

A Study on Lin Yutang's Cultural Identity Through His Translation Work: *The Wisdom of Laotse*

Yan Xin* and Yuan Xiaolu

Abstract—The translation of Chinese classics has a history of more than a century, and Lin Yutang was a model of translating and introducing Chinese classics to the world in English. Lin Yutang translated *Tao Te Ching* as *The Wisdom of Laotse* by means of reconstructing, rewriting and interpreting, which has caused widespread concern and far-reaching influence in the world, and many Westerners began to learn about Chinese Taoist culture from *The Wisdom of Laotse*. By comparing the translated version with the original one, this paper attempts to study Lin Yutang's cultural identity through *The Wisdom of Laotse* from a macro perspective. As a famous Chinese writer, linguist and essayist, Lin Yutang not only switched the linguistic code and adjusted the structure of *Tao Te Ching*, but also explained its contents and interpreted its thoughts in details with his own understanding, removing the strangeness of the original text, adding the logic and systematization of the *Tao Te Ching*. Lin introduced the indigenous Chinese Taoist culture to the English world with his insights, which has shaped his own cultural identity as a cultural interpreter, communicator and philosopher.

Index Terms—Cultural identity, Lin Yutang, *Tao Te Ching*, *The Wisdom of Laotse*

I. INTRODUCTION

The translation of Chinese classics has a history of more than a century, and Lin Yutang was a model of translating and introducing Chinese classics to the world in English. Lin Yutang's compilations and translations of classic Chinese texts into English were bestsellers in the West. With the wisdom of the East and the West, along with the combination of "Shu (Technique)" and "Tao (Doctrine)", Lin Yutang translated the complex and abstract Chinese classics, containing traditional culture, philosophical ideas and Chinese people's wisdom, into the English-speaking world, which has been welcomed and concerned worldwide.

The *Tao Te Ching*, written by Laotse during the Spring and Autumn period in ancient China (770 B.C.–476 B.C.), is an important source of Chinese Taoist philosophical thought. It consists of a total of eighty-one chapters, each of which is untitled, and the entire book is centered on the themes of self-cultivation, governance, military use, and health care. It is profound and involves politics, metaphysics, ethics, psychology and other things. The translation process of it involves both intralingual and interlingual translation, and "its ambiguity and esotericism have given rise to much debate as to whether or not there is a central philosophical

nucleus that can link the different thematic elements together, depending on its selection and reconstruction" [1].

In 1948, Lin Yutang translated *Tao Te Ching* into *The Wisdom of Laotse* through compilation, rewriting and interpretation, making it a popular reading material with prominent themes, strict logic and strong readability, so as to enable English readers to fully understand the great thoughts of the ancient Chinese philosophers, and to successfully introduce the philosophical wisdom of the ancient Chinese Taoists to the English-speaking world, which has had a profound impact all over the world. Through the comments of readers from different regions of the world on Amazon's official website, it can be seen that many English readers began to contact Chinese Taoist thought and start to love Taoist culture through Lin Yutang's *The Wisdom of Laotse*.

Lin Yutang code-switches and adjusts the framework of the *Tao Te Ching*, deconstructs the textual structure of the original book, reclassifies the contents according to his own understanding, and illustrated it with the help of another Chinese philosophical classic *Chuangtse*. Thus, the strangeness of the original classic texts is removed, the organization, logic and system are added, and the Taoist culture of China is reproduced in English, and Lin Yutang's own insights fully embody his own Taoist thought. Lin Yutang shows not only his identity as a translator, but also a philosopher, cultural interpreter and communicator. It fully reflects Lin Yutang's philosophical thought and demonstrates his multiple identity roles.

II. THE TRANSLATOR'S CULTURAL IDENTITY

Cultural identity is "the link between people's subjective experience of the world and the cultural-historical setting that constitutes this subjectivity" [2].

Cultural identity is an abstract and broad concept consisting of multiple components. The cultural identity of the translator discussed in this paper specifically refers to the different identity roles that the translator exhibits before, during, and after the translation of the work. Cultural identity changes over time and space; the stability of cultural identity is relative, while changing is constant, and cultural identity changes throughout a person's life. As a translator, when Lin Yutang came to the United States as an ethnic diaspora, what and how to translate cultural values that were deeply rooted in his translations were highlighted in his translated texts. An examination of the external factors of Lin Yutang's choice of translated texts shows that the classic texts highlight the construction of his cultural identity.

Lin Yutang had a special life experience in that he lived in both China and the United States and received relevant education. During his abroad life, Lin Yutang noticed the great prejudice against China and the huge misunderstanding

Manuscript received August 9, 2023; revised September 20, 2023; accepted October 17, 2023.

Yan Xin and are with School of International Studies, Shaanxi Normal University, China.

Yuan Xiaolu is with School of Humanities and Foreign Languages, Xi'an University of Posts and Telecommunications, China.

*Correspondence: yanxin@xupt.edu.cn (Y.X.)

of Chinese culture in foreign countries at that time, thus forming a strong concept of “orientalism” and “self-orientalism” [3]. They pushed him to start up his journey of writing and translating to justify for the Chinese culture so as to allow westerners and other countries around the world to truly understand the essence of Chinese culture and philosophy.

Lin Yutang is “returning to traditional culture as a Chinese”, “examining traditional culture from the perspective of modern intellectuals”, and “choosing culture from a Western perspective” [4]. Lin Yutang reproduces his native culture in foreign language through his translations, and shapes his multiple identities as a translator, philosopher, and culturalist through the construction of native discourse.

III. LIN YUTANG’S IDENTITY OF CULTURAL TRANSLATOR

The Wisdom of Laotse, a successful English translation of a Chinese philosophical text, was published in the United States (1948), Germany (1948), Spain (1953), and Korea (1998), and reprinted in the United States in 1949, 1979, and 1983. This paper selects the version published by *The Modern Library* in June 1979. Lin Yutang had seen “nine German translations and twelve English translations before the retranslation, of which he considered Wiley’s and Mills’ to be the best, and from which he himself benefited greatly when translating” [5]. It can be seen that Lin Yutang is first of all an excellent reader, carefully absorbing the studies and translations of his predecessors, and then creatively translating them through his own thinking and understanding.

The cover of Lin Yutang’s translation of the *Tao Te Ching* reads “*The Wisdom of Laotse, Translated, edited and with an introduction and notes by Lin Yutang*”, which shows that this is not a simple translation of linguistic symbols, but a cultural and philosophical book that is translated, edited, rewritten, and interpreted. Utilizing free verse, this book is comparable to the original in terms of content momentum and style, with a cohesive and precise textual expression. The text begins with “Pronunciation of Chinese names” “Introduction” and “Prolegomena by Chuangtse” before the main body of the text. The original book of *Tao Te Ching* contains eighty-one chapters, but none of them has a title. After Lin Yutang’s reconstruction and editing, seven parts were formed, and each of them has a title summarizing the content of the ideas, for example, “Book I: *The Character of Tao*; Book II: *The Lessons of Tao*; Book III: *The Limitation of Tao*; Book IV: *The Source of Power*; Book V: *The Conduct of Life*; Book VI: *The Theory of Government*; Book VII: *Aphorisms*”. At the same time, the table of contents clearly indicates “The chapter headings indicate the text of Laotse; section headings indicate selections from *Chuangtse*”. The reader can see Lin Yutang’s narrative style of “explaining Laotse through Chuangtse” in every section. In the concluding section of the book, Lin adds “Imaginary conversations between Laotse and Confucius” and “Conversion Table of Chapters in *Chuangtse*” [6].

The first forty chapters of *Tao Te Ching* form the philosophical principles of Laozi’s thought, while the last forty-one chapters focus on problems in practical life. To help readers comprehend the ideas and connotations of each theme, Lin Yutang gives each chapter a title according to its

theme before translating the original text of the *Tao Te Ching*, and most of the chapters are supplemented with commentaries and explanations afterward. Whether it is the original text of Laotse or quotations from *Chuangtse*, Lin Yutang rearranges them according to their contents and themes, and guides them with headings, which provides English readers with clearer ideas and lines of thought and enables them to grasp more accurately the connotations of China’s abstract philosophical ideas.

According to the needs of the readers and the reality of cultural differences, Lin Yutang changes certain cultural elements of the original text so that the translated text could enter into the readers’ minds, shorten the distance with the readers, and realize cultural acceptance. Lawrence Venuti believes that translation not only constructs the representation of local culture of unique foreign culture, but also participates in the shaping process of local identity. [7] From the perspective of translation motivation and the translated texts, *The Wisdom of Laotse* is very natural and flexible. Lin’s skillful translation techniques and strategies, guided by the translation purpose of introducing Chinese culture to Westerners, flexibly use both domestication and foreignization, with domestication aiming to allow Westerners to understand Chinese culture more smoothly, and foreignization perfectly preserving the numerous Chinese cultural information which is very different from that of Western cultures.

In the process of translation, Lin Yutang skillfully used two cultural backgrounds, making them influence each other, contain each other, and transform each other to merge into a compound cultural identity, in which Chinese culture is the foundation, and western is the medium and expression method. [8] Every translation of a text is a creative act, a result of the translator’s integration of the text in his own historical tradition, and a process of constructing the text in his own understanding, which is the way the text continues to exist. Lin Yutang’s translation method is to Americanize Chinese stories and sinicize European and American stories. He wants the West to identify with the Eastern culture and at the same time let the East accept the Western culture, and it all has to do with his cross-cultural identity as a translator. “The process of reconstruction and reorientation of cultural identity is a process of cross-cultural communication, which lays the material and ideological and psychological foundation for translation” [4].

IV. LIN YUTANG’S IDENTITY OF PHILOSOPHICAL THINKER

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, China saw the emergence of a number of famous thinkers who put forward some philosophical theories. For example, Gong Zizhen proposed that “good and evil all start later” in human nature. Wei Yuan proposed that “being practical in the world” “the more we change the past, the more we make things easier for the people”. Zhang Ot focused on the deductive method, and his philosophy of discursive thinking went from theory to voluntarism; Liang Qichao put forward the doctrine of “removing the slaves of the heart”, emphasizing that freedom of thought is the source of truth [5].

Lin Yutang has been regarded as a literary and linguistic

scholar. Does he have his philosophical theories and can he be called a philosopher? In fact, Elmira College (New York) awarded Lin Yutang an honorary Doctor of Arts degree in 1940, and the president of the college commented on Lin Yutang like this:

“Lin Yutang—philosopher, writer and wit—patriot and yet a citizen of the world: by the magic of your pen, you have portrayed the soul of your great people to the people of the English speaking world in a way no person has ever done before. In doing so, you have spoken to the people of the English speaking world in their own language with an artistry that is at once their envy, admiration, and despair...May your native language and your adopted language forever express humanity’s aspiration to preserve the precious values of the human spirit.” [9]

Lin Yutang spends his life translating and creating in the integration of Chinese and Western cultures, and constructing his own cultural and philosophical system in translation and writing [10]. In the composition of Lin Yutang’s philosophical views, the philosophy of leisure, spirituality and humor occupies an important position, and the common source behind these philosophical concepts is Taoist philosophy represented by Laotse’s and Chuangtse’s thoughts.

Lin Yutang has realized the modern reconstruction and systematization of Taoist thought by reorganizing the chapters and explaining the content of the *Tao Te Ching* in different contexts. After Lin Yutang’s reintegration and interpretation, Laotse’s seemingly scattered maxims have become a set of coherent, focused and clear philosophical thoughts, which have completed the sorting and modern reconstruction of Taoism. In addition, Lin Yutang reveals and clarifies the relevance of Laotse’s and Chuangtse’s thoughts with a paratext. As an interpretive material, paratexts are guides and prompts for readers to accept heterogeneous texts, including prefaces, introductions, commentaries, and appendices. In the process of compiling *The Wisdom of Laotse*, Lin Yutang gives full play to his subjectivity as a philosopher, and by adding subtexts, his translations bring English readers closer and deeper into his philosophical world.

In *The Wisdom of Laotse*, Lin Yutang puts Laotse’s wisdom in the context of the entire traditional Chinese culture, supplementing a large amount of historical background information and ancient Chinese philosophy and culture, focusing on the comparison between Laotse and Chuangtse, and the cross-time and space “dialogue” with Confucius. Before translating the *Tao Te Ching*, he delved into the works of Laotse and Chuangtse several times, comparing the similarities and differences between the two ancient philosophers:

“The fundamental basis of thinking and the character of ideas of the two philosophers were the same. But while Laotse spoke in aphorisms, Chuangtse wrote long, discursive philosophical essays. While Laotse was all intuition, Chuangtse was all intellect. Laotse smiled; Chuangtse laughed. Laotse taught; Chuangtse sculled. Laotse spoke to the heart; Chuangtse spoke to the mind, Laotse was like Whitman, with the large and generous humanity of Whitman;

Chuangtse was like Thoreau, with the ruggedness and hardness and impatience of an individualist. To go back to the period of the Enlightenment, Laotse was like Rousseau in his harking back to nature; Chuangtse was like Voltaire in the sharpness of his sting.” [6]

Lin Yutang delved into the ideological connotation of Laotse and Chuangtse in *The Wisdom of Laotse*, and explained it to the reader in the introduction part as follows:

“The Tao of the Taoist is the divine intelligence of the universe, the source of things, the life-giving principle; it informs and transforms all things; it is impersonal, impartial, and has little regard for individuals. It is immanent, formless, invisible, and eternal. Best of all, the Taoist does not presume to tell us about God; he insists to the point of repetitiousness that Tao cannot be named and the Tao which is named is not Tao. Above all, the one important message of Taoism is the oneness and spirituality of the material universe.” [6]

Lin Yutang has a personal interest and yearning for Taoism, and he often claims that he believes in Taoism. As for the similarities and differences between Confucianism and Taoism, Lin Yutang has his own unique views, “It must also be admitted at the outset that if any Chinese sage was distinguished for talking in proverbs, it was Laotse and not Confucius. Somehow Laotse’s aphorisms communicate an excitement which Confucian humdrum good sense cannot. Confucian philosophy is a philosophy of social order, and order is seldom exciting; it deals with human relationships, and preoccupation with human relationships of the workaday world is apt to dull one’s senses to the spiritual yearnings and imaginative flights of which the human soul is capable, Confucians worship culture and reason; Taoists reject them in favor of nature and intuition....” [6].

In Lin Yutang’s view, Taoism focuses on the natural and true feelings of people’s hearts. Taoists act in accordance with nature and do not have to be bound by external constraints. They are the true self after removing all external social attributes.

V. LIN YUTANG’S IDENTITY OF CULTURAL INTERPRETER AND COMMUNICATOR

Lin Yutang is one of the few scholars who has truly practiced the interpretation of the modernity of traditional Chinese culture in his own era. When he wrote the book *The Wisdom of Laotse*, he completed a modern reconstruction of Taoist thought, and tried to examine its values and shortcomings from a higher level, trying to inspire new values of Taoist thought in the context of the new era [11].

In the creation and compilation of *The Wisdom of Laotse*, Lin Yutang also shows his cultural identity as cultural interpreter and communicator. From the perspective of communication objects, Lin Yutang’s interpretation of English works directly entered the field of vision of Western readers, satisfying the expectations of foreign readers formed under the constraints of Sinology mentality for a long time.

Lin Yutang’s life experience gave him a sense of western thinking, enabling him to examine Chinese culture and classic works from the perspective of western readers and to personally judge western readers’ ability to understand and

internalize Chinese culture. Its Chinese cultural background makes Lin Yutang take “telling Chinese stories to westerners” as the fundamental purpose and the highest pursuit and strived to maintain the cultural elements of the original text in translation, highlighting the characteristics of Chinese culture to allow readers to have direct contact with the aesthetic world of the original text.

As mentioned before, in *The Wisdom of Laotse*, Lin Yutang selected the essence of *Chuangtse* to confirm the meaning of Laotse’s thought, so as to help readers correctly grasp the essence of Laotse’s thought and Taoism culture. For example, in the twenty eighth chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, the first part of the original text reads, “知其雄,守其雌,为天下谿。为天下谿,常德不离,复归于婴儿。”[12] and Lin Yutang’s version is as follows:

28. KEEPING TO THE FEMALE

He who is aware of the Male

But keeps to the Female

Becomes the ravine of the world.

Being the ravine of the world,

He has the original character which is not cut up,

And returns again to the (innocence of the) babe. [6]

The focus of this chapter is on the origin of human nature. “Simplicity” “Infancy” and “Femininity” are important philosophical and cultural concepts of Taoism. “知其雄,守其雌,为天下谿” is the basic doctrine of Laotse. Lin Yutang cited the dialogue between the the River Spirit and the Spirit of the North Sea in chapter 17 of “*Chuangtse-Outer Chapters*”. The part selected by Lin Yutang here just makes the best cultural annotation for Laotse’s theory. Here is the part:

ON RETURNING TO NATURE:

“What do you mean by nature or the natural? And what do you mean by man or the artificial?” asked the River Spirit.

And the Spirit of the North Sea replied, “When a cow or a horse walks about with his four legs I in freedom), we call it nature. To put a halter around the horse’s head and put a ring through the cow’s nose, that we call the artificial. Therefore, it is said, do not let the artificial submerge the natural. Do not for material purposes destroy your life. Do not sacrifice your character for lame. Guard carefully your nature and do not let it go astray. This is called returning to one’s nature.” [6]

Lin Yutang’s writing, translating and editing contexts determine his identity construction, and in turn, the identity system he constructs also determines his cultural choices. Lin Yutang focuses on the receptivity of foreign readers when selecting texts for translation from the Chinese classics, and also took into account the themes and materials of the texts in his text selection, and introduces his system of thought comprehensively in his interpretations and explanations. Lin Yutang’s manipulation of Chinese culture from the linguistic to the cultural level brought himself from invisibility to visibility as a communicator of Chinese culture.

VI. CONCLUSION

Lin Yutang has made a cross-cultural interpretation of *Tao*

Te Ching from the perspectives of ideology, philosophy, culture and literature, and created a cross-cultural classic translation between the two cultures, which is of great significance in the history of Chinese classics translation and cross-cultural communication. At the level of Chinese and foreign cultural exchanges, Lin Yutang’s translation of classics has made the values, lifestyles, languages, and spiritual world of his own nation known and understood by the world in order to enhance the status of Chinese nation in the world.

Lin Yutang stands in the intercultural space and sees the universal meaning of Taoism. In translating, what Lin Yutang did was not to rehash the ancient aphorisms, not to paraphrase everything, but to extract and organize the classical Chinese philosophy for the new social propositions in the new context of different times, and to “give a new life to the classical Chinese philosophical classics on a new platform” [11].

The fundamental purpose of Lin Yutang’s translation and writing is to “promote Chinese culture, share Chinese wisdom, and connect Chinese civilizations with Western civilizations.” [13] Through Lin Yutang’s translation, the mellow and wise Laotse, the humorous and romantic Chuangtse came into the reading vision of the Western readers, condensed into the personality traits of Chinese culture and Oriental wisdom, and these characters became the spiritual soulmates of the Western readers. By translating *Tao Te Ching*, a classic text that conforms to his philosophical idea, Lin Yutang interprets and explains his philosophical thoughts, preserves, inherits and constructs his cultural identity, and completes his multiple identities as a translator, philosopher, cultural interpreter and communicator.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author and the corresponding author Yan Xin conducted the research, and wrote the paper. The second author Yuan Xiaolu revised the paper. All authors had approved the final version.

FUNDING

This research was sponsored by the “National Social and Scientific Fund Program (18BYY096)” and the “General Program of Shaanxi Provincial Education Department (20JK0360)”, and it was a part of achievements of “Translation Theory and Practice II” Program (2023 Bench Model Course and 2022 Model Course of Curriculum Ideology and Politics) of Xi’an University of Posts and Telecommunications.

REFERENCES

- [1] C. Hansen, *Language and Logic in Ancient China*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1983, p. 65.
- [2] P. Gilroy, *Diaspora and the Detours of Identity*, Sage Publications, 1997.
- [3] W. Shaodi, *A Cross-Cultural Study on Lin Yutang’s Translation*, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2002.
- [4] Y. Liu, “Six chapters of a floating life,” *Economists*, no. 2, pp. 130–131, 2008.

- [5] Z. Feng, *Cross-Cultural Transmission of Chinese Wisdom: A Study of Lin Yutang's English Translation*, Qingdao: Ocean University of China Press, 2011, pp. 151–431.
- [6] Y. Lin, *The Wisdom of Laozi*, New York: The Modern Library, 1979, pp. 4–163.
- [7] L. Venuti, "Translation and the formation of cultural identities," in *Cultural Functions of Translation*, Schaffner and H. Kelly-Holmes, Eds. Clevedo: Multilingual Matters, 1996.
- [8] Y. Sun, "The compound cultural identity of Lin Yutang and his intercultural communication of Chinese ethnic culture," *Journal of Translation and Interpretation Studies*, no. 2, pp. 50–58, 2022.
- [9] T. Lin, *Biography of Lin Yutang*, Changchun: Northeast Normal University Press, 1994, pp. 188–189.
- [10] Q. Liu, *Lin Yutang's Translation: Philosophies, Theories & Practices*, Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2020, pp.II, 11.
- [11] W. Xia, *Perspective and Expression: A Study on Lin Yutang's Translation*, Chengdu: Sichuan University Press, 2017, pp. 8, 80,
- [12] Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, translated and annotated by J. Zhang and S. Zhang, Zhonghua Shuju, 2022.
- [13] L. Yanshi, *Searching for the Cultural Identity of Translators—Lin Yutang and Gu Hongming as the Case*, Chengdu: Southwest University of Finance and Economics Press, 2014.

Copyright © 2023 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).