

# Taoist Aesthetic Hermeneutics in Foreign Languages

—A Case Study of *Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry* Translated by Herbert Allen Giles

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**Abstract:** The *Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry* authored by Sikong Tu, the poetry as well as the litterateur and the literary theorist work is featured with the theoretical and aesthetic. Because of Sikong Tu's embracement of the Taoist thoughts of Lao Tzu and Meng Tzu with the Tao (道), "doing nothing" (无为), "plainness" (朴素), "naturalness" (自然) as the core, his work reflects the Taoist philosophy of which is extended into the aesthetics of creating the poems: implicativeness, naturalness and elusiveness. This paper aims to adopt the "four steps" by George Steiner, the hermeneutic approach to translation to analyze and study how the famous English sinologist in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Herbert Allen Giles understand and interpret the Taoist thoughts throughout the work so as to meet the goal that make the reader know and applicate this theory better, providing another new theorist perspective in the later similar study.

**Key words:** Taoist Aesthetics; *Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry*; Sikong Tu; hermeneutics; George Steiner; Herbert Allen Giles

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## Introduction

In Tang Dynasty, the ancient Chinese poems had peaked top, characterized by five characters or seven characters a line with the end rhyme. Synchronously, an array of both poets and literary theorists had created scores of poetic theorists works in forms of poems in which embodied the writers' philosophical thoughts and their personal understanding of the poems. Therefore, the works of this kind are commonly featured with the theorist as well aesthetics.

Sikong Tu, the poet as well as the poetic theorist in the late Tang Dynasty, was born in an official family. He enjoyed the genius in

literature from earlier and was conferred the official title for his articles which has been widely appreciated at that time. Later, one of his brothers had participated in an uprising and tried to persuade him to be in. After refusing his brother, Sikong Tu had come back hometown to negatively live a recluse life, during which his most poetic works were produced. Instead of getting in touch with the feudal official authorities, he "Drink a pot at the leisure time,

Singing an endless song deep in the Wulingxi" (Return Wangguang in Dingwei), and "Since the Qilin Mansion in my home, all the scholarly honors I seek are appreciate the poems" (Apricot Blossoms Watching in Wucun under the Liji Mountain). Later, he settled in the ancestral villa of Wangguang of Zhongtiao Mountain. In this "paradise", where is called the interest of seclusion, he sang music with eminent monks and famous scholars every day. During his secluded life, he had felt and enjoyed the Taoist philosophical thoughts, creating this poetic criticism work.

Inheriting the aesthetic thoughts of its predecessors, *The Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry* takes the light of nature as the aesthetic basis, includes many poetic artistic styles and aesthetic artistic conception, and classifies the styles and realms created by poetry. It is a theoretical work on the creation of poetry, especially the problem of poetry aesthetic style. According to the literature investigation, it is well known that there have been so many interpretations of this work both from home and abroad. For instance, Herbert A. Giles in 1901 had fully translated it titled as *SSU-K'UNG TU; L. Granmer-Byng* had translated part of

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it; in 1963 Yang Hsien-yi and Glayds Yang cooperatively translated the whole of this work by the title of *The Twenty-four Modes of Poetry*; in 1992 Stephen Owen translated it all with the title *The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry*; in 2002 Wang Hongyin translated all the work titled as *The Realm of Poetry and Other Works with Translations and Commentaries*; and in 2012 the *Library of Chinese Classics* (Chinese-English) includes the Zhang Zongyou's translating into modern Chinese as well as Giles' translation.

From the perspective of hermeneutic translation, this paper conducts the analysis and study of Giles' translation of *The Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry*, trying to be known of how Giles understands and interprets the Taoist philosophical thoughts implicated by this work through George Steiner's "four steps" of translation. By this way, the paper aims to specify the significance of the hermeneutic approach to translation and its theorist meaning in further analyzing and studying the translator's translation thoughts, the subjectivity construction, value orientation etc., with the expectation to provide a new perspective for translation studying and a lesson for translation practice.

### 1. Sikong Tu and *The Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry*

In Wang Hongyin's *A CRITIQUE OF POETIC REALM FROM LITERARY MIND: Sikong Tu, His Life, Other Works and The Realm of Poetry from a Perspective of Literary Translation*, it has detailed this learned scholar of late Tang Dynasty and his poetic theory work. "According to the Old Tang Book, Sikong Tu had retired from his official title returning to villa in Wangguguan with self-entitled 'Nairu Jushi (a person resistant to the humiliation)'"(2020:25). He had come into the world in a family that his ancestors were all taking the official titles in feudal authorities, and enjoyed a tendency of promotion. His great-grand father named Sikong Sui, ever was the county magistrate; his grand father named Sikong Tuan, was ever the Shuibu Langzhong (the official responsible for shipping administration and water facilitating); his father Sikong Yu had a good command of official art and was proficient in writing poems and proses, then to be the official responsible for salt trading administration and later in the court be promoted as Simen Yuanwailang and Hubu Langzhong. In addition to that, his mother's family was also literarily cultivated. Form all above, Sikong Tu was born in a rich and distinguished family with the smooth and successful official career. He himself also was bathed

in Confucius classics, historically acclaimed "a talented writer".

In accordance with his early poems and prose, it can be seen that he had grown up with the good Confucian thoughts imparting. "Affected by the political situation and ideology at that time, in the respect of self-discipline, his family embraced the Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism which were paid the equal attention in the late Tang Dynasty".

In the Huang Chao uprising, the Capital city Chang'an had fallen and the Emperor Xizong escaped. Sikong Tu had recognized that situation and known that nothing should help this Royal Court avoid from being destroyed so he chose to escape this misfortune world to recluse back to his hometown.

*The Twenty-Four Styles of Poems* is his monograph on poetry, referred to as *Styles of Poems*. Among this work, the artistic styles and conceptions of poetry are divided into 24 categories, each category with twelve sentences of four rhymes to describe, and also involves the author's ideological cultivation and writing techniques. It is different from Zhong Rong's "Poetry" on the source of writers' works. The art style of Sikong Tu reflects a variety of styles developed by the two basic style beauty of masculine and feminine. "The General Summary of the Four Libraries" said that it was "well prepared and undisciplined". Xu Xiaofang also said in his postscript that "he taught people poetry, with a wide portal and no one style". However, the biggest contribution of poetry in the artistic style is from the language style of literature to the artistic conception style of literature. In the Tang Dynasty, the theory and poetry began to divide discussing, and the style theory in poetry gradually turned to the artistic conception style of poetry, which can be clearly seen in the bright 19-character style theory, while *Styles of Poems* is a pure poetic artistic conception style theory.

### 2. The Taoist Philosophical Thoughts and its Aesthetics

Taoism is one of the most important schools of thought in the hundred schools of thought in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. The core of Taoism is "Tao", which is believed that "Tao" is the origin of the universe and the rule governing all movements in the universe. But how our ordinary people can grasp the Tao in order to achieve "self-emancipation" to live a happy life? Lao Tze in his work *Tao Te Chin* said that people should abide by the Tao, that is the rule of movements of the universe, although here, concluding the

Tao simply into the rules is also something improper. That mean men should integrate themselves into the movements of the universe, not making preeminent among others and retiring after political success. Besides, Taoism also appeals the "empty", which means "being" comes from the "empty" and they are mutual supporting. If there is no "empty" then we are impossible to know what is "being". Throughout the Tao Te Chin there are so many similar dialectic statements.

Since the core of the Taoist philosophical thoughts can be primarily concluded into three aspects: plainness, naturalness and doing nothing, affected from that, the unique Chinese aesthetics also takes shape, which appeals implicative and elusiveness. That means the creating the poems should resemble painting: natural, smooth, and plain, which can stimulate the readers' imagine or let the reader to fill the state of mind of the poems by themselves instead of telling them completely and directly by so many words. In this Styles of Poems, "Without a word writ down, all wit may be attained" ultimately embodies traditional Chinese aesthetics extended from Taoist philosophical thoughts: naturalness and implicativeness and elusiveness.

### 3. Herbert A. Giles and His Experience

H.A. Giles, in full Herbert Allen Giles, an English scholar of Chinese language and culture, helped to popularize the Wade-Giles system for the romanization of the Chinese languages. Educated at Charterhouse school, London, Giles joined the consular service and spent the years 1867-92 in various posts in China. Upon his return, he lived in Aberdeen, Scot., until 1897, when he was appointed professor of Chinese at the University of Cambridge, succeeding Sir Thomas Francis Wade; he retained the chair until 1932. Over the years he published a variety of books on Chinese language and culture that were popular into the second half of the 20th century, including *Chinese Without a Teacher* (1872), *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (1880), *Gems of Chinese Literature* (1884), *A Chinese Biographical Dictionary* (1898), *A History of Chinese Literature* (1901), *An Introduction to the History of Chinese Pictorial Art* (1905; 2nd ed. 1918), and *The Civilization of China* (1911).

His *Chinese-English Dictionary* (1892; 2nd ed. 1912) firmly established the Wade-Giles romanization system, which had been developed by Wade. Wade-Giles remained the most popular such system for English-speaking scholars until the official promulgation of Pinyin in 1979.

Herbert Allen Giles perhaps best known for his association with the Wade-Giles transliteration system, was a British Foreign Service officer who spent 25 years in China. After retiring from diplomacy, he became the second professor of Chinese at Cambridge University. Giles initially took Chinese as a job requirement. But after mastering the language for that purpose, he pioneered the discipline of Chinese studies and was a prolific author of numerous textbooks and articles on China's language, literature, culture, history, arts and philosophy. It would be unfair to compare Giles with today's U.S. Foreign Service officers, since he spent his entire diplomatic career in China and Taiwan. Nevertheless, his story proves that it is not only possible for an adult to learn Chinese, but to be remarkably successful. With that in mind, here are some possible lessons for FSOs preparing for language-designated positions.

Giles had discovered creative ways to learn the language. After completing his studies at the Charter School in Oxford, Giles passed the competitive examination to be a student interpreter for the British Foreign Service. Immediately after arriving in China in 1867 as a 22-year-old, he distinguished himself by his nontraditional approach to learning the language. There were very few textbooks available for Westerners to learn Chinese at that time. Giles was not entirely satisfied with the recommended textbook, *Yu Yan Zi Er Ji*, considering it as an "ill-arranged and pedantic primer"—an assessment that would become a major point of contention between Giles and its author, Sir Thomas Wade. "He set out to learn what the Chinese were reading and how their children attained literacy."

### 4. Taoist Aesthetic Delivery from George Steiner's "Four Steps"

Based on the "four stages" translation theory by George Steiner, this work translated by Giles can be well analyzed and studied from the perspective of hermeneutics so as to explore how the translator delivery the Taoist aesthetics of the original.

#### 4.1 Deliver the "Implicativeness" by Retaining the Original Images

Implicativeness reflected in the ancient Chinese poetry is just like what Sikong Tu said in his work that even without a word, all meaning can be expressed. Extended from the Taoist philosophical thoughts, implicativeness originates its appealing that people should abide the rules of movements of the universe so that they should not make themselves eminent and sharp among

others. They should hide their edge and success to live an uncompetitive life, which means follow the nature or as the nature it goes. Reflected in the literature work, especially in the poems, it appeals that creating the poems should be like drawing a picture with Chinese ink and brush instead of western oil pictures characterized by the realistic.

Styles of Poems is a work that uses the poetic language to illustrate the poetic theory. Therefore, it is required that translation should succeed not only in delivering the essence of the writer but also in conveying the poems' aesthetics. Incorporation of the four stages stresses the translator absorbs and retains the contents of the original so as to inject the vigorousness into the translation anew. Viewing from the whole picture, what is the most significant is that Giles takes this works as a philosophical monography to translation, which makes his translation more like a philosophical poetry. In addition to that, due to his desire to let the British people to know Chinese better as well as his own great interest to Chinese, he tries to translate the work close to the source language as far as possible. For example, in the 11th Style Conservation, a sentence "悠悠空尘, 忽忽海沓" is translated as "The wide-spreading dust-motes in the air, The sudden spray-bubbles of ocean,"; "天风浪浪, 海山苍苍" in 12th Style Set Free is translated as "Wide-spreading as the wind of heaven, Lofty as the peaks of ocean,"; "青春鹦鹉, 杨柳楼台" in the 13th Style is translated as "The parrot of the verdant spring, The willow-trees, the terrace"; and "海之波澜, 山之嶙峋" in 20th Style is translated as "The rolling breakers of ocean, The crags and cliffs of mountains". One of methods in creating the ancient Chinese poems is to juxtapose the images without any connective words between the two images, which also has influenced the creation of American imagist poetry. Form all the translation above, it can be seen that the translator use the images juxtapose the same as the Chinese poems creating method, trying not to use more words to fill the empty built by juxtaposed images as much as he can.

It also reflects the incorporation of the four stages by George Steiner that the translator has absorbed the original patterns through his own understanding and hermeneutics to inject the new vitality into the translation.

#### 4.2 Deliver the "Naturalness" by Expounding in Meaning

Naturalness in Taoist philosophical thoughts implicates all natural things constitute our natural world like plants, water, air and so on. In the Styles of Poems

it also has transformed to an aesthetic experience, which means writing poems should avoid playing or performing in order to express the emotion. Like flowers blooming and sun rising, it should all be as natural as things in the natural world. When expressing this conception, the writer also use some Taoist terms to implicatively illustrates what should be naturalness, which leads to a problem that it is too difficult to understand by the target language readers if there is no interpretations. Here are some examples such as "超以外象, 得其环中" "脱有形似, 握手已违" "俱道适往, 着手成春" "薄言情语, 悠悠天钧" "若其天放, 如是得之" "遇之自天, 泠然希音" that are respectively translated by "Beyond the range of conceptions, Let us gain the Centre" "Ever shifting in semblance, It shifts from the grasp and is gone" "All roads lead thither,— One touch and you have spring!" "And when emotions crowd upon me, I will leave them to the harmonies of heaven" "If our own selves we can reach this point, Can we not be said to have attained?" "I heard the music of heaven, Astounded by its rare strains". The Chinese verse all describes the features of naturalness when creating the poems and they can be concluded as "don't play what you want to write and express". In the first example, "象外" in accordance with the interpretation by Stephen Owen is that it can be recognized as a metaphysic potential power (Strength[xiong]) or as a status without shapes like the rolling clouds. Giles comprehends it as the conception and the "环中" simply as the Centre, which interprets the "象" (but it's improper) by his own understanding. In the second example, "脱" means "if", and this verse means poetry lies in the natural encounter, not to investigate. If forced to pursue, but it is very hard to find. Even if the surface is connected, if there is a shape can be sought, just grasp, that would be too persistent, and the spirit of poetry has been far away. The translator interpret the "形" into "semblance", a situation in which sth seems to exist although this may not, in fact, be the case.

Among these examples, the translator gives the interpretation by his own understanding in the forms of philosophical style close to the original, which embodies the aggression of the four stages, that is when the translator encounter where is different from the target language expression, he will realize it and manage to overcome it by expounding in meaning so as to well deliver the essence of the original.

#### 4.3 Deliver the "Elusiveness" by Returning to the Impressionistic Style

According to Stephen Owen in his Readings in

Chinese Literary Thought, Sikong Tu is the person who most appeals the Elusiveness of the poems, so the language he uses in this theorist work also express elusively. Such examples as "反虚入浑, 积健为雄" "素处以默, 妙机其微" "如有佳语, 大河衡前" "流水今日, 明月前身" "真力弥满, 万象在旁" "俱似大道, 妙契同尘" "超超神明, 返返冥无" respectively are translated as "Let us revert to Nothing and enter the Absolute, Spiritual existence means inward fulness" "It dwells in quietude, speechless, Imperceptible in the cosmos" "And sweet words are exchanged Though the great River rolls between" "Like flowing water is our to-day, Our yesterday, the bright moon" "Filled with a spiritual strength, All creation by my side" "All these are like TAO, Skillfully woven into earthly surroundings" "Beyond the bounds of thought, Circling for ever in the great Void". These examples are from Energy-Absolute, Tranquil Repose, Concentration, Wash-Smelt, Set Free, Form and Feature and Motion. From each Style it can be seen these verses are depicting the methods to meet the aesthetic experience of the artistic mood but the writer avoids telling these methods directly replaced by using Taoist philosophical conception to express in an elusive way. For example, "反虚入浑", what is "虚" and "浑" and how to "返" and "入"? In the first sentence, the translator retains the original expression, "返" into "revert to" and "入" into enter, "健" into "fulness" and "雄" into "spiritual existence". From these translations it can be seen that the translator directly translate the original verses with adding to own understanding but there it not too much interpretation or overinterpretation, which aims to retain the elusive effect of the original by "impressionistic styles" to the largest extent by the prerequisite that the translator is unable to interpret the elusive philosophical terms, especially once expressed in detail, it might wreck the elusiveness that original generated in readers. Besides, in order to ensure the readability of the targeted language text, the translator properly add some interpreting of the significance based on the original.

They also reflect the restitution to the original, that is returning what should belong to the original meanwhile complementing for the original.

## 5. Conclusion

According to the point of view of the hermeneutic school, the comprehension is interpreting. George Steiner believes that the process of production and understanding is the process of translation. Translation is one of attributes in languages, which covers interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer and personal communication. This

paper has illustrated the hermeneutic translation theory in detail and the spiritual and philosophical connotation of The Twenty-Four Styles of Poems to analyze and study Giles translation. By adopting the "four steps" by George Steiner, this paper has found that Giles takes this theorist work as a philosophical literature to translate, so he doesn't strictly abide the poetry pattern or add too much his own interpretation to make the hidden meaning clear. Employing George Steiner's "four steps" to analyze Giles' translation of this Styles of Poems has provided a new perspective to study translators' understanding and interpretation of the original, which enables the researcher to further study a translator in the level of his translation thoughts.

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