

The notion of originality and degrees of faithfulness in translating classical

Chinese: Comparing translations of the *Liezi*

Introduction

Starting from the 1960s, the classical Chinese text the *Liezi*, so far little translated, has finally been translated in full into modern Chinese, English, French, Japanese and Dutch. This article will compare four of these translations and examine questions about the concept of originality of the source text, the degrees of closeness to the original text a modern translation can achieve, and how the notion of translational 'faithfulness' may be reconsidered but not abandoned, especially by resisting the tendency to evaluate translations by using the source text as standard. I will first discuss how the problem of the *Liezi's* originality has negatively influenced critics' and translators' perception of the text's significance. Then I will compare different translations of one particularly problematic passage in the *Liezi* to show the specific translational, interpretational and contextual problems of each translation. Finally, I will reflect on the overarching methodological question that frames my comparisons of translations, namely, why compare? As I argue, comparing translations cannot be an evaluative means to ascertain which is the best translation or the standards for an ideal translation, because both concepts of originality and faithfulness are multiple in meaning rather than singularly defined. Instead of measuring translations in terms of their 'fidelity', a more helpful practise would be finding out what insights different translations offer into the relationships between the original and translated texts, the source and target languages, as well as questioning the construction of texts as 'original source texts' through translation by recognising the potential fluidity and multiplicity of the source text itself.

The problem of the *Liezi*'s originality

To begin with, as we know, the *Liezi* is a collection of texts loosely grouped under several broad themes such as cosmology, dreams and fate. It is attributed to the legendary figure Lie Yūkou 列御寇, who seems to have lived around the 5thC BCE, and who appears in other early Chinese texts such as the *Zhuangzi* and the *Lüshi chunqiu*. But later scholarship has generally agreed that the *Liezi* was written by various authors and includes writings from both Warring States and late Han or Six Dynasties periods. Most notably, the *Liezi* includes many passages that also appear, almost identically, in the *Zhuangzi*.¹ According to Angus Graham, one of the first major translators and critics of the *Liezi* in Western scholarship, these passages are copied from the *Zhuangzi*, albeit an earlier and more complete version of the *Zhuangzi*, which has been lost.² Moreover, Ji Xianlin has shown in his essay "Liezi yu fo dian" that the story about the machine man who could dance and even express emotions in the *Liezi* (5.13) is derived from a similar story about a wooden robot in the Chinese translation of the *Jātaka nidāna*, i.e. the *Sheng Jing* 生經.³ As the translation of the *Sheng Jing* dates to as late as 285 CE, this section of the *Liezi* therefore cannot be written before this date. This provides strong evidence to support the claim that the authors of the *Liezi* have copied and imitated earlier texts, and that at least certain parts of the *Liezi* were written during the Six Dynasties. Ji even argues boldly that the *Liezi* is a forgery by its main compiler and commentator, Zhang Zhan 張湛 (c. 370 CE), who was the *de facto* main author.⁴

Because of these arguments against the *Liezi*'s antiquity and genuineness, although it

1 As identified by Angus C. Graham in *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 12, there are sixteen episodes that the *Liezi* and *Zhuangzi* share in common: Liezi and the skull, Shun's question, Liezi and Guanyin, Liezi's archery, Confucius and the catcher of cicadas, the seagulls, Liezi and the shaman, Liezi and Bohun Wuren, Yang Zhu and Laozi, the innkeeper's concubines, the fighting cocks, Guanyin's saying, Guan Zhong's dying advice, Liezi in poverty.

2 Angus C. Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 216.

3 Ji Xianlin 季羨林, "Liezi yu fo dian 列子與佛典" (1986) in *Fo jiao shi wu ti 佛教十五題* (Beijing: Zhong Hua, 2007), 219-28.

4 About whether Zhang Zhan was indeed the main author, however, I agree with Yan Beiming's view that this is unlikely (see Yan Beiming & Yan Jie, *Liezi yi zhu 列子译注* (Shanghai: Shanghai Gu Ji, 1986), 3), because Zhang's commentary clearly shows places where he does not understand the text well.

was canonised in the late Tang (c. 740 CE) as one of the four core Daoist classics, alongside the *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi* and *Wenzi*, it has received relatively little attention from both critics and translators. Critical studies, especially outside China, only increased more recently, as evidenced by the collection of essays *Riding the Wind with Liezi* (2011) edited by Littlejohn and Dippmann. This lack of scholarly attention and exegeses is mainly due to the perception of the *Liezi* as a ragbag of miscellaneous writings that are not authentic or 'original', and which lack the philosophical depth and linguistic complexity of earlier literature. Graham writes that 'in general *Lieh-tzu* is one of the easiest of ancient texts',⁵ and Muriel Détrie, writing not so long ago, states that the *Liezi* 'definitely does not have the literary quality of the *Zhuangzi* and offers nothing new when compared to the *Zhuangzi*'.⁶ These established views that predominantly valorise textual authenticity and antiquity have discouraged scholars to engage with the *Liezi* on a deeper level, for its intellectual depth and textual complexity are in fact far from superficial and many of its sections merit detailed examination, as recent studies increasingly show.⁷ Nevertheless, critical and commentatorial depreciation became the biggest reason why translators also slighted the *Liezi*, since translators would rather translate a more important and recognised text. Unlike the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, which have attracted numerous translators since the nineteenth century, for a long time the *Liezi* has not been the source of serious and full-length translations. Lionel Giles's 1912 translation *Taoist Teachings from the Book of Lieh Tzu* cuts out chapter seven on Yang Zhu because Giles thought that the chapter 'deals exclusively' with Yang Zhu's egoistic doctrine and has nothing to do with the rest of the *Liezi*.⁸ Anton Forke only translated chapter seven, and as an independent book on Yang Zhu, which is *Yang Chu's Garden of Pleasure* (1912). Before 1950, therefore, there was no full-length translation of the *Liezi* in English, despite the two pioneering full translations in

5 Angus C. Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 231.

6 'Le *Liezi*...n'a assurément pas les qualités littéraires de celui-ci [*Zhuangzi*] et n'apporte rien de nouveau par rapport à lui', Muriel Detrie (ed.), *Littérature et extrême-orient: le paysage extrême-oriental, Le taoïsme dans la littérature européenne* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999), 149.

7 See Ronnie Littlejohn and Jeffrey Dippmann (eds), *Riding the wind with Liezi: new perspectives on the Daoist classic* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), and Steven Coutinho. *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies* (Columbia University Press, 2013).

8 Lionel Giles, 1912. *Taoist Teachings from the Book of Lieh-tzu* (London: John Murray, 1912), 14.

French and German: Léon Wieger's *Les Pères du système taoïste* (1913) and Richard Wilhelm's *Liä Dsi, das wahre Buch vom quellenden Urgrund* (1921). It was not until the 1960s when full-length translations began to appear, most prominently, Angus Graham's *The Book of Lieh-tzu* (1960), Benedykt Grynopas's *Lie tseu: le vrai classique du vide parfait* (1961), and translations in modern Chinese, such as Yan Beiming and Yan Jie's *Liezi yi zhu* (1986). I focus on these translations in this paper, together with another translation that presents an interesting case: Eva Wong's 1995 *Lieh-tzu: a Taoist guide to practical living*.

Before turning to compare these translations, however, I would like to further enquire into the question of what kind of 'originality' a modern translator may expect an ancient text to have. If we look at Oxford English Dictionary, we have these definitions of 'originality':

1. The fact or quality of being primary, or produced at first hand; authenticity, genuineness.
2. As an attribute of persons: original thought or action; independent exercise of one's creative faculties; the power of originating new or fresh ideas or methods; inventiveness.
3. The quality of being independent of and different from anything that has gone before; novelty or freshness of style or character, esp. in a work of art or literature.

The concept of 'originality' therefore includes two main aspects: unprecedentedness and non-derivation. There is also an emphasis on the individuality of the creator of a work or action that is considered 'original', namely, that she and nobody else has produced something new that breaks with convention. If we look at the *Liezi* from these perspectives, it certainly cannot be regarded as 'original'. My contention is, however, that we should not judge the *Liezi*, and indeed any ancient Chinese text, from these viewpoints. Although originality is a commonly understood and accepted notion now, it did not appear

in use in Europe until the early Modern times, namely, the eighteenth century. This can be seen in the vast majority of the example sentences for the use of 'originality' in the Oxford English Dictionary, which do not date earlier than the mid-eighteenth century. In fact, as contemporary literary and art critics have shown repeatedly, the perception that works of aesthetic and intellectual value should be 'original' is rooted in the Romanticist belief in the individual genius and the twentieth-century obsession with signature-style and author copyright.⁹ Therefore, applying this modern Western notion of originality to ancient Chinese texts is very problematic and misleading, for many texts are syncretist and formulated by authors and commentators over centuries, who were not concerned about maintaining the individual mark of single authorship. Of course, twentieth-century sinologists, in contrast to earlier sinologists who often sought eurocentrically for Chinese parallels and similarities that match European cultural models, realised this problem and emphasised the difference of Chinese culture and the need to use non-Eurocentric methods and perspectives to study it. Nevertheless, certain deep-rooted European ways of thinking still lingered (even unconsciously), for instance, the correlation between a text's significance and its authenticity, and in my case, scholars' depreciation of the *Liezi* on the grounds of its dubious originality and textual antiquity. The scarcity of *Liezi* translations shows that translators' expectation that the source text should be valuable in terms of 'originality' influences how often the text is translated and re-translated.¹⁰

If we now turn to translation, however, we find another problem concerning the notion of originality, but which is of a different nature compared to the originality of being unprecedented and novel. One of the biggest problems in translation is the long-debated question of the translated text's fidelity to the source text. The source text therefore appears in this case as the original text, the one version that is often understood as the measure for judging its multiple versions of translations. Once a text becomes the source text of translation, no matter how many spurious writings it includes, and no matter how

⁹ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*. (USA: MIT Press, 1986), 151.

¹⁰ It is also worth mentioning that the *Liezi*'s translators were mostly scholars in Chinese studies whose main occupation was studying Chinese culture rather than translation.

fragmented or illogical its language may be, it becomes irreproachable, whereas its translations are always challengeable. The very act of translation thus emerges from positing a text as the source text, which is a perception of the text that does not support any textual changes and insists that the text must exist in exactly the form that it has been given to exist by the time the translation is initiated. The text that becomes a source text by entering into the realm of translation is therefore petrified, not because it could not have been written in other ways at the time of its production or put together differently by posthumous editors and commentators, but because the context of translation demands the text to be singular rather plural, fixed rather than fluid. This idea of the 'original text' in translation thus emerges from the translational demand and process themselves. In other words, a text begins to be considered in terms of translational originality only when it starts to be translated and interpreted as a source text. It is thus understood that 'originality' in the aesthetic sense discussed above is not 'originality' in the translational sense. Aesthetic originality is about authenticity and primordially in the creation of a text, it denotes a quality of style that defines a text as having a certain literary and artistic value. In other words, aesthetic originality is implicitly axiological. Translational originality is, however, not an aesthetic value but a linguistic fact, i.e. the linguistic form in which the source text exists, for which there is no identical equivalent in another language, not even in the very language in which the source text is written (we would call that paraphrase). Translation is therefore a deliberate formalisation of the source text, and makes formal rather than aesthetic demands on the text's 'originality'. Whether the linguistic form of the source text is of high aesthetic or literary value does not affect the translational originality of the text in the least. While the aesthetic originality of a text has everything to do with interpretation and varies widely, the translational originality of a text is exclusively concerned with medium and form and always remains the same. This is not to say, however, that these two kinds of originalities are completely unrelated. As we see in the *Liezi's* case, the negative perception of the text's aesthetic originality hinders the text from becoming a

source text for translation, which means the condition for its being treated as a translationally original text is to some extent decided by its aesthetic originality.

My discussion so far shows that there are different ways of understanding 'originality', for originality is a multi-faceted concept, ironically, since 'originality' itself denotes singularity rather than plurality. In fact, most conceptual terms, upon close examination, will show themselves to hold multiple meanings that offer different perspectives. I believe that this is also the case with the notion of faithfulness in translation, which directly relates to translational originality, for all discussion of translational fidelity will have to follow upon the prior positing of a text as the original text. In the following, translational fidelity will be considered through a comparison of the *Liezi*'s translations.

The notion of fidelity to the source language in translation

As mentioned above, there are four notable post-1950s translations of the *Liezi*, which each represent a different type of translation: firstly, Yan Beiming and Yan Jie's version is typical of modern Chinese translations that preserve more of the classical Chinese syntax, vocabulary and idiomatic expressions than the non-Chinese translations; secondly, Angus Graham's translation exemplifies the language-sensitive approach to translation that is grammatically closer to classical Chinese; thirdly, Benedykt Grynopas's French translation represents the reader-friendly translation that makes the text read smoothly in the target language; and lastly, Eva Wong's 1995 rendering of the *Liezi* presents the readers with a type of translation that is deliberately unfaithful, or 'free' in form, but which tries to reproduce the 'voice' of the text in a contemporary way by endeavouring to translate 'in the spirit of' the original text and the thought it embodies.¹¹ I will now examine these translations' renderings of a specific passage in the *Liezi* that particularly demands more interpretation, so that these translations' different characteristics, approaches, and degrees of faithfulness can be shown.

11 Eva Wong, *Lie-tzu: a Taoist guide to practical living* (Boston & London: Shambala, 1995), 14.

In the beginning of Chapter Five 'Tang wen' 湯問, or 'Questions of Tang', the *Liezi* presents us with one of the most sophisticated and intriguing discussions of cosmic infinity in ancient Chinese literature, as quoted here:¹²

《列子·湯問》

殷湯問於夏革曰：「古初有物乎？」夏革曰：「古初無物，今惡得物？後之人將謂今之無物可乎？」殷湯曰：「然則物無先後乎？」夏革曰：「物之終始，初無極已。始或為終，終或為始，惡知其紀？然自物之外，自事之先，朕所不知也。」殷湯曰：「然則上下八方有極盡乎？」革曰：「不知也。」湯固問。革曰：「無則無極，有則有盡；朕何以知之？然無極之外復無無極，無盡之中復無無盡。無極復無無極，無盡復無無盡。朕以是知其無極無盡也，而不知其有極有盡也。」 [my italics]

This passage discusses some fundamental cosmological questions such as the beginning of the existence of things (*wu*), the limits and exhaustibility of the world or space, and what could be beyond the limits. This kind of cosmological discussion appears frequently as an important theme in the *Liezi* and ties in with the concern for speculating about the distant and unknown in time and space found in other early Chinese texts such as the *Shizi*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Huainanzi*. The meaning of this *Liezi* passage is, however, far from clear and there are also some uncertainties about whether there is textual corruption. For instance, Tao Hongqing argued that '有則有盡' should be '有則無盡';¹³ other commentators have puzzled over the legitimacy of the double negative in '無極之外復無無極', literally translated as 'outside that which has no limit, again there is no limitlessness', which seems self-contradictory and absurd. Moreover, part of the dialogue also appears in the *Zhuangzi* (1.2), with a slight variation:¹⁴

12 Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (ed.), *Liezi ji shi* 列子集釋. (Beijing: Zhong Hua, 2008), 147-8.

13 Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (ed.), *Liezi ji shi* 列子集釋. (Beijing: Zhong Hua, 2008), 148.

14 Chen Guying 陳鼓應 (ed.), *Zhuangzi jin zhu jin yi* 莊子今注今譯. (Beijing: Zhong Hua, 2009), 15.

湯問棘曰：「上下四方有極乎？」棘曰：「無極之外，復無極也。」

(Tang asked Ji: 'Are there limits to above and below and the four directions?')

Ji said: 'Outside the limitless there is again the limitless.'

The single negative *fu wu ji* '復無極' in the *Zhuangzi's* version seems to be much more comprehensible, namely, affirming that 'outside the limitless there is again the limitless'. The *Liezi's* version therefore seems to explicitly complicate the question (since the repetition of *fu wu wu ji*, *fu wu wu jin* '復無無極', '復無無盡' makes it unlikely that the double negative is a textual corruption) by introducing not only the double negative but also the problem of *wu jin* '無盡' (the inexhaustible) into the discussion. To translate this passage, therefore, requires an interpretation of philosophical cosmology from the translator. Let us now see how translators have dealt with it.

Yan Beiming and Yan Jie's translation goes thus:¹⁵

殷湯問夏革道：「遠古之初有物(1)存在嗎？」

夏革回答說：“遠古時代沒有物(2)存在，現在怎麼會有物(3)存在呢？”

(sentence A) […]

殷湯又問：「這樣說，事物(4)的產生就沒有先後之分了嗎？」

夏革回答：“事物(5)的開端和終結，本來就沒有固定的準則。開端或者就是終結，終結或者就是開端，又如何知道他們的究竟呢？(sentence B)但是如果說物質(6)存在之外還有什麼，事情發生之先又是怎樣，我就不知道啦。”

殷湯再問：“那麼天地八方有極限和窮盡嗎？”

夏革回答：“不知道。”

15 Yan, Beiming and Jie Yan 嚴北溟, 嚴捷, *Liezi yi zhu* 列子译注. (Shanghai: Shanghai Gu Ji, 1986), 135.

殷湯一個勁地問。夏革才回答道：“既然是空間，就沒有極限，既然是事物，就沒有窮盡，那麼我憑什麼知道呢？因為空間的沒有極限之外肯定連‘沒有極限’也沒有，事物的沒有窮盡之中肯定連‘沒有窮盡’也沒有。沒有極限又連‘沒有極限’也沒有，沒有窮盡又連‘沒有窮盡’也沒有，於是我從這裏知空間是沒有極限的，事物是沒有窮盡的，而不知道它們是有極限有窮盡的。”¹⁶

[my italics]

Firstly, Yan has preserved some of the original vocabulary and syntax, for instance in keeping '物' (*wu*) in the first few sentences, in using *tian di ba fang* '天地八方' for *shang xia ba fang* '上下八方', and keeping the syntax in sentences A and B. Nevertheless, this preservation does not make the translation much clearer in meaning. Yan does not attempt to explain or qualify 物 (*wu*), literarily 'things', in its first three appearances, then at the fourth and fifth instances translates it as *shi wu*, literarily 'phenomena/events and things' in modern Chinese; and at the sixth instance further changes to *wu zhi*, i.e. 'matter', 'substance' in modern Chinese. These changes of terms are not only imprecise but also misleading. The question of what is a 'thing' (*wu*) in classical Chinese is of great philosophical importance and demands extensive investigation. For instance, in the

16 I give a more or less literal translation of Yan's translation here:

Yin Tang asked Xia Ji: 'In the beginning of remote antiquity did *things* [*wu*] exist?'

Xia Ji replied: 'If there were no things during the times of remote antiquity, then how can there be things now?' [...]

Yin Tang asked again: 'Therefore, does the chronological order of the coming-into-being of *phenomena and things* not matter?'

Xia Ji replied: 'The beginning and end of phenomena and things have never abided by any fixed rules. The beginning might have been the end, the end might have been the beginning, how could one know what precisely they were? But if it is about the question of what exists beyond *material existence*, and what it was like prior to the occurrence of all events, then I don't really know.'

Yin Tang asked yet again: 'Then, do heaven and earth and the eight directions have their limits and a point of exhaustion?'

Xia Ji replied: 'I don't know.'

But Yin Tang pressed him on with questions. Then Xia Ji answered: 'Since it is space, then it has no limits; since it is phenomena and things, then they cannot be exhausted. So how do I know this? Because outside the limitlessness of space, surely there is not even 'limitlessness'; inside the inexhaustibility of phenomena and things, surely there is not even what you call 'inexhaustibility'. Having no limits but yet there being no 'limitlessness', being inexhaustible but yet there being no 'inexhaustibility', from these I know that space has no limits, that phenomena and things are inexhaustible, but do not know whether they have limits or can be exhausted.'

Zhuangzi (chapter 17), the 'myriad things', *wan wu* 萬物, denote all the different kinds of existences in the world, without distinguishing between the inanimate and animate, human or non-human. Only the *dao* is not a *wu* because it is both inherent in and beyond everything. This view on *wu* is similar to the *Liezi's* views, as we see in '天地含精，萬物化生' (LZ 1.2), i.e. 'heaven and earth hold the essence, and the myriad things (*wan wu*) are transformed and born'; and more explicitly stated as '凡有貌像聲色者，皆物也' (LZ 2.4), 'all that have appearance, likeness, sound and colour are things (*wu*)'. Thus *wu* denotes more precisely, existences rather than inanimate objects. In modern Chinese, however, *wu* predominantly means inanimate objects, therefore Yan's preservation of the term *wu* in the first three instances is in fact confusing. As for Yan's translation *wu zhi*, 'matter, substance', for the sixth *wu*, it completely misses the point. The *wu* in the *Liezi* passage has not changed whereas *wu zhi* no longer denotes existences or things but the matter they are constituted of. Yan's introduction of *wu zhi* thus diverts the topic of discussion to the question of what exists besides matter, whereas the *Liezi* passage is in fact pressing on with the question of exists beyond different existences. If we read further and consider the most difficult part of the dialogue, which is about the question of limits and exhaustibility, the translation is clearly an endeavour to interpret the original text, for 'limits', *ji xian* 極限, are correlated with space, whereas 'exhaustibility', *qiong jin* 窮盡, is correlated with *shi wu* 事物, phenomena/events and things. This does make the text slightly more comprehensible. The problem is the original classical Chinese does not indicate that limits and exhaustibility (極, 盡) are qualifying different things. The translation does preserve the self-contradiction of the double negative in *wu wu ji* 無無極, but overall the translated dialogue about cosmological limits does not make much sense to the modern reader, for no clear or coherent explanation of cosmic limits is given. Although Yan tries, as he states in the introduction, to 'translate literarily' and 'convey the original meaning' (but he does not

elaborate on the difficulties of knowing what 'the original meaning' is before even trying to convey it),¹⁷ he does not succeed in conveying much meaning—even in his modern Chinese interpretation—in this instance. Does Yan fail as a translator here or as an interpreter? Clearly, to translate such a text into a passage expressing a coherent view on cosmology, the translator has to be simultaneously a good interpreter, and one who does not avoid making changes and supplementing information to the fragments of meaning that can be gleaned from the *Liezi* itself. The fidelity to the original in Yan's translation is formal rather than semantic, and lacks the philosophical awareness that the *Liezi* requires its readers to have.

Angus Graham's translation, however, contrasts strongly with Yan's translation, especially in that it is extremely philosophically sensitive and self-consciously interpretational. Unlike Yan, who cut down on footnotes, Graham includes extensive footnotes and explanations of background and textual complexities. The fact that this *Liezi* passage about cosmic limits is obscure and hard to interpret is acknowledged by Graham and he clearly states that his translation is both limited and not really 'literal': '[this] obscure passage my treatment of which has left me with an uneasy conscience'.¹⁸ When we read Graham's translation, therefore, we understand well that the original text is itself unclear and perhaps corrupted:¹⁹

The Emperor T'ang of Yin asked Chi of Hsia:

'Have there always been things?'

--'If once there were no things, how come there are things now? Would you approve if the men who live after us say there are no things now?'

'In that case, do things have no before and after?' (1)

--'The ending and starting of things

17 Yan, Beiming and Jie Yan 嚴北溟, 嚴捷, *Liezi yi zhu* 列子译注. (Shanghai: Shanghai Gu Ji, 1986), 20.

18 Angus C. Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), xiv.

19 Angus C. Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 94-5.

Have no limit from which they began.

The start of one is the end of another,

The end of one is the start of another.

Who knows which came first?

But what is outside things, what was before events, I do not know.'

'In that case, is everything limited and exhaustible above and below and in the eight directions?'

--'I do not know.'

When T'ang pressed the question, Chi continued:

--'It is *Nothing which is limitless, Something which is inexhaustible*. (2) How do I know this? ...(3) *But also there is nothing limitless outside what is limitless, and nothing inexhaustible within what is inexhaustible*. (4) There is no limit, but neither is there anything limitless; there is no exhausting, but neither is there anything inexhaustible. That is why I know that they are limitless and inexhaustible, yet do not know whether they may be limited and exhaustible.' [my italics]

We notice that Graham tries to retain some of the classical Chinese style, as evidenced in his switch from prose to verse at 'The ending and starting of things/Have no limit from which they began', which reflects the more lyrical chant of the original text. He also translates *wu* and *shang xia ba fang* quite literarily as 'things' and 'above and below and in the eight directions'. For the question of limits, Graham introduces the contrast between 'something' and 'nothing' to correspond to *you wu* 有無, which makes the italicised sentences clearer in terms of what *you wu* is referring to. But 'something' and 'nothing' in English have much stronger metaphysical connotations than *you wu* in Chinese, which is why they sound like ontological entities or categories in this translation. Of course, an

interpretational decision has to be made, and we cannot expect there to be a translation that exactly matches the original or reproduces all its nuances, not to mention that the original meaning here is very uncertain. Graham recognises this problem and states in lengthy footnotes that he thinks part of the text is missing between sentences (2) and (3), but can only guess by comparing with similar arguments from the *Zhuangzi* that the passage is mainly about 'empty space [being] limitless, bodies [being] inexhaustible'.²⁰ Therefore, on both formal and semantic levels, Graham attempts to keep close to the original text, but also points out the problems with the original text that make a fully comprehensible translation impossible. In my view, the making visible of the lack of transparency in translation is also a kind of translational fidelity, for it reveals the deeper issue that translation itself is not an action of fidelity but rather, of transformation, retelling, and replacement.

Now, if we compare Graham's translation with Yan's, we see that despite the preservation of Chinese terms and syntax in Yan's translation, and despite the relative proximity between modern Chinese and classical Chinese when compared to the distance between English and classical Chinese, Graham's translation does much better in clarifying obscurities and making the reader aware of the complexities of the original text. This is an important point for consideration, for it shows that translating in a language that is closer to the original text's language is not necessarily more precise or faithful than translating in a language that is radically different from the original language. In fact, modern Chinese's continued use of certain classical Chinese terms and expressions, albeit with changed meanings, such as *wu*, *qi* 氣, *hun dun* 渾沌, *jing shen* 精神, often makes the task harder for the modern Chinese translator of classical Chinese, for she needs to further clarify the semantic differences between terms that are formally exactly the same. This also explains why sometimes classical Chinese terms are not translated in modern Chinese translations, for leaving them as they are is indeed less interpretationally

20 Angus C. Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 95.

dangerous as well as less linguistically awkward. The downside of this is that the modern Chinese translation does not clarify readers' understanding of these terms but misleads the readers to think with reference to these terms' modern Chinese connotations rather than their ancient connotations or how these terms' meaning were shifting across time. In the case of a translation in a language radically different from classical Chinese, English for example, the translator is obliged to make a decision on the meaning of every word he translates, and therefore steers clearly away from the confusion between archaic and modern uses of Chinese terms. In this aspect, therefore, the greater the difference between the source and target languages, the bigger potential and demand there is for clarification of meaning and interpretation. This shows, in fact, that a huge difference between the source and target language can be an advantage rather than disadvantage sometimes.

The translator's attempts at better clarification and interpretation are also evident in Grynopas's French translation of the *Liezi*. It offers us this version of the cosmological passage:²¹

T'ang, de la maison de Yin, interrogea Hia Ko et dit: "Au début des âges, y avait-il déjà des *êtres séparés* (1)?" Hia Ko dit: "Si à l'origine il n'y avait pas d'êtres, comment existeraient-ils aujourd'hui? A l'avenir, les hommes pourraient aussi dire qu'il n'y a pas d'êtres aujourd'hui." T'ang de Yin demanda: "Mais alors, les êtres n'ont-ils pas de succession dans le temps?" Hia Ko s'expliqua comme suit: "*Le commencement et la fin ne sont pas des concepts absolus* (2). Chaque commencement peut être conçu comme une fin, toute fin peut être posée comme un commencement. Comment pourrais-je le démêler? *Ce qui est au-delà de la nature des choses* (3) et avant les événements est ce qui m'échappe." T'ang de Yin demanda: "*L'espace comprend-il une limite extérieure et (possède-t-il) d'ultimes parties simples*

21 Benedykt Grynopas, *Le vrai classique du vide parfait* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 145-6.

(4)?" Ko dit: "Je l'ignore." T'ang se fit plus pressant et Ko déclara: "L'espace est-il vide? Il est alors sans limites. L'espace est-il rempli? Il n'y aura pas alors de parties simples. Mais comment le savoir? Cependant on peut se représenter au-delà des limites du vide encore un vide illimité et ainsi à l'infini. (*On peut concevoir à l'infini, à l'intérieur des parties minuscules des parties plus minuscules encore et ainsi à l'infini*) (5). Puisqu'au-delà de l'illimité, il y a encore de l'illimité et à l'intérieur de l'infiniment petit, il y a encore de l'infiniment petit, je puis penser qu'il n'existe ni limites, ni parties simples, cependant que je ne puis concevoir l'existence des limites et des parties simples (6)." [my italics and numbering]

Grynpas's rendition reads smoothly, is quite reader-friendly with very few disruptions made by footnotes, and shows clear signs of added explanation and interpretation in the text itself. We notice first that *wu* at (1) is translated as 'êtres séparés', i.e. 'separated beings', which shows Grynpas's background knowledge of cosmological views in Daoist literature. In particular, Grynpas's translation seems to recall the *Zhuangzi's* views on *wu*. For example, we find in the *Zhuangzi* expressions about the boundaries between *wu*:

古之人，其知有所至矣。惡乎至？有以為未始有物者，至矣盡矣，不可以加矣。
其次以為有物矣，而未始有封也。(ZZ 2.7)

(Some people of antiquity [...] believed that there have never begun to be things. [...] then there were those who believed that things exist, but there have never begun to be boundaries [between them].)

物物者與物無際，而物有際者。(ZZ, 22.6)

(There are no borders between that which-makes-things-things and things, but between things there are borders.)²²

²² Chinese text quoted from Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Zhuangzi jin zhu jin yi* 莊子今注今譯. (Beijing: Zhong Hua, 2009),

The existence of myriad things in the world is already a state that has left the primordial indifferentiation, the shapeless *hun dun*, which as the *Liezi* (1.2) affirms is the state when 'the myriad things are confounded with each other and not yet separated' (渾淪者，言萬物相渾淪而未相離也). Grynepas's translation '*êtres séparés*' is thus a well-grounded interpretational translation. But as we read on we realise that Grynepas goes well over the minimum interpretation required for the sentences to make sense, as we see in (2) '*Le commencement et la fin ne sont pas des concepts absolus*' ('The beginning and the end are not absolute concepts'), which obviously emphasises relativist views, whereas the original text is not explicitly relativist but talks of the continuity between beginning and end. In (4), the question of limits and exhaustibility (*ji jin* 極盡) becomes the contrast between 'limite extérieure' and 'ultimes parties simples', i.e. exterior limit and indivisible particles, which is just one step away from saying 'atoms', a concept very foreign to ancient Chinese thinkers. In (5), Grynepas's translation does away with the double negative in *wu wu ji* '無無極' and *wu wu jin* '無無盡', and presents the question as that of quantity and infinitesimals, or infinite multiplication and infinite division. With this extensive interpretation, the translated version reads well and makes a lot of sense, in fact it makes so much sense that the self-contradiction and uncertainty of the original text disappears. By comparing Graham's translation with Yan's translation, we recognised the need for some extensive interpretation of the original text to produce a more comprehensible translation. But Grynepas does this to the extent that the reader is no longer aware of the interpretational problems posed by the original text. Is this good or bad? Can we talk about translational fidelity here without bringing into consideration interpretational fidelity? But interpretation has much less obligation to faithfulness to the original than translation, or at least we would like to think so. In fact, the notion of 'faithfulness in translation' itself requires interpretation and qualification, it is plural just as 'originality' is plural.

The question of how far translational fidelity can extend into interpretation is posed even more prominently in Eva Wong's version of the *Liezi*. This is an interesting case because it is not really a translation but an adaptation interspersed with many translated passages, combining certain parts of the original text while eliminating others. Wong's intention is to contemporize the *Liezi*'s thought and treat it as wisdom that can be applied to concrete life, as is clearly shown in the subtitle: 'A taoist guide to practical living'. Wong is explicitly not treating the text as a historical object of study, as she professes: 'Instead of a straight translation of the semantics of the text, I have decided to present the "voice" of Lieh-tzu', so that he can 'speak to us as if he were here'.²³ The translational enterprise here is therefore more a figurative carrying-across of meaning rather than a linguistic one. Certainly, to *re-present* the *Liezi* as a contemporary voice in English is a translational process, but it is not precisely translational on the level of the linguistic form of the original text. Wong's endeavour sounds as naïve and idealistic as the belief in 'direct' translation, but it does offer something: an alternative approach to translation that requires the translator to empty her mind of 'linguistic constraints' and abandon 'the analytical mentality', thus trying to engage with the ancient text more intimately, without the layers of commentatorial and translational history cluttering the translator's perception.²⁴ This approach is in fact increasingly entering translators' and commentators' discourse recently, as evidenced in Jean-François Billeter's readings of the *Zhuangzi*, since Billeter explicitly states that he prefers to let the *Zhuangzi* talk to his own experiences and thoughts rather than work through layers of commentaries to excavate meaning in the text.²⁵ Likewise, Roger Ames and David Hall's translation and interpretation of the *Daodejing* (2003), which has the subtitles: 'A philosophical translation', and 'Making this life significant', also echos this more personal approach to understanding ancient texts, an approach that often motivated by the endeavour to see these texts as not obsolete but still valuable for our

23 Eva Wong, *Lie-tzu: a Taoist guide to practical living* (Boston & London: Shambala, 1995), 14-5.

24 Eva Wong, *Lie-tzu: a Taoist guide to practical living* (Boston & London: Shambala, 1995), 16.

25 See Jean-François Billeter, *Leçons sur Tchouang-Tseu* (Paris: Allia, 2002).

thought and experience.²⁶ To translate in the spirit of the original is much harder, if not impossible, than conventional linguistic translation. Although Wong does not, in my view, do very well in this attempt, for instance her adaptation of this cosmological passage is much too simplified and misses out on the gist of the original text:²⁷

'Then is there a limit to the universe?'

'I don't know.'

The Emperor Tang pressed further. 'There's got to be a boundary somewhere.'

The sage then said, '*Nothingness is limitless. How do I know where its boundaries are? How do we know that beyond this universe there is not another universe?* I can only say that things are limitless, but I cannot tell you if there are any boundaries.' [my italics, showing the simplified parts]

The problematic double negatives are eliminated and the idea of a universe beyond the known universe is introduced instead. This idea comes from the *Liezi* itself, in fact, for if we read further on from this passage in Chapter Five, we find Xia Ji saying: 'How do I know whether outside heaven and earth there is not something bigger than heaven and earth?' (朕亦焉知天地之表不有大天地者乎?) This shows that Wong has re-arranged the text by paraphrases that show important ideas in the text that offer a clearer picture to the reader. Despite her reduction of the complexity of the original passage, the fact that Wong makes such an attempt still offers much food for thought on the nature of translation and how we treat texts from antiquity.

In the above discussion about faithfulness in translation, I have demonstrated that although it is idealistic to believe there is a translational fidelity that could produce a text equivalent to the original, we cannot abandon altogether the attempt to convey the

26 As Ames states (2003: 8): 'Instead of 'the text' providing the reader with a specific historical context or philosophical system, its listeners are required to supply always unique, concrete, and often dramatic scenarios drawn from their own experience to generate the meaning for themselves.'

27 Eva Wong, *Lie-tzu: a Taoist guide to practical living* (Boston & London: Shambala, 1995), 47.

meaning of the original/source text—meaning as seen from no matter under what perspective—in more precise and comprehensible translations. In fact, faithfulness can still be qualified in degrees of more or less, and from different perspectives of what is understood as 'faithful'. For example, faithfulness in form—such as preserving words' grammatical functions, sentence patterns, prosodic features—may not be faithfulness in meaning—meaning in terms of the overall gist, the philosophical implications, or understatements depending on context. And vice versa, faithfulness in meaning may not be faithfulness in form. Moreover, to translate 'faithfully', no matter according to what understanding of fidelity, always involves different degrees of clarification and interpretation. To visualise this on a spectrum (see below), the most extreme degree of faithfulness to the original text would be an identical text, which is both the ideal of transparent translation and not a translation at all. As exemplified in Borges's Pierre Menard, a fictional twentieth-century French writer who attempts to translate the *Don Quixote* completely faithfully, Menard ends up producing an identical copy of Cervantes's text.²⁸ Nevertheless, an identical text is also the least clear in explanation and least interpretative. On the other end of the spectrum, the freer the translation, the more adapted and interpretive it tends to be. Thus the extreme end of unfaithfulness to the original would be a creative interpretation, which is again not a translation any more. What we usually understand to be translations are, therefore, situated somewhere in-between the two extremes of original text and interpretation.

Adaptation/Interpretation

Faithfulness to original text



adaptation/free translation

identical text (no translation)

²⁸ It has been pointed out that even Menard's identical reproduction of *Don Quixote* is still not identical to Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, because it is written in a different context. This does not make an identical reproduction any clearer in explaining the source text though.

Conclusion

After having compared the different aspects and degrees of originality and fidelity in translation, I would like to draw some concluding remarks about the comparison of translations here. Firstly, it is necessary to recognise that each translation is produced in different contexts, with different aims and audiences. Yan states that his translation is for 'readers of average education', namely, the wider non-specialist public;²⁹ Grynbas translated for readers who would like an updated translation rather than Wiegner's old version with strong Catholic undertones, but his audience was not meant to be particularly scholarly either; Graham, however, had a more academic audience in mind, for his extensive footnotes and textual exegeses would be of interest to readers who would like to engage further with the original text; whereas Wong's translation-adaptation targets readers on the opposite side: the wider public who are not seeking to increase their knowledge about sinological scholarship but to gain some life wisdom from ancient sages and texts. These considerations on the translators' part definitely influence the choice of their translational approaches, therefore any attempt to seek the 'best translation' would immediately entail questions like 'best for whom?', 'best in what way?', 'what criteria should be used to judge what is best? and why should these criteria be used?'. The comparison of translations does not have the determination of a definitive translation as its purpose. There is no definitive translation of any text, for the practise of translation itself involves creating plural versions of one text. As Oseki-Dépré says: 'It is impossible to produce a transparent translation in view of the fact that there will always be another translation that [...] will be superimposed over the previous translation'.³⁰

Nevertheless, precisely because of the multiplicity of translation and its embodiments in different languages, a comparison between translations can provide better insight into different translational approaches and concerns. More importantly, besides clarifying these

29 Yan, Beiming and Jie Yan 嚴北溟, 嚴捷, *Liezi yi zhu* 列子译注. (Shanghai: Shanghai Gu Ji, 1986), 20.

30 'Il est impossible de produire une traduction transparente dans la mesure où il y aura toujours une autre création [...] qui viendra se superposer à elle'. Inès Oseki-Dépré, *Théories et pratiques de la traduction littéraire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1999), 83.

individual choices of translators and their contexts, comparing translations also reveals something about the source and target languages and their interrelationship, and deepens the reader's understanding of the source text too. For instance, comparing Yan's modern Chinese translation with Graham's English translation shows the proximity between modern and classical Chinese to be the cause of certain difficulties in translating precisely; or, comparing Grynopas's translation with Wong's adaptation we see better how contemporary language and concepts appropriate, to different extents, classical Chinese notions: e.g. 'espace' and 'universe' for *shang xia ba fang*, the cardinal directions that focus on directionality but do not primarily present the world as a spatial continuum or unity. As Benjamin has argued:³¹

Translation ultimately has as its purpose the expression of the most intimate relationships among languages. Translation cannot possibly reveal or produce this hidden relationship; however, translation can represent this relationship, insofar as it realises it seminally or intensively.

I agree with Benjamin that translation goes beyond the purpose of achieving a similar representation of the source text. But I would like to challenge his idea that translation cannot reveal or produce the relationship between languages. I believe that the process of translation itself is a process of discovering and engaging with the nature of and relationship between different languages as well as between language and thought, because translation always involves linguistic and semantic comparison. But by just reading one translation, this inherent comparison is often lost to the readers. The method of comparing translations is therefore a method that stems from the nature of translation itself, since it reveals the implicit comparison and multiplicity that happens in the translational process. By incorporating multiple translations, comparing translations becomes an extension from the binary comparison between source and target languages to plural comparisons between the source and different target languages, and therefore

³¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Translator's Task", trans. by Steven Rendall, *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, Volume 10, no. 2 (1997), 154.

more translational approaches as well as linguistic inter-relationships can be brought into view. Moreover, seeing the differences between different translations also prompts us to rethink the notion of the 'original text'. Do not the many possibilities for translating and understanding the source text introduce the realisation that the source text itself could have been written differently? The author or editor of the source text could have chosen or edited other words and expressions to convey his ideas, or he could also have thought slightly differently and written slightly differently, or he could have written and edited the text in a way that did not convey his ideas sufficiently. This realisation re-introduces the notion of the fluidity of language and thought into the perception of source text, which the translational act at first negated by petrifying the source text in its received linguistic form. Thus it can be said that just like multiple translations, the 'original' text itself is also potentially plural. And this is important for the study of classical Chinese texts, which are usually syncretist, incomplete, and corrupted at various points which are seldom certain. Reading and comparing different translations of classical Chinese texts therefore plays a crucial role, even and especially for those for *can* read and translate the original Chinese version, for the practice of comparing translations will help readers to better understand and problematise the complexities of the original text. This comparison of translations of the *Liezi*, I hope, has served to make this point.