

Difficulties and Countermeasures in Japanese Translation of Traditional Chinese Ancient Books: A Case Study of *A New Interpretation of The Book of Transformation*

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Through the Chinese-Japanese translation practice of the first chapter of “New Interpretation of Huashu,” this paper attempts to summarize the difficulties in the Japanese translation of Chinese classical ancient books, and finds that the translation obstacles mainly focus on the three levels of the interwoven text structure and corresponding sentence pattern transformation of classical Chinese and vernacular, the profound culture-loaded words, and the unique Taoist philosophical concept system. In view of these difficulties, the translator must go deep into the philosophical core and rhetorical texture of the text and flexibly use the strategies of “semantic translation” and “communicative translation.” That is to say, semantic translation is used to anchor the spirit and strength of the text, and communicative translation is used to give new life and vitality to the translation. Only by achieving a delicate balance between the two can we achieve the leap from “text translation” to “cultural transmission.”

Keywords: Chinese translation of Japanese, Taoist ancient books, translation difficulties, philosophical concepts, Cultural transmission

Introduction

The Book of Transformations (Huashu) is built around the core concept of “transformation” (hua), constructing a philosophical system that encompasses nature, society, and ethics. It not only inherits and develops the Daoist theory that “the Dao generates all things,” but also critically analyzes and evaluates the society of its time, while proposing practical paths for individual transcendence. It is an important classic of Daoist philosophy. The source text for this translation practice, *A New Interpretation of The Book of Transformations* (Huashu Xinjie), aims to elucidate the abstruse Daoist philosophical theories embedded in the original text, enabling readers to better grasp the underlying principles, and thereby facilitating further exploration of the ideological essence and scientific wisdom of Daoist culture. Moreover, as no Japanese translation of *The Book of Transformations* has been published to date, the Japanese translation of *A New Interpretation of The Book of Transformations* holds practical significance for promoting the dissemination of ancient Chinese classical philosophical thought and Daoist culture in Japan. At the same time, it can contribute to diversified research in the field of Daoist thought—for instance, the reflections on social development found in the book may offer valuable insights for addressing real-world issues, such as population aging.

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Guided by Newmark's (1981) theory of semantic and communicative translation, this paper proposes a solution for translating Classical Chinese into foreign languages, which involves a dynamic and flexible application of semantic and communicative translation strategies based on text-type analysis. The aim is to balance the accurate transmission of the original philosophical ideas with the acceptability of the target text within the target language culture, thereby avoiding a mechanical, surface-level linguistic conversion. For example, literal translation is employed to preserve the linguistic structure and meaning of culture-loaded terms, while techniques, such as amplification and shift are used to bring the target readers' cognitive and emotional responses to the translation as close as possible to those of the original readers.

Textual Feature Analysis and Confirmation of Translation Difficulties

The source text of this translation practice, *A New Interpretation of The Book of Transformations* (Huashu Xinjie), is an in-depth exegesis of the ancient Daoist classic *The Book of Transformations* (Huashu). Through the interlocking steps of citing the original classical text, parsing its semantic meaning, and interpreting the underlying thought, the work presents a comprehensive and profound analysis of *The Book of Transformations*. Consequently, the linguistic style of the entire book is characterized by an interweaving of Classical Chinese and Vernacular Chinese. Built upon a faithful and objective annotation of the ancient original, the author incorporates his own analytical discussions, giving the text a distinctive feature of "well-documented citations, measured interpretations, and an organic unity of scholarly objectivity and the author's subjective insights."

During the process of close reading and translation, numerous challenging difficulties emerged, which paradoxically constitute the unique textual characteristics of the work.

At the lexical level, the text contains a large number of core Daoist philosophical terms and allusions, making the handling of culture-loaded words the primary challenge. The translation of these terms involves not merely the conversion of literal meanings, but also requires an accurate grasp of their connotations within a modern academic context, as well as the reconstruction of their philosophical and historical significance in the target language, so as to achieve precise semantic correspondence and facilitate the cross-cultural dissemination of Daoist culture.

At the sentential level, the translation of Classical Chinese poses a major difficulty. Considering the profound influence of ancient Chinese culture and Chinese characters on Japan, the translation must not only allow target-language readers to appreciate the charm of classical Chinese culture and the stylistic flavor of the classical language, but also ensure their correct understanding of the original semantics and thought. To this end, the translation of Classical Chinese passages adopts a combined approach of Kanbun Kundoku¹—A literal interpretive method developed by the Japanese for reading classical Chinese texts, which involves keeping the original Chinese text unchanged while reading it with Japanese kun readings, adjusting word order, and adding Japanese particles and auxiliary verbs to transform the Classical Chinese into an expression conforming to Japanese morphological patterns, thereby enabling Japanese-style comprehension—along with modern Japanese translations.

At the discourse level, classical texts are characterized by strong parataxis, making comprehension difficult,

¹ A literal interpretive method developed by the Japanese for reading classical Chinese texts. It involves keeping the original Chinese text unchanged while reading it with Japanese kun readings, adjusting word order, and adding Japanese particles and auxiliary verbs to transform the Classical Chinese into an expression conforming to Japanese morphological patterns, thereby enabling Japanese-style comprehension.

and thus clarifying the logical relationships between sentences becomes particularly important. Therefore, the translator must, on the basis of a deep understanding of the original meaning, identify the implicit logical threads and render them into a coherent target-language discourse that conforms to its norms through the addition of cohesive devices, such as conjunctions.

In response to the above textual features of *A New Interpretation of The Book of Transformations*, this translation practice adheres to the principle of “domestication as the primary strategy, foreignization as supplementary.” Specifically, for core conceptual terms, literal translation with annotations is prioritized to preserve cultural specificity; for the explanatory portions of cited passages, a combination of literal and free translation is employed, utilizing techniques, such as “addition of logical connectives” and “reduction through merging of repetitive expressions” to enhance comprehensibility. In sum, when dealing with a hybrid text that interweaves Classical Chinese quotations, modern vernacular explications of classical texts, and the author’s own modern vernacular discussions, the translator should strive to strike a balance between the cultural richness and stylistic elegance of Classical Chinese and the semantic clarity of vernacular Chinese, thereby achieving a natural stylistic transition.

Translation of Culture-Loaded Words

The Japanese translation of Classical Chinese requires the reconstruction of a coherent and self-consistent expressive system within the context of Japanese culture. There are numerous culture-loaded words in Chinese that embody the spiritual heritage and cultural essence of the Chinese nation. In translating these terms, it is necessary to delve deeply into their meanings, conduct careful analysis and interpretation, and then confirm the final translation by consulting parallel texts. In addition, accurately identifying and determining the meanings of polysemous words according to specific contexts to avoid ambiguity poses another major challenge, which will also be analyzed in detail below.

Example 1:

ST: 故藏之为元精, 用之为万灵, 含之为太一, 放之为太清。(Therefore, when stored, it is the Primordial Essence; when used, it is the Ten Thousand Spirits; when contained, it is the Great One; when released, it is the Great Clarity.)

TT: 故に蔵するは元精（生命と宇宙の源）となり、用いるは万霊（元精が働くとき、無限の具体的な形態と不思議な効用が顕現すること）となり、含むは太一（元精が内側に凝縮した状態）となり、放つは太清（元精が拡散して宇宙に満ち溢れた状態）となる。つまり、生命と宇宙の根源をなす唯一の原理とは、内に宿れば「精」となり、外に働けば「霊」となり、未分化の状態にあれば「一」となり、それが展開するときに宇宙的秩序として顕れるものなのである。

This sentence describes four different states of existence of the “Dao,” the origin of the universe: when stored, it manifests as the most fundamental essence, vitality, and driving force of all things (Yuanjing: “元精”); when employed, it transforms into all the wondrous functions and effects in the universe (Wanling: “万灵”); when contained within the body, it unites with the sole origin and principle of the universe (Taiyi: “太一”); when released, it reveals itself as the most unobstructed, pure, and primeval state of the universe (Taiqing: “太清”). The terms “Yuanjing,” “Wanling,” “Taiyi,” and “Taiqing” in the text are all specialized Daoist terminologies. According to the Dictionary of Daoism (Daojiao Dacidian), “Yuanjing” refers to “the essence of heaven and earth;” “Taiyi” denotes the fundamental sovereign of life and existence, the supreme deity; and “Taiqing” refers to “the Heavenly Dao, a state of void and chaos.” Wang Boying, in his *Complete Guide to Chinese Immortal*

Health Preservation (Zhonghua Quianxian Yangsheng Quanshu), annotates Wanling as follows: “Wanling refers to ‘the wondrous function of Yuanjing;’ when it manifests externally, it becomes all the unfathomable and divine traces (of activity in the universe)”—That is, the manifestation of the sublime efficacy of “Yuanjing,” which, when directed outward, displays all the marvelous operations and phenomena in the universe.

In terms of translation treatment, if only the literal forms of the terms “Yuanjing,” “Wanling,” “Taiyi,” and “Taiqing” were retained, it would cause confusion for Japanese readers lacking a background in Daoist culture, making it difficult to convey the original text’s philosophical connotations. In order to reproduce the contextual meaning of the original text as faithfully as possible, the final translation employs the technique of amplification as a compensatory measure. By adding brief modern Japanese explanations in parentheses for the four core terms, the abstract concepts are rendered more concrete and accessible to readers. Furthermore, an additional summarizing sentence is added at the end of the passage, unifying the four states of the “Dao” under the core concept of “the sole principle of life and the universe,” and clarifying the logical relationships among the four terms through the opposition-and-unity relationships of “inner-outer” and “undifferentiated-unfolded.” This treatment effectively balances the professionalism and readability of the text.

Example 2:

ST: 反溯道的根源，是由形化气，由气化神，由神化虚，到虚明的状态，万物本质相通。(Tracing back to the root of the Dao, it proceeds from form transforming into Qi, from Qi transforming into Spirit, from Spirit transforming into Emptiness, reaching a state of emptiness-yet-clarity, in which the essence of all things is interconnected.)

TT: 逆に道の理法を探ると、形あるものがエネルギーと転じて、エネルギーが神（人の生命活動を主宰するもの、精神なはたらき）と転じて、神が虚無と転じて、虚でありながら明らかな状態になって万物の本質は通じ合っている。

Taking the broader context into consideration, the phrase “道的根源” (the root of the Dao) in this context can be understood as “the operating principle of the Dao” (道の理法). The Japanese term rihō (理法) not only conveys the meanings of “operating principle” and “norm,” but also embodies the fundamental nature of the Dao’s operation and the Daoist cultural connotations of causality, thereby skillfully conveying the deeper implications of the word “root” (根源) within the target cultural context.

The term “神” (Spirit) in this sentence does not refer to a deity in the traditional Japanese sense, but rather to that which governs the phenomena of human life. In order to prevent misunderstanding and to help readers grasp the true meaning of the term, an explanatory gloss has been added in the translation. Furthermore, given that the expression “that which governs the phenomena of human life” remains somewhat abstract, an additional concrete explanation has been provided subsequently to further facilitate reader comprehension.

Translation of Classical Chinese Sentences

On the one hand, the syntactic structure of Classical Chinese differs significantly from the Japanese word order (SOV). During translation, it is necessary to accurately grasp the vocabulary and syntactic structure of the original sentence, correctly extract its semantic meaning, and then reorganize the linguistic form in accordance with Japanese grammar based on that semantic meaning. On the other hand, Classical Chinese places great emphasis on rhythmic and prosodic features, such as parallel structures and phonological harmony. However, once converted into the target language, these rhythmic and prosodic qualities are easily lost. Consequently, the translator must subsequently employ compensatory strategies—such as symmetrical sentence structures and

syllabic adjustments—to reproduce, to the greatest extent possible, the stylistic and rhythmic beauty of the original text.

Example 3:

ST: 圣人托其神于灵府, 而归于万物之初。(The sage entrusts his spirit to the Numinous Abode, the source of human thought and consciousness, and returns himself to the Beginning of All Things, the primordial state before the differentiation of all things, i.e., the Dao or the Great Oneness.)

TT: 聖人は其の神を靈府（人の思想と意識の発源する所）に託し、（自分を）万物の初め（万物が分化する以前の根源つまり道または太一）に帰す。

This sentence means “that the sage, by calming his spirit within, returns his life to its original source.” During translation, attention must be paid to the grammatical structural differences between Japanese and Chinese. It is necessary to clarify that the subject of the second clause, “帰す” (returns), is the sage himself, so as to prevent readers from mistakenly interpreting “spirit” (神) as the object of the second clause. Therefore, in the translation, the object “自分を” (himself) is added in the latter half of the sentence to make it clear that the subject performing the action of returning—and the entity undergoing the transformation—is the sage himself, not his “spirit.” This clarifies that the process is an ontological return of life as a whole, rather than a merely partial spiritual regression.

Example 4:

ST: 《周易・系辞》曰: “一阴一阳之谓道, 阴阳不测之谓神”, ……。(The Xici [Appended Judgments] of the Book of Changes states: “The existence of yin and yang in relative opposition is called the Dao; the unfathomable functioning of yin and yang is called the divine.”)

TT: 『周易・繫辞』には次のように述べられている: 「陰と陽が相対的に存在することを道と言ひ、陰と陽の働きが予測できないことを神という。」

Given that Japanese readers may be unfamiliar with Classical Chinese syntactic structures, the compact classical wording may pose comprehension difficulties. Therefore, the translation provides supplementary explanations for the original sentence. In the phrase “阴阳不测,” the word “不测” (bù cè) might superficially appear to mean “immeasurable” or “incalculable.” However, when examined in context, it becomes clear that the semantic emphasis here leans toward “unpredictable.” Hence, it is translated as “予測できない” (unpredictable). Likewise, “阴阳” in this context should be understood as “the functioning or manifestation of yin and yang,” and is therefore translated as “陰と陽の働き” (the functioning of yin and yang). Furthermore, based on the logical semantics of the second clause, it can be inferred that the “一阴一阳” in the first clause does not emphasize a quantitative notion of “one yin and one yang,” but rather points to the state of existence in which “yin and yang coexist in relative opposition, distinguishable and discernible.” Accordingly, “一阴一阳” is specifically interpreted as “陰と陽が相対的に存在すること” (the existence of yin and yang in relative opposition). The character “之” in the original text functions as a formal noun (substantive) and is translated as “こと” (koto). The translation renders the original coordinate clauses into two judgment sentences of the form 「……という。」 which not only aligns the sentences more closely with the reading rhythm of modern Japanese, but also provides each of the definitions of “Dao” (道) and “divine” (神) with its own complete semantic space.

Translation at the Discourse Level

The difficulties in translating Classical Chinese into Japanese are also evident at the discourse level. To ensure adequate restoration of the overall contextual meaning of the source text, the translator must make clear

choices among the Japanese kundoku style (訓読体), the classical literary style (文語体), and modern stylistic forms, so as to prevent the loss of aesthetic ambiance. Furthermore, as Classical Chinese texts often contain abstract concepts, it is necessary to employ annotation, imagery analogies, and other methods to facilitate the cross-cultural transmission of cultural connotations. The logical progression of Chinese classical texts differs from the gradual, incremental mode of exposition characteristic of Japanese discourse. Therefore, while preserving the essential charm of the original text, the translator must also convert the translation into expressions conforming to Japanese linguistic conventions by adding conjunctions and connective particles that explicitly indicate logical relationships.

Example 5:

ST: 《淮南子・原道訓》又云：“今人之所以眊然能视，替然能听，形体能抗，而百节可屈伸，察能分白黑、视丑美，而知能别同异、明是非者，何也？气为之充而神为之使也。何以知其然也？①凡人之志各有所在而神有所系者，②其行也足躓趺堦、头抵植木而不自知也，招之而不能见也，呼之而不能闻也。③耳目非去之也，然而不能应者，何也？神失其守也”。(The Huainanzi · Yuandao Xun [The Treatise on the Primordial Dao] further states: “Now, as for why people today can see clearly, hear distinctly, hold their bodies upright, bend and stretch all their joints, observe and distinguish white from black, perceive the ugly and the beautiful, and with their intellect differentiate the same from the different and discern right from wrong—why is this so? It is because Qi fills them and Spirit actuates them. How do we know this to be the case? ①Whenever a person’s will is directed toward something and his Spirit is attached to something, ②then when he walks, his feet may stumble over uneven ground or fall into a pit, or his head may strike a tree trunk, and he will not be aware of it. If someone beckons to him, he cannot see it; if someone calls out to him, he cannot hear it. ③It is not that his ears and eyes have lost their function—yet he cannot respond—why is this? It is because his Spirit has abandoned its post.”)

TT: 『淮南子・原道訓』にはさらに次のように書かれている。人はなぜ、目がはっきりと見え、耳を澄まして聞け、身体がしっかりと立ち、すべての関節が自由に曲げ伸ばしができ、視覚によって白黒や美醜を見分け、知覚によって異同や是非を弁別できるのか。それは、「気」が身体を満たし、「神」がそれを司っているからである。どうしてそうと言えるのか。そもそも、人の意識がどこか別のところに向かい、「神」がそこに縛られていると、その人は、歩いていても足が穴につまずき、頭が植木にぶつかろうとしても自分では気づかず、手招きされても見えず、呼びかけられても聞こえなくなるのだ。耳や目がなくなったわけではないのに、反応できないのはなぜか。それは、神がその本来の働きを失っているからである。

This passage is a classic exposition from the Huainanzi elucidating the relationship between body and mind. It aims to demonstrate, through everyday experience, that human life activities are the result of the joint action of “Qi” (vital energy) and “Spirit” (mental/spiritual function), with the latter serving as the “主宰” (sovereign/controller). The original text follows a three-step structure of posing a question→demonstrating/arguing→drawing a conclusion/induction, and the translation should likewise adhere to this framework while making adjustments to suit the comprehension needs of Japanese readers.

First, given that the original text’s wording and sentence structures are themselves abstruse and difficult to grasp, the translation should adopt clear, explanatory expressions and employ commonly used Japanese conjunctions and connective particles at the various semantic junctures to clarify the logical flow, thereby facilitating rapid comprehension for target-language readers.

In the question-posing section, the translation introduces the subsequent argumentation with the sentence pattern 「どうしてそうと言えるのか。」 (How can this be known?). In the demonstration section, the pattern 「そもそも…と、…のだ」 is used to connect parts ① and ②, closely linking the conditional clause with the result clause, and making explicit the logical relationship that “When a person’s attention is completely absorbed elsewhere, the functions of sight, hearing, and motor control become impaired.” Finally, in the conclusion/induction section, the interrogative expression 「なぜか」 (Why is this?) is employed in conjunction with the causal pattern 「それは…からである」 (It is because...) to create a rhetorical echo, thus completing the closed loop of the argumentation.

Example 6:

ST: 帛书本《道德经》为“大器免成”，笔者以为“免”比“晚”更合适，因为后面的“希”和“无”表示少、无等否定含义，而“免”正有有避免、逃避、免除、免于等否定含义。意思是最大的形象和物体并非人工制作，而是自然形成、浑然天成，所以说“免成”。结合后面的“大象无形”来看，这里的“大器”还可以指超越一般有形之器的无形之象，因为无形之象才是更大的“器”，而“成”字本身就有成形、成型、成就、固定等含义。除了大小的思辨，还可以从有形、无形的角度来看，就像气、水无形，方能无处不在、无处不居，随形就态，千变万化，这又是另一个角度的“大器”了。(The silk manuscript version of the Dao De Jing reads “the Great Vessel is exempt from completion” [大器免成]. The author believes that “exempt” [免] is more appropriate than “late” [晚], because the subsequent characters “希” [rare] and “無” [non-existence] carry negative connotations of “few” and “none,” and “免” likewise bears negative meanings, such as “avoid,” “escape,” “exempt,” or “be free from.” This implies that the greatest image or object is not artificially made, but is naturally formed and effortlessly complete—hence the term “exempt from completion.” Taking into account the subsequent phrase “the Great Image has no form” [大象无形], the “Great Vessel” [大器] here can also refer to “a formless image that transcends ordinary tangible vessels,” for it is precisely the formless image that constitutes the greater “vessel.” Moreover, the character “成” [completion] itself carries meanings, such as “take shape,” “form,” “achieve,” and “fix.” Beyond the dialectic of magnitude, one may also consider it from the perspective of the tangible versus the intangible. Just as Qi and water are formless, they can be everywhere present, dwell everywhere, adapt their form to their container, and undergo endless transformations—This, too, represents yet another dimension of the “Great Vessel.”)

TT: 帛書本『道德經』では「大器免成」となっている。筆者としては、この「免」は通行本に見られる「晚」よりも適切であると考え。なぜなら、「免」には「避ける」「逃れる」「免除する」「～に至らない」といった意味があり、「大器免成」に続く「大音希声」および「大象無形」における「希」や「無」と同様に、「少ない」「ない」といった否定的な意味合いを帯びているからである。「大器免成」とは、最も大きく根源的なものは人為的に作り上げられるのではなく、自然のはたらきによって自ずから生成され、初めから全体として調和した在り方を備えている、ということの意味している。したがって、それは意図的に完成する必要がなく、「成ることを免れる（免成）」と表現されるのである。後文の「大象無形」と合わせて考えれば、ここの「大器」は、通常の形ある器にとどまらず、形として固定される以前の、根源的な現れ——すなわち無形の「象」をも指していると理解できる。なぜなら、無形の象こそあらゆる形を受け入れうる、より大きな意味での「器」だからである。また、「成」という字には、形を与えること、型にはめること、完成させて固定すること、といった意味が含まれている。この点から見ても、「大器」が特定の形に完成されるものではない、と

いう含意を読み取ることができる。さらに、この思想は単なる大小の比較にとどまらず、「形あるもの」と「形なきもの」という観点からもとらえられる。たとえば、気や水は形がなく、だからこそあらゆる場所に行き渡り、あらゆる場所に留まり、状況に応じて姿を変え、自在に変化することができる。このような在り方もまた、別の角度から示された「大器」の姿である。

This passage offers an interpretation of the term “the Great Vessel is exempt from completion” (大器免成). Therefore, in translation, it is necessary to reflect the original text’s dialectical logic and philosophical connotations within the Japanese linguistic and cultural context. Given that the logical structure of the Chinese text differs from Japanese conventions of expression, the translation deliberately adjusts the sentence order to facilitate rapid comprehension for Japanese readers of the information conveyed in the original.

In the original text, the argument proceeds as follows: first, the conclusion that “大器免成” (the Great Vessel is exempt from completion) is the more appropriate reading is proposed, followed by the presentation of evidence arranged in layers: Basis ① (formal maintenance of the negative structure)→Basis ② (consistency with the semantics of the preceding and following text). Each layer of reasoning is deployed in support of the central thesis.

By contrast, Japanese differs from Chinese in its expository conventions, tending to favor a mode of argumentation that proceeds by “first stating objective facts, then expressing a personal opinion, and finally closing with rigorous theoretical reasoning”—a more cautious logical structure. Accordingly, the translation reorders the sentence sequence to present a reading structure more familiar to Japanese readers.

Furthermore, while preserving culturally loaded and abstract concepts imbued with Sinological significance—such as “器” (vessel), “免” (exempt), and “浑然天成” (naturally and effortlessly complete)—the translation supplements them with accessible explanatory expressions, thereby achieving effective cross-cultural communication while maintaining philosophical rigor.

Conclusion

This paper, centered on the Japanese translation practice of *A New Interpretation of The Book of Transformations* (Huashu Xinjie)—a Daoist classic—explores the issue of balancing professionalism and readability in the translation of cultural classics. Daoist culture is profoundly rich in content and abstruse in expression, making it difficult to handle with a single translation strategy. To address this challenge, this paper adopts the method of literal translation with annotations in rendering specialized terminologies, which not only preserves the professional rigor of the terms themselves, but also eliminates comprehension barriers that target-language readers might encounter due to cultural differences.

Meanwhile, for passages in the original text characterized by implicit logical relationships and complex discourse structures, a combined approach of literal and free translation is employed, which takes into account both the rhythmic and prosodic qualities of the original and enhances the readability of the target text.

This paper has focused its analysis on selected excerpts from *A New Interpretation of The Book of Transformations*, primarily concentrating on translation strategies at the levels of culture-loaded words and discourse logic. Other translation issues pertaining to Daoist classics have not been fully addressed. Future research will select additional chapters from *A New Interpretation of The Book of Transformations* for supplementary case analyses; in order to test the general applicability of the translation strategies proposed in this paper. Furthermore, comparative analyses will be conducted with more texts of a similar type, with a view to further refining the translation methods for such classics and enhancing the effectiveness of disseminating

ancient Chinese classical culture—including Daoist thought—overseas.

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