

The Tri-Leveled Translation Approach: A Systematic Model for Translating Chinese Classics

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Abstract

This article elaborates the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach as a systematic and operational model for the translation or retranslation of Chinese classics, with the *Tao Te Ching* as its illustrative case. The model is motivated by six interrelated causes: the long history and profound cultural accumulation of Chinese classics, the communicative gap between source and target cultures, the radical differences between local cultures, the precious wisdom contained in historical texts, the need for solutions to contemporary social problems, and the translator's historical mission of cultural transmission. Drawing on Holz-Mänttari's Theory of Translatorial Action, Nord's function-plus-loyalty principle, Venuti's critique of translator invisibility, and Gadamer's hermeneutics, the model distinguishes three interrelated levels. The micro level prioritizes literal meaning through foreignization and literal translation with annotation, serving researchers and scholars while ensuring cultural fidelity. The meso level focuses on implied meaning through domestication and free translation, serving general readers while enhancing accessibility and practical guidance. The macro level engages in translation-writing to convey metaphysical wisdom, serving readers seeking spiritual resonance while manifesting translator subjectivity. The article specifies the research objectives, research questions, methodology, operational procedure, evaluative criteria, and application scope of the model, arguing that it offers a flexible, ethically grounded heuristic for producing translations that are culturally faithful, communicatively effective, and spiritually resonant. By coordinating the relationships among source-text author, target reader, and translator, the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach responds to the multi-agent nature of translational action and provides a practical roadmap for the global dissemination of Chinese classics.

Keywords: Tri-Leveled Translation Approach; *Tao Te Ching*; translational action; function plus loyalty; Chinese classics translation

1. Introduction

The truth is that a single translation of a culturally and philosophically dense Chinese classic such as the *Tao Te Ching* can hardly satisfy all agents involved in translational action. Holz-Mänttari's (1984) Theory of Translational Action conceptualizes translation as a collaborative, purpose-driven, cross-cultural communicative process in which the translator negotiates relationships among the source-text author, the target reader, the commissioner, and the translator himself or herself. Nord's (1991, 1997) function-plus-loyalty principle further insists that the translator bears responsibility to all partners in the translation interaction. Building upon these theoretical foundations, this article elaborates the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach as a systematic and operational model for the retranslation of Chinese classics, with the *Tao Te Ching* as its illustrative case.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

2.1 Research Objectives

This study establishes four specific research objectives:

Objective 1: To construct a systematic and operational Tri-Leveled Translation Approach for translating or retranslating Chinese classics.

This objective addresses the need for a multidimensional translation framework capable of accommodating the diverse expectations of different agents involved in translational action. Drawing on Holz-Mänttari's (1984) Theory of Translational Action, which conceptualizes translation as a collaborative, purpose-driven, cross-cultural communicative process, and Nord's (1991, 1997) function-plus-loyalty principle, which insists that the translator bears responsibility to all partners in the translation interaction, this objective seeks to develop a coherent model that differentiates translational functions across three interrelated levels. The construction of this model requires a systematic analysis of the theoretical foundations, operational procedures, and evaluative criteria that constitute the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach.

Objective 2: To clarify the theoretical mechanisms through which the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach operates in the (re)translation of Chinese classics.

This objective requires an in-depth examination of the theoretical basis of the model, including the integration of functionalist translation theory, hermeneutics, and cultural studies. As Gadamer (2004) argues, understanding always proceeds from the interpreter's "prejudice," and translation is a process of "fusion of horizons" between the translator and the original author. The Tri-Leveled Translation Approach draws on this hermeneutic insight to legitimize the translator's interpretive role at the macro level, while Venuti's (1995) critique of translator invisibility and Nida's (1964) dynamic equivalence illuminate the tension between foreignizing fidelity and domesticating readability. This objective seeks to demonstrate how these theoretical resources are integrated into a coherent framework that assigns different functions to different levels of translation.

Objective 3: To demonstrate the practical applicability of the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach through illustrative analysis of the *Tao Te Ching*.

This objective involves applying the model to concrete translation examples from the *Tao Te Ching*, with particular attention to the comparative analysis of James Legge's (1891) and Stephen Mitchell's (1988) renderings. The analysis focuses on specific passages that exemplify the micro, meso, and macro levels of translation: Legge's treatment of "道可道，非常道" (*dao ke dao, fei chang dao*) as "The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao" (Legge, 1891, p. 47) illustrates the micro-level emphasis on literal meaning and cultural fidelity; Mitchell's rendering of "上善若水。水善利万物而不争" (*shang shan ruo shui. shui shan li wan wu er bu zheng*) as "The highest good is like water. Water gives life to the ten thousand things without striving" (Mitchell, 1988, p. 8) exemplifies the meso-level focus on implied meaning and accessibility; and Mitchell's rewriting of "万物负阴而抱阳" (*wan wu fu yin er bao yang*) as "All things have their backs to the female and stand facing the male" (Mitchell, 1988, p. 42) demonstrates the macro-level engagement in translation-writing and the manifestation of translator subjectivity.

Objective 4: To propose practical implications for the global dissemination of Chinese classics based on the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach.

This objective seeks to derive actionable insights from the theoretical and analytical work of the previous objectives. It addresses the practical challenges identified in the rationale and background section, particularly the communicative gap between source and target cultures (Ji, 2022) and the need for solutions to contemporary social problems. The practical implications concern translators, publishers, educators, and cultural institutions involved in the dissemination of Chinese classics, offering guidance on how to produce translations that are culturally faithful, communicatively effective, and spiritually resonant.

2.2 Research Questions

To achieve the above objectives, this study addresses four research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the theoretical foundations and operational procedures of the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach?

This question seeks to clarify the conceptual components of the model, including its theoretical basis in Holz-Mänttari's (1984) Theory of Translatorial Action, Nord's (1991, 1997) function-plus-loyalty principle, Venuti's (1995) critique of translator invisibility, and Gadamer's (2004) hermeneutics. It also requires specifying the five-step operational procedure outlined in Section 4.6 of the model, from textual and contextual analysis to tri-level evaluation.

Research Question 2: How does the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach differentiate translational functions across the micro, meso, and macro levels?

This question addresses the specific content of the model, including the distinct objectives, strategies, methods, readership orientations, and inter-agent relationships associated with each level. It requires examining how the micro level prioritizes literal meaning through foreignization and literal translation with annotation, how the meso level focuses on implied meaning through domestication and free translation, and how the macro level engages in translation-writing to convey metaphysical wisdom or

sublimated inspirations.

Research Question 3: How can the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach be applied to the analysis of existing translations of the *Tao Te Ching*?

This question involves the illustrative application of the model to Legge's (1891) and Mitchell's (1988) translations, examining how these translations exemplify different levels of the tri-leveled framework. It requires analyzing specific translation choices in relation to the model's evaluative criteria: semantic and cultural accuracy at the micro level, readability and relevance at the meso level, and depth of philosophical resonance at the macro level.

Research Question 4: What practical implications does the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach offer for the global dissemination of Chinese classics?

This question seeks to derive actionable recommendations from the theoretical and analytical work of the previous questions. It addresses the practical challenges of (re)translating Chinese classics for international audiences, including how to balance cultural fidelity with accessibility, how to serve multiple readerships simultaneously, and how to coordinate the relationships among source-text author, target reader, and translator.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual analysis design with illustrative comparative cases. The choice of this design reflects the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research questions. Unlike empirical studies that seek to test hypotheses or establish causal relationships, this study aims to clarify concepts, reconstruct theoretical arguments, and explore their implications for translation practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design is informed by established approaches in comparative philosophy (Ames & Hall, 2003) and interpretive social science (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987).

The qualitative conceptual analysis design is appropriate for this study because the primary focus is on developing and elaborating a theoretical model rather than on testing its empirical validity. As Green et al. (2021) note, conceptual analysis is particularly suited to research that seeks to clarify concepts, identify their logical relationships, and explore their implications for practice. The illustrative comparative cases serve to demonstrate the practical applicability of the model, not to provide empirical evidence for its effectiveness.

3.2 Primary Texts and Materials

The primary materials analyzed in this study include:

Theoretical texts: The works of Holz-Mänttari (1984), Nord (1991, 1997), Venuti (1995, 2013), Gadamer (2004), and Nida (1964), which provide the theoretical foundations for the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach.

Translation texts: James Legge's (1891) *The Tao Teh King* and Stephen Mitchell's (1988) *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version*, which serve as illustrative cases for the application of the model.

Scholarly sources: Recent research on the translation of Chinese classics, including studies by Ames and Hall (2003), Girardot (2002), Goldin (2002), Kohn (2019), Komjathy (2013), and Moeller (2006), which inform the analysis of translation strategies and cultural transmission.

Supplementary materials: Chinese source texts of the *Tao Te Ching*, including the received Wang Bi edition and other available versions, as well as Chinese-language scholarship on the text and its translation.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The analytical procedure involves four stages:

Stage 1: Theoretical construction. The first stage involves the systematic construction of the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach through a critical review and synthesis of relevant theoretical resources. This stage addresses Research Question 1, clarifying the theoretical foundations and operational procedures of the model.

Stage 2: Comparative analysis. The second stage involves the application of the model to the analysis of Legge's and Mitchell's translations of the *Tao Te Ching*. This stage addresses Research Question 2 and Research Question 3, examining how the translations exemplify different levels of the tri-leveled framework and evaluating their adequacy according to the model's criteria.

Stage 3: Practical application. The third stage involves the derivation of practical implications for the translation and dissemination of Chinese classics. This stage addresses Research Question 4, offering guidance for translators, publishers, and cultural institutions.

Stage 4: Evaluation and refinement. The final stage involves the evaluation of the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach itself, considering its **strengths, limitations**, and potential for further development.

3.4 Criteria for Evaluating the Model

The evaluation of the Tri-Leveled Translation Approach is based on three criteria:

Theoretical coherence: The model should be internally consistent, with its components logically connected and mutually reinforcing.

Explanatory power: The model should be capable of explaining the differences between existing translations and providing a framework for understanding why translators make different choices.

Practical applicability: The model should offer actionable guidance for translators and other agents involved in the translation of Chinese classics.

4. Interpretation of Tri-leveled Translation Approach

4.1 Rationale and Background

The Tri-Leveled Translation Approach is motivated by six interrelated causes:

1. **Long history and profound cultural accumulation:** Chinese classics embody over five thousand years of continuous cultural evolution, encompassing philosophy, ethics, politics, medicine, military strategy, and aesthetics. This depth cannot be captured through any single translational lens.
2. **Lack of communication and communicative fault:** Many translated Chinese classics remain confined to academic circles and have not reached broader international readerships, resulting in a communicative gap between source and target cultures (Ji, 2022).

3. **Huge differences between local cultures:** The cosmological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions embedded in Chinese classics differ radically from Western frameworks, creating substantial interpretive barriers (Ames & Hall, 2003; Moeller, 2006).
4. **Precious wisdom contained in history and culture:** Chinese classics contain profound insights into life, nature, governance, and the universe that remain relevant to contemporary global challenges (Kohn, 2019).
5. **Problems facing current society need solutions:** Ecological crises, social alienation, and spiritual anxiety call for wisdom that transcends narrowly Western paradigms.
6. **Translators' historical mission of culture:** Translators bear the responsibility not merely of linguistic transfer but of cultural transmission and intercultural dialogue (Venuti, 2013).

These causes justify the need for a multidimensional translation framework capable of addressing the diverse expectations of different agents.

4.2 Advantages of the Tri-Leveled Approach

The Tri-Leveled Translation Approach offers four principal advantages:

1. **Achieving an all-win translation goal:** By differentiating translational functions across three levels, the model enables the simultaneous satisfaction of academic, popular, and spiritual readerships.
2. **Enriching translation research:** The model provides a new analytical framework that integrates functionalist translation theory, hermeneutics, and cultural studies.
3. **Protecting, transmitting, and promoting local culture:** The micro level preserves cultural identity; the meso level adapts cultural content for accessibility; the macro level enables cultural dialogue.
4. **Enhancing the efficiency of intercultural communication:** The model offers a practical roadmap for translators to make informed strategic choices according to audience and purpose.

4.3 Application Scope

The Tri-Leveled Translation Approach is applicable to works characterized by wisdom, deep cultural connotations, profound philosophical meaning, high spiritual energy, and unique aesthetic value. These include, but are not limited to, the *Tao Te Ching*, *Zhuangzi*, *Lunyu*, *Mengzi*, *Zhongyong*, *Sunzi Bingfa*, *Huangdi Neijing*, and *Bencao Gangmu*. The model is especially suited to translation or retranslation projects that aim to reach multiple readerships simultaneously.

4.4 Specific Content of the Tri-Leveled Approach

The model comprises three interrelated levels: the micro level, the meso level, and the macro level. Each level has distinct objectives, strategies, methods, readership orientations, and inter-agent relationships, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The Tri-Leveled Translation Approach

Dimension	Micro Level	Meso Level	Macro Level
Core focus	Literal meaning	Implied meaning	Metaphysical wisdom,

Dimension	Micro Level	Meso Level	Macro Level
			sublimated meaning, and inspirations
Primary strategy	Foreignization	Domestication	Domestication
Primary method	Literal translation + annotation	Free translation	Translation-writing
Intended readership	Researchers, experts, scholars	General public readers	Readers seeking spiritual resonance
Inter-agent relation	Loyalty to source-text author	Loyalty to target readers	Manifestation of translator subjectivity
Primary function	Cultural fidelity	Accessibility and practical guidance	Spiritual dialogue and value co-creation
Evaluative criterion	Semantic and cultural accuracy	Readability and relevance	Depth of philosophical resonance

4.4.1 Micro Level

At the micro level, the translator prioritizes the literal meaning of the source text. The dominant strategy is foreignization, and the dominant method is literal translation, often accompanied by annotation. The intended readership consists of researchers, experts, and scholars who require historical and philological accuracy. The inter-agent relationship is characterized by loyalty to the source-text author, and the primary function is cultural fidelity.

Legge's (1891) translation provides a paradigmatic example. In Chapter 1, "道可道，非常道" (*dao ke dao, fei chang dao*), Legge translated "The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao" (Legge, 1891, p. 47). The choice of "trodden" preserves the etymological sense of *dao* as "to walk," and the accompanying notes discuss the ambiguity of *dao* as both "to walk" and "to speak." In Chapter 5, "天地不仁，以万物为刍狗" (*tian di bu ren, yi wan wu wei chu gou*), Legge retained the image of "the dogs of grass" and explained in a note the ancient Chinese sacrificial practice behind *chu gou* (Legge, 1891, p. 51). These choices respect the cultural identity of the source language and provide target readers with

access to authentic Chinese cultural elements.

4.4.2 Meso Level

At the meso level, the translator focuses on revealing the implied meaning of the source text. The dominant strategy is domestication, and the dominant method is free translation. The intended readership is the general public, and the inter-agent relationship is characterized by loyalty to target readers. The primary function is accessibility and practical guidance for life.

Mitchell's (1988) translation exemplifies this level. In Chapter 8, "上善若水。水善利万物而不争" (*shang shan ruo shui. shui shan li wan wu er bu zheng*), Mitchell rendered "The highest good is like water. Water gives life to the ten thousand things without striving" (Mitchell, 1988, p. 8). The rendering is concise, fluent, and immediately intelligible to contemporary English readers. In Chapter 2, "是以圣人处无为之事，行不言之教" (*shi yi sheng ren chu wu wei zhi shi, xing bu yan zhi jiao*), he translated "The Master acts without doing anything, teaches without saying any words" (Mitchell, 1988, p. 2). The domesticating transformation of *sheng ren* (圣人) into "the Master" makes the text resonate with contemporary spiritual seekers.

4.4.3 Macro Level

At the macro level, the translator engages in translation-writing to convey the metaphysical wisdom of the source text. The intended readership consists of readers seeking spiritual resonance, and the inter-agent relationship is characterized by the manifestation of translator subjectivity. The primary function is spiritual dialogue and value co-creation.

Mitchell's handling of Chapter 42 illustrates this level. After a largely faithful rendering of "道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物" (*dao sheng yi, yi sheng er, er sheng san, san sheng wan wu*), Mitchell rewrote "万物负阴而抱阳" (*wan wu fu yin er bao yang*) as "All things have their backs to the female and stand facing the male," adding "When male and female combine, all things achieve harmony" (Mitchell, 1988, p. 42). This rewriting transforms Laozi's cosmological generation theory into a spiritual expression of gender harmony, reflecting Mitchell's personal philosophical stance and his Zen-informed worldview.

4.5 Theoretical Basis

The Tri-Leveled Translation Approach is grounded in three theoretical sources:

1. **Holz-Mänttari's (1984) Theory of Translatorial Action:** Translation is an expert intercultural action in which the source text functions as source material rather than as an absolute authority. This opens the possibility of differentiating translational functions according to the needs of different agents.
2. **Nord's (1991, 1997) Function-plus-Loyalty Principle:** The translator bears responsibility to all partners in the translation interaction—the source-text author, the target reader, and the initiator—

rather than privileging any single party.

3. **Venuti's (1995) Critique of Translator Invisibility and Nida's (1964) Dynamic Equivalence:** These illuminate the tension between foreignizing fidelity and domesticating readability, providing the theoretical justification for assigning different functions to different levels.

The model also draws on hermeneutic theory, particularly Gadamer's (2004) notion of "fusion of horizons," which legitimizes the translator's interpretive role at the macro level.

4.6 Operational Procedure

The Tri-Leveled Translation Approach can be operationalized through five steps:

1. **Textual and contextual analysis:** Identify the source text's literal, implied, and metaphysical dimensions.
2. **Reader and agent analysis:** Determine the intended readership and the expectations of other agents such as publishers, editors, or patrons.
3. **Level allocation:** Decide which levels will be foregrounded in the translation project.
4. **Strategy and method selection:** Apply foreignization and literal translation at the micro level; domestication and free translation at the meso level; translation-writing at the macro level.
5. **Tri-level evaluation:** Assess the translation according to cultural fidelity (micro), accessibility and guidance (meso), and spiritual resonance (macro).

4.7 Evaluative Criteria

The Tri-Leveled Translation Approach proposes a multidimensional evaluative framework. A translation is judged not by a single standard of equivalence but by its adequacy across three levels:

- **Micro-level adequacy:** Fidelity to source semantics and cultural identity.
- **Meso-level adequacy:** Readability, acceptability, and practical relevance for target readers.
- **Macro-level adequacy:** Depth of spiritual and philosophical resonance.

This framework allows Legge's and Mitchell's translations to be evaluated as complementary rather than mutually exclusive achievements: Legge excels at the micro and meso levels, while Mitchell excels at the meso and macro levels.

5. Conclusion

The Tri-Leveled Translation Approach offers a systematic, flexible, and ethically grounded model for the translation or retranslation of Chinese classics such as the *Tao Te Ching*. By distinguishing the micro, meso, and macro levels, it coordinates the relationships among the source-text author, the target reader, and the translator, thereby responding to the multi-agent nature of translational action (Holz-Mänttari, 1984) and the ethical demands of function plus loyalty (Nord, 1991). The model does not prescribe a single correct translation but provides a heuristic for producing translations that are culturally faithful, communicatively effective, and spiritually resonant. In the future, it is hoped that this model will be applied to concrete translation practice with the aim of demonstrating its applicability and practical value for the global dissemination of Chinese classics.

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