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On the Translation and Dissemination of *Zhuangzi*

Siheng Xie*

Fujian University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Fuzhou 350122, China
* **Corresponding author:** Siheng Xie

Abstract: As a core classic of Taoism, *Zhuangzi* not only embodies profound philosophical thoughts but also contains rich maritime cultural connotations. This study systematically combs the translation and research history of *Zhuangzi* in Asian countries, Western non-English-speaking countries, and English-speaking countries, based on existing literature and statistical data. It analyzes the characteristics, influences, and academic value of translations in different regions and languages, focusing on the dissemination paths, reader acceptance, and cultural adaptation strategies of the classic. The study finds that *Zhuangzi* has been translated into at least 15 languages worldwide, with 10 full English translations and numerous abridged versions. Its dissemination has not only shaped the cultural perceptions of target regions but also formed diverse translation paradigms adapting to different cultural contexts. The enlightenment lies in cultivating translators with a deep understanding of Taoist thought, selecting translation strategies that align with the target language's cultural spirit, and promoting cooperative translation to enhance the international influence of Chinese culture.

Keywords: *Zhuangzi*, Translation, Dissemination, Academic Reception.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the ocean has emerged as a critical arena for international cooperation, cultural exchange, and sustainable development. Telling good maritime stories has become an important means to enhance a country's maritime soft power. As a classic carrying Chinese maritime cultural genes, *Zhuangzi*'s overseas translation and dissemination not only facilitate the cross-cultural communication of Taoist philosophy but also showcase the uniqueness of Chinese maritime civilization [1]. To date, *Zhuangzi* has been translated into at least 15 languages, including Asian languages (Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese) and Western languages (Spanish, German, French, English), forming a global dissemination network. However, existing studies often focus on single-language or regional translations, lacking a comprehensive and systematic analysis of its global dissemination pattern, translation characteristics, and cultural impacts [2].

2. The Translations and Studies of *Zhuangzi* in Asian Countries

Asian countries, geographically and culturally close to China, have a long history of accepting and studying *Zhuangzi*. The translation and dissemination of *Zhuangzi* in Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam not only retain the core of Taoist philosophy but also integrate with local cultures, forming unique academic traditions and cultural phenomena.

(1) Japan

According to He Mingxin(2022), the influence of *Zhuangzi* in Japan can be traced back to the Heian period (8th–12th centuries). During the Muromachi period, *Zhuangzi Xuanzai Kouyi (Annotations and Interpretations of Zhuangzi*), a work integrating Confucianism and Buddhism by the Southern Song scholar Lin Xiyi, was widely sought after by Japanese scholars and remains an important reference for Zhuangzi research in Japanese academia [3].

After World War II, Japanese *Zhuangzi* research entered a prosperous period, represented by scholars such as Kouji Fukunaga. Fukunaga argued that Taoism had an essential impact on Japanese culture, not only shaping the title of the emperor but also influencing Japanese religious beliefs and cultural practices. For example, Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, gradually took shape and improved under the influence of Taoism. The sacred treasures of the Japanese emperor-the Kusanagi Sword and the Yatsugi Mirror-are even regarded as reflections of Taoist influence during the Six Dynasties.

In modern times, *Zhuangzi* has attracted widespread attention from Japanese literati, scientists, and artists. Literary figures such as Mori Okuwai and Natsume Soseki, as well as Hideki Yukawa (the first Japanese Nobel laureate in Physics and a pacifist scientist), were avid readers of *Zhuangzi*. Chikyu Ikeda, a Japanese professor, has systematically sorted out Japanese academic research on *Zhuangzi* in fields such as literature, cosmology, epistemology, and aesthetics. His representative work *New Research on Taoist Thought: The Center and Shishi of Zhuangzi* points out that *Zhuangzi* has profoundly influenced Japanese painting and poetry creation. For instance, Yokoyama Daikan, a painter of the Meiji period, took "Pao Ding Dismembering an Ox" as the theme of his works, embodying the Taoist spirit of "harmony with nature" [3].

(2) South Korea

Zhuangzi was introduced to the Korean Peninsula as early as the 18th century. From 1776 to 1800, Chinese classics including *Zhuangzi* were recorded in documents such as *Kuijang General Catalogue* (a catalog of Chinese books in Korea), and Korean-language works such as *Namhwajinjing Dawonkou* appeared.

In recent years, against the backdrop of intense social competition and fast-paced urban life, South Korea has witnessed a new wave of "*Zhuangzi* craze." Kim Hak-joon, Emeritus Professor of Seoul National University, who first translated the full text of *Zhuangzi* into Korean in 1983, used plain Korean to explain obscure Chinese characters, making the classic accessible to young people. He believed that *Zhuangzi*'s thought of pursuing absolute freedom could help modern people alleviate anxiety and stress. Lee In-ho, a

professor at Hanyang University, divided *Zhuangzi*'s ideas into themes such as abstinence, modesty, self-sufficiency, and play, explaining them in a popular way and even citing Western films like *Planet of the Apes* and *The Shawshank Redemption* to illustrate Taoist philosophy [3].

Kim Baek-hyun, a professor at Gangneung University, noted that *Zhuangzi* research in South Korea has expanded to multiple fields including literature, history, art, philosophy, and religion. Fables such as "Butterfly Dream" and "Pao Ding Dismembering an Ox" have become popular catchphrases among the Korean public, reflecting the deep integration of *Zhuangzi*'s thoughts with Korean popular culture.

(3) Vietnam

Before the 19th century, *Zhuangzi* had a significant influence among the upper class in Vietnamese society. After the Latinization of the Vietnamese script, several Vietnamese translations of *Zhuangzi* were published. For example, *Essence of Zhuangzi* (1945) and the 1960 edition of *Zhuangzi* (including abridged translations of chapters such as "Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease," "Man in the World," and "The Great and Most Honoured Master") introduced Taoist philosophy to Vietnamese readers. These translations focused on adapting to the Vietnamese language and such cultural context, laying the foundation for the dissemination of *Zhuangzi* in Vietnam [3].

3. The Translations and Studies of *Zhuangzi* in Western Non-English-Speaking Countries

According to Zhang Aimin(2019), the translation and dissemination of *Zhuangzi* in Western non-English-speaking countries began in the 16th century, mainly promoted by missionaries, sinologists, and philosophers. These translations not only introduced Taoist philosophy to the West but also triggered dialogues and interactions between Eastern and Western thought [4].

(1) Spanish-Speaking Countries

The translation of *Zhuangzi* into Spanish can be traced back to the 16th century. In 1593, Juan Cobo, a Spanish Dominican missionary, published *Mingxin Baojian (Precious Mirror of Clarifying the Mind)* in Manila. Compiled by Fan Liben, this book contains 673 aphorisms from Confucius, Mencius, Zhuangzi, and other Chinese sages, marking the first time Zhuangzi's thoughts were introduced to the Spanish-speaking world [5].

In the 20th century, Spanish translations of *Zhuangzi* became more systematic. In 1967, Carmelo Elorduy, a Jesuit professor, sinologist, and lexicographer, published a Spanish translation of Zhuangzi in Manila, followed by his research work *Lao Zhuang Thought and Western Philosophy* in 1968. In 2005, Pilar González España, a Spanish sinologist, published a comprehensive Spanish edition of *Zhuangzi*, which was widely concerned in academic circles for its accurate translation and in-depth annotations[5].

(2) German-Speaking Countries

German translations of *Zhuangzi* emerged in the early 20th century. In 1910, Martin Buber, a German Jewish philosopher and sinologist, published a German translation of *Zhuangzi* based on Herbert Allen Giles' English version. In 1912, Richard Wilhelm, a German missionary in China, published *Zhuangzi Nanhua Zhenjing*, a German translation that emphasized the philosophical connotations of *Zhuangzi* and was widely disseminated among intellectuals in the German literary and artistic circles. Wilhelm's translation, in particular, had a profound impact on German philosophy and literature. It introduced Taoist concepts such as "Tao" and "wu-wei" (inaction) to Western thought, providing a new perspective for German scholars to reflect on modern rationalism[6].

(3) French-Speaking Countries

French research on *Zhuangzi* gained momentum in the 21st century. In 2002, Jean-François Billeter, a professor of Chinese at the University of Geneva, published Four Lectures on *Zhuangzi*, the first French monograph on *Zhuangzi*. This book has been reprinted seven times, indicating its high academic and readership recognition. In 2004, Billeter published another collection of essays focusing on the textual research and philosophical interpretation of *Zhuangzi*, further promoting the dissemination of *Zhuangzi*'s thoughts in French-speaking countries[4].

(4) Other Western Countries

Sweden: In 1922, Erik Folke, a Swedish missionary, published *Ideologists of Ancient China*, which included translations of *Zhuangzi* excerpts. In 1976, Klas Bernhard Johannes Karlgren, a famous sinologist, published *Words of Lexical Instability in Selected Chapters of Zhuangzi*, focusing on the linguistic characteristics of *Zhuangzi*. In 2021, Leonvig published a full Swedish translation of *Zhuangzi*.

Finland: In 1958, Patty Nieminen, a Finnish scholar, edited *The Middle Way: An Anthology of Chinese Philosophical Thought*, which included translations of "Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease" and "Autumn Floods." In 1991, he co-published *Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease: Chapters of Zhuangzi* with Kay Nieminen, referencing translations by James Legge and Lin Yutang.

Poland: In the 1950s, Witold Jabłoński, a Polish sinologist, organized a team to translate selected chapters of *Zhuangzi* and provided a comprehensive introduction in the preface. In 2009, Martin, a Polish sinologist, published a Polish translation of *Zhuangzi*, aiming to reveal the internal contradictions and pluralistic meanings of the text.

Russia: In 1995, Vladimir Vyacheslavovich Malyavin, a Russian sinologist, published the first Russian translation of *Zhuangzi*. In 2009, Маривен published *Zhuangzi: Library of Chinese Classics* (Chinese-Russian Translation) (two volumes), the latest full Russian translation of *Zhuangzi* [4].

4. The English Translations and Studies of *Zhuangzi*

The English translation of *Zhuangzi* has a history of over 140 years, with 10 full translations and numerous abridged versions. These translations, produced by sinologists from different countries and cultural backgrounds, have played a crucial role in promoting the dissemination of *Zhuangzi* in the English-speaking world [7].

(1) Early English Translations (19th Century–Mid-20th Century)

According to Liu Bilin(2021), the earliest English translation of *Zhuangzi* was *Divine Classic of Nan-hua, being the Works of Chuang Tsze, Taoist Philosopher* (1881) by Frederic H. Balfour, a British journalist. Although this translation had limitations in accuracy, it laid the foundation for the English dissemination of *Zhuangzi* [8].

In 1889, Herbert Allen Giles, a British sinologist, published *Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*, the first full English translation of Zhuangzi. Revised and reprinted in 1926 under the title *Chuang Tzu: Taoist Philosopher and*

Chinese Mystic, this translation influenced Chinese translators such as Fung Yulan and Lin Yutang, who acknowledged that their own translations were based on Giles' version. However, in terms of academic authority, Giles' translation was surpassed by James Legge's *The Writings of Kwang Tsze* (1891), which was included in Max Müller's Sacred Books of the East series. Reprinted independently in 1959 with an introduction by Japanese Zen scholar Suzuki Teitaro Daisetz, Legge's translation provided a comprehensive interpretation of *Zhuangzi*'s philosophy and literary art [8].

(2) Mid-20th Century–Late 20th Century: Diversification of Translations

The mid-20th century witnessed a surge in English translations of Zhuangzi, with translators adopting diverse strategies to adapt to different readers.

Fung Yulan's Translation (1931): The Chinese philosopher Fung Yulan translated the seven inner chapters of Zhuangzi and compiled *Chuang Tzu: A Selected Translation with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang*. Republished in New York in 1964, this translation emphasized the philosophical system of *Zhuangzi* and Kuo Hsiang's commentary, catering to academic readers.

Arthur Waley's Translation (1939): The British sinologist Arthur Waley published *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*, which selectively introduced *Zhuangzi*'s philosophical stories and arguments, focusing on the comparison between *Taoist, Confucian, and Legalist thoughts*.

Burton Watson's Translations (1964, 1968): The American sinologist Burton Watson published *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (1964) and *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (1968). Integrating research from Chinese and foreign scholars, Watson's translations balanced philosophical depth and literary expressiveness. They were adopted as textbooks by many American universities and included in the *Norton Anthology of World Literature and UNESCO's Collection of Representative Works*. Richard B. Mather, a professor at the University of Minnesota, praised Watson's translation as a "light-hearted and clever reproduction" benefiting both scholars and the general public [9].

Thomas Merton's Translation (1964): The American Trappist monk Thomas Merton published *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, a poetic re-creation of *Zhuangzi*'s essence based on English, German, and French versions. With strong readability and artistic appeal, this translation aroused widespread interest among Western readers.

(3) Late 20th Century–21st Century: Specialization and Popularization

In recent decades, English translations of *Zhuangzi* have shown two trends: academic specialization and popularization [10].

Academic Translations:

Angus C. Graham's *Chuang-tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings from the Book Chuang-tzu* (1981) is regarded as the most comprehensive English translation of Zhuangzi to date, with detailed annotations and philosophical analyses.

Victor H. Mair's Experimental Essays on Chuang-Tzu (1983) collects 9 essays by scholars from the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan and other countries, covering core topics such as the Taoist view of nature and the metaphorical analysis of the concept of mind in Zhuangzi. It is a classic reader in the field of Taoist thought research. And his *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (1994) includes a glossary of terms in the appendix, providing valuable reference for readers.

Bowdoin College Asian Studies Program's *Zhuangzi: Rationality: Interpretation-Essays from the 1991 New England Symposium on Chinese Thought* focuses on the rational dimensions and interpretive approaches of Zhuangzi, compiles cutting-edge research findings in this field, and serves as an important compilation of documents for Western sinologists to interpret the philosophical thoughts in *Zhuangzi* [11].

Brook A. Ziporyn's *Zhuang-zi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (2009) integrates traditional Chinese commentaries with modern interpretations, enhancing the academic depth of the translation.

Popular Translations:

Brian Bruya and Tsai Chi-chung's *Zhuangzi Speaks: The Music of Nature* (1992), a comic book translation, uses vivid illustrations and plain language to popularize *Zhuangzi* among the general public. Reprinted in 2019 as *The Way of Nature, it remains popular.*

Nina Correa's Being Boundless (2006), the first full electronic translation of *Zhuangzi*, was published on the website Open Doctrine, facilitating online access for readers worldwide.

Chinese Scholars' Translations: Wang Rongpei and Ren Xiuhua's *Zhuangzi: A Chinese-English Volume* (1999) is the first full English translation of *Zhuangzi* by Chinese mainland translators. Included in the *Library of Chinese Classics*, this translation is praised for its accuracy, readability, and detailed annotations [8].

5. Findings and Enlightenment

(1) Main Research Findings

This study systematically combs the overseas translation and dissemination of *Zhuangzi* and draws the following conclusions:

Global Dissemination Pattern: *Zhuangzi* has been translated into at least 15 languages, forming a global dissemination network covering Asia, Europe, and the Americas. English translations are the most numerous and influential, with 10 full versions and diverse abridged editions, while Asian translations (Japanese, Korean) have a long history and deep cultural integration, and Western non-English translations (German, French) focus on philosophical dialogue.

Cultural Adaptation Strategies: Translators from different regions adopt diverse strategies to balance "faithfulness to the original" and "reader acceptance." Asian translators emphasize cultural continuity like integrating *Zhuangzi* with Shinto in Japan; Western translators focus on philosophical interpretation, comparing Taoism with Western philosophy; and English translators pursue both academic rigor and popular readability, a typical example is Watson's balanced approach.

Cross-Cultural Influence: *Zhuangzi*'s thoughts have profoundly influenced target cultures: shaping Japanese religious and artistic traditions, alleviating modern anxiety in South Korea, providing a critique of rationalism in Western philosophy, and offering a spiritual resource for global audiences to pursue freedom and harmony with nature. Maritime imageries in *Zhuangzi* have become a bridge connecting Chinese and foreign cultures, reflecting the universal value of Chinese maritime civilization.

(2) Enlightenment for Chinese Cultural International Communication

The overseas dissemination of *Zhuangzi* provides important enlightenment for the internationalization of Chinese culture:

Cultivate Professional Translators: Train translators with a deep understanding of traditional Chinese culture and target cultures, who can accurately convey the philosophical connotations and cultural symbols of classics like *Zhuangzi* while adapting to the linguistic and cultural habits of target readers.

Optimize Translation Strategies: Adopt diversified translation strategies based on the characteristics of the target language and audience. For academic readers, emphasize accuracy and annotation; for the general public, use popular language and innovative forms (e.g., comics, electronic versions); for cross-cultural communication, focus on the dialogue between Chinese and foreign thoughts (e.g., comparing Taoist philosophy with Western existentialism).

Strengthen Sino-Foreign Cooperation: Collaborate with foreign sinologists and academic institutions to leverage their international influence and academic experience, co-translating and promoting Chinese classics. For instance, the cooperation between Chinese translators and Western scholars can enhance the authenticity and acceptability of translations.

Highlight Universal Cultural Values: Emphasize the universal significance of Chinese classics in addressing global issues. For instance, *Zhuangzi*'s thoughts on "freedom," "harmony with nature," and "equality of all things" can provide solutions to modern problems such as environmental crises, social anxiety, and cultural conflicts, enhancing the cross-cultural appeal of Chinese culture.

6. Conclusion

Zhuangzi, a profound carrier of Chinese Taoist philosophy and time-honored maritime culture, has undergone centuries of cross-cultural translation, adaptation, and interpretation, achieving extensive dissemination and widespread recognition across the world. Its rich overseas dissemination experience, encompassing diverse translation strategies, cultural adaptation practices, and reception dynamics, offers valuable theoretical and practical references for the international communication of contemporary Chinese culture. By leveraging these experiences, we can better showcase the unique spiritual connotations and universal humanistic values of Chinese civilization, thereby enhancing China's cultural soft power and reinforcing its maritime soft power in the international context.

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