

A Research on the Textual Interpretation and English Translation of Chinese Taoist Metaphorical System in Zhouyi Cantong Qi

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Abstract: The metaphors in Chinese Taoist ancient works have unique literary features. The book Zhouyi cantong qi has received high attention since Tang dynasty as one of the most important works in Chinese alchemy. Metaphorical expressions are widely used to symbolize the alchemical process both for inner and external alchemy. From an intercultural perspective, the paper discusses the translations of metaphorical system and key terms in two English translations of Zhouyi cantong qi separately by Zhou Shiyi and Fabrizio Pregadio. It finds out that translators' perception of the main idea of the book largely affected their translation process and strategies, Chinese translator used more liberal translation strategy than the western translator, and both translators effectively kept the images of metaphors of the source text. The use of metaphorical words in phrases and sentences makes the whole text of Cantong qi full of mystery.

1. Introduction

Among the early Taoist classics in ancient China, the narrative style and stylistic style of *Zhouyi cantong qi* (*The Kinship of the Three According to the Book of Changes*, hereinafter referred to as *Cantong qi*) are quite different from those of *Daode jing* (*The Book of the Way and its Virtue*). One of the main features of *Cantong qi* is its rich metaphorical expression.

The author of *Cantong qi* is generally attributed to be Wei Boyang of the Eastern Han Dynasty (ca. 151-221). The book was generally recognized as the first theoretical ancient alchemical classic. The book with more than 6000 Chinese characters is basically composed of four or five-character rhymes, containing a large number of alchemical metaphors, forming a set of metaphorical system.

The English introduction and study of *Cantong qi* has lasted for more than a hundred years, yielding four English translations of *Cantong qi* till 2022, including the translations by Wu Luqiang & Tenny Davis (1932), Zhou Shiyi (1988), Richard Bertschinger (1994) and Fabrizio Pregadio (2011). However, the research on its literary features of metaphors and their interpretation is still limited. Through a comparative analysis of *Cantong qi* and its translations by Zhou Shiyi (1988) and by Fabrizio pregadio (2011), this paper probes into their perspectives of interpretation of metaphors and relevant translation strategies.

Mainly based on the theoretical framework of *yijing* (*The Book of Changes*), the thoughts of Yellow Emperor and Laozi, and the experience of alchemical practice, the literary sources of *Cantong qi* are multifarious, which are the major aspects of Chinese ancient alchemical culture.

2. The Linguistic Features of Cantong Qi in Accordance with the Book of Changes and Their Translations

The original text borrows related images of *Book of Changes* to construct the theoretical basis of Taoist alchemy. From the perspective of both Chinese commentators and western scholars, differences can be found for the interpretation of the original text. The following example shows the metaphorical usage in *Cantong qi* and its various interpretations by modern scholars, who are also the translators of the full text of *Cantong qi*. These metaphors are related to the foundation of

alchemy. The Chinese original texts here are quoted from Yu Yan's *Zhouyi cantong qi fahui* (*Explanation of Kinship of the Three in Accordance with the Book of Changes*).

Example (1):

Qiankun zhe, yi zhi menhu, zhonggua zhi fumu. kanli kuangkuo, yungu zhengzhou

English Translations and Interpretation:

1) *Qian* ☰ and *Kun* ☷ mean the two gates for *yi*, or the parents of the family of trigrams, or the walls of *Kan* ☵ and *Li* ☲. The working of *Kan* ☵ and *Li* ☲ is like that of a hub which spins the wheel and holds the axle in place. (Zhou 1988, p. 7)

2) *Qian* ☰ and *Kun* ☷ are the door and the gate of change, the father and the mother of all hexagrams,

Kan ☵ and *Li* ☲ are the inner and the outer walls, they spin the hub and align the axle. (Pregadio 2011, p. 71)

In the *Book of Changes*, it uses the phenomena of heaven, earth, thunder and wind in nature to symbolize the hexagrams of *Qian*, *Kun*, *Zhen* and *Xun*. In the 64 hexagrams, *Qian* and *Kun* are basis or “parents”, representing the circulating Yang and Yin. In *Cantong qi*, *Qian* and *Kun* are inseparable from *Kan* and *Li*, these four *guas* (hexagrams) constitute the basic alchemical model to explain the whole alchemical process and principles. The system they set up is inclusive, which is like *Kuangkuo* (outline or walls), or the periphery of the universe; the *guas* are also compared to the combination of central axle (*zhou*) of a cart and the hub (*gu*) of the wheel centre. Therefore, all the alchemical process is covered in such a general and theoretical system.

From the above translations, the first interpretation used “is like”, a way of simile, to express the original intended meaning. Moreover, the first translation applied a large number of Chinese characters and symbols of trigrams or hexagrams, which adds abundant Chinese literary and visual information into the translated texts. While the latter just translated the literal meaning without using rhetorical expressions, and its implied meaning is further explained in the notes or following complementary text. The translator Pregadio used literal translation (or a nearly rigid word-for-word translation) for translating “坎离匡廓” into “*Kan* and *Li* are the inner and the outer walls”, which is consistent with the interpretation of Peng Xiao's Chinese commentary in *Daozang* (*The Taoist Canon*). (*Daozang* 1988, 20, p. 133) The wide use of trigram system and its symbolic meaning for alchemy in *Cantong qi* becomes one of the most typical forms of literary expression, which also contains a number of figurative expressions.

3. The Text of Cantong Qi Akin to the Theory of Yellow Emperor and Laozi and Their Translations

The alchemical operations are numerous, but some of them act against the way of nature advocated by Yellow Emperor and Laozi, and their ways deviate from the true path to the Tao. Metaphors are also used to generate the theory of alchemy and represent alchemical images.

Example (2):

Zhushu shen zhongduo, qiantiao you wanyu, qian que wei huanglao, quzhe li jiudou

English Translations and Interpretation:

1) Numberless methods like these are all against the doctrines laid by *Huanglao* and will violate the process of *jiudu*. (Zhou 1988, pp. 49-50)

2) The arts are so many --
for each thousand, there are ten thousand more.

Their tortuous routes run against the Yellow Emperor and the Old Master,
their winding courses oppose the Nine Capitals. (Pregadio 2011, p. 105)

The above text discusses the behaviors of violating the alchemy method, and holds that we should practice correctly both physically and mentally, otherwise practitioners will be tired and hard to live forever. Different scholars have different understandings of *jiudu*. In Wu Luqiang and T. Davis's note, it says that they could not “identify Chiu-tu” (Wu & Davis 1932, p. 272), thus the translators use the method of transliteration without giving further explanation or even speculation.

Zhou Shiyi, from the perspective of *neidan*, holds that *jiudu* are metaphorical term for nine-turns in physiological alchemy (Zhou 1988, p. 51). Pregadio, as a sinologist and expert on alchemy studies, uses literal translation and render it into “Nine Capitals”, which helps to preserve the original literary form of *Cantong qi*, but Pregadio still holds this term is “unclear” that may refer to subterranean palaces. (Pregadio 2011, p. 107). In one of the commentaries of *Cantong qi*, *jiudu* is understood as the methods of achieving Tao in a certain way with “*jiuzhen zhi fa*” (the methods of becoming immortals). (*Daozang* 1988, 20, p. 75)

Besides, more terms and images used in *Laozi* (*Daode jing*) are borrowed to signify the alchemical framework in *Cantong qi*, such as *tuoyue* (bellows and nozzles) in “牝牡四卦 以为橐钥” (These four female and male trigrams – Qian, Kun, Kan, Li – function as hollow but unexhausted air-blower (*tuoyue*)), which symbolizes the whole operation framework of the alchemical universe.

4. The Text of Cantong Qi Associated with Alchemical Practice and Their Translations

Lots of natural signs are borrowed to resemble the process and apparatus in making alchemy. In making elixir, one needs to act at proper season and fire times in accordance with signs of trigrams. The way of alchemy follows that of heaven and earth, alchemists need to observe celestial phenomena and landscape on earth.

Example (3):

Yan yue fa dinglu, baihu wei aoshu, gong ri wei liuzhu, qing long yu zhi ju

Translations and Interpretation:

1) The ding (reaction vessel) and lu (furnace) is modelled on the shape of the half moon lying on its back. The white tiger is the vital axis and the white gong (mercury) is the liuzhu (the flowing pearl), that is the green dragon which goes hand in hand with the white tiger. (Zhou 1988, p. 54)

2) The supine Moon is the model of tripod and furnace, the White Tiger is the hinge of the heating. The mercurial Sun is the Flowing Pearl, the Green Dragon is together with it. (Pregadio 2011, pp. 123-4)

The above sentences contain a lot of symbolic images for explaining the formation of furnace and alchemy chemicals. In Zhu Xi’s (1130-1200) commentary of *Cantong qi*, he clearly indicates the figurative usage of *yanyue* (crescent moon, signifying the shape of the furnace), *baihu* (white tiger, symbolizing lead, fire, yang, gold, etc.), *aoshu* (the pivot in alchemy, signifying the lead is at the bottom and the mercury on the top), *gongri* (mercurial sun, the essence), and *qinglong* (blue dragon, the water). The verses explained the foundation (the caldron and furnace) in alchemy.

To sum up, the characteristics of figurative language in *Cantong qi* are unique, which have far-reaching influence on Taoist scriptures and especially the texts of alchemy. Taoist literatus embraced this occult and covert expressive way in writing alchemical verses, and thus the texts invite various and even competing commentaries. It is of great significance for a deeper study of *Cantong qi* from the perspective of metaphorical system, so as to decode its implied meaning.

5. Discussion

In western culture, the etymology of metaphor comes from the Greek “metapherein”, where “meta-” means “transfer”, while “-pherein” means “bear”, and its meaning focuses on bearing. (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary 1994, p. 730) Metaphor is not only a rhetorical method, but also an important means of human cognition. Thus, people can understand and experience other things by the ways of metaphor. (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 5) Metaphor is also widely utilized in Chinese literature since the ancient time. In Chapter 77 of *Laozi*, readers can easily find some metaphorical expressions, such as “the way of heaven is like bowing” (*Laozi* 2007, p. 184). Metaphors convey the author’s intention vividly and flexibly through the ingenious combination of subject and vehicle.

According to Jiang (2019, p. 52), the number of metaphors used in *Cantong qi* is 15, which is mainly associated with the process of producing elixir, such as basic alchemy theory, the beginning,

the materials, the fire-times, the formation and effect of golden elixir, etc. However, the metaphors applied in *Cantong qi* are also interpreted as tools for exclusively explaining *neidan* (inner alchemy), and the number of them then is more than 15. Besides, metaphors are also related to the chemicals of alchemy and the fire-time for making alchemy.

In *Cantong qi*, Wei Boyang also uses traditional Chinese classics to indicate the significance of the foundation of alchemy. For example, it says that Confucius praised the chaotic status in prehistoric times when commenting on the Five Classics; *The Book of Changes* begins with cavernous and empty *Qian* and *Kun*; *The Book of History* begins with the first sage emperor *Yao*; *The Book of Poetry* begins with “Guan go the ospreys” (*guanju*) for the establishment of human ethics; *The Book of Rites* begins with ceremonies for coming of age and wedding for the tie of men and women; and *The Spring and Autumn Annals* begins from the first year to symbolize the growth of sprouts. It seems these verses are irrelevant with alchemy, actually the specific figure of speech used here is metonymy, because its internal thinking pattern is not similar but associative. The Five Classics (*wujing*) are the most familiar books for most of the scholars or officials in Han dynasty, then it is clear that the description will arouse readers’ attention and interests in thinking the real and intended textual meaning between the lines.

Besides, *Cantong qi* borrows the concept of *sancai* (heaven, earth and human) to indicate that making elixir should be consistent with the natural way, i.e. the Tao. During the advancing and retiring process of alchemy, the sun, moon, seasons and time-fires are inseparable. Both in external and inner alchemy, theorists and practitioners use a large number of indirect jargons to hide the real meaning, without leaking out the Taoist secrets. In the metaphorical system of *Cantong qi*, except for *long* (dragon) and *hu* (tiger), the trigrams *Kan* and *li* are also used to symbolize *yaowu* (chemicals). In *Cantong qi*, most of the *guas* are related to *huohou* (fire times), which is essential for the formation of golden elixir.

Metaphorical language is unique and far-reaching in Taoist works. With the metaphorical system, *Cantong qi* influenced later works of alchemy in Taoism, and further exerted an important influence on the literary production in Song Dynasty, e.g. *Wuzhen Pian* (*Verses for Realizing Reality or Awakening to Reality*) written by Zhang boduan (983-1082), a classic work of alchemical scripture. The phenomenon of metaphor system becomes easily noticeable in later Taoist works, which has become one of the most important principles for passing down the esoteric works in Taoist culture and “the most prominent language feature of Taoist classics”. (He & Li 2017, p. 100)

6. Conclusion

From the perspective of intercultural studies and comparison of metaphorical interpretations, this paper examines many factors that affect the process and effect of the translations of Chinese traditional classics. As for the translation of *Cantongqi*, it is of great significance to deepen the understanding of source text itself by referring to various commentaries and the translators’ own perception. The interpretation of these metaphors is not only influenced by the translator’s personal cognition, but also restricted by the society, culture and history. These two aspects interact and influence the interpretation, translation and communication effect of Chinese Taoist classics. The examples are limited in this paper, it calls for a thorough investigation of more Taoist scriptures.

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