

The masculine Way no more

A historical pragmatics of gender recontextualization in *Tao Te Ching* translations

Chinese is grammatically gender-neutral and number-unmarked. Its isolating typological profile poses difficulties for translation to a typologically different language such as English with number and pronominal gender marking. This study traces how English translations of the ancient Chinese text Tao Te Ching (TTC) or Dao De Jing ‘Book of the Way’, ascribed to the sixth-century BCE philosopher, Lao Tzu (Laozi), have changed over time in handling gender as a translation problem arising from the typological differences between the source and the target languages. I specifically focus on the history of how gender-indefinite personal references in the Chinese original are rendered and recontextualized in English in relation to the larger sociocultural shift toward gender parity in language use in the Anglo-American cultural context. Quantitative analyses of frequency changes in generic masculine forms and qualitative semantic-pragmatic analyses of such forms were conducted based on a corpus of fifteen best known translations published between 1898 and 2003. The results showed a steady decrease of generic masculine forms in the TTC translations corpus. A strong correlation was found between this trend and the overall decrease of generic masculine uses in the corpus of Google Books n-grams within the same time interval. Scrutinizing these results for historical pragmatics, I argue that the pragmatic and semiotic interplay varies not only across cultural contexts in translation practice, but the recontextualization of the source semantics also changes across historical contexts shaped by macro sociocultural shifts in the target culture. The irony of this history is the gender-neutral Way in the source text finally came to the English-speaking audience thanks to the second wave feminist language reform in the U.S. after the masculine Way, semantically inaccurate as it is, had prevailed for over a century.

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