ LAU, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, p.18.

This is because D.C. Lau is an expert on phonology. This makes his translations rhythmic and literary. Therefore, although both Arthur Waley and D.C. Lau are equally concerned with the original meaning of the text, D.C. Lau's translation is more beautiful.

2.3 Historical Aspect

Gia-fu Feng's translation has distinct difference from Arthur Waley and D.C. Lau's. For instance:

You can ride the things that are now. (Trans. Arthur Waley)⁸

In order to keep in control the realm of today. (Trans. D.C. Lau)⁹

Move with the present. (Trans. Gia-fu Feng)¹⁰

以御今之有

Concerning to the character '御 *yu*', Arthur Waley uses the verb 'ride' to translate it. In the mean time, there is an annotation on the word 'ride' in the translation of Arthur Waley: 'i.e. dominate'. D.C. Lau uses the verb 'keep in control' to translate. Both of these two verbs are related to 'power'. It means that their translation is based on the political climate, which is an important historical factor in the Spring and Autumn period. Hence, Arthur Waley and D.C. Lau's translations are an exhortation to the monarch in the context of monarchical dictatorship. However, Gia-fu Feng uses the verb 'move' to translate the character '御 *yu*', which is not being politicized, just an action. Gia-fu Feng's translation is not a historical translation.

3. My Translation

Dao is colorless, so it cannot be seen.

視之不見名曰夷

Dao is silence, so it cannot be heard.

聽之不聞名曰希

Dao is minute, so it cannot be caught.

搏之不得名曰微

These three cannot be thought and discussed separately, so they are regarded as one.

⁸ Waley, *The Way And Its Power*, p.159.

⁹ LAU, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, p.18.

¹⁰ Feng and English, *Tao Te Ching*, p.51.

此三者不可致詰，故混而為一

The light of the sun and moon cannot make *Dao* brighter.

其上不皦

The darkness cannot make *Dao* dimmer.

其下不昧

Dao stretches to the horizon, but it cannot be named.

繩繩兮不可名

Because *Dao* is without substance.

復歸於無物

This is called the shape that has no shape,

是謂無狀之狀

The image that has no image.

無物之象

This is neither ‘being’ nor ‘not-being’.

是謂惚恍

Encountering *Dao* you cannot see its head.

迎之不見其首

Following *Dao* you cannot see its rear.

隨之不見其後

Living in this day and age with the help of *Dao*.

執古之道，以御今之有。

Knowing the ancient beginning of *Dao* is inheriting *Dao*.

能知古始，是謂道紀。

My translation can be regarded as the interpretation of the original text. It is not a word-for-word translation. The biggest difference from the translation I mentioned before is that I use the word ‘*Dao*’ as the subject directly, which can let readers learn about what I am talking about as soon as possible, because my target audience is general audience in western country, who does not have or has little sinological basis. For this same reason, I do not follow the order of the original text. Because when I study *DaoDe Jing*, I find that the characters are easy to be understood or looked up, but the logic of each sentence is hard to be teased out. Hence, I show the logical relationships among sentences, such as ‘so’ ‘but’ that do

not exist in the original text. Besides this, I add words ‘separately’, ‘the light of the sun and moon’, ‘darkness’, etc. to make the meaning of the text clearer.

Arthur Waley and D.C. Lao’s translations serve the original text. I agree with their thoughts. But their translation is too closely linked to the monarch to allow readers to associate themselves with the text. In the mean time, I agree with Gia-fu Feng’s thought: focusing on practicing. But, Gia-fu Feng’s translation has close connection with Daoism. It means that his translation is associated with Eastern mysticism. I think this will give readers the impression that this text has little relevance to their daily life if they are not interested in Eastern mysticism. I learn from their strengths. Hence, I combine philology and contemporary relevance. For example:

Living in this day and age with the help of *Dao*.

執古之道，以御今之有。

Knowing the ancient beginning of *Dao* is inheriting *Dao*.

能知古始，是謂道紀。

I translate it with reference to Hanshan Deqing’s 憨山德清(1546-1623) commentary. This is because I think that his commentary is more comprehensive than other scholars as he uses the concepts of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism to explain *Dao De Jing*, which are the representative mainstream culture in China.

Instead of translating the characters ‘執(*zhi*, holding)’ ‘御(*yu*, keeping in control)’ ‘謂(*wei*, called)’ literally, I use the verbs ‘with the help’ ‘living’ and ‘inheriting’ to try to let readers feel that *Dao* is near to themselves and they can take advantage of it immediately. I think ‘holding’ means that I need to take time to hold the *Dao* at first, then I can apply *Dao*. But ‘with the help’ means that we can apply *Dao* directly. ‘Keeping in control’ is suitable for the people in high place, so I use the verb ‘living’ to translate the character ‘御 *yu*’ for general audience. This is because to people in high place, ‘御 *yu*’ is about managing others, but to ordinary people, it is about managing interpersonal relationships, which actually means living a good life. Regarding to the character ‘謂 *wei*’, I think the original meaning of it ‘called’ cannot inspire readers, but the verb ‘inherit’ changes the sentence from a statement of *Dao* to the practice of *Dao*.

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