

Dissimilation from the original meaning to the translated versions of Lao Zi's Philosophical Book "Dao De Jing"

Yuan Zhang
Hefei Normal University

Abstract

There are more than 600 versions of Dao De Jing in western languages. Most of the translations were done by non-native Chinese speakers. Through their understanding, a big issue was clearly revealed that the 20th century Western philosophy in fact did not reasonably accept and absorb the real idea from different cultures resulted from the limitation of interpreters' own cultural background. The original philosophical concept of "Wu Wei", in "Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)" by Lao Zi reveals: (a) doing something before thing's beginning; (b) doing actually with non-doing in surface; (c) nothing would be undone if "Wu Wei" could be carried out. "Wu Wei" was literally rendered as non-action, non-acts, non-doing, or taking no action, etc., a totally misunderstanding of the real idea. This is actually cultural estrangement between East and West, resulted in an unequal communication of Chinese culture with Western culture.

Keywords

Dao De Jing, "Wu Wei", translation, dissimulation

"Wu Wei" is a key concept and typical philosophical idea of Lao Zi's thought in one of Chinese classics, Dao De Jing. "Dao", when translated as "God", "Logos", "Word" or "Creator" in West versions, is a sort of forced analogy, while "Wu Wei", translated as "doing nothing", "non-action", "without doing" and etc., is not treated as a concept or a philosophical idea in Chinese thought at all. It is more like "Dao" translated as "Road", "path", "principle", "reason" and "way", using specific word to replace the superficial meaning of the philosophical concept while it is complex and full of contents in its philosophical sense. The original concept of "Wu Wei" in "Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)" by Lao Zi reveals: (a) doing something before thing's beginning; (b) doing actually with non-doing in surface;

(c) nothing would be undone if “Wu Wei” could be carried out. In West versions, “Wu Wei” was literally rendered as non-action, non-acts, non-doing, or taking no action, etc., which is a total misunderstanding of the real meaning of “Wu Wei”. This is actually cultural estrangement between East and West, resulted in an unequal communication of Chinese culture with Western culture.

I. What is the real idea of “Wu Wei”

1. What is the connotation of Chinese character “Wu”

Based on the etymology research conducted by Pang Pu, a famous Chinese historian, well known for his research in Chinese Confucian, “Wu” has three connotations at different levels. The connotation at first level is “Wang”, indicating lost after having; the second level is “Wu” like dance, indicating “apparently having while actually not having”; the third level is “Wu”, indicating “not having”.¹

1.1 “Wu” vs “Wang”

Chinese character “Wu” was originally written as “Wang”, which was from “You” proved in inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty. The image “𠂔” means “You” when part of the stretch is gone, “𠂔” or “𠂔” called “Wang” which means “lost”. So at that time “Wu” was known as “Wang”, referring to “originally owning and later lost”. There are many phrases in ancient Chinese comprised of “Wang” indicating “Wu”. For instance, “Wang Feng” means that “the wind was gone” while “Wang Yu” means that “the rain stops”. In both of these two phrases, “Wang” refers to “Wu”, originally having and then lost. At that time, “Wang” didn’t have its later meaning “Escaping” as it has now. This meaning was only recorded or shown in the bamboo Slips unearthed in Qing tombs of Shui Hu area, Yun Meng county, Hu Bei Province, in December 1975.

1.2 “Wu (tone 2)” vs “Wu (tone 3)”

The origin of “Wu (tone 2)” can be dated back to the time when “Dao De Jing” was created. At that time “Wu(tone 2)無” was from “Wu (tone 3舞)”. “無” and “舞” are homology. “Wu (tone 3舞)” means “dance” or “dancing”. In the old time, the ancient Chinese people played a certain

1. Pang Pu: One is divided into 3, Pang Pu’s Literature Collection, Volume 4 Compiled by Liu Yiqun, Shandong University Press, 2005

kind of dance to get courage from it before departure for hunting. They all knew that dance was some certain kind of psychological consolation. It seemed that there was a certain power in the air to protect them, and when they played dancing, which symbolized that they would be favored with invisible power and got courage to go for fight against wild animals. Actually it was a necessity in their mind even though they knew this magic power was only an imagination and they would rather think it exist than nothing in their mind. This is the origin of "Wu (tone 3 舞)". Therefore, "無" from "舞", indicates that "something seems to be there but actually nothing exists". This kind of dance cannot only help people to get inner power before going for hunting, but also help going for a war in the same way. After gaining successful experience in hunting or war, Chinese ancient people even applied that in their daily lives, such as dancing before collecting fruits, going fishing and etc. The dance was also performed by people who were confronting a bad and hard situation. Furthermore, with time moving, that kind of connotation of "dance" was made used of by wizards or witches to communicate with "spirit", "ghost" or some super "power". No one knows how many meanings of "Wu" have been developed or added later so far gradually.

1.3. "Wu" vs "You"

In Laozi's philosophy, "Wu" and "You" make up the practical world. Here is a stanza that Lao Zi wrote to illustrate his idea of "Wu" in Chapter 11, Dao De Jing. It says:

Thirty spokes unite in one hub;
It is precisely where there is nothing, that we find the usefulness of the wheel.
We fire clay and make vessels;
It is precisely where there's no substance, that we find the usefulness of clay pots.
We chisel out doors and windows;
It is precisely in these empty spaces, that we find the usefulness of the room.
Therefore, we regard having something as beneficial;
But having nothing as useful.²

The above stanza shows that "You" indicates something that can be made used of, while "Wu" means something that is useful. It is the empty space of the house that people can live in. It is the empty space of the pot that can be used to put things in. This thought was also adopted in Heidegger's philosophy.

2. Translated by Robert G. Henrics, Lao-Tzu: Te Tao Ching, A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-Wang-Tui Text, London: Bodley Head, 1991, p. 63

2. What is the connotation of “Wu Wei” by Lao Zi

Based on the above character’s research, the connotation of “Wu” at that time is far different from the meaning in the dictionary in our modern society. According to Pang Pu’s research, the Chinese character “Wu” had neither been in inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty nor in the bamboo slips buried in Qing dynasty, but only seen in Han tombs unearthed at Yin Que Shan, Lin Yi, Shan Dong province in 1972. Therefore, the connotation of “Wu Wei” should not have been interpreted in terms of its later developed meanings.

Based on the three connotations of “Wu”, “Wu Wei” should be interpreted as 1. doing before things formed, 2. predicting, controlling things from inside, not the outside forcing. 3. carrying out the idea of “Wu Wei”, nothing was not realized.

2.1 Doing before things are formed

“Wu” was originally “Wang”, which means “once having” and “later gone”. Therefore, “Wu Wei” refers to acting before things begin and non-acting after things formed. For instance, Chapter 64 says: “What is at rest is easy to hold”;

What has not yet given a sign is easy to plan for;
The brittle is easily shattered;
The minute is easily scattered;
Act on it before it comes into being;
Order it before it turns into chaos.

All the above illustrates doing first and non-doing after.

2.2 Not doing anything superficially but doing actually

In other words, “Wu Wei” is to predict, control things from inside, not to act forcing from outside. Here are two chapters in case.

Chapter 68 says:

The brave soldier is not violent;
The good fighter does not lose his temper;
The great conqueror does not fight (on small issues);
The good user of men places himself below others. (translated by Lin Yu Tang)

Chapter 3 says:

Refrain from exalting capable men, so that the people shall not compete.
Refrain from valuing rare goods, so that the people shall not steal.

Refrain from displaying anything which arouses desires, so that the people's hearts will not be disturbed. (translated by Ren Jiyu)

From these above two chapters, we can see that Lao Zi doesn't regard superficial physical oppression or administration as important for conquering others or controlling people, but use strategies or do good guiding by means of conscious nurturing. All this work is done intangibly, seems no action in surface, however the final aim is achieved by planing, conscious nurturing etc..

2.3 Nothing would be undone if "Wu Wei" could be carried out

Superficially, doing nothing and doing something constitute the world, like the empty hub at the center of the 'full' spokes, which leaves spaces for spokes acting, not disturbing, the empty and non-empty both compose the whole world. This is also an ideal state and final achievement of "Wu Wei". Lao zi's "Wu Wei" does not mean doing nothing or non-action, but through carrying out "Wu Wei", everything is done and final achievement is reached.

It is like what Chapter 63 says: "Practice non-action. Be concerned with non-concern. Taste the flavourless." (translated by C. Spurgeon Medhurst). Or "(It is the way of the Tao) to act without (thinking of) acting; to conduct affairs without (feeling the) trouble of them; to taste without discerning any flavour" (translated by James Legge). Or "Accomplish do-nothing. Attend to no-affairs. Taste the flavorless." (translated by Lin Yutang). This chapter tells us that doing big things is like non-doing anything, taste big flavour is like flavorless, a healthy man is feeling nothing of his body at all. It's also like the best leader who guides everything while no one knows. It shows that he did it on time and before the thing is formed. That's what Lao Zi's real idea about "Wu Wei", which is demonstrated in the later of Chapter 63 of "Dao De Jing":

All the difficult things under Heaven necessarily arise from the state in which they were easy;
All the great tasks under Heaven arise from the state in which they were small.
For this reason, the sage never does great things,
And he can accomplish great things just on that account. (translated by Ren Jiyu)

It is also like what Chapter 41 says: "Great space has no corners;

Great talent takes long to mature;
Great music is faintly heard;
Great form has no contour;

And Tao is hidden without a name.” (Translated by Lin Yutang)

So in Lao Zi’s thought, “Wu Wei” is to act before things happen; to do nothing in surface, yet actually to do a lot from inner side; to carry out the idea of “Wu Wei” resulted in every thing is done. These three aspects are not separated but combined into one. It is the real idea of Lao Zi’s “Wu Wei”.

II. Dissimilation from the original to the translated versions

Wu Wei has three connotations at different levels from the above research and analysis. However in west versions, the real meaning was dissimilated. Hereby three typical chapters were chosen to show the big gap of “Wu Wei” between Chinese original text meaning and English Versions

“Wu Wei” was mentioned in 14 chapters in Lao Zi’s book, Dao De Jing. Here are three chapters chosen in terms of its logic subjects (one is Dao, another is Sheng Ren, and the third refers to something in general). Through comparison and contrast of the original text with the expression in translated versions, it is clear that the big gap lying between the idea implied in the source language and the meaning reflected in the target language.

The following table shows different interpreters and their translations of the three sentences.

Interpreters and the year of interpreting	Title of the book	Chapter 37: Dao Chang Wu Wei Er Wu Bu Wei	Chapter 2: Sheng Ren Chu Wu Wei Zhi Shi	Chapter 48: Shun Zhi You Sun Yi Zhi Yu Wu Wei
Hans-George Moeller 2007	Dao De Jing A Complete Translation and Commentary	The Dao is constantly <u>without name</u> .	Therefore the sage resides with the task of <u>nonaction</u> .	To decrease and to decrease even more so that “ <u>doing nothing</u> ” is reached.
H.G. Oswald 2006	The Book of Meaning and Life	Tao is eternal <u>without doing</u> , and yet nothing remains not done.	He dwells in effectiveness <u>without action</u> .	He decreases and decreases until at last he arrives at <u>non-action</u> .
R.B. Blakney 1955, 1983, 2007	The Way of Life	The Way is always still, <u>at rest</u> , And yet does everything that’s done.	Indeed the Wise Man’s office is to work by <u>being still</u> ;	Loss upon loss until At last <u>comes rest</u> .
Sam Hamill 2005, 2007	Tao Te Ching A New Translation	Tao <u>does nothing</u> but leaves nothing undone	That is why the sage can act <u>without effort</u>	Lose, lose again, until you <u>are emptied</u> .

Hermonould 1946	The Way of Acceptance	The Tao is eternally inactive; Yet nothing is left <u>undone</u> .	Therefore the sage, the self-controlled man, dwells in <u>actionless</u> activity, poised between contraries	Shedding more and more, Until he attains <u>Non-action</u> .
Michael Lafargue 1992	The Tao of the Tao Te Ching	Tao invariably <u>Does Nothing</u> , and nothing remains not done. Tao is forever <u>not-doing</u> , Yet there is nothing undone	And so the Wise Person: Settles into his job of <u>Not Doing</u>	<u>Doing nothing</u> , nothing will remain not done.
Patrick M. Byrne 2002	The Way of Virtue	Tao endures without a name, Yet nothing is left undone.	Therefore, the sage conducts his affairs <u>without action</u>	To decrease, and again decrease, Until <u>wu-wei</u> is attained,
Stephen Adiss and Stanley Lombardo 1993	Lao-Tzu Tao Te Ching	The Way constantly <u>takes no action</u> .	Therefore the Sage abides in affairs that entail <u>no action</u> ,	<u>Non-doing</u> —and nothing not done.
Robert G. Henrics 2000	Te-Tao Ching Based on Ma-Wang-tui Text	The Tao eternally <u>non-acts</u> , and so It does nothing and yet there is nothing left to do. Tao <u>remains quiescent</u> , and yet leaves nothing undone. The Tao in its regular course <u>does nothing</u> (for the sake of doing it), and so there is nothing which it does not do.	And so the sage, in his affairs, <u>does not on doing dwell</u> ,	They decrease and decrease, Until they reach the point where they <u>do nothing</u> at all.
Heysinger 1903	The Light of China	he acts <u>without effort</u>	Do you continually <u>curtail your effort till there be nothing left of it?</u>	And as the work lessens and lessens there comes a condition of <u>nothing doing</u> ,
Walter Gorn-Old, 1904	The Simple Way Lao-tse: The Old Boy	Therefore the sage manages affairs <u>without doing anything</u> ,	He diminishes it and again diminishes it, till he arrives at <u>doing nothing</u> (on purpose).	
James Legge 1894	The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu			

1. Lao Zi's "Dao zhi Wu Wei" was not "Dao Zhi Bu Wei"

In Chapter 37 of Dao De Jing, the subject of the sentence, "Dao Chang Wu Wei Er Wu Bu Wei", is Dao while Wu Wei is its predicate. The whole sentence means that the essence and state of Dao is "Wu Wei", through which nothing is never conducted. The Key point of Lao Zi's Dao is "Wu Bu Wei", which can be achieved by means of "Wu Wei". However, R.B. Blakney translated it as "The Way is always still, at rest, and yet does everything that is done." In Blakney's thought: "Wu Wei is always still, at rest". Hans-Georg Moeller translated it as "Dao is constantly without name." He thought Wu

Wei is without name. H.G. Oswald thought: “Tao is eternal without doing”, which means Wu Wei is eternal without doing. Sam Hamill thought “Tao does nothing”, which means Wu Wei does nothing. Hermon would thought: “Dao is eternally inactive”, which means Wu Wei is eternally inactive. Michael Lafargue thought “Tao invariably Does Nothing,” which shows Wu Wei invariably Does Nothing. Patrick M. Byrne thought, “Tao is forever not-doing”, which indicates Wu Wei forever not-doing. Stephen Adiss and Stanley Lombardo thought, “Tao endures without a name,” which Wu Wei is without a name. Robert G. Henrics thought: “Dao takes no action”, which shows Wu Wei refers to no action. James Legge thought, “Dao does nothing”, which indicates Wu Wei does nothing.

From above translation, we can see that 1. most of the translators interpreted Wu Wei as “without doing”, “does nothing”, “not-doing”, 2. some of them rendered Wu Wei as “still, at rest”, “inactive”, 3. one of them rendered Wu Wei as “without a name”. Number three is totally a misunderstanding. The phrases that numbers 1 and 2 chose are similar, for “still, at rest or inactive” imply “doing nothing”. So a conclusion can be drawn from those west versions, Tao superficially “Wu Wei”, “doing nothing”. However, Tao actually uses its own way to do things and leaves no thing un-done.

“Wu Bu Wei” can be only realized by “Wu Wei”, so “Wu Wei” cannot mean to do nothing, but to do things differently from surface. Its meanings are at three levels: (a) doing something before the thing’s beginning; (b) doing actually with non-doing in surface; (c) nothing would be un-done if “Wu Wei” could be carried out. So the key point of Wu Wei by Lao Zi could never be not doing, but doing. To do is the key of Wu Wei by Lao Zi. Therefore, apart from number 3, a misunderstanding, numbers 1 and 2 are not right.

2. Sheng Ren Zhi Wu Wei” does not mean “Xian Ren(idle man) Zhi Bu Wei”(Sheng Ren is not an idle man)

In the same way, in chapter 2 of Dao De Jing, the subject of the sentence, “Sheng Ren Chu Wu Wei Zhi Shi”, is Sheng Ren while Wu Wei is the predicate. The whole sentence means that What Sheng Ren carried out is the same way as Tao acts “Wu Wei”, through which nothing is never achieved. For instance, When Sheng Ren instructs people, he does not use words yet achieve the result of instruction.

Blakney translated this sentence as: “Indeed the Wise Man’s office is to work by being still.” So his point is that Sheng Ren’s work is being still. Hans-Georg Moeller translated it as “Therefore the sage resides with the task of nonaction.” He thought Sheng Ren does nonaction. H.G. Oswald translated: “He dwells in effectiveness without action.”, which means

Sheng Ren is effective without action. Sam Hamill translated: "the sage can act without effort", which means Sheng Ren even act, yet without effort. Hermon would translate: "Therefore the sage, the self-controlled man, dwells in actionless activity, poised between contraries", which means Sheng Ren is in actionless state by means of keep balance between contraries. Michael Lafargue translated: "The Wise Person: Settles into his job of Not Doing", which shows that Sheng Ren did his job by not doing. Patrick M. Byrne translated: "the sage conducts his affairs without action", which indicates that he deals with his affairs without action. Stephen Adiss and Stanley Lombardo translated: "the Sage is devoted to non-action", which means Sheng Ren's work is non-action. Robert G. Henrics translated: "the Sage abides in affairs that entail no action", which shows Sheng Ren undertakes no action. James Legge thought: "the sage manages affairs without doing anything", which indicates Sheng Ren does things by doing nothing.

From the above translations, we can see that, 1. most of the translators interpreted Sheng Ren's work is "nonaction", "without action", "actionless activity", "without doing anything" and something like this; 2. some of them rendered Sheng Ren's work is "without effort", "by being still"; 3. one of them rendered as "Sheng Ren does not doing on dwell." All these translations indicate that translators thought Sheng Ren all "do nothing", or "conduct actionless activity". Or in other words, their work did not need effort, or being still was their work. If this is right, readers would think Sheng Ren would do nothing at all. Then my question is: what's the difference between Sheng Ren and common people, or Sheng Ren with laziest people? Does that mean Sheng Ren are Lazy? Of course Sheng Ren are not doing-nothing men. In many chapters of Dao De Jing, Lao Zi illustrates how good Sheng Ren are and how they do good work. Take chapter 81 as an example, it says: "Therefore, the Way of Heaven is to benefit and not to cause any harm; The Way of Man is to act on behalf of others and not to compete with them."³ Here Lao Zi thought Sheng Ren do something for people but not to do anything to hurt people. It also implies that Sheng Ren are not in doing-nothing state, but keep doing. In this case, the original meaning of "Sheng Ren Chu Wu Wei Zhi Shi" is not reflected in the Western versions at all.

3. There is not a point, or a balance or a connection between "Wu Wei" and "You Wei", but the two parts of the world

The third sentence to discuss is in chapter 48: "Sun Zhi You Sun, Yi Zhi Yu Wu Wei." There is no specific subject in this sentence in general.

3. Translated by Robert G Henrics, Lao-Tzu: Te Tao Ching, A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-Wang-Tui Text, London: Bodley Head, 1991, p. 158

Lao Zi wrote this sentence to tell us how we can carry out “Wu Wei”. That is the opposite to learning. Learning makes us know more and more, while practicing “Dao” makes us break the limits of our knowledge. Breaking and more breaking, then arrives at “Wu Wei”, which means by breaking the barriers and the blindings around us the original and simplest way will show up and work. So the Taoist is a special type of people whose work is to break the limits or barriers which prevent us from knowing the real way of the world. Some people may argue that learning knowledge is also a way to know the world, then why is it not good? Well, in the whole article of *Dao De Jing*, Lao Zi is good at finding something out of the usual way or common sense. For example, Lao Zi thought when all people think something is good, then it is not good, because if people know what is good, they will all rush for it. In this case, good is not good because it will cause war. In the same way, Lao Zi saw that learning and learning more makes human so wise that they will know the way how to be good and how to get what they want. Thus they will be blinded by their own eyes and do not know what is their highest need. In this case, Lao Zi promotes that breaking our limits, then we will know what is our highest need and find the Dao in the end.

“Sun” is translated mostly by “decrease” (by Moeller, Oswald, Henrics); or “loss” (by Blakney, Hamill); or “shedding” (by Hermon); even Michael Lafargue translated “Sun” as “Doing nothing”. That is to say, the translators comprehend “Sun” in different ways and they did not know what the object of “Sun” was. So they never gave a specific object to it. They did not know what is decreased, or lost, or shredded, but their imagination worked during translation. They translated the above sentence like this: Patrick M. Byrne translated: “To decrease, and again decrease, Until wu-wei is attained”; Robert G. Henrics translated: “They decrease and decrease, Until they reach the point where they do nothing at all”; Heysinger translated: “And as the work lessens and lessens there comes a condition of nothing doing”; Walter Gorn-Old translated: “Do you continually curtail your effort till there be nothing left of it?”; Legge translated: “He diminishes it and again diminishes it, till he arrives at doing nothing (on purpose)”; They never think what Lao Zi said in a philosophical and dialectic way but only a common straight way. So they infer that there will be a point, or a balance, or a condition between “You Wei” and “Wu Wei”, and as long as you arrive at that point, then you can achieve Wu Wei, or even “curtail your effort till there will be nothing left of it”.

Therefore, there will never be a point or balance or a condition for Wu Wei’s coming, but a dialectic way of thinking.

III. Wrong diction in translation of "Wu Wei"

1. Words chosen to replace "Wu Wei"

"Wu Wei" in Chinese can be either a verb, a phrase, or a noun. In English, translators have a free choice of the part of speech. Mostly they choose noun phrases such as, "Non-action", "non-action", "no action", "non-acts", "actionless". Some like to use verb phrases such as, "does nothing", "take no action", "do nothing", "does not on doing dwell", "be emptied", gerund phrases such as, "non-doing", "nothing doing", "not doing", "not-doing", "doing nothing". They can also choose prepositional phrases, such as "without action", "without doing", "without effort". One of them even renders the idea of "Wu Wei" as a sentence: "remains quiescent, curtail your effort till there be nothing left of it".

In general, no matter what part of speech they choose, the key idea of "Wu Wei" is "non-doing anything", and even some of them choose "doing without effort" or "remains quiescent". Blakney translated it as "curtail your effort till there be nothing left of it". Hamill translated it as "be emptied". Their understanding is similar. They never take "Wu Wei" as a philosophical concept but a common phrase.

2. How interpreters think about Wu Wei

If translators could not follow the original meaning of the text, they would find their own way to comprehend it for sure. Here we will track the translator's way of comprehending "Wu Wei" in the following.

James Legge comprehended "Wu Wei" this way: "All efforts made with a purpose are sure to fail."⁴ He translated the sentence in chapter 48 as "He diminishes it and again diminishes it, till he arrives at doing nothing (on purpose)". So in Legge's mind, "Wu Wei" is "taking no action". Any action made with a purpose is not "Wu Wei". This is very objective. Can we say eating is "Wu Wei"? when we are hungry, we eat. This is on purpose. Are you sure this is sure to fail? In Legge's logic, it does not do good. How can the "purpose theory" be applied in Lao Zi's philosophy?

Robert Henrics thought that "the important Taoist term wu-wei (non-action), literally "without action", in one sense stands for spontaneity and genuineness; it does not mean literally to do nothing, but rather "to act without acting", to spontaneously say and do what is genuinely felt rather than putting on a show for others ("acting")⁵. Here, Henrics thought "Wu

4. Legge, James, "Tao Teh King", IN *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol.XXXIX[G]. London :Oxford University Press, 1891, p. 72.

5. Henrics, R. G: *Lao-Tzu: Te Tao Ching*[M], London: Bodley Head ,1990, p.xxvi, 引文原文:).

Wei” is not “to do nothing”, but “to act without acting” or “showing for others”. In Henrics’ mind, an action is not for showing off is called “Wu Wei”. In this case, can we say if the terrorists explode a bridge at night is called “Wu Wei”?

Patrick Michael Byrne thought “Wu” means “without”; “Wei” means “to do, cause, make, effect”. “The two together imply a state of effortless non-striving, though this does not exactly mean doing absolutely nothing. Often, wu-wei may be best translated simply as ‘effortlessly’.”⁶ He thought that “the sage does not assert himself, does not force things. He works in harmony with the inner nature of things, appearing to do nothing while things continue to be done”.⁷ So in Byrne’s mind, if Sheng Ren works in harmony with the inner nature of things, it is called “Wu Wei”. For example, if the water is flowing downwards, let it flow, which is “Wu Wei”. Then what if the flood appears? Is “Sheng Ren let it” or “doing something effortlessly” called “Wu Wei”?

However, Hans-Georg Moeller thought “Wu Wei” was like Tao which is constantly without name. The Dao is “like the empty hub at the center of the ‘full’ spokes, the necessary pivot around which all activities circle and which thereby constitutes the unity and harmonious balance of the whole scenario”.⁸ In his mind, “Wu Wei” is the un-present of Dao. “The sage marks the position of the Dao in this ongoing process, the non-present in the midst of the present. The sage takes on no specific duty and does not take part on the discourse about the good, the beautiful, and the ugly. So he can let the world go on.”

Byrne compares “Wu Wei” to a state of effortless, non-striving, while Moeller takes “Wu Wei” as the center of the “full” spokes. They both try to catch the meaning of “Wu Wei”. However, it is never be the real connotation by Lao Zi.

R.B. Blakney thought that “Wei Wu Wei” cannot be translated literally and still render its meaning. “Clumsily, wei wu wei is to do without doing, to act without action. Put positively, it means to get along as nature does: the world get created, living things grow and pass away without any sign of effort.” He said “Wu Wei is man’s part; he is to be still, quiet and passive so that the Way, ultimate Reality, the universe of being, may act through him without let or hindrance. To use more familiar vocabulary, the idea is

6. Byrne, Patrick Michael, *Dao De Jing*[M], Santa Fe, New Mexico: Sun Books, Sun Publishing, 1991, p. 6

7. Byrne, Patrick Michael, *Dao De Jing*[M], Santa Fe, New Mexico: Sun Books, Sun Publishing, 1991, note 1, p. 14

8. Moeller, Hans-Georg: *Dao De Jing: A Complete Translation and Commentary* based on his German translation of the Mawangdui silk manuscripts version[M], Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2007, pp. 5,6

to let God be God in you.”⁹ This is Blakney's “Wu Wei”, let God in to control everything while man can keep still, quiet and passive and nothing can not be achieved.

To conclude, translation of “Wu Wei” in above versions is a trying by various ways to catch the kernel of “Wu Wei”. The meanings from those, such as without purpose, without showing off, effortless, the necessary pivot and letting God in are actually a reflection of different aspects of “Wu Wei”. If translators' comprehensions only stay at that level, it is not only a distracting, a single-faceted, but also a wrong presenting of the original idea.

IV. Conclusion

All in all, the translation of Dao De Jing is like conducting a building of philosophy in the East to the West. The building in the East could not be moved directly to the West. We hope that Dao the translated versions of De Jing could be shown in the same way to its target readers as the text to its original readers. The translators should play both as a original reader and target creator. First they should learn and digest what they saw as the origin and then produce their own way of expression. It is easy to say, however, the change happens on both the ways.

Admittedly, the general comprehension and expression of “Wu Wei” by translators shows that they have tried their best to understand ideas from other culture. However, the translators' own cultural background and their first philosophical impression limit their comprehension of other culture and philosophy. Firstly, they simplified the idea of Chinese philosophy, Wu Wei. They tried to use one phrase to replace “Wu Wei”, a Chinese thought, which could not be interpreted even by its original language. Secondly, they superficially interpreters Lao Zi's thought, Wu Wei, only based on its literal meaning, such as “non-action”, “doing something effortlessly”. Thirdly, all their efforts are trying to get close to the kernel of Wu Wei. In other words, the interpreting of Lao Zi's thought is approaching to the key idea. Some of the translation touched a certain part of the kernel at a certain level. Some good translation is like trunk, ears, legs and etc to an elephant. The above mentioned meanings are at most parts of the elephant. Even all the parts put together does not make a living elephant. The full image of Lao Zi's thought can be shown in the west only by means of Lao Zi's way where subject, dialectical, roundly acceptance of other culture. Any prejudice, ignorance, domesticated, simplified or superficial idea would ruin the real meaning of other culture. All these shows that

9. Blakney, R. B.: *The Way of Life: Lao Tsu—The New American Library*(Mentor Books 129) [M], New York: Penguin, 1955/83, p. 45

the 20th century Western philosophy in fact did not reasonably accept and absorb the real idea from different cultures resulted from the limitation of interpreters' own cultural background. Interpreters must be open-minded to comprehend and accept other culture.