

# A Contrastive Analysis of the “In-coming” and “Out-going” Translations of *Zhuangzi*

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Received: May 15, 2023

Accepted: July 10, 2023

Online Published: July 25, 2023

doi:10.5539/ijel.v13n4p91

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v13n4p91>

## Abstract

Based on *Zhuangzi with Chinese Annotation and Translation* written by Chen (2007), this article has conducted a contrastive analysis of different translations of *Zhuangzi* by Liang and Kang (2020), Ziporyn (2009), Legge (1891) and Watson (1968). This study aims to help translate Chinese classics and offer western readers a better comprehension of the extensive and profound philosophical thoughts of Chinese traditional culture. It is found that with full consideration of the target readers, Liang and Kang's (2020) translation has retained most of the original thoughts of *Zhuangzi* and hereby bridges the cultural gap which is beyond the efforts of western translators. The publication of this translation has tremendous significance for cultural exchange and international interaction, guiding future translation practice and engaging in translation criticism.

**Keywords:** contrastive analysis, translations, philosophical thoughts, *Zhuangzi*

## 1. Introduction

For quite a long time, the unilateral definition of translation in the western translation circles has eclipsed the bidirectionality of translation activities. In recent years, China has been advancing the “go global” strategy of Chinese culture and heightening the proposition of out-going translation, which is well-acclaimed by experts from various fields, including translation, culture, and communication. “Out-going Translation” refers to the initiative translations from Chinese to foreign languages under the guidance of the Chinese government, relevant organizations or translators. In the out-going process of cultural translation, the translations of Chinese classics and ancient prose serve as an essential carrier for the worldwide promotion of Chinese culture, which concerns not only whether the essence of Chinese traditional culture can provide new ideas for and contribute new values to the prosperity and development of world culture, but also whether China can participate in the dialogue of world civilization on an equal footing. Then, on whom should such a vital mission fall? Xu and Xu (2019) point out the controversial views on who is more suitable to translate Chinese classics. Some scholars believe that Chinese classics should be translated entirely by Western translators because they are native speakers of the target language and their translations are more fluent and more receptive. However, some others hold that Chinese translators have highly cultural consciousness and cultural confidence and hereby suitable for such out-going translation activities.

Based on *Annotation and Translation of Zhuangzi* from Chen (2007) and the out-going translation of *The World of Master Zhuang* by Liang and Kang (2020) and three other in-coming translations respectively by Ziporyn (2009), Legge (1891) and Watson (1968), this article compares the different expressions on the core thoughts of *Zhuangzi* to provide guidance for the future translation of Chinese classics and help western readers better comprehend the profound philosophical ideas of traditional Chinese culture.

## 2. Book Description

*Zhuangzi*, as an essential work of Chinese classics during the pre-Qin period, integrates the works of Zhuang Zhou (hereinafter referred to as Zhuangzi), his followers, and other schools of Taoism. It has always been regarded as one of the most excellent classics and critical philosophical works. With its imaginative expression and romanticism, this work includes a comprehensive and profound ideological system through sufficient fable stories and philosophical speculation, which can be briefly categorized into three aspects as follows: (1) it appeals to liberation from earthly fetters and conformity with the nature through inaction while taking a journey

carefree ; (2) it is an inheritance and further development of Lao Tseu's thought, which regards "Taoism" as the central principle in the world, and advocates the concept of "all is one"; and (3) based on the previous thoughts, it puts forward "inaction" as the code of conduct and an ideal view of life, as is mentioned in the chapter of *A journey carefree* (庄子·逍遥游) — "He is perfect who ignores self, divine who is indifferent to merit, and holy who seeks no fame" (至人无己、神人无功、圣人无名。). All of its thoughts, styles, and expressions have a significant influence on the later Chinese philosophy, literature, and culture. Therefore, well-grounded comprehension of its thoughts will bridge the communication between different cultures and help eliminate conflicts and misunderstandings.

*Zhuangzi* have gained attention from foreign scholars, which can be inferred from the number of its English versions between the late 19th and early 21st centuries. There are now at least nine complete English translations and approximately 20 selected or abridged translations. Many of them conduct studies on the thoughts of *Zhuangzi*. However, in the versions translated by scholars speaking target language, there exist plenty of misunderstandings concerning the original Chinese text due to their unfamiliarity with the structures and characteristics of Chinese (ancient Chinese in particular). Besides, such versions have failed to deal with the incompatible thoughts in the text, which inevitably leads to a deviation and distortion of the original ideas. Therefore, discussions based on incorrect comprehension can hardly avoid misunderstanding or distortion, resulting in a conclusion far from the initial thoughts.

### 3. The Thoughts of *Zhuangzi* and Their English Translations

The core thoughts of *Zhuangzi* include *Zhuangzi*'s view of life, the understanding of the universe, the theory of knowledge acquisition, and the political ideas. Within the range of these four thoughts, this chapter aims to investigate the different expressions respectively selected from one out-going and three in-coming translations of the philosophical thoughts of *Zhuangzi*. Typical excerpts from source language (SL) and corresponding excerpts from target language (TL) are selected as examples to illustrate the different understanding and translation of the core thoughts in *Zhuangzi*.

#### 3.1 The View of Life

*Zhuangzi*'s view of life demonstrates his pursuit of self-ignorance, merit-indifference, and no fame through developing an ideal personality. Meanwhile, in the book, he set the description of different attitudes towards life as a foil for his life philosophy and endeavored to achieve real spiritual freedom, namely "a realm carefree." Such a view of life is based on solving his life predicaments, unlike other scholars during the pre-Qin dynasty who set their eyes on the short-term and limited realistic society to seek escape. From the very beginning, *Zhuangzi* aspired to find a path for humanity to be rid of realistic social predicaments and the fear of death. Therefore, "spiritual freedom" is one of the core thoughts of *Zhuangzi*. To realize this greatest freedom, one should first recognize that they, like other things in nature, have a doomed process from life to death, as mentioned in the chapter of *The most respectable teacher* (庄子·大宗师) — "Life and death are natural phenomena, inevitable as night and day. It is a natural law" (死生命也，其有夜旦之常，天也。). *Zhuangzi* compared life and death to the alternation of day and night and believed it unnecessary to fear death. Only when one treats life and death with equanimity can one handle all secular emotions. See the following excerpt:

**SL:** 知天之所为，知人之所为者，至矣。知天之所为者，天而生也；知人之所为者，以其知之所知以养其知之所不知，终其天年而不中道夭者：是知之盛也。(《内篇·大宗师》)(Chen, 2007)

This passage indicates that one can leave himself to nature if he knows what is natural and utilize his wisdom only if he knows what is human. One who can manage this reaches the tiptop of cognition. He will enjoy his natural life without dying young if he can use his intelligence to know the unknown. Here's the translation from Liang and Kang (2020):

**TL:** It is perfect to know what is disposed by Heaven and what is proposed by man. The knowledge of what Heaven does is derived from nature; the knowledge of what man does is acquired by his intellect to nourish what is unknown by his intelligence, so that he can live out the years given by Heaven instead of dying premature.

Liang and Kang dealt with the words "知" (know, intellect, or knowledge in Chinese) in a very subtle way, the first "知" as "know," the second as "intellect," and the third as "knowledge," which accurately completes a circle from perception to enlightenment and then backward. This displays the translator's in-depth insights into the thought of "conforming to heaven and nature." Syntactically, some other expressions also reveal that the translator has fully considered the target readers. For example, the clauses without subjects in the source text were translated into a cleft one led by the anticipatory "it". Such reconstruction both foregrounds the core

argument of the clause (the principle of End-Weight in English) and perfectly reserves the objectivity.

From the perspective of Zhuangzi, the tiptop of life is “beyond the real world” (超然世外). On the one hand, one should get rid of the fear of death and the pursuit of eternal life, namely, “a true man in ancient times knew neither to love life nor to hate death (不知悦生, 不知恶死.)”. On the other hand, he should not concern himself with the secular morality and emotion, as is stated in the chapter of *All is one* (庄子·齐物论) — “The sages did not engage in secular affairs, or seek private interests, or avoid harms and disasters, or make inappropriate requests, or insist on the set rules” (不从事于务, 不就利, 不违害, 不喜求, 不缘道.). However, taking this path beyond the real world and emotions does not mean being alone or isolating oneself. In fact, the essence of “beyond” lies in leaving oneself to the truth and nature, as is shown in the following excerpt:

**SL:** 子桑戶、孟子反、子琴張三人相與友，曰：“孰能相與於無相與，相為於無相為？孰能登天遊霧，撓挑無極，相忘以生，無所終窮？”三人相視而笑，莫逆於心，遂相與友。(《內篇·大宗師》)(Chen, 2007)

This passage describes how Zhuangzi viewed ideal friendship and personality. The comprehension of “One who does not make friends for any purpose and helps others not for being known (孰能相與於無相與，相為於無相。)” is the primary difficulty facing foreign translators. Here is the translation from Ziporyn (2009):

**TL1:** “*Who can be together in their very not being together, do things for one another by not doing things for one another? Who can climb up upon the Heavens, roaming on the mists, twisting and turning round and round without limit, living their lives in mutual forgetfulness, never coming to an end?*” The three of them looked at one another and burst out laughing, feeling complete concord, and thus did they become friends.

This translation deviates from the real meaning of the original sentence, which baffles the readership. How can a man “be together while not being together and do things for one another but not doing things for one another?” In fact, those who are well worth associating with must share some common sense concerning human nature. Firstly, they interact with each other without any personal purpose. Secondly, they ask for no return when offering help. Thirdly, only those taking a journey carefree can be grouped. In this aspect, Liang and Kang’s (2020) translation is far better in agreement with the original meaning:

**TL2:** Sanghu Zi, Zifan Meng, and Qin Zhang Zi were discussing together: “*Who does not make friends with any purpose, who helps others without being known, who transcends all things, and who dances in the infinite, forgetting all about life and death?*” The three of them smiled to one another, nodded agreement, and became friends.

### 3.2 The Understanding of Universe

In the chapter *Miscellany of Zhuangzi* (庄子·庚桑楚), the statement “That which exists without boundary is the dimension of space; that which grows but has no beginning or end is the dimension of time (有实而无乎处者，宇也；有长而无本剝者，宙也。)” shows how Zhuangzi defined universe. Then what is the root of the universe? According to Zhuangzi, it boils down to “Taoism” (道), which is shown as follows:

**SL:** 夫道有情有信，无为无形；可传而不可受，可得而不可见；自本自根，未有天地，自古以固存；神鬼神帝，生天生地；在太极之先而不为高，在六极之下而不为深；先天地生而不为久，长于上古而不为老。(《內篇·大宗師》)(Chen, 2007)

“夫道有情有信，无为无形” tells that “Taoism,” as the source of the universe, is firstly an objective existence but then unobservable in vision. “可传而不可受，可得而不可见” means that the universe is beyond human perception and control, “自本自根” refers to “self-reliance”, and “神鬼神帝，生天生地” indicates that Taoism is the origin of all things in heaven and earth. “在太极之先而不为高，在六极之下而不为深；先天地生而不为久，长于上古而不为老。” implies that “Taoism” can transcend space and time. The definition and description of “Taoism” in this excerpt display Zhuangzi’s view of the universe. Before proposing the argument of “invisibility being the characteristic of Taoism,” Zhuangzi firstly informed the readers of the “objectivity.” Here’s the translation from Legge (1891):

**TL1:** This is the Dao; there is in it *emotion and sincerity*, but It does nothing and has no bodily form. It may be *handed down (by the teacher)*, but *may not be received (by his scholars)*. It may be apprehended (by the mind), but it cannot be seen. It has Its root and ground (of existence) in Itself. Before there were heaven and earth, from of old, there It was, securely existing. From It came the mysterious existences of spirits, from It the mysterious existence of God. It produced heaven; It produced earth.

As has been mentioned above, “Taoism” is characteristic of objectivity, so the “情” here can hardly be “emotion” but “truth” while the “信” is not “sincerity” but “evidence.” A literal translation of “有情有信” into “emotion and sincerity” totally deviates from the original meaning. Liang and Kang’s (2020) version can be more accurate:

**TL2:** Dao is *true and testable*; however, it imposes no actions and leaves no traces. *It may be transmitted from mind to mind but not from mouth to mouth. It may be comprehended but not seen.* It takes root in itself, existing before Heaven and Earth. It generates demons and gods and Heaven and Earth. It is above the zenith but does not seem high; it is beneath the nadir but does not seem low; it comes into existence before Heaven and Earth but does not seem long; it precedes the time immemorial but does not seem old.

The translation of “True and testable” (有情有信) in TL2 reads better than that in TL1 as the former one perfectly retains the meaning of “objectivity.” Meanwhile, the implication of “invisibility” can also be felt in the translations “It may be *transmitted* from mind to mind but not from mouth to mouth.” and “It may be *comprehended but not seen.*” but somehow it disappears in “It may be *handed down* (by the teacher), but may not be received (by his scholars)” as the expression of “hand down” improperly visualizes “Taoism” as something tangible, which is entirely against the nature of “invisibility”.

### 3.3 The Theory of Acquisition

Zhuangzi recognized some contradictions in this field due to the human limitation of knowledge acquisition, including his perception, individual thinking, time, and space. These limitations prevent human beings from reaching a complete unification in recognition but often get them exposed to harsh relativity. Such perplexing relativity puts them in constant search of “true knowledge”(真知), which is far from within reach. To Zhuangzi, the so-called “true knowledge” is a mission impossible for human beings owing to the limitations aforementioned. Based on this recognition, he stated in the chapter on *Essence of Life* (庄子·养生主)—“Life is limited, but knowledge is limitless. The pursuit of the limitless knowledge within the limited span of life is tiring (吾生也有涯，而知也无涯，以有涯随无涯，殆已。)” and then raised a new question—Is there anyone who has access to the “true knowledge”? In the chapter of *The Most Respectable Teacher* (庄子·大宗师), he mentioned a group of people honored as the “true man” (真人)—“There is no true knowledge till a true man appears (且有真人而后有真知)”. What does he mean by “a true man”? See the following excerpt:

**SL:** 故其好之也一，其弗好之也一。其一也一，其不一也一。其一，與天為徒；其不一，與人為徒。天與人不相勝也，是之謂真人。(《內篇·大宗師》)(Chen, 2007)

“故其好之也一，其弗好之也一” indicates that there are always two sides to everything, one bright and the other dark, while “其一，與天為徒；其不一，與人為徒” means that there are two kinds of people, some being willing to comply with the heaven’s law and others living as humans do. However, a third minority has leaped out of this alternation, and each of them is honored as the “true man.” In other words, the “true man” in *Zhuangzi* has fully reconciled himself to heaven’s law and human nature by accepting the inherent complexity of human limitations. Only when the inborn nature is balanced with what is acquired can one escape from these limitations and obtain “true knowledge.” See the translation from Watson (1968):

**TL1:** Therefore, *his liking was one and his not liking was one. His being one was one and his not being one was one.* In being one, he was acting as a companion of Heaven. In not being one, he was acting as a companion of man. When man and Heaven do not defeat each other, then we may be said to have the True Man.

As can be inferred from the explanation above, a pair of seeming contradictions may not contradict each other but imply a reconciliation instead in Zhuangzi’s philosophy. This may be why Watson mistranslated them into “...was one and...was one”, which inevitably reflects a zero-sum mentality. However, it is more desirable that unification outweighs contradiction here. See Liang and Kang’s (2020) translation:

**TL2:** *Heaven and man are one* irrespective of man’s likes or dislikes and regardless of his yes or no. *Conforming to the unity of Heaven and man* means identification with nature; denying it means identification with man. And it is the true man who does not set Heaven and man opposite to each other.

As shown in TL2, both “Heaven and man are one” and “Conforming to the unity of Heaven and man” prefers “reconciliation” to “contradiction,” which lays bare their logical relationship.

### 3.4 The Political Ideas

Zhuangzi’s political view derives right from his personal experience of the then war-torn times characterized by

unprecedented turbulence and unrest when the commoners were plunged into a spiritually evil land owing to the political trickery in those days. Therefore, Zhuangzi could do nothing but exclaim in the chapter of *Abandoning Sage and Knowledge* (庄子·胠篋) — “Is any of the so-called sages not guarding for robbers? (所谓圣者，有不为大盗守者乎。)” and “Robbers will not vanish till the death of the sages (圣人不死，大盗不止。)” By this means, he condemned the usurpers’ acts through wars and called for an immediate truce. In the chapter of *Nonaction* (庄子·徐无鬼), Zhuangzi suggested the rulers that “If feeling obliged to do something, then it must be to cultivate the sincerity in your heart to follow the course of nature instead of causing disturbance to others (脩胸中之诚，应天地之情而勿撓。)” This criticism of the brutal and cruel behaviors in the disguise of civilization makes the starting point of his political philosophy. “A unified nature (至德之世)” is the ideal state of society in his political philosophy on perfection. He was fully aware of the distortion and hypocrisy brought about by the ethical codes of human societies and thus advocated a total return to nature. Therefore, the expectation of “a unified nature” depicts a simple and natural state where people are in harmony and intimacy with everything. There are a lot of such statements. For example:

SL: 吾意善治天下者不然。彼民有常性，織而衣，耕而食，是謂同德；一而不黨，命曰天放。故至德之世，其行填填，其視顛顛。(《外篇·馬蹄》)(Chen, 2007)

This excerpt firstly proposes a political view of “the best ruling is no ruling (善治)” and then profiles an ideal life when everyone complies with the unified nature of “weaving for clothes and plowing for food (有常性，織而衣，耕而食)”. Zhuangzi believed that a wise ruler was to protect his subjects’ constant nature and instinct. The phrase “一而不黨(黨)” is quite tricky even for native speakers as it refers to a principle of interpersonal interaction rather than an individual or a political party (Note 1). Here the “one” refers to the thought of “all is one,” and the word “黨” is used as a verb meaning “form cliques.” Therefore, this phrase should be understood as “all is one without forming cliques for personal interests.” The following two translations are from Ziporyn (2009) and Watson (1968):

**TL1:** In my opinion, someone who was really good at managing the world would not go about it like that. For the people too have their own constant inborn nature. To be clothed by their own weaving, fed by their own plowing—this is what is called their shared Virtuosity. All as one, without faction—I call that simply the way *Heaven has cast them forth*. Thus, in the age of perfect Virtuosity their actions were solid and full but their gaze was distant and blank.

**TL2:** In my opinion, someone who was really good at handling the affairs of the world would not go about it like this. The people have their constant inborn nature. To weave for their clothing, to till for their food—this is the Virtue they share. They are one in it and not partisan, and it is called *the Emancipation of Heaven*. Therefore, in a time of Perfect Virtue, the gait of men is slow and ambling; their gaze is steady and mild.

The expression “一而不黨” suggests an ideal form of interpersonal relationship or ultimate pureness that human beings can achieve – “Being real,” which will lead to a state of “leave oneself to natural tendencies”(天放). Watson’s “The Emancipation of Heaven” resulted from a literal misreading of the source text. However, Ziporyn’s translation of “Heaven has cast them forth” may carry the derogatory sense of “exile and expulsion,” which leads to more misinterpretation of the original thought. Liang and Kang (2020) translated the excerpt as follows:

**TL3:** However, I believe that those who are good at governing under Heaven would not choose to do so. With their constant nature, people weave for their own clothes and plow the land for their own food. This is the instinct they share. Therefore, those who govern remain an integral whole without any preference, which is called *abandonment to nature*.

However, “abandonment to nature” leaves something to be desired as it may carry a derogatory sense. Here’s another version proposed by the author of this article:

**TL4:** However, a wise ruler would not do so. Human beings have a constant instinct: weaving for clothes and plowing for food. This is the unified nature of humanity. Should everyone agree to let nature take its course by keeping “all is one” in mind without taking any action for personal interests, they all will behave well and be purified from the inside out.

#### 4. Conclusion

Over the past decades, Chinese scholars of translation have mainly focused on the practice and theoretical exploration in the “in-coming” translation and, to some extent, ignored the great value of “out-going” activities and the correlational studies in constructing Chinese image and promoting Chinese culture. Since 2000, with the

implementation of the “Going-out” strategy, more and more Chinese literary works and cultural classics have entered the western world. Meanwhile, boosting out-going translation has also aroused great enthusiasm over Chinese culture among western scholars. However, with Mo Yan awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, some disharmonious voices emerged, mainly owing to the honor of the translator Howard Goldblatt and claiming he is “the chief and only midwife of Chinese literature.” For quite a moment, a translation pattern represented by western translators and Sinologists seemed to be the only path for the out-going of Chinese literature and culture (Cao, 2016). Overseas scholars in a wide range generally believe that translation as a profession is an in-coming activity that can only be done from a foreign language to a mother tongue. In fact, as the comparative analysis shown above, due to the difficulty in Chinese comprehension and the diachronically accumulated misunderstandings resulting from ideology, there are many obstacles to the incoming translation of traditional Chinese classics.

In *The World of Master Zhuang*, Liang and Kang (2020) has mainly solved two problems encountered by foreign translators when translating Chinese classics. First, it isn't easy to ensure whether the incoming translations can introduce Chinese culture and bridge communication and dialogue between China and the western world at a relatively balanced level. The second problem is that the in-coming pattern fails to represent China's will, especially for a brand-new image and excellent voice. Based on *Annotation and Translation of Zhuangzi*, Chen (2007) has conducted out-going translation through which he delivered the author's philosophy with full consideration of target readers. The author's major arguments are highlighted by presenting a brief introduction of each chapter to target readers. In this way, the target readers will note the differences in writing arrangement between Chinese classics and western academic works, understand the rich and profound thoughts of Zhuangzi in a relatively easier way.

The heavy use of imaginative myths and romantic fable stories in *Zhuangzi* inevitably endows itself with a solid literary color. Through the careful observation and detailed reasoning about humans and nature, this masterpiece displays its positive scientific quality. Besides, it also offers readers the chance to capture the precious flashing truth of life, philosophy, and beauty hidden in the arguments or stories that may sound absurd or unreasonable. Western readers are expected to see Chinese philosophic thoughts as a good or even better match for those of Socrates or Aristotle. In the background of telling Chinese stories and globalizing Chinese culture, the publication of his translation is of tremendous significance for both cultural exchange and interaction and future translation practice and criticism.

### Acknowledgments

This study was funded by National Social Science Fund of China (grant number 21BYY043).

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### Notes

Note 1. The Chinese character “一” usually refers to “one” in English and “党” to “political party”.

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