

# Interpreting the Tao Te Ching

Tools

# Tools

- Compare translations
- Understand translators' challenges
- Understand simile, metaphor, symbol, paradox
- Choose books that have informative  
Introductions, Glossaries, Commentaries, Notes;  
Notice translator's purpose(s), if you can
- \*\* Compare translations      **ex. poem 9**

# The Translators' Challenges

- 1. **lexicon** word correspondences betw. languages are frequently inexact; connotation as well as denotation must be considered; there may be several choices dependent on context
- 2. **grammar** structure & usage vary among languages; existence of certain forms may vary
- 3. **syntax** customary word order varies among languages; this can affect understanding of subject

- 4. **idioms** words & phrases which carry meaning only in the original language
- 5. **imagery** colorful & often deeply insightful figures of speech, these may not be effective in the receptor language; should an equivalent be used to transmit the sense?
- 6. **symbolism** like imagery & idiom, symbolism tends to be culture-bound bec. it works on association ( + connotation over denotation)

*The above challenges apply to translation betw. modern languages & in prose; additional problems arise when translating poetry.*

- 7. **sound** rhyme, assonance, consonance, pun, onomatopoeia... cannot often be replicated betw. languages; yet poetic sound devices may actually carry some of the meaning in the orig. lang.
- 8. **meter** syllabic cadence or rhythm may be essential; very difficult to reproduce in receptor language w/o significance violence to the other concerns

*The above challenges apply to translating poetry across modern languages; when translating an ancient language into a modern one, more challenges arise.*

- 9. **etymology** words change – in usage, meaning, connotation, throughout history; translators must be sensitive to what a word meant when it was used; the longer the time span, the greater the difficulty
- 10. **pictographic sources** perhaps the original language is not even an alphabetical one! Sometimes a symbol or picture is meant to convey a full expression, not simply a word or phrase; and what if the pictograph appears to carry a metaphoric expression? The translator will have to exercise a lot of scholarly judgment here.

- **11. multiple sources** a text may have been reproduced many times over the centuries & surviving mss. may vary; which should be considered the most authentic? (this is the realm of textual criticism... sort of the forensics of literature!) Sometimes the existence of a line or dot changes a letter or alters the sense of a word or phrase... The translator must now first decide what is to be translated before he even faces the how of it.

# A page from Addis & Lombardo glossary showing that many pictographs have multiple meanings

<i>ch'ang</i> 常 Common, enduring, lasting, 1	<i>chih</i> 知 To know, 28	<i>erh</i> 而 But, moreover, and, as, 48	<i>hsing</i> 行 Walk, move, go, 69
<i>ch'ang</i> 長 Long, excelling, 7	<i>chih</i> 執 Hold, grasp, 35	<i>fa</i> 法 Rule, law, follow rules, 25	<i>hsiung</i> 雄 Male, hero, 28
<i>che</i> 者 Person, 24	<i>chih</i> 至 Reach, become; the extreme, 72	<i>fan</i> 汜 Spread out, overflow, 34	<i>hsüan</i> 玄 Mysterious, dark, profound, subtle, 6
<i>cheng</i> 正 Correct, norm, 45	<i>chih</i> 智 Knowledge, 19	<i>fan</i> 反 Reverse, turn over, opposite, 78	<i>hsü</i> 虛 Emptiness, stillness, 16
<i>cheng</i> 爭 Contend, 68	<i>ch'in</i> 親 Related, close, favorite, 44	<i>fei</i> 非 No, not, 1	<i>i</i> 以 By, through, like, with, 11
<i>chi</i> 紀 Record, history, 14	<i>ching</i> 驚 Fear, surprise, 13	<i>fei</i> 廢 Abolish, reject, 18	<i>i</i> 已 End, 30
<i>chi</i> 極 Extreme, most, 16	<i>ching</i> 靜 Quiet, calm, 45	<i>hai</i> 海 Ocean, sea, 66	<i>i</i> 一 One, 42
<i>chi</i> 饑 Hungry, starve, 75	<i>ch'ing</i> 輕 Lightness, 26	<i>hsi</i> 兮 (pause or exclamation), 20	<i>i</i> 夷 Even, smooth; barbarian, 53
<i>ch'i</i> 棄 Discard, throw away, 19	<i>ch'ing</i> 清 Pure, 45	<i>hsi</i> 希 Few, spare, 23	<i>i</i> 易 Easy, simple, 70
<i>ch'i</i> 企 On tiptoe, anxious, 24	<i>chiu</i> 久 Finally, enduring, 7	<i>hsia</i> 下 Falling, lower, under, 17	<i>jan</i> 然 Certainly, naturally, 23
<i>ch'i</i> 其 This, that, 28	<i>ch'u</i> 出 Come out, emerge, 50	<i>hsiang</i> 相 Mutually, together, each other, 2	<i>jen</i> 仁 Kind, benevolent, 5
<i>ch'i</i> 器 Vessel, utensil, 29	<i>ch'u</i> 處 Manage, dwell, 76	<i>hsiang</i> 祥 Omen, 31	<i>jen</i> 人 Person, human, 12
<i>chiang</i> 江 River, 66	<i>ch'ü</i> 曲 Crooked, crippled, 22	<i>hsiang</i> 象 Elephant; image, 35	<i>jo</i> 若 Resemble; and, if, 8
<i>chiao</i> 交 Mingle, mix, flow, 60	<i>ch'üan</i> 全 Whole, complete, 22		<i>jo</i> 弱 Weak, frail, 76
<i>chieh</i> 皆 All, everyone, 67	<i>chüeh</i> 絕 Sever, banish, 10		<i>jou</i> 柔 Soft, weak, 76

## pictographs

- *Hsu* “Emptiness”

The root is the character for “tiger,” suggesting danger or bravery... the character can also mean “false,” “vacant,” “insubstantial,” or “abstract” – all can be dangerous.

Sam Hamill

Calligraphy by

Kazuaki Tanahashi



# pictographs

- *Chih* “to govern”

This character also means

- “to cure”
- “to heal”
- “to distinguish”

Sam Hamill

Calligraphy by

Kazuaki Tanahashi



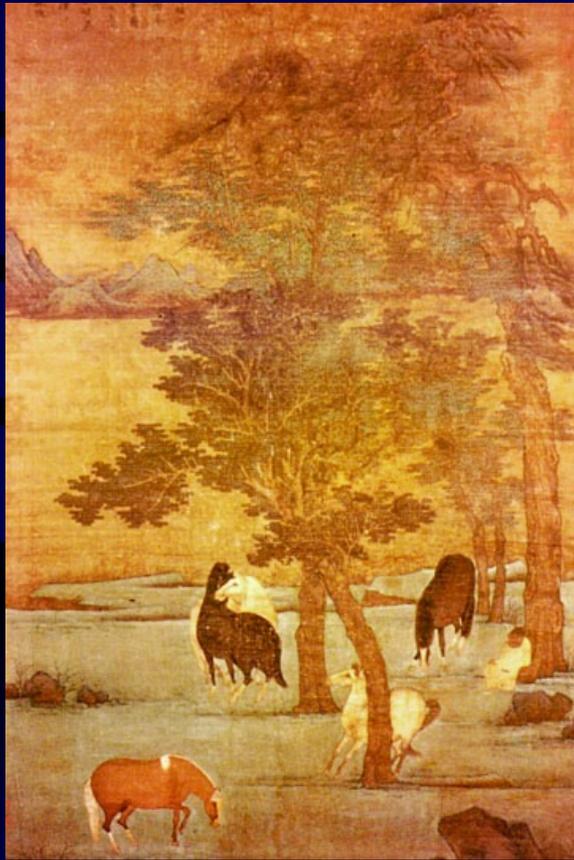
## pictographs

- *Ho* “harmonize”  
As “mouth” is the radical,  
harmony is often achieved by  
lending our voice to others.  
Can also mean “peace” or  
“reconciliation”

Sam Hamill  
Calligraphy by  
Kazuaki Tanahashi



## 2 approaches to translation



*formal correspondence* -  
emphasis is on form of the  
original language; tends  
toward literal rendition;  
what over how

*dynamic equivalence* -  
emphasis on readability in  
receptor language; attempts to  
be true to sense or spirit; how  
is as important as what

# Gendered pronouns

- “The third person pronoun is often omitted in classical Chinese, but even when it is explicitly stated, rarely is the sense of gender implied. The translator not only has to supply a subject to satisfy the requirements of English grammar, but is forced to decide in each instance whether ‘he,’ ‘she,’ or ‘it’ is more appropriate” (Mair xvi ).

D. C. Lau's translation indicates rhymes and shows homiletic or redaction:

**Indented** = rhymed

**Added letter** = line(s) added by a later 'Lao Tzu'

## Poem 22

- 50            Bowed down then preserved;  
              Bent then straight;  
              Hollow then full;  
              Worn then new...
- 50a          Therefore the sage embraces the One...
- 50b          He does not show himself...
- 50c          It is because he does not...
- 50d          The way the ancients had it, 'Bowed down then...

- “...more than half of the text consists in rhyming passages...”  
(Lau xlv).



Figurative language  
plays a vital role in ancient literature.



Essential to recognize:

- SIMILE
- Metaphor
- Symbol
- PARADOX

Simile is a creative comparison;  
a simple, pervasive, & very old type of expression

*Governing a large country  
is like frying a small fish.* from ch. 60, Mitchell

*How like a bellows  
Empty but inexhaustible.* from ch. 5, Pine

*Heaven and earth  
act as a bellows.* from ch. 5, Leguin

## Metaphor is a bolder figure of speech.

Metaphor = a creative identification, a transference

- because this form drops the “like” or “as” & says something “is” something else, it is more striking, more powerful imagery.
- And can be more easily misunderstood.

# Symbol

- A symbol is something concrete which stands for something abstract (e.g. a concept or idea)



uncarved blocks, 1975

Carl Andre, artist

from [artgallery.nsw.gov.au](http://artgallery.nsw.gov.au)

Paradox is an expression containing contradiction.

*Seeing into darkness is  
clarity.*

*Knowing how to yield is  
strength.*

from ch.52 , Mitchell

*Insight sees the  
insignificant.*

*Strength knows how to  
yield.*

from ch. 52, Leguin



## More paradox...

*Thus, the Sage knows without  
travelling,  
Sees without looking,  
And achieves without Ado.*

from ch. 47, Wu

*True words seem paradoxical.*

from ch. 78, Mitchell



## More paradox...

- ...is often a very challenging type of expression, inviting us into a deeper experience of meaning through contemplation of apparent opposition.

*The soft overcomes the hard.*

*The slow overcomes the fast.* from ch. 36, Mitchell

*This is called the small dark light.*

*The soft, the weak prevail.*

*Over the hard, the strong.* from ch. 36, Leguin

## More paradox

*Increase what you want to reduce,  
strengthen what you want to weaken,  
raise what you want to demote,  
give to the one you would take from,  
and you will shine without shadow.*

from ch. 36, Levi

*To win the world one must renounce all.*

from ch. 48, Wu

# Compare translations

- Example

Poem 9

Go to [WordDoc/PDF](#)

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