

Translating Nonhuman Agency: A Posthumanist Reading of *The Zhuang Zi* and its Three English Translations

Quan Wang

English Department

Beihang University, CHINA

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5848-4368>

wangquanheming@126.com

ABSTRACT

This article explores the translation of nonhuman agency in *The Zhuang Zi* from two perspectives. Zhuang Zi wrote this Taoist classic on nature in the late 4th BC and accentuated the agency of things. From the perspective of intersemiotic translation, Zhuang Zi proposes four interconnected approaches to facilitate species communication: anthropocentric relinquishment, nonhuman agents, equality of things, and cross-species becoming. He often examines the world from nonhuman angles and creates an aura of Taoist mystery in his work. From the perspective of interlingual translation, translators have intervened in this process with different strategies. For example, Burton Watson's anthropocentric translation demystifies nonhuman agents and popularizes the Chinese classic among English speakers. The "translation disparation," to borrow the term from Michael Cronin, of (de)mystifying nonhuman agency generates creative responses from translators. A.C. Graham acknowledges the mysterious quality but aligns it with literary sections, so his paratext of thematic reorganization is a reinforced version of anthropocentrism. In contrast, Victor H. Mair presents a more accurate Taoist account of species relationships and recreates the mysterious aura in his translation.

KEYWORDS: intersemiotic translation; nonhuman agency; posthumanism; translation disparation; Zhuang Zi

1. Introduction

Climate change has exerted an unprecedented influence on the planetary ecology and requires us to reconsider species relationships. Humans should communicate and collaborate with nonhuman counterparts to build a sustainable future. Then cross-species communication becomes our priority question. Historically, Roman Jakobson identified three ways of

interpreting a verbal sign: “it can be translated into other signs of the same language, into another language, or into another, nonverbal system of symbols” (1959: 114). Jakobson defines the first category as “intralingual translation or *rewording*” and the second one as “interlingual translation or *translation proper*” (114). As for the third group, “Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (114). Jakobson does not explicate “intersemiotic translation” but it has, nonetheless, prolifically featured in many disciplines. In 2019, *Adaptation* devoted a special issue to the exploration of “intersemiotic translation.” Vasso Giannakopoulou summarizes the term as “the transfer of verbal texts into other systems of signification, such as visual, oral, aural, gestural, or kinesic” (2019: 199). Michael Cronin introduces species communication into the term. He defines communication between “radically different forms of species” as “intersemiotic translation,” and its mission is to recast the voices of nonhuman species into human languages (2017: 82). To achieve the goal, Cronin proposes “three elements to the translational exploration of human-animal communication: the rehabilitation of the animal subject; engaging difference; cross-species agency” (76). In one recent article, Cronin derives his concept of “translation disparation” from parallaxes in optics. Each retina perceives the world in a bi-dimensional image, but the two images from each eye are not identical and these differences create “a new axiom, tri-dimensionality” (Cronin 2019: 198). Likewise, similar phenomena occur in translation: “Problematic disparation which is remarkably analogous to translation — a new entity emerging in the problematic gap between different languages — produces singularity” (198).

Cronin makes a great contribution to translation studies: “intersemiotic translation” expands the field of translation, and “disparation” provides scientific evidence to justify differences between the source text and target text. However, Cronin does not substantiate intersemiotic translation with interlingual examples and makes translation “risk being dilated into nothing” (quoted in Maitland 2017: 19). Further, Cronin confines his discussion on interspecies communication within the Western tradition. This article explores species relationships from Zhuang Zi’s Taoist perspective and provides an alternative view to Western works.¹ And the

¹ *The Zhuang Zi*, is a “compilation” of Taoist texts on nature written by Zhuang Zi and his disciples in the late 4th century BC. “The period was marked by humanist and naturalist reflections on normativity shaped by the metaphor of a *dào*—a social or a natural path” (Hansen 2021 *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). These Taoist texts write about nature in a manner which allows the possibility of nonhuman agency. However, translators have intervened in this process, and this article tries to analyze their translating strategies in rendering nonhuman agency.

“disparation” between *The Zhuang Zi* and Burton Watson’s translation creates a new dimension in rendering nonhuman agency. The article argues that Zhuang Zi’s intersemiotic translation of nonhuman agency produces an aura of Taoist mystery and challenges Western translators. Specifically, Watson applies an anthropocentric approach to demystify nonhuman agency and popularizes the Chinese classic among Western readers. Unlike Watson, A. C. Graham acknowledges the text’s enigma but contains it within literary verses while Victor H. Mair foregrounds nonhuman agency and recreates the mystery in his paratext of literary graphics.

2. Intersemiotic Translation in *The Zhuang Zi*

For Zhuang Zi, at the initial stage, humans and nonhuman species follow the principle of “the equality of things” and coexist in a harmonious symbiosis. Before the birth of mankind, things in nature have “no boundaries among them” and are in a fluid process of cross-species becoming (Zhuang 1968: 41). When humankind comes into existence, it joins the myriad species on earth and becomes an equal member in their symbiosis. Gradually, human beings ascend to a dominant position over other species, assume centrality, and forget their original connections with things in nature. In other words, human culture erodes our healthy relationships with other species, so Zhuang Zi urges us to forget human culture and restore the uncontaminated connections between humans and nonhumans. Zhuang Zi’s philosophy therefore contains the seeds of posthumanism. Posthumanism, as a recent intellectual trend, argues against the centrality of human beings and contends for species equality and nonhuman agency. To “‘understand’ the animal,” Cary Wolfe proposes, humans have to ‘stand ‘under,’ not above her—by surrendering the dream of mastery troped as vision” (Wolfe 2003: 5). Similarly, Robert P. Marzec introduces a much broader framework to reconsider human history. “If you were to map out and collapse all cosmic history within one calendar year then human history would begin at five minutes to midnight on the last day of the year” (Marzec 2018: 586). The decentering of anthropocentrism reorients our cognition of human subjectivity and species relationships. Donna Haraway elevates “companion animals” to the status of “companion species” in *When Species Meet* (2008: 16) and argues for unfolded human identity. “We are all cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics” (1991: 150). Rosi Braidotti succinctly categorizes current posthumanist discussions into three branches: “becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine” (Braidotti 2013: 66). Despite different critical foci, one shared mission of posthumanism, Philip Armstrong

declares, is “to find ways of describing agency at work through the interactions of a complex and widely-dispersed network of actants, both human and other-than-human” (2008: 196). To achieve that goal or a very similar goal anticipating posthumanism by many centuries, Zhuang Zi proposed four progressive steps: *anthropocentric relinquishment*, *nonhuman agency*, *equality of things*, and *cross-species becoming*.

Anthropocentric relinquishment includes nonknowledge and nonaction. Nonknowledge refers to human reduction of knowledge to the minimum or the suspension of human knowledge (Zhuang 1968: 247). Knowledge, to some degree, is a stereotype and often misguides our understanding of the world. Knowledge forces the categorization of unfamiliar things using pre-existing structures, tagging these objects with labels, and stabilizing them within an established hierarchy; therefore, knowledge already involves blindness. Zhuang Zi thus recommends adopting nonknowledge practice to observe things. If we unlearn our knowledge or deculturize ourselves, we could look at things from fresh perspectives. Nonknowledge is closely linked with nonaction. Nonknowledge enables us to be neutral and to look at things as they are; similarly, nonaction (inaction) refers to withdrawal of human interference on the unfolding of things (Zhuang 1968: 191). All things in nature are in a dynamic process of changing. “To let them go means to follow the natural and be wu-wei, i.e., without action. To oppose them and to keep the old ones that are already out-of-date is to be artificial and yu-wei, i.e., with action” (Fung 1948: 224). The restriction of human activities makes room for other species to exercise their autonomy.²

In addition to anthropocentric relinquishment, the acknowledgement of nonhuman agency is another essential step to establish effective inter-species communications. Anthropocentrism assumes the centrality of human beings and regards nonhuman species as resources to be exploited. If things satisfy human needs, they will be valued as “useful” objects, but worthless trash if they do not. The story of the “useless” oak tree reveals Zhuang Zi’s negative attitude toward the objectification of things (Zhuang 1968: 64). Things should not be defined as “useful or useless objects” for humans; instead, they are entities with their own agency and life. Abandonment of the utilitarian view enables the possibility of going beyond anthropocentric monopoly and embracing a wider spectrum of agents, both humans and

² Teahyun Kim proposes an alternate approach of “anti-anthropocentrism.” Ecology for Zhuang Zi means the vision of “decentering humans by invalidating all dualisms and accepting the intrinsic moral value of all beings” (21).

nonhumans.

The balance between the descent of anthropocentrism and the ascent of nonhuman agency aims at “the equality of things.”³ If we forget as Zhuang Zi advises, we could restore the original egalitarian existence of species. Philosophically, all things in nature originate from the same material and enjoy ontological equality: “You have only to comprehend the one breath that is the world” (Zhuang 1968: 236). The “one breath” in the quote refers to air. For Zhuang Zi, air follows different categorical principles and then condenses itself into myriad things in accord with the principle of that object. Therefore, all things are interconnected and equal. Furthermore, the circulation of air among species indicates things’ capacity of cross-species becoming.

Cross-species becoming is one of the most elusive metaphysical terms Zhuang Zi propagates. Taoist sages often praise an infant as the idealized self. “Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me” (Zhuang 1968: 43).⁴ At the early phase of its birth, the infant has no concept of self; without a felt sense of corporeal boundary, the infant imagines that its flowing body is entangling with the surrounding things and becomes “one” of “the ten thousand things.” In this primordial fantasy, the infant lives in a world of “the equality of things.” Zhuang Zi’s concept of “cross-species becoming” receives solid support from modern science. According to Jacques Lacan, within the first six months, an infant has not developed the concept of self, and it identifies itself with any adjacent thing that might offer comfort, such as a blanket, a bottle, or a toy. The infant lives in a world of “universal equivalents” where things become equal replacements (Lacan 1988: 86). Gradually, the child narrows down its identification from heterogeneous things to the mother because of frequent maternal feedings. The shift from “heteromorphic identification” to “homeomorphic identification” indicates the child’s progression into the “Mirror Stage” (Lacan 2001: 4). The “heteromorphic identification” evinces the fluidity of identity and lends credit to Zhuang Zi’s speculation of “cross-species becoming.”⁵

³ Instead of species equality, Irving Goh argues for a replacement of “anthropocentric cognitive horizon” with “an animal philosophy.” “For Chuang Tzu, *thinking the Way concerns following or thinking the animal*” (111).

⁴ One possible reason, according to N.J. Girardot, is that a child is “in the faceless condition of Hun-tun” (1978: 33). The rite of “face-giving operation” declares a child’s initiation into society whereby he “becomes a complete member of a particular socio-cultural unit” (29). Thus, facelessness implies the returning to the chaotic state of becoming.

⁵ In fact, Lacan studied Taoist classics under the tutelage of François Cheng and quoted Zhuang Zi several times in his seminars (Cheng 2002: 54). The Real, a cornerstone in the Lacanian theory, is indebted to Zhuang Zi’s concept of the coexistent birth of Heaven, Earth and I.

3. Burton Watson's Translation: Anthropocentric Agency for Nonhumans

The Zhuang Zi has a long history of translation. This was first accomplished in the English language in 1881 when Frederic Henry Balfour published *The Divine Classic of Nan-Hua*. As the first English translation, Balfour's book pioneered the introduction of Zhuang Zi's philosophy to English speakers. In 1889, Herbert Allen Giles retranslated it as *Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*. He inserted commentary in the body of the text, and employed Victorian clichés, much to the frustration of modern readers. In 1891, James Legge authored *The Writings of Kwang-dze* which added chapter summaries and detailed notes. His appendixes are illuminating to western readers, especially the narratives and apologues in *Appendix VI* (273-310). In 1933, Yu-lan Fung translated the Inner Chapters and distinguished his version with an English translation of Kuo Hsiang's commentary. In 1968, Burton Watson published *The Complete Work of Chuang Tzu*. In 1981, A. C. Graham translated selected chapters of Chuang Tzu but substantially rearranged their contents. In 1994, Victor H. Mair found that previous English translations had been "subjected to excessive philosophical analysis" so he retranslated the book with the emphasis on its literary quality (xlv). This synopsis is not meant to exhaustively list all English translations of *The Zhuang Zi*, but rather to showcase the enduring vitality of this Oriental classic.⁶

The reasons for pinpointing the last three translators (Watson, Graham and Mair) as case studies in this paper are threefold. First, on a macrolevel, the chosen translators share the same historical background: they were intellectually active from the 1950s to the 1990s. After World War II, people became more concerned with their living environment. Rachel Carson published two environmental "best-sellers" in the 1950s, *The Sea Around Us* (1951) and *The Edge of the Sea* (1955), and *Silent Spring* in 1962. These ecological books re-engineered popular human thoughts on nature and exerted a far-reaching influence in the subsequent decades. Watson, Graham and Mair, who prepared and translated their works during this period, could not be immune to society's increasingly prevalent environmental concerns. Coincidentally, *The Zhuang Zi* also prioritizes the relationship between humans and the environment. Secondly, on a microlevel, Watson became a common denominator for these

⁶ According to Jun Wen and Xia Gan, there are 33 versions of English translations of the complete work of *The Zhuang Zi*, excluding excerpt translations (2012: 33). Besides, *Terebess Asia Online* contains 13 influential English versions of this Taoist classic. For more information, please refer to <https://terebess.hu/english/tao.html>.

translators. Watson's translation became a staple undergraduate textbook in the USA and was elected into the UNESCO Collection.⁷ Watson popularized this Chinese classic among western readers and left an indelible imprint on Zhuang Zi scholarship. Graham admitted his indebtedness to Watson in the first part of his book (1981: 30). Likewise, Mair acknowledged Watson as one of the scholars whose studies on Taoism he has "relied upon so heavily" (1998: 402).

The third point is their representativeness. The experience Watson acquired in translating *Grand History of China* and *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsun Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu* led to his historical reading of Chuang Tzu. This is reflected in his writing that Master Chuang "remains within society" but discards the "baggage of conventional values" and frees himself from social bondage (4-6). However, Watson neglected the "disjointed, mutilated" nature of the book (Graham 1981: 30). Therefore, Graham favored a synthetic approach, as shown in his description of *The Chuang Tzu* as a "hotchpotch" compiled by different writers from disparate ages that contains both edifying wisdom and "whimsical" nonsense (31). Whether unintelligible passages are whimsical nonsense or soaring imagination remains controversial. Unlike Graham, Mair cast a literary reading of Zhuang Zi. Mair "view[s] *the Chuang Tzu* primarily as a work of literature" (1998: xi). Therefore, he prioritized "philological accuracy" to "simulate the odd quality of writing in *the Chuang Tzu*" (xii).

Watson published *The Complete Work of Chuang Tzu* in 1968. His translation is easy to understand and maintains high academic quality leading to its acceptance in the Chinese Series of the Translations Collection of UNESCO and popularity as a textbook in U.S. undergraduate programs. It is regarded as one of the best translations of *The Zhuang Zi* in the English language. However, as far as nonhuman agency is concerned, Watson adopts a conservative attitude and accentuates anthropocentric dimensions. Based on the steps of interspecies communication mentioned in the previous section, this article selects the following paragraphs to showcase the point.

齧缺問乎王倪曰：“子知物之所同是乎？”
曰：“吾惡乎知之！”
“子知子之所不知邪？”

⁷ The UNESCO version is available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000047237>. Readers can also consult other English versions of this Taoist classic at <https://terebess.hu/english/tao.html>.

曰：“吾惡乎知之！”

“然則物無知邪？”

曰：“吾惡乎知之！雖然，嘗試言之。庸詎知吾所謂知之非不知邪？庸詎知吾所謂不知之非知邪？且吾嘗試問乎女：民溼寢則腰疾偏死，鱗然乎哉？木處則惴慄恟懼，猿猴然乎哉？三者孰知正處？”（陈鼓应 2007：97）

Nieh Ch'ueh asked Wang Ni, "Do you know what all things agree in calling right?"

"How would I know that?" said Wang Ni.

"Do you know that you don't know it?"

"How would I know that?"

"Then do things know nothing?"

"How would I know that? However, suppose I try saying something. What way do I have of knowing that if I say I know something I don't really not know it? Or what way do I have of knowing that if I say I don't know something I don't really in fact know it? Now let me ask *you* some questions. If a man sleeps in a damp place, his back aches and he ends up half paralyzed, but is this true of a loach? If he lives in a tree, he is terrified and shakes with fright, but is this true of a monkey? Of these three creatures, then which one knows the proper place to live?" (Watson 45)

Zhuang Zi discusses knowledge from species perspectives. Each species has special sensory receptors to perceive the environment and, consequently, formulates its unique understanding/knowledge of the world. For example, a loach regards "a damp place" as a comfortable place, while a man deems the wet swamp as a detrimental habitat, because of their different organs and physical characteristics. These diverse preferences are equally valid. However, anthropocentrism tends to universalize human knowledge as the standard to evaluate all species. Therefore, human knowledge of the "damp place" as an improper place to live signals our ignorance of a loach's ideal living habitat. Zhuang Zi's discussion on the dialectic relationship between knowledge and ignorance intertwines with species cognition. Human knowledge, as explored in the first part, favors stereotypical associations and colours our observation. We thus should forget knowledge and adopt an ignorant attitude (nonknowledge) to witness the process in which things unfold themselves—the agency of nonhumans.

To align with Western expectations, Watson pays excessive attention to human actors and neglects nonhuman agency in his translation. Frequent appearances of the "I" in the selected translation overwhelm the whole passage and leave no room for nonhuman actors. His translation turns interspecies communication into a completely human issue: how do we ascertain the corresponding relationship between linguistic utterances and human cognition? "If I say I know something," it might refer to the fact that "I don't know it." And "if I say I

don't know something," it may indicate that "I in fact know it." The central issue becomes: what is the reliable criterion to measure linguistic utterances and signified realities? This translation erases nonhuman species and renders the discussion into an exploration of human cognition.⁸ In actuality, Zhuang Zi integrates the relationship of knowledge and ignorance with species distinctions. Human knowledge of a tree as a terrible living place masks our ignorance of monkey's living habitat; and if we practice nonknowledge, this "ignorant" attitude could facilitate our understanding of nonhuman species and open a world of nonhuman knowledge. Watson misses the cross-species dimension in his translation of knowledge.

Nonknowledge is closely associated with nonaction.

[此]是事之變，命之行也；日夜相代乎前，而知不能規乎其始者也。……使之和豫通而不失於兌，使日夜無卻而與物為春，是接而生時於心者也。（陈鼓应 2007: 184）

These are the alternations of the world, the workings of fate. Day and night they change place before us and wisdom cannot spy out their source. [...] If you can harmonize and delight in them, master them and never be at a loss for joy, if you can do this day and night without break and make it be spring with everything, mingling with all and creating the moment within your own mind. (Watson 73-4)

"To be spring with everything" epitomizes Zhuang Zi's concept of the ideal relationship between humans and nonhuman species. "The alternations of the world" manifest themselves in a ceaseless and spontaneous way. Humans are incapable of comprehending the "source" of these workings, nor could humans hold back these rushing currents of nature. Therefore, the best policy is to adopt nonaction practice: to be an empty vessel and thereby connect oneself with nature and embrace the changing world. Nonaction minimizes human actions and maximizes room for nonhuman agency. Watson perceives Zhuang Zi's emphatic tone on the performance of things and exalts the precise wording of "to be spring with everything" as "an example of the highly poetic language" (Watson 1968: 19). "To render the phrase as 'live in peace with mankind' (Giles), or 'be kind with things' (Yu-lan Fung), not only blurs the image of the original beyond recognition, but suggests that Chuang Tzu is mouthing platitudes" (19). Watson is justified in his efforts in exploiting "the beauties of ancient Chinese" and he

⁸ Readers might ask: to what extent and how does the translation impose this anthropocentrism? One possible reason is attributed to differences between Chinese and English. The relationship between the ancient Chinese source text and the translation will be further discussed in section 4.

intuitively perceives nonhuman agency. Though his instincts have merit, Watson subdues nonhuman agency to human domination. A survey of verbs in his translation, such as “master them,” “do this,” “make,” and “create,” clearly reveals human lust for domination. Each of these verbs shows an unmistakable message of human determination and the augmentation of these human efforts aims at one teleological purpose: to create the desirous moment in one’s mind. This anthropocentric translation is incongruent with Zhuang Zi’s attitude of nonaction, which accentuates nonhuman agents over human actors.

Zhuang Zi not only grants agency to nonhuman beings but also acknowledges the validity of nonhuman perspectives. The story of the P’eng bird concretizes this point.

野馬也，塵埃也，生物之以息相吹也。天之蒼蒼，其正色邪？其遠而無所至極邪？其視下也，亦若是則已矣。（陈鼓应 8）

Wavering heat, bits of dust, living things blowing each other about—the sky looks very blue. Is that its real colour, or is it because it is so far away and has no end? When the bird looks down, all he sees is blue too. (Watson 29)

Watson’s translation ignores the aviary perspective and projects a heavily humanized version instead. The human brain has a large number of cones in the retina, so humans have highly sensitive color vision. Most animals lack such vision. Men look up to the sky and perceive the empyrean to be blue. A bird that has different sensory receptors might perceive the sky to be a different colour. Therefore, Zhuang Zi compels readers to ponder a provocative question: “Is blue the standard colour of the sky?” Watson misses species differentiation and ascribes blue colour to its far distance and remote boundary: “Is that its real colour, or is it because it is so far away and has no end?” In fact, the sky is only “far away” from human beings who stay on the ground, and NOT “far away” from the gigantic bird that rises “ninety thousand miles” above the ground and is actually very close to the sky. The following sentence consolidates this posthumanist interpretation. “When the bird looks down, all he sees is blue too” (29). What the bird sees in “ninety thousand miles” is precisely the same as human vision, and the aviary perspective is totally absorbed into the human standard. In fact, Zhuang Zi is very artistic in presenting species differences: men could only look up to the sky from the ground, and from a far distance; in contrast, the bird soars “ninety thousand miles” above the ground, and is in close contact with the sky. What is the possible colour of the sky for such a bird? Zhuang Zi skillfully juxtaposes the vertical polarization of up and down with the horizontal difference of far and near to accentuate species diversity. Then he speculates on a

tentative result: when the bird beholds from “ninety thousand miles” in the sky, he might have a similar view as humans look up to the sky. This speculative mood contains species differences and human eagerness to initiate species communications, but Watson’s translation (“all he sees is blue too”) bulldozes the aviary perspective and absorbs it into the human world.

Anthropocentric relinquishment and the ascent of nonhuman agency aim at the equality of things. For Zhuang Zi, all things in nature are ontologically equal because they all stem from air, and they are only later organized into hierarchical categories when humans assume apex status. Therefore, the title of the second chapter, “Qi wu lun,” (齐物论), indicates a regression from liberating things from anthropocentric organizations to restoring the original equality of things. Watson’s translation of the title as “discussion on making all things equal” accentuates human efforts and downplays nonhuman species (36). Zhuang Zi condenses multiple meanings into the title and liberates the full potential of each Chinese character in the phrase. When “Qi” functions as a noun, the title refers to the ontological status of things, covering the meanings of both “the equality of things” and “the equality of human discussions.” When “Qi” works as a verb, the title indicates human efforts to achieve any of the following goals: 1) to equalize things, 2) to equalize human discussions, 3) to equalize things and discussions (Wu 1988: 181-2). Whatever the case, “the equality of things,” like the latent content of dreams, has various manifestations. Watson’s translation focuses on the surface and concentrates on human efforts towards “making all things equal.” In short, his accentuation of human discussion fails to give full weight to the ontological status of the equality of things.

The equality of things is closely linked with cross-species becoming. Things have no fixed and permanent boundaries, and they are in a dynamic process of becoming. Cross-species becoming finds full expression in the polymorphous manifestations of Master Pot meeting a shaman. “Just now I appeared to him as Not Yet Emerged from My Source” (鄉吾示之以未始出吾宗) (Zhuang 1968: 96). Here Zhuang Zi places the birth of “I” at the emergence of things. At this primordial phase, things have not formulated their boundaries and are in a process of becoming. Like a newborn infant, its inchoate self is flowing in random directions and mingling with adjacent things.⁹ Here is Watson’s translation: “I came at him empty,

⁹ Quan Wang makes a systematic investigation into the relationship between becoming and the inchoate

wriggling and turning, not knowing anything about ‘who’ or ‘what,’ now dipping and bending, now flowing in waves” (吾與之虛而委蛇，不知其誰何，因以為弟靡，因以為波流，故逃也。) (1968: 97). In the original Chinese text, “I” become empty, and the empty “I” and things intermingle and cancel out individual boundaries, with a strong accent on both human and nonhuman agency. Yet, in Watson’s translation, the partnership between human and nonhuman actors disappears, and instead, it is the human subject (“I”) that is completely responsible for all actions: “wriggling and turning,” “dipping and bending,” “flowing in waves.”

This kind of anthropocentric translation is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Watson runs the risk of explaining nonhuman agency unfaithfully. Agency of things is of paramount importance for Zhuang Zi because the spontaneous rhythms of things provide exemplary lessons to edify humans. Taoist sages often examine the world from nonhuman perspectives, so their enigmatic words commonly perplex readers. “I was astonished by his words, which were limitless as the Milky Way. They were extravagant and remote from human experience” (Zhuang 1998: 6). If Watson had loyally translated nonhuman agency into English, Western readers would have been baffled by this mysterious oriental classic. This leads to the other side of the sword: Watson’s anthropocentric translation greatly facilitates Western readers’ rudimentary understandings and popularizes this Taoist classic in English-speaking countries.

4. Translation Disparation: The Paratexts of Thematic Reorganization and Literary Graphics

Like many Taoist sages, Zhuang Zi often detaches himself from the anthropocentric perspective, examines the world from nonhuman viewpoints, and becomes a mouthpiece for these species. Therefore, his words are often baffling and obscure to people entrenched in anthropocentric discourse. This frustrating situation is further complicated by Zhuang Zi’s adroit manipulation of language. A substantial portion of ancient Chinese follows grammatical structures of verb + object, with salient absences of a subject. Zhuang Zi adeptly makes these absent subjects legitimate places for both human and nonhuman agents. This, given prevalent anthropocentric culture, accentuates the importance of nonhuman species. It

subject in “A Comparative Study of the Subject in Jacques Lacan and Zhuangzi” (2017: 257-260).

also becomes an intriguing question for English translators. English sentences usually follow the patterns of subject + verb + object. The absence of a subject often occurs in imperative sentences, such as “Close the door” and “Finish the work.” In these imperative sentences, the missing subjects are usually human agents who issue requests or orders. This differs significantly from ancient Chinese in *The Zhuang Zi*, where absent subjects are often legitimate positions qualified for either human or nonhuman agents. Watson must make frequent choices in his translation process. In most cases, he prioritizes anthropocentric selection of human agency and follows the logocentric tradition of Western culture. Watson’s preference for human agency makes his translation smooth and elegant, so it enters the canon of world literature: the texts of the U.S. Office of Education and the Translation Collections of UNESCO.

Here we have a translation disparation: *The Zhuang Zi* often speaks to readers from nonhuman perspectives and gains an aura of Taoist mystery; Watson’s anthropocentric approach demystifies nonhuman agency and makes the oriental text more intelligible to Western readers. This disparation of nonhuman agency between the source text and its translation creates a new dimension to deal with the mysterious aura. A. C. Graham acknowledges the disparation and responds with the paratext of thematic reorganization, while Victor H. Mair proposes the paratext of literary graphics to handle the situation.¹⁰

Graham’s thematic reorganization recognizes the mysterious or even “unintelligible” quality of this Chinese classic and recategorizes its content into different chapters (Graham 1981: 30). On a micro level, Graham aligns nonhuman agency with literary sections or segments of the text. A translator should “do equal justice to Chuang-tzu as a philosopher and as a poet” (33). One way to “do justice to” Zhuang Zi “as a poet” is to recognize his literary imagination: mysterious, wild, unbelievable, which forms a sharp contrast with pragmatic daily life. The accentuation of “the literary aspect” of Zhuang Zi enormously facilitates English readers’ comprehension of this mysterious Taoist text. For example, many confusing Taoist terms, such as the equality of things and cross-species becoming, if they are

¹⁰ A paratext, according to Gérard Genette, is “a threshold of interpretation” that builds a bridge between a text and its readers (1997: 2). “The paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers, and more generally, to the public” (1). It consists of a heterogenous group of discourses, such as subtitles, notes, and illustrations. Paratexts have different manifestations in two translators’ texts. Graham chiefly employs “notes” and rearranges the “tables of contents” to streamline the logic in his translation. And Mair primarily adopts “illustrations” and “genre indications” to foreground the literary quality of *The Zhuang Zi*.

understood as literary representations, are more easily digestible. Furthermore, Graham distinguishes two writing styles of Zhuang Zi in his translation: prose and verse. Prose is closely associated with philosophical explication while verse has affinity with the literary genre. It is “quite reasonable” to “render rhymed passages as poetic prose” (32). Graham’s highlight of Zhuang Zi “as a philosopher and as a poet” in fact is a dividing of the text/translation into prose and literature, the latter of which becomes a more appropriate genre for expressing nonhuman agency. These literary segments are scattered among philosophical reflection and become footnotes to the metaphysical edifice. In other words, literary sections are embedded within philosophical expositions and disciplined into an anthropocentric project. The large number of notes also testifies to Graham’s anthropocentric anxiety to demystify Taoist concepts.

Despite Graham’s purported claim to represent Zhuang Zi’s enigmatic text, his translation becomes a reinforced version of anthropocentric domination. The above-mentioned analysis only represents a part of his overall translation strategy. On a macro level, Graham acknowledges that the original text is “disjointed, mutilated, even frankly unintelligible” (1981: 30), and his translation strategy is to reorganize the whole content of *The Zhuang Zi* into several categories: the thought of Zhuang Zi, the Primitivist, the Yangists, the Syncretists (31). Among these categories, “this extraordinary hotchpotch” consists of incompatible fragments and contradictory intellectual trends from various writers in different historical periods (30). However, within the same category, the translation has “homogenous blocks” (32). These units are rearranged along the axis of themes to foreground their logical relations. Graham even employs “transpositions” to streamline logical connections of sections by moving passages “to more suitable contexts” (32). As for these sections which could not be classified into labeled categories, Graham simply abandons these undisciplined passages, “which amount to a fifth of the book” (32). While Graham’s paratext of thematic reorganization acknowledges the enigmatic quality of the original text, his intermingling of literary mystique with philosophical discourse produces an enhanced anthropocentric translation.

Victor H. Mair also notices the translation disparation but he responds to it with a new paratext: literary graphics. In both the “Preface” and “Acknowledgements,” Mair admits his indebtedness to Watson, yet his expertise in Taoism enables him to detect the deficiencies in previous translations. As a critic, he edits *Experimental Essays on Chuang-Tzu* and expands

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the horizons of Taoist studies. As a translator, he is well known as “the acclaimed translator of the *Tao Te Ching*,” which is regarded as the founding text of Taoism. Therefore, Mair is conversant with Taoism, fully aware of the importance of nonhuman agency. “While Confucian humanism definitely put man at the center of things, Master Chuang thought of man as but one among the myriad things” (Mair 1998: xxv). And all things in nature enjoy an ontological status of equality. “All the myriad things in the world are different by nature and they have different innate abilities, but they are equal” (xl). To arrive at equality, Mair discovers that “Master Chuang’s game is to put dents in, if not annihilate altogether, human thought process” (xxxix). Correspondingly, his translation pays due respect to nonhuman species.

Besides, Mair regards the original Chinese text as primarily “a literary text” (Mair 1998: xlv). Names of characters in the story epitomize literary quality. Many translators simply “transcribe” characters’ names into English and completely ignore their provocative ramifications within a literary text. In fact, these names “constitute puns or are otherwise intimately operative in the unfolding of a given tale” (lii). The “protean Master Chuang” concretizes such an example (xxxiv). He is known to others as “Master Chuang,” a reverent sage who is supposed to be a living example of virtue; behind the respected façade lies his real name: “Chuang Chou,” which “ostensibly mean[s] ‘Solemn Round,’” conveying a humorous and ironic connotation of “slipperily circular” (xxxv). This humorous touch permeates everywhere, turns the whole book into an interesting literary work, and refuses any dividing between philosophy and literature. Likewise, Zhuang Zi, rather than “a systematic philosopher,” becomes the “protean Master Chuang” who metamorphizes himself into various characters to engage with other participants in situational discussions.

These two aspects of Mair, his expertise in Taoism and his literary reading of the text, combine content and form into an ideal platform for exploring nonhuman agency. Mair creates a new translation paratext to embody the idea: literary graphics. These eleven graphics depict diverse aspects of nature and orchestrate independent chapters into a unified book. A systematic investigation into these sketches reveals that they are much more than simple illustrations. These graphics have a strong accent of nonhuman agency. The total of eleven sketches may be categorized as follows: animals (3), landscapes (6), and humans (2). The three animal pictures share a common feature: the size of the animals is disproportionately enlarged to occupy almost the whole space of each picture, depicting animals taking actions.

For instance, one picture is of three big fish huddling together on the land. When springs dry up, these fish “blow moisture on each other and keep each other wet with their slime” (Zhuang 1998: 53). Confronted with an endangered situation, these intelligent fish organize activities to help each other and assist their mutual survival.

Apart from animals, six sketches regard trees, rivers, and mountains as the central protagonists and convey an unmistakable message of nonhuman agency. The picture of the “gnarled and knotted trees” in Chapter 20 epitomizes this Taoist teaching. Things are often defined as useful objects for humans; the uselessness of the gnarled trees departs from the anthropocentric system and enables the trees to have a life of their own, a space to unfold their unique rhythms. There are only two sketches about human beings. In one picture, a man is surrounded by woods and mountains, suggestive of a harmonious symbiosis of myriad species. In another, two fishermen are paddling a small boat on a big river. The navigation calls for the cooperation of the padding fishermen and surging currents and visualizes human negotiation with nonhuman agents.

In addition, these graphics establish alignment within the translation as a whole. Mair carefully distributes these drawings throughout the whole work. Approximately at an interval of every 30 pages, a well-designed picture appears, foregrounding nonhuman species. These graphics, like beacons, guide readers going through this mysterious oriental tome and constantly remind readers of the Taoist doctrine of the agency of things. The front cover encapsulates the Taoist essence and sets the basic tone for the whole book. In this mysterious sketch, a man is seemingly “prisoned” amongst mountain rocks. However, a closer examination reveals that he is fusing himself with the adjacent environment. A man should descend from human hubris and deprive himself of anthropocentric action and knowledge. While his de minimis human will and action resembles that of a “prisoner,” his status of nonaction and nonknowledge isolates him from society and reconnects him with nature. The title of the translation further consolidates this posthumanist reading, as illustrated in Figure 1. “Wandering on the Way” inspires a man to abandon his desire and destination so that he will be able to listen to the voices of other species and respond to things in nature.

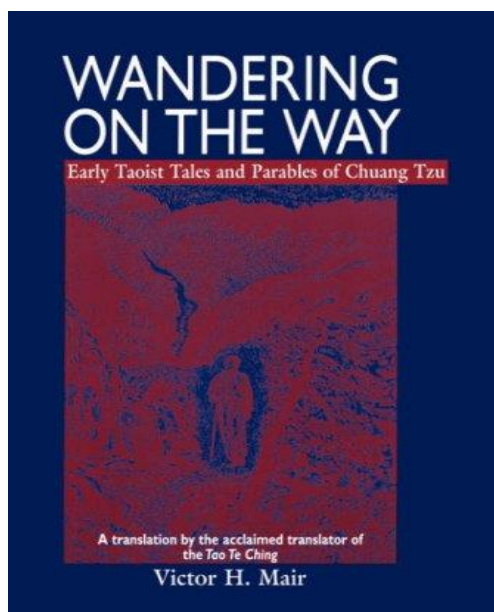


Figure 1: Cover design by Santos B. Barbasa

5. Translating Nonhuman Agency: (De)mystifying

This section selects the following paragraphs from Graham and Mair, respectively, to make a comparative study of their translations of nonhuman agency and their strategies of (de)mystification.¹¹

To maintain our store in peace and joy, and let none of it be lost through the senses though channels to them are cleared, to ensure that day and night there are no fissures and it makes a springtime it shares with everything, this is to be a man who at every encounter generates the season in his own heart. (Graham 80)

To make the mind placid and free-flowing without letting it be dissipated in gratification, causing it to have springtime with all things day and night uninterruptedly, this is to receive and engender the seasons in one's mind. (Mair 48)

Graham's translation implies a determined human desire to command everything. The parallel structure of three verbs — "to maintain, to let, to ensure" — demonstrates an unyielding determination to place everything within human reach. This contradicts Taoist nonaction: humans should minimize their actions to hear the voices of nature and witness the unfolding of nonhuman agents. In this regard, Mair's translation delivers a superior rendering of interspecies relationships. "To make the mind placid and free-flowing" bears a closer resemblance to Zhuang Zi's sage of "sitting in forgetfulness," who empties himself of earthly

¹¹ The Chinese paragraphs are the same as quoted in Part II; therefore, the article does not repeat the citations in this section.

obsessions, responding to and free-flowing with myriad things. In addition, the selection of verbs also reveals their attitudes on species relations. Verbs, such as “generate,” “let,” and “make” in Graham’s translation suggest an accentuation of human actors. Instead, Mair culls his dictions to curb human actions and foreground nonhuman species. “Causing” dilates human determination and repositions it as one of many factors in a chain of natural actions; “to receive and engender” indicates passive human actions and this passivity of human action (nonaction) restores the original connection with things. The translators’ different views on species are further revealed in their representations of aviary agency.

Is the azure of the sky its true colour? Or is it that the distance in which we are looking is infinite? It never stops flying higher till everything below looks the same as above (heat hazes, dust-storms, the breath which living things blow at each other).
(Graham 43)

Is azure the true color of the sky? Or is the sky so distant that its farthest limits can never be reached? When the P’eng looks down at the sky from above, it must appear just the same as when we look up... (Mair 4)

Both Graham and Mair pay certain respect to nonhuman agency, but they adopt different attitudes toward interspecies relationships. Graham’s translation gives an impression that men are gazing at the sky and a gigantic bird soaring high above, and these two occurrences appear insulated from one another. Mair’s translation recapitulates the Taoist essence. Is the sky observed from below the same as it is observed from above? In other words, if the same thing is observed from two polarized perspectives, are the results congruent with each other? If not, which one is the “true” observation? Mair adroitly juxtaposes perspectives with species to validate the plurality of standards: men look up to the sky, while the bird “looks down at the sky from above.” The speculative mood of “must appear just the same” evinces Taoists’ eagerness to go beyond the monopoly of human perspective and embrace nonhuman experience.

The translations of “Qi wu lun” are a further illustration of their different views on species. Graham’s translation, “the sorting which evens things out,” accentuates human efforts of “sorting” to build up balances of things. He confines the key Taoist concept to human affairs, dealing with “criticism of analytic thinking in terms of right and wrong alternatives,” leaving out the original ontological equality of things (Graham 1981: 29). In contrast, Mair’s translation is more inclusive. “On the equality of things” refers to both human discussions on

relationships and human transcendence of anthropocentrism to embrace species equality.

Moreover, the episode of Master Pot's cross-species becoming magnifies their differences.

I showed him how it is before ever we come out of our Ancestor.
With him I attenuated, wormed in and out,
Unknowing who or what we were,
It made him think he was fading away,
It made him think he was carried off on the waves. (Graham 97)

I showed myself to him with my ancestry having not yet begun to appear. I was
emptily intertwined with it so that one could not discern who was who. Thus did I
bend with the wind and flow with the waves. (Mair 70)

In this episode, Zhuang Zi vividly illustrates the primordial emergence of "I" from the surrounding environment. "Heaven and earth were born together with me and the myriad things are one with me" (Zhuang 1998: 18). In this pristine realm, the shapeless "I" interacts with the surrounding things and metamorphizes itself into any contingent thing. Mair's translation captures this Taoist spirit. "I was emptily intertwined with" the things in the nascent emergence and lost personal boundary. Then the "I" fused itself with the adjacent species: sometimes the "I" mingled with the blowing wind, and at another time, the "I" became the flowing waves.

Graham also notices the mysterious quality of this passage and translates it into verses with a special typographic layout to remind English readers of its literary quality. Despite his salient efforts, Graham's translation injects a heavy dose of anthropocentrism and downplays the theme of cross-species becoming. His translation provokes a likely impression for English readers: Master Pot ("I") is performing a magic show to outwit Chi Hsien ("him"). "I" change myself into various bizarre forms, create a hallucinatory scene, and draw the audience into the virtuality. And this magic world "made him think he was fading" and "he was carried off on the waves." In other words, the audience feels his loss of control and self so that he becomes terrified and flees away. Graham places the emphasis on the loss of human identity and the dramatic effect of the performance, so the whole scene incorporates interpersonal activities that have no reference to cross-species becoming. Moreover, to demystify this enigmatic passage, Graham even resorts to science. In the translation note, he ascribes Master Pot's occult performance to "the control of the ch'i (the breath and other energies of the body) by breathing which is very deep" (Graham 1981: 98). This physical manipulation of

breath-controlling disperses the mist of mystery, sheds light on readers' comprehension, and underscores human agents.

6. Conclusion

Translating nonhuman agency has become an emergent topic for translators. Michael Cronin makes a systematic study of intersemiotic translation and proposes fundamental concepts in the field of eco-translation. However, he limits his exploration within the Western tradition, and does not provide interlingual translations to support his concept. This article explores the Taoist concept of interspecies communication and provides an alternative to the Western model. In addition, the translation disparation between the original text and Burton Watson's translation generates innovative responses from translators. A.C. Graham concedes the aura of mystery but limits it within literary sections in his reinforced version of anthropocentric translation, while Victor H. Mair foregrounds nonhuman agency and recreates the mysterious atmosphere in his translation.

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