

Emotional Engagement and Translator Responses to Indeterminacy in Translating the "*Dao De Jing*"

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Abstract:

Translating classical Chinese philosophical texts presents particular interpretive challenges due to their linguistic ambiguity, conceptual complexity, and aesthetic openness, often described in Chinese aesthetics as *liubai* ("leaving space"). These features often create points of textual indeterminacy that require translators to actively negotiate meaning. These features create points of textual indeterminacy that require translators to actively negotiate meaning and that also evoke complex emotional responses. Focusing on selected passages from the *Dao De Jing*, a text renowned for its brevity, philosophical depth, and aesthetic indeterminacy, this study explores how such emotional engagement is intertwined with translators' interpretive decision-making during the cross-cultural translation process.

Drawing on an empirical translation experiment involving 38 student and professional translators, this paper combines keystroke logging data from Translog-II with retrospective interviews to capture both behavioural patterns and subjective experiences. The findings suggest that indeterminacy functions as an activating condition that triggers emotional responses such as frustration, hesitation, pride, excitement, and aesthetic appreciation. These emotional reactions may ultimately shape translation outcomes in complex and sometimes unexpected ways.

In responding to indeterminacy, translators tend to adopt two broad strategic orientations. A step-back response involves suspending interpretive closure and preserving textual openness, while a step-forward response reflects a movement toward interpretive resolution through clarification, elaboration, or contextualisation. These responses are not merely technical strategies but are closely linked to translators' situated understanding and affective engagement with the text.

This study contributes to reclaiming the agency of translators by grounding it in observable translation processes, rather than treating it as a purely theoretical construct. At the same time, by incorporating empirical data, it offers a methodological complement to hermeneutic phenomenological approaches, which have traditionally focused on interpretive subjectivity, providing systematic insights into how understanding unfolds in practice.

Keywords: emotion in translation, hermeneutic phenomenology, textual indeterminacy, *Dao De Jing* translation