

Examples of Deficient Translation Choices

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The following are some examples of deficient translation choices or mistakes that taint and potentially undermine otherwise reliable translations by expert academic translators of Daoist literature.* They point towards the importance of intentionality and attentiveness in translation.

dé 德 as “potency”

Major, John, Sarah Queen, Andrew Meyer, and Harold Roth. *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China, by Liu An, King of Huainan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

“Potency” was the compromise translation among the four scholar-translators. Unfortunately, it has the connotation of male virility (via “impotence”) in English. (The age and gender demographics of said translators probably is not coincidental.) My preferred and a more accurate translation is “inner power,” but *dé* also has been rendered as “integrity” and “virtue,” either of which is preferable to “potency.” Recall the etymology: An aligned (直) heart-mind (心) expressed in/as/through embodied activity (行) in the world. An intellectual genealogy, or perhaps “translation genealogy,” also is involved in the choice of “potency,” specifically via A.C. Graham 葛瑞漢 (1919-1991).

qì 氣 as “breath” (physical respiration)

Roth, Harold. *Original Tao: Inward Training and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

While *qì* may and oftentimes does refer to physical respiration, it also designates “subtle breath” or “energy.” It also is translated obfuscatingly as “pneuma” (via Greek) among some members and associates of the Schaferean school, via Edward Schafer 薛愛華 (1913-1991). In the texts of classical Daoism and the larger Daoist tradition, it is the primary sense of subtle presence and enlivening influence in which *qì* is used. In contrast, there are various technical terms related to physical respiration, including *hūxī* 呼吸 (lit., “exhale and inhale”). One influence on Roth’s

* This is not to mention catastrophic mistranslations in non-specialist academic translations that provide some access to the original Chinese Daoist texts. Two examples are *xuán* 玄 (“mystery/mysterious”) as “God” and *xiān* 仙 (“immortal/transcendent”) as “genie” in James Ware’s (1966) translation of the *Bàopǔzi nèipiān* 抱朴子內篇 (Inner Chapters of Master Embracing Simplicity; DZ 1185; ZH 980). Ware is generally reliable on the Chinese literary and quasi-scientific (outer alchemical) dimensions, but deficient on the Daoist content, including the applied, lived, and practical aspects.

translation and associated interpretations is his own Zen Buddhist practice, which often focuses on respiratory techniques. Unfortunately, this misinterpretation taints his larger academic oeuvre, which is especially problematic for Daoist practitioners consulting his work. My preferred choice involves simply using the Pinyin Romanization “qi.”

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qì 氣 as “spirit”

Watson, Burton. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.

Watson, Burton. *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. Columbia University Press, 2013.

See previous comments on Roth’s *Original Tao*. In his translation of the passage on *xīnzhāi* 心齋 (“fasting of the heart-mind”) (ch. 4), Watson renders *qì* as “spirit,” which is a mistranslation. “Spirit” would correspond to *shén* 神. This has major implications for practice-based engagements, and the mistranslation has, in fact, led to confusion among individuals who do not read Chinese, including Western “Daoist” popularizers. Like classical Daoism more generally, the emphasis is on “energetic listening,” with some connection to “pervasion” (*tōng* 通), “(un)recognizability” (*shí* 識), and “resonance” (*yìng* 應).

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zuòwàng 坐忘 as “sitting in oblivion”

Kohn, Livia. *Seven Steps to the Tao: Sima Chengzhen’s Zuowang lun*. St. Augustin: Steyler Verlag, 1987.

Kohn, Livia. *Sitting in Oblivion: The Heart of Daoist Meditation*. Dunedin, FL: Three Pines Press, 2010.

Wàng 忘 is principally a verb and more conventionally means “forget,” so *zuòwàng* more literally means “sit and forget.” The character consists *wáng* 亡 (“lose/perish”) and *xīn* 心 (“heart-mind”), with the former usually read as a phonetic. “Oblivion” has the connotation of annihilation and even obliviousness, neither of which is the context-specific meaning. Specifically, there is an emphasis on energetic presence: Emptiness of the heart-center results in energetic integrity and sensitivity, including a deeper form of awareness and perception (“listening” [*tīng* 聽]). This may be further clarified by *Nèiyè* 內業 (Inward Training) 14: “Within the heart-mind, there is yet another heart-mind. That inner heart-mind is an awareness that precedes language.” *Zuòwàng* is, in turn, connected to *xīnzhāi* 心齋 (“fasting of the heart-mind”), which is defined as “emptiness” (*xū* 虛). My preferred technical translation is “sitting-in-forgetfulness,” with “forgetfulness” being a contemplative (non)state paralleling stillness (*jìng* 靜).