

Writing Process and the Ideological Values of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* by Thomas Merton

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Abstract: *The Way of Chuang Tzu* is the result of intercultural communication between Thomas Merton and John C. H. Wu. As the first co-translated version of Chuang Tzu in English, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* adopts the structure of poetry and expression of intentionality, conveying the aesthetic characteristics of *Chuang Tzu* to western readers. By an exchange of letters with John C. H. Wu for years, Thomas Merton has acquired more objective and comprehensive knowledge about Chuang Tzu's thoughts. This book marks the transition of English version of *Chuang Tzu* from missionary spreading to modern spreading.

The Way of Chuang Tzu by Thomas Merton, an American researcher of Christianity, is a selected English version of *Chuang Tzu*. With poetic structure and exquisite language, the translation book becomes popular among western readers, the uniqueness of which is as follows. First of all, it represents quintessence of cross-cultural communication in the five-year span between Merton and John C. H. Wu, a Chinese scholar. It is actually the first co-translated version throughout the history of *Chuang Tzu* in English. Secondly, Merton's pioneering translation in the poetic form, called "translation in spirit", not only better conveys to western readers aesthetic features of *Chuang Tzu*, but also exerts a significant influence on other English translation books. Thirdly, the thoughts of Chuang Tzu produce important impacts on Merton's views on Christianity in the late period. Therefore, the philosophy of Chuang Tzu and Buddha-Zen thought are both regarded by Merton as panaceas for long-standing problems in the western society.

1. Exploration of the Writing Process

Throughout Thomas Merton's entire life, he not only explores spirit and seeks inner world, but also breaks through cultural and religious barriers to pursue universal goodness for human. His autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* describes Merton's spiritual journey from his childhood to conversion to Catholicism, from which we can find the clue of his interest in other religions and cultures in the late period. In 1937, influenced by Aldous Huxley, Merton, at the age of 22, read through the French version of *Oriental Texts* by Father Wieger (Merton, 1948:205). In the same year, he met and befriended a monk named Bramacharis from India (Merton, 1948:213). All these experiences laid a good foundation for Merton's journey of oriental culture in the following days. Also, it should be noted that the Catholic branch Merton belonged to was Trappist, a type of Monasticism in Catholic Church that practiced the principles of desirelessness, pennilessness, hard work, and seclusion from the worldly society. This has something in common with pleasures and interests advocated by Chinese hermits who dwell in the high mountains and thick forests, and it also coincides with interests in nature pursued by the traditional Chinese Taoism philosophy.

Merton began to translate *Chuang Tzu* in March 1961 and finished it in July 1965. Prior to Merton, Herbert Giles and James Legge, both Sinologists, had respectively completed their translated versions of *Chuang Tzu* that were widely accepted in the world. As for Merton's translation, its value can be defined at least from two perspectives: one is the historical materials related to Sinology, and the other is the research values on translation. As for the former, readers

only saw a final translation work, but failed to witness the writing process of the previous translated versions. However, detailed translating process of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* is completely preserved in 51 letters. By analyzing the above letters, we can describe the writing process as follows:

1.1 Reasons and Motivation of the Translation

We can see from Merton's first letter to John C. H. Wu on March 14, 1961 that Merton was invited by New Direction publishing house to translate *Chuang Tzu*. Owing to lacking knowledge of Chinese, Father Paul Chan recommended John C. H. Wu who was a Catholic scholar proficient in traditional Chinese culture as a consultant (Serran Pagan, 2013:173). Then, they befriended each other, establishing a profound cross-border friendship. Aside from the same religious belief, they had many similarities in terms of spiritual world and aesthetic taste. As their communication went deeper, no longer restricted to Chuang Tzu's philosophy, the topics they discussed in the letters varied from Buddhism-Zen to Christianity and every aspect of social life. Back in 1961, Merton first contacted Wu for three reasons. First of all, he wanted to discuss the writing background of *Chuang Tzu*. Secondly, he wanted Wu to help select the original English version for the translation. Thirdly, he hoped to divide the translation process into three steps: selected by Merton, translated by Wu and polished by Merton.

1.2 Different Stages of the Translation

The translation can be divided into three stages: 1. Discussion on cultural background and selection of texts (from March 1961 to May 1961). In this stage, Merton and Wu first decided to take James Legge's version as the reference, and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the current translation versions, pointing out the universal problems while studying the oriental culture in the western academic circle. Later, the relations between Confucianism and Taoism were discussed, and a consensus was reached: Compared with Confucianism, people are more likely to appreciate the beauty of Taoism, because the uniqueness of Taoism is obvious while the value of Confucianism is not easy to be recognized. Hence, the philosophy of Confucianism and that of Taoism have a lot in common at deep level rather than be contradictory. Meanwhile, Wu recommended more translation versions to Merton and sent Herbert Giles's translation for reference. After that, Merton finished the first selection and asked Wu to translate it. It should be noted that on April 11, 1961, Merton wrote: "Thanks above all for the first sample of your own translation. I like the almost poetic form and think we ought to use that often." (Serran Pagan, 2013:190) from which we can see that translation in the poetic form was initiated by Wu. Subsequently, Merton adopted it as the translation genre in the book. On May 27, 1961, Merton listed the titles of chapters he had selected. 2. Shift of their translation tasks and completion of the draft (from May 1961 to July 1962). On August 4, 1961, Wu proposed to change the original plan: Merton did all the translation independently first, then Wu proofread and polished the text. There were three reasons for that shift: first, since Merton's spiritual world was connected with Chuang Tzu, he was fully capable of grasping implied meaning of Chuang Tzu. Second, the interpretation of *Chuang Tzu* was controversial from ancient times, and there was no single standard answer. Therefore, Merton's interpretation had its own value. Third, from the perspective of linguistic accuracy, Merton is the best man to complete the translation draft. Merton accepted Wu's advice gladly and started learning Chinese characters with Wu's help. It should be noted that through the exchanges of letters, they began to connect Chuang Tzu's thoughts with the practical problems in the western society, and discussed such issues as war and peace, the emptiness and fullness of human spirit, the current situation and predicament in the Catholic Church, etc. On July 10, 1962, Merton wrote: "I thought I would finally type out one of the versions I did after Chuang Tzu" (Serran Pagan, 2013:234), which marked the completion of the first draft translation. 3. In-depth discussion of Chuang Tzu's philosophy and completion of the translation (from July 1962 to July 1965). On June 23, 1963, Merton wrote: "I have had a very amusing Chuang Tsuean experience" (Serran Pagan, 2013:252).

On June 9, 1965, he wrote again: “It was pure delight, and it made me so happy that I had been insane enough to go ahead with the work on Chuang Tzu” (Serran Pagan, 2013:272). We can see that as his exploration went deeper, he had increasingly deep understanding of and fondness for Chuang Tzu. More importantly, at this stage, Wu sent to Merton his writings about Chuang Tzu’s philosophy. Merton completed *The Way of Chuang Tzu*’s preface *A Study of Chuang Tzu* by accepting Wu’s point of view, which reflects his view on Chuang Tzu completely and marks the transition of the English version of the book from missionary spreading to the modern one.

2. Research on Chuang Tzu’s Ideological Values

The preface and postscript of a translation work reflect a translator’s view and attitude about the original. During 19th and 20th century, the thoughts of *Chuang Tzu* were spread to western society mainly by missionaries. The two most famous English versions are *Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer* by Herbert Giles (1889) and *The Writings of Kwang Zou* by James Legge (1891), which are the master copy of Merton’s translation. Merton is a Christian scholar indeed, but a comparison among these three versions can throw light on how western scholars’ attitudes toward the thought of Chuang Tzu evolve.

2.1 Herbert Giles and James Legge’s Views on Chuang Tzu

Before Herbert Giles’s English version, western readers knew little about Chuang Tzu. So, *Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer* attracted extensive attention in the western Sinology circle once it came out. In the introduction, Giles states his own thoughts about Chuang Tzu. The main points are as follows: First of all, the purpose of *Chuang Tzu* is to advocate Lao Tzu’s thinking and criticize Confucianism. Secondly, the two have different focuses: since Confucius is a pure materialist, he does not believe in god or soul. His propositions cater to the mindsets of shrewd Chinese, which explains why his thoughts were embraced by many people. While Lao Tzu advocates goodness, pursuing a spiritual life that is free from material. His thoughts do not adapt to the mainstream mindset, so they are espoused only by the elder or those who suffer setbacks at official career. Thirdly, Chuang Tzu’s idea is built mostly on Lao Tzu, without any special values though, its charming literacy grace is laudable. In addition, Giles often used Christian terms as analogy while explaining philosophical ideas of Chuang Tzu. When it came to the authenticity of the *Tao Te Ching*, he announced with “assertiveness” that it is a pseudograph. For this reason, he believed that the *Tao Te Ching* was not qualified as the *Sacred Books of the East*, let alone *Chuang Tzu*. “If works like these are to be included among the Sacred Books of the East, then China alone will be able to supply matter for translation for the next few centuries to come,” Giles said, (Giles, 1889: xvi). It is easy to feel his arrogance and strong superiority of political power through his words. James Legge soon overturned Giles’s cursory research result, and Giles’s rigid way of translation was no longer acceptable by later translators. As translation researchers, we have to point out the limitation of Giles’s views on one hand. On the other hand, the limitation has to be understood in a specific context. Meanwhile, we have to admit that in an era when people know little about Chuang Tzu, Herbert Giles who “is afraid of nothing for his ignorance” did make a difference and lay a foundation for better translations in the future. Compared with Giles’ version, *The Writings of Kwang Zou* by James Legge is much smoother and more faithful to the original. By virtue of his prestige in the Sinology circle and “faithful and accurate” standard he has been pursuing, this book becomes an authoritative version for later translators and researchers. It’s also the first English version of *Chuang Tzu*. Apart from the full translation, this book comprises a detailed preface, an annotation and index. In the preface, Legge integrated and discussed Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu’s thoughts, corrected Giles’s idea that *the Tao Te Ching* is a pseudograph. He criticized such a rigid translation way as comparing “Tao” to “God” but advocated meaning should be attained from the context. In addition, he made an outline of the core ideas of Lao-Chuang philosophy and the evolving process of late Tao philosophy in the late period. With detailed and

accurate historical textual research, Legge had a more objective and comprehensive understanding on Taoism philosophy. However, in Legge's view, *Chuang Tzu* whose unique ideological and aesthetic value did not be explored is just the extension of *Lao Tzu*'s philosophical system.

2.2 Thomas Merton's Views on Chuang Tzu

It was Thomas Merton who fully probed into the philosophical depth and artistic value of *Chuang Tzu*. Having deliberating for years and being inspired by John C. H. Wu, Merton wrote a long preface, *A Study of Chuang Tzu*. It came up with the following proposals that have a significant effect on the western history of Sinology. Firstly, it emphasized the importance of *Chuang Tzu* from the perspective of philosophy. Secondly, it pointed out two premises to understand Chuang Tzu's thoughts: One is to take historic background into account so as to have an overall understanding and comparison among Chuang Tzu, Confucius, Mencius, Mo Tzu and Huishi's ideas, etc. The other is to draw a strict distinction between early Taoism philosophy and the later Taoism religion. Thirdly, Merton was the first to make profound and objective comments on the essence and the relations of Confucius and Chuang Tzu's thinking. Merton believed that both of their thoughts are personalism, which should be distinguished from Yang Tzu's individualism. Therefore, he said, "There is not much danger of confusing Chuang Tzu with Confucius or Mencius, but there is perhaps more difficulty in distinguishing him at first sight from the sophists and hedonists of his own time" (Merton, 1969:17). This kind of academic acuity was not much often seen in Sinology at that time. When it comes to seemingly pungent criticism about Confucius, Merton held that "If Chuang Tzu reacted against the Ju doctrine; it was not in the name of something lower.....but in the name of something altogether higher. This is the most important fact to remember when we westerners confront the seeming antinomianism of Chuang Tzu or of Zen Master." (Merton, 1969:20) His insights and validity have been verified by later researchers. Fourthly, different from the standpoint that Chuang Tzu is commonly considered as "a pure recluse" by Sinology circle, Merton believed, "Chuang Tzu is not merely a professional recluse. The 'man of Tao' does not make the mistake of giving up self-conscious virtuousness in order to immerse him in an even more self-conscious contemplative recollection." (Merton, 1969:26) We can conclude, without exaggeration, that Merton has a more perceptive insight on the essence and spirit of Chuang Tzu. No wonder Wu would say: "I have come to the conclusion that you and Chuang Tzu are one.....It is Chuang Tzu himself who is writing his thoughts in the English of Thomas Merton" (Serran Pagan, 2013:302).

As a devout Christian, there is no doubt that Merton cannot completely get rid of his preconceived idea but to present a totally impersonal and detached research attitude. There are some analogies in the book like St. Paul to Chuang Tzu and Torah to *The Analects of Confucius*. However, what is precious is that Thomas Merton has clearly understood, "The analogy must certainly not be pushed too far" (Merton, 1969:25). As the first co-translated version in English, the writing process of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* and translator's intercultural research attitude provide references for today's cross-cultural communication and cross-religion exchanges.

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