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# On the Three-Dimensional Interpretation of *Tao Te Ching* from the Perspective of Eco-translatology- a Case Study of James Legge's Version

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**Abstract**

With the advent of rapid industrialization, the relationship between humanity and nature has become increasingly strained, prompting calls for a return to an ecologically civilized society. The *Tao Te Ching*, a classical Chinese text on Taoism, offers profound insights into harmonious relationships among "heaven, earth, and humanity". Its ecological ethics provide valuable guidance for alleviating tensions between humans and the natural world. This study aims to analyze the interpretative choices employed by James Legge in his rendering of the Tao Te Ching through the lens of eco-translatology. By examining Legge's linguistic, cultural, and communicative transformations, the paper reveals how his translation aligns with the eco-translatological framework, effectively bridging cultural and ecological contexts. The findings demonstrate that Legge's approach not only preserves the text's philosophical essence but also adapts it to the target readership, enhancing its accessibility and relevance. This research contributes to understanding the interplay between translation and ecological thought while validating the explanatory power of eco-translatology as a theoretical tool in translation studies.

**Keywords:** Eco-translatology; Three-Dimensional Interpretation; *Tao Te Ching*; Adaption and Selection.

## 1. Introduction

With globalization accelerating, cultural soft power has become a strategic priority for many nations. China's rich heritage, exemplified by Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, plays a crucial role in this context. Widely translated, with over 100 English versions since 1868, the text has significantly influenced Western perceptions of Chinese philosophy. Eco-translatology, proposed by Hu Gengshen (2004, 2008), applies Darwinian principles of "adaptation and selection" to translation, emphasizing linguistic, cultural, and communicative transformations. This study

examines James Legge's translation, renowned for its scholarly rigor, through an eco-translatological lens, offering new insights into cross-cultural transmission and the global reception of Chinese classics.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Lao Tzu

Lao Tzu, a central figure in Taoism, was an ancient Chinese thinker, philosopher, writer, and historian. He worked as an archivist during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty. Sima Qian noted alternative theories about *Tao Te Ching*: it may have been authored by Lao Tzu, consisting of 15 chapters, or by Lao Dan of the Zhou state.

Lao Tzu emphasized harmony with nature, advocating non-interference and adherence to natural laws. His principles extend to politics, aiming to eliminate societal disputes and guide people toward peace and simplicity. Through the concept of "Tao", Lao Tzu envisioned a society free of power struggles, wars, and excess, promoting sincerity and minimalism. In the face of modern challenges like competition and materialism, *Tao Te Ching* remains a timeless reminder of living in accordance with nature and authenticity.

### 2.2 *Tao Te Ching*

*Tao Te Ching*, authored by Lao Tzu during the Spring and Autumn Period, is a seminal Taoist text and an influential pre-Qin philosophical work. Comprising 81 chapters and 5,000 words, the text explores self-cultivation, governance, military strategy, and health. Chapters 1–37 focus on natural laws and problem-solving, while chapters 38–81 provide ethical and behavioral guidance.

Domestic research on *Tao Te Ching* evolved through three stages in the 20th century. Early research (early 20th century–1940s) focused on commentary and textual criticism using Western academic methods (Li Xia, 2004, p.106). From the 1950s to 1970s, studies were influenced by Marxism, emphasizing class analysis and philosophical materialism. After the 1990s, with the discovery of Bamboo Slips, research deepened with comparative studies.

The 1990s marked growing interest in translation studies. Wang Rongpei (1992) compared D.C. Lau and Wit Berner's translations, discussing fidelity and translator influence. Li Yimeng (1995, p.34-36) carefully analyzed Lau's loyalty, aesthetics, and poetic qualities. Cui Changqing (1997, p.50-55) highlighted reciprocity and loyalty in four translations. Chen Guohua (2002, p.465-471) addressed the choice of original texts, while Miao Lingling (2002, p.68-70) emphasized translator subjectivity. Kang Min (2004, p.34-35) applied hermeneutics to explore interpretative openness and translator biases. Lei Qiong (2007) critiqued Arthur Waley's errors through Nida's functional equivalence.

Recent theses have explored translation through new theories. Wang Ying (2003) applied Skopos theory to analyze four versions, arguing for flexible approaches. Xiong Ying (2005) conducted a historical study of ten translations, providing valuable resources. Li Huali (2006, p.49-51) examined translation diversity using German functionalist theory, while reception theory to analyze *Tao Te Ching*'s acceptance in the UK and US was used (Yi Ming, 2006, p.58-63).19 translations, addressing linguistic and cultural challenges were compared (He Xiaohua, 2006). Xin Hongjuan and Gao Shengbing (2008, p.79-84) explored translators' manipulation and differences in audience reception.

Internationally, *Tao Te Ching* translation has three phases. The Christianity Period (1868–1905) compared Taoism with Christianity, with James Legge's translation (1891) being a milestone. The Western Adaptation Period (1915–1973) treated *Tao Te Ching* as an independent philosophy, emphasizing its meaning. The Plural Interpretation Period (1973–) began with the Silk Book discovery,

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focusing on cultural context and eliminating prior biases.

Key international contributions include accessible translation for modern readers (Stephen Mitchell's, p.1988) and corpus-based analysis of Legge, Lau, and Mitchell (Bell and Fera's, 2000, p.127-129).

Overall, both domestic and international studies highlight the complexity and diversity of translating *Tao Te Ching*. While domestic researchers focus on preserving the philosophical and poetic essence, international scholars often grapple with bridging cultural gaps. These efforts collectively enrich global understanding of this profound Taoist classic, despite challenges arising from differing cultural, linguistic, and philosophical contexts.

**2.3 Eco-Translatology**

According to Yan Weikang (2021, p109-119), by the end of 2021, eco-translatology research has progressed through three main developmental stages. From 2008 to 2010, theoretical investigations predominated, focusing on establishing its core concepts. Between 2010 and 2016, an increasing number of empirical studies expanded the understanding of translation as adaptation and selection, the cornerstone of eco-translatology, with diverse research directions emerging. From 2016 to 2021, scholarly attention shifted towards ecological translation in the context of international publicity, reflecting both adherence to earlier theoretical breakthroughs and the exploration of new connotations. Most empirical studies utilize eco-translatology to guide translation practice, addressing fields such as novel translations, Chinese classical texts, ancient poems, political literature, news, propaganda, interpreting strategies, subtitling, word translation, sign language, and advertising.

**3. Theoretical Framework**

Eco-translatology, introduced by Hu Gengshen (2008), represents a paradigm shift in translation studies by incorporating ecological thinking into the translation process. Rather than viewing translation as a mere linguistic conversion, it is seen as a dynamic, interactive ecosystem where multiple factors—linguistic, cultural, social, and environmental—interact. Rooted in ecological criticism and the concept of eco-holism, eco-translatology emphasizes the balance between preserving the source text's integrity and adapting it to the target audience's context. This approach underlines the translator's role as an active agent who navigates and adjusts to various internal and external factors in the translational process.

**3.1 Key Concept of Eco-Translatology**

**Adaptation and Selection**

It is well-known that adaptation refers to the translator's modifications made to align the target text with both linguistic norms and cultural expectations, while "selection" denotes the deliberate choices aimed at preserving the source text's inherent ecological structure. A fundamental concept in eco-translatology is adaptation and selection, which serves as the theoretical basis for analyzing the translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. Drawing on Darwin's theory of evolution, Hu Gengshen (2008) conceptualizes translation as an adaptive process in which translators make selective choices to ensure textual coherence. Nida (2001) similarly highlights the necessity of linguistic and cultural adaptation to meet audience expectations. In the source text-translator-target text cycle, the translator, as an "organic being", actively engages with the translational eco-environment, making instinctive adaptations to produce a culturally and linguistically coherent target text (Hu Gengshen, 2008).

**Translation Method: Multi-Dimensional Transformations**

Translation involves transformations across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. At the linguistic level, effective translation requires mastery of lexical, syntactic, and stylistic structures to maintain textual

fidelity. Culturally, translators must navigate sociocultural differences to facilitate cross-cultural understanding (Hu Gengshen, 2008). The communicative dimension emphasizes functional equivalence, with domestication and foreignization serving as complementary strategies. While domestication enhances accessibility, foreignization preserves cultural authenticity, necessitating a balance between comprehensibility and faithfulness to the source text (Hu Gengshen, 2008).

In conclusion, translation is a dynamic and adaptive process integrating linguistic precision, cultural awareness, and communicative intent. By strategically balancing these dimensions, translators ensure effective cross-cultural communication and textual integrity.

## 4. Three-Dimensional Transformations of *Tao Te Ching* from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

In translating the *Tao Te Ching* within the framework of the Approach to Translation as Adaptation and Selection, translators possess the autonomy to shape the target text through strategic choices across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions.

### 4.1 Transformation from the Linguistic Dimension

Various aspects embody transformations in linguistic dimensions. At the lexical level, *Tao Te Ching* contains numerous interchangeable characters and polysemies, reflecting the ancients' preference for concise expressions carrying profound meanings. This complexity often surpasses the literal interpretation of its characters. At the syntactic level, the absence of standardized punctuation in ancient Chinese presents challenges for both domestic and Western translators, as differing punctuation can yield varying interpretations. Stylistically, *Tao Te Ching* is renowned for its philosophical poems, characterized by elegant, rhythmic language and the use of rhetorical devices like parallelism, anti*paper*, and

anadiplosis. Translators must carefully make transformations to preserve these elements.

**Adaptive Selections at Lexical Level**

One distinctive feature of classical Chinese is the interchangeability of characters. This concept, known as tongjia in Chinese, involves using homophones or characters with similar sounds to convey the meaning of another character.

*Example1.*

Lao Tzu: 道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。（第一章）

James Legge: The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. (Chapter one)

Here, the first "道" refers to the metaphysical origin of all things, while the second "道" functions as a verb, meaning "to describe" or "to express". Legge's choice of "trodden" emphasizes the idea of a path or practice, but it risks confining the abstract concept of "道" to a physical or concrete action. Legge interprets the use of "非常" in "非常道" as "enduring and unchanging", conveying timelessness. However, Legge does not explicitly address the nuanced meaning of "非" as negation or "常" as impermanence, potentially narrowing the philosophical scope. Regarding "名可名，非常名", Legge interprets "名"(name) as both noun and verb, reflecting its interchangeable function. His translation highlights the ineffability of the Tao but leans toward a rigid literalism that can obscure its poetic and rhetorical layers.

Legge's focus on academic precision and fidelity to the original text ensures his translation is reliable. However, his treatment of interchangeable characters and complex philosophical concepts may lack the dynamic interpretive depth needed to fully engage readers with the text's profound ambiguity.

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## Adaptive Selections at Syntactic Level

Chinese and English syntax differ significantly, particularly in ancient Chinese prose. Chinese syntax, characterized by parataxis, features fused, flowing sentences that prioritize meaning and connotation over grammatical completeness, enhancing readability and depth. In contrast, English syntax emphasizes hypotaxis, with strict grammatical rules, logical sequence, and clearly defined clauses, often incorporating parentheses to clarify relationships. These syntactic differences pose challenges for translating texts like *Tao Te Ching*, where punctuation can significantly impact interpretation.

*Example2.*

Lao Tzu: 天下有道，却走马以粪。天下无道，戎马生于郊。（第四十六章）

James Legge: When the Tao prevails in the world, they send back their swift horses to (draw) the dung-carts. When the Tao is disregarded in the world, the war-horses breed in the border lands.(Chapter forty-six)

James Legge's translation exemplifies his adaptation of Chinese paratactic syntax to the hypotactic demands of English. For the phrase "天下有道,却走马以粪", Legge interprets "却走马" as the withdrawal of swift warhorses and "以粪" as their repurposing for agricultural tasks. By introducing the phrase "send back", Legge adheres to English grammatical conventions, providing clarity and logical flow. However, this translation simplifies the vivid imagery of Chinese, where "走马以粪" evokes a direct contrast between peace and war, reducing the text's emotional depth. In translating "天下无道,戎马生于郊", Legge effectively conveys the grim reality of a Tao-less world by stating "the war-horses breed in the border lands". His choice to omit the imagery of pregnant mares giving birth on battlefields softens the dramatic intensity of the original text. This decision aligns with Victorian preferences for readability but sacrifices the rich connotations embedded in Lao Tzu's language.

Legge's approach reflects his goal of making *Tao Te Ching* accessible to Western readers, prioritizing hypotactic clarity and logical structure over the nuanced, connotative richness of Chinese parataxis. This strategy highlights the translator's role in balancing linguistic and cultural differences, particularly when dealing with texts where punctuation and syntax significantly influence meaning.

## Adaptive Selections at Stylistic Level

Lao Tzu employs a range of rhetorical devices, including anadiplosis, duality, and parallelism, which render the five-thousand-character *Tao Te Ching* both concise and elegantly poetic. The following excerpt demonstrates the use of parallelism, a rhetorical technique that amplifies linguistic rhythm and expressive force by presenting balanced and symmetrical structures.

*Example3.*

Lao Tzu: 将欲歙之，必固张之；将欲弱之，必固强之；将欲废之，必固举。（第三十六章）

James Legge: When one is about to take an inspiration, he is sure to make a (previous) expiration; when he is going to weaken another, he will first strengthen him; when he is going to overthrow another, he will first have raised him up; when he is going to despoil another, he will first have made gifts to him:—this is called 'Hiding the light (of his procedure)'.(Chapter Thirty-six)

Legge's translation retains this parallel structure, presenting a series of cause-and-effect relationships that encapsulate Taoist philosophy. Each clause begins with "when he is going to", followed by a specific action and its paradoxical prerequisite, emphasizing the Taoist principle of achieving goals through indirect means. The repetition of this pattern not only mirrors the parallelism of the original text but also reinforces its thematic unity.

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By maintaining this structure, Legge preserves the rhythm and logical progression of Lao Tzu's thought, making the passage accessible to English readers. However, his explanatory additions, such as "this is called 'Hiding the light (of his procedure)'", slightly disrupt the symmetry and poetic flow of the original. Despite this, Legge effectively conveys the interplay between opposites, a cornerstone of Taoist philosophy.

## 4.2 Adaptive Selections of Cultural Dimensions

Chinese and English differ in thinking patterns and cultural values. Easterners emphasize holistic thinking, valuing integration with nature and the pursuit of eternity. Conversely, Westerners prioritize logical with foreign readers.

thinking, evident in Descartes' "subject-object dichotomy", favoring objectivity and inanimate subjects in language. Chinese expression, characterized by metaphor and visual symbolism, contrasts with Western linguistic structures. Translating *Tao Te Ching* involves addressing these cultural and linguistic disparities to convey its philosophical essence accurately and avoid misinterpretation by Western readers.

## Adaptive Selections of "Tao"

The translation strategy for "Tao", a central philosophical concept in *Tao Te Ching*, not only reveals the varying intentions of translators but also plays a crucial role in ensuring the target text resonates effectively

**Table 1 Translations of "Tao"**

| Translation Strategies / Frequency / Translator | Literal Translation | Free Translation (the Way, doctrine, highway) | No Translation |
|---|---|---|---|
| James Legge | 59 | 10 | 1 |

James Legge's translation of *Tao Te Ching* reflects his unique approach to the complex concept of "Tao", particularly through his preference for transliteration. This method underscores the ineffability of "Tao", emphasizing its role as a foundational element of Chinese philosophy. By preserving the original term, Legge allows foreign readers to recognize the depth and mystery of "Tao" as an abstract, all-encompassing principle akin to the ancient Greek "logos". His transliteration aligns with the understanding that "Tao" transcends linguistic explanation, thus encouraging readers to explore its philosophical implications independently.

In the case of "恒道" (enduring Tao), Legge translates it as "enduring and unchanging Tao", focusing on its permanence

and longevity. While this captures the timeless nature of "Tao", it risks neglecting its dynamic aspects, such as its role in the creation and evolution of all things. By emphasizing only its constancy, Legge's interpretation may limit a comprehensive understanding of "Tao" as both eternal and transformative.

Legge's background as a missionary likely influenced his association of "Tao" with the Western concept of the "Way", as seen in Christian theology. This perspective adds a comparative dimension to his translation but may unintentionally align "Tao" with the Western notion of absolute truth, potentially leading to misinterpretations among his readers.

## Adaptive Selections of Number

In ancient Chinese texts, numbers often carry symbolic meanings beyond their quantitative value, reflecting profound cultural and philosophical ideas. Translators must discern these connotations to convey the text's depth effectively.

*Example4.*

Lao Tzu: 五色使人目盲，驰骋田腊使人心发狂。难得之货使人之行仿。五味使人之口爽，五音使人之耳聋。（第五十六章）

James Legge: Color's five hues from the eyes their sight will take; Music's five notes the ears as deaf can make; The flavors five deprive the mouth of taste; The chariot course, and the wild hunting waste make mad the mind; and objects rare and strange, sought for, men's conduct will to evil change. (Chapter Fifty-six)

James Legge's translation illustrates his effort to preserve the text's poetic structure while conveying its essence. However, his approach to terms such as "五色" (five colors), "五味" (five flavors), and "五音" (five notes) primarily focuses on transliteration, which, though faithful to the original, lacks contextual explanation and may hinder Western readers' comprehension.

Legge's rendition captures the rhythmic cadence but overlooks the deeper cultural implications. For example, "five flavors" correlate with the five elements in Chinese cosmology (earth, wood, fire, metal, water), representing balance and harmony. Likewise, "five colors" (yellow, white, blue, red, black) and "five notes" (Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, Yu 宫、商、角、徵、羽) symbolize broader metaphysical concepts of order and equilibrium. Without elaborating on these cultural dimensions, Legge's translation risks appearing overly literal and may obscure Lao Tzu's interconnected worldview.

Providing contextual explanations alongside the translation is essential for enhancing Western readers' understanding of these culturally rich elements. This approach ensures fidelity to the original text while offering a deeper appreciation of its symbolic depth and philosophical insights. By addressing the cultural connotations of numbers and their significance, translators can provide a more holistic and accessible interpretation of Lao Tzu's philosophy.

## Valuing Softness and Keeping Modesty

Confucianism and Taoism shape Chinese culture, with Confucianism emphasizing masculinity and Taoism valuing femininity. It is that Confucian knowledge favors control, while Taoism embraces receptivity. Laozi, influenced by such environment, frequently uses water as a metaphor for humility and resilience. *Tao Te Ching* envisions gender harmony and elevates femininity, reflected in its philosophical discourse and translations.

*Example5.*

Lao Tzu:天下莫柔弱于水，而攻坚强者莫之能胜。以其无以易之。（第七十八章）

James Legge: There is nothing in the world more soft and weak than water, and yet for attacking things that are firm and strong there is nothing that can take precedence of it;— for there is nothing (so effectual) for which it can be changed. (Chapter Seventy-Eight)

Jegge's version conveys the literal meaning but lacks cultural and philosophical depth. His rendering of 柔弱 as soft and weak introduces a negative connotation, failing to reflect water's Daoist qualities of resilience and strategic adaptability. A more precise translation, such as yielding yet persistent, would better capture water's paradoxical strength.

Additionally, 无以易之 is translated as for which it can be changed, overlooking its core implication that water is irreplaceable due to its harmony with the Dao. A more accurate

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rendering should emphasize irreplaceability or unsubstitutability, highlighting water's unique role in overcoming rigidity.

Legge's translation also omits the deeper cultural symbolism of water in Daoism, where it represents 德 (virtue) and femininity, embodying 尚柔 (esteeming softness). Without annotations, Western readers may miss its philosophical depth. While Legge conveys the basic meaning, refining lexical choices and incorporating cultural context would enhance alignment with the Daoist principle of 以柔克刚 (overcoming the hard with the soft).

## 4.3 Adaptive Selections of Communicative Dimensions

As Tan (1999) asserts, information holds value only when it facilitates communication. Therefore, translators must not only adapt language and culture but also consider the communicative function of the source text. Venuti (1995) categorizes translation strategies into domesticating and foreignizing approaches. Domesticating translation alters foreign texts to suit the target audience's cultural norms, while foreignizing translation maintains the text's foreignness, resisting ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism. The translator's decision between these approaches depends on whether they aim to preserve the source text's cultural distinctiveness or make it more accessible by aligning it with familiar concepts.

James Legge's translation of *Tao Te Ching* exemplifies a foreignizing strategy, particularly in his treatment of the term "天下". This term appears frequently in the text and is key to Lao Tzus philosophy. Legge often translates it as "the world", a term that, in its broader meaning, evokes transcendence and mystery, aligning with the metaphysical implications of "天下". By preserving these deeper connotations, Legge resists simplifying the term to a more familiar equivalent like "the empire", as seen in Lau's translation. Although this approach maintains the philosophical

richness of the original, it may hinder immediate understanding for Western readers unfamiliar with the cultural context.

Legge's translation, marked by rigorous fidelity and a pronounced foreignizing approach, contrasts sharply with Waley's and D.C.Lau's versions. Whereas Waley adapts his style to enhance fluidity and cultural accessibility for Western audiences, D.C.Lau supplements his translation with detailed annotations that clarify culturally laden terms. This divergence in adaptive strategies results in Legge's version garnering a relatively modest reader reception, as its unembellished adherence to the original text may challenge those less versed in Chinese cultural nuances. Such differences underscore the pivotal role of adaptive selections in shaping reader engagement across translations.

## 5. Conclusion

This study evaluates James Legge's English translation of the *Tao Te Ching* through linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, with particular attention to his adaptive selections.

From a linguistic perspective, Legge demonstrates a nuanced understanding of lexical choices, particularly in his handling of polysemy and interchangeable terms. While his familiarity with ancient Chinese culture may be limited compared to native translators, his meticulous research ensures that his translation remains faithful to the original text. At the syntactic level, Legge's approach to punctuation reflects a balanced effort to enhance readability while maintaining the philosophical integrity of the text. His syntactic choices contribute to a coherent and accessible translation. At the stylistic level, his translation prioritizes logical clarity and conceptual precision over poetic rhythm. Although it may lack the aesthetic elegance of other translations, it effectively preserves the structural and thematic coherence of Laozi's philosophy.

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Culturally, Legge adopts a transliterative approach, particularly in retaining terms such as "Tao", thereby preserving the distinctiveness of Chinese philosophical concepts. However, his assumption that foreign readers possess a foundational understanding of Chinese culture results in a lack of explanatory notes for culturally significant terms, which may hinder comprehension. Providing more detailed annotations could enhance accessibility for Western audiences.

From a communicative perspective, Legge's translation leans toward foreignization, preserving the text's cultural authenticity at the expense of immediate reader comprehension. While this strategy ensures fidelity to the original work, it necessitates greater engagement from readers unfamiliar with Chinese philosophy.

Overall, Legge's translation of the *Tao Te Ching* is characterized by intellectual rigor and a commitment to preserving its philosophical and cultural depth. While his foreignizing approach poses interpretive challenges, it ultimately enhances cross-cultural understanding, making his work a significant contribution to the global appreciation of Taoist thought.

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