

Interpreting the Tao Te Ching

Tools

Tools

- Compare translations
- Understand translators' challenges
- Understand simile, metaphor, symbol, paradox
- Choose books that have informative
Introductions, Glossaries, Commentaries, Notes;
Notice translator's purpose(s), if you can
- ** Compare translations **ex. poem 9**

The Translators' Challenges

- 1. **lexicon** word correspondences betw. languages are frequently inexact; connotation as well as denotation must be considered; there may be several choices dependent on context
- 2. **grammar** structure & usage vary among languages; existence of certain forms may vary
- 3. **syntax** customary word order varies among languages; this can affect understanding of subject

- 4. **idioms** words & phrases which carry meaning only in the original language
- 5. **imagery** colorful & often deeply insightful figures of speech, these may not be effective in the receptor language; should an equivalent be used to transmit the sense?
- 6. **symbolism** like imagery & idiom, symbolism tends to be culture-bound bec. it works on association (+ connotation over denotation)

The above challenges apply to translation betw. modern languages & in prose; additional problems arise when translating poetry.

- 7. **sound** rhyme, assonance, consonance, pun, onomatopoeia... cannot often be replicated betw. languages; yet poetic sound devices may actually carry some of the meaning in the orig. lang.
- 8. **meter** syllabic cadence or rhythm may be essential; very difficult to reproduce in receptor language w/o significance violence to the other concerns

The above challenges apply to translating poetry across modern languages; when translating an ancient language into a modern one, more challenges arise.

- 9. **etymology** words change – in usage, meaning, connotation, throughout history; translators must be sensitive to what a word meant when it was used; the longer the time span, the greater the difficulty
- 10. **pictographic sources** perhaps the original language is not even an alphabetical one! Sometimes a symbol or picture is meant to convey a full expression, not simply a word or phrase; and what if the pictograph appears to carry a metaphoric expression? The translator will have to exercise a lot of scholarly judgment here.

- **11. multiple sources** a text may have been reproduced many times over the centuries & surviving mss. may vary; which should be considered the most authentic? (this is the realm of textual criticism... sort of the forensics of literature!) Sometimes the existence of a line or dot changes a letter or alters the sense of a word or phrase... The translator must now first decide what is to be translated before he even faces the how of it.

A page from Addis & Lombardo glossary showing that many pictographs have multiple meanings

<i>ch'ang</i> 常 Common, enduring, lasting, 1	<i>chih</i> 知 To know, 28	<i>erh</i> 而 But, moreover, and, as, 48	<i>hsing</i> 行 Walk, move, go, 69
<i>ch'ang</i> 長 Long, excelling, 7	<i>chih</i> 執 Hold, grasp, 35	<i>fa</i> 法 Rule, law, follow rules, 25	<i>hsiung</i> 雄 Male, hero, 28
<i>che</i> 者 Person, 24	<i>chih</i> 至 Reach, become; the extreme, 72	<i>fan</i> 汜 Spread out, overflow, 34	<i>hsüan</i> 玄 Mysterious, dark, profound, subtle, 6
<i>cheng</i> 正 Correct, norm, 45	<i>chih</i> 智 Knowledge, 19	<i>fan</i> 反 Reverse, turn over, opposite, 78	<i>hsü</i> 虛 Emptiness, stillness, 16
<i>cheng</i> 爭 Contend, 68	<i>ch'in</i> 親 Related, close, favorite, 44	<i>fei</i> 非 No, not, 1	<i>i</i> 以 By, through, like, with, 11
<i>chi</i> 紀 Record, history, 14	<i>ching</i> 驚 Fear, surprise, 13	<i>fei</i> 廢 Abolish, reject, 18	<i>i</i> 已 End, 30
<i>chi</i> 極 Extreme, most, 16	<i>ching</i> 靜 Quiet, calm, 45	<i>hai</i> 海 Ocean, sea, 66	<i>i</i> 一 One, 42
<i>chi</i> 饑 Hungry, starve, 75	<i>ch'ing</i> 輕 Lightness, 26	<i>hsi</i> 兮 (pause or exclamation), 20	<i>i</i> 夷 Even, smooth; barbarian, 53
<i>ch'i</i> 棄 Discard, throw away, 19	<i>ch'ing</i> 清 Pure, 45	<i>hsi</i> 希 Few, spare, 23	<i>i</i> 易 Easy, simple, 70
<i>ch'i</i> 企 On tiptoe, anxious, 24	<i>chiu</i> 久 Finally, enduring, 7	<i>hsia</i> 下 Falling, lower, under, 17	<i>jan</i> 然 Certainly, naturally, 23
<i>ch'i</i> 其 This, that, 28	<i>ch'u</i> 出 Come out, emerge, 50	<i>hsiang</i> 相 Mutually, together, each other, 2	<i>jen</i> 仁 Kind, benevolent, 5
<i>ch'i</i> 器 Vessel, utensil, 29	<i>ch'u</i> 處 Manage, dwell, 76	<i>hsiang</i> 祥 Omen, 31	<i>jen</i> 人 Person, human, 12
<i>chiang</i> 江 River, 66	<i>ch'ü</i> 曲 Crooked, crippled, 22	<i>hsiang</i> 象 Elephant; image, 35	<i>jo</i> 若 Resemble; and, if, 8
<i>chiao</i> 交 Mingle, mix, flow, 60	<i>ch'üan</i> 全 Whole, complete, 22		<i>jo</i> 弱 Weak, frail, 76
<i>chieh</i> 皆 All, everyone, 67	<i>chüeh</i> 絕 Sever, banish, 10		<i>jou</i> 柔 Soft, weak, 76

pictographs

- *Hsu* “Emptiness”

The root is the character for “tiger,” suggesting danger or bravery... the character can also mean “false,” “vacant,” “insubstantial,” or “abstract” – all can be dangerous.

Sam Hamill

Calligraphy by

Kazuaki Tanahashi



pictographs

- *Chih* “to govern”

This character also means

- “to cure”
- “to heal”
- “to distinguish”

Sam Hamill

Calligraphy by

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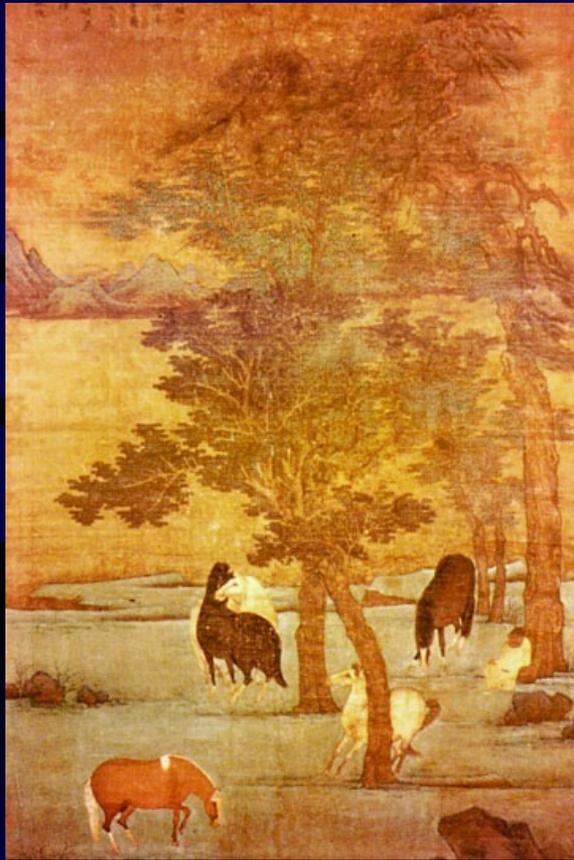
pictographs

- *Ho* “harmonize”
As “mouth” is the radical,
harmony is often achieved by
lending our voice to others.
Can also mean “peace” or
“reconciliation”

Sam Hamill
Calligraphy by
Kazuaki Tanahashi



2 approaches to translation



formal correspondence -
emphasis is on form of the
original language; tends
toward literal rendition;
what over how

dynamic equivalence -
emphasis on readability in
receptor language; attempts to
be true to sense or spirit; how
is as important as what

Gendered pronouns

- “The third person pronoun is often omitted in classical Chinese, but even when it is explicitly stated, rarely is the sense of gender implied. The translator not only has to supply a subject to satisfy the requirements of English grammar, but is forced to decide in each instance whether ‘he,’ ‘she,’ or ‘it’ is more appropriate” (Mair xvi).

D. C. Lau's translation indicates rhymes and shows homiletic or redaction:

Indented = rhymed

Added letter = line(s) added by a later 'Lao Tzu'

Poem 22

- 50 Bowed down then preserved;
 Bent then straight;
 Hollow then full;
 Worn then new...
- 50a Therefore the sage embraces the One...
- 50b He does not show himself...
- 50c It is because he does not...
- 50d The way the ancients had it, 'Bowed down then...

- “...more than half of the text consists in rhyming passages...”
(Lau xlv).



Figurative language
plays a vital role in ancient literature.



Essential to recognize:

- SIMILE
- Metaphor
- Symbol
- PARADOX

Simile is a creative comparison;
a simple, pervasive, & very old type of expression

*Governing a large country
is like frying a small fish.* from ch. 60, Mitchell

*How like a bellows
Empty but inexhaustible.* from ch. 5, Pine

*Heaven and earth
act as a bellows.* from ch. 5, Leguin

Metaphor is a bolder figure of speech.

Metaphor = a creative identification, a transference

- because this form drops the “like” or “as” & says something “is” something else, it is more striking, more powerful imagery.
- And can be more easily misunderstood.

Symbol

- A symbol is something concrete which stands for something abstract (e.g. a concept or idea)



uncarved blocks, 1975

Carl Andre, artist

from artgallery.nsw.gov.au

Paradox is an expression containing contradiction.

*Seeing into darkness is
clarity.*

*Knowing how to yield is
strength.*

from ch.52 , Mitchell

*Insight sees the
insignificant.*

*Strength knows how to
yield.*

from ch. 52, Leguin



More paradox...

*Thus, the Sage knows without
travelling,
Sees without looking,
And achieves without Ado.*

from ch. 47, Wu

True words seem paradoxical.

from ch. 78, Mitchell



More paradox...

- ...is often a very challenging type of expression, inviting us into a deeper experience of meaning through contemplation of apparent opposition.

The soft overcomes the hard.

The slow overcomes the fast. from ch. 36, Mitchell

This is called the small dark light.

The soft, the weak prevail.

Over the hard, the strong. from ch. 36, Leguin

More paradox

*Increase what you want to reduce,
strengthen what you want to weaken,
raise what you want to demote,
give to the one you would take from,
and you will shine without shadow.*

from ch. 36, Levi

To win the world one must renounce all.

from ch. 48, Wu

Compare translations

- Example

Poem 9

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