

BEYOND “DOING NOTHING”: IVANHOE’S RENDERING OF WUWEI IN THE DAODEJING (CHS. 1, 3, 37, 48), WITH LAU, HENRICKS, AND AMES AND HALL AS CONTEXT

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Chen Guo Xing

School of Foreign Languages, Qilu University of Technology, Jinan, China.

Suyunov Askar Uktamovich

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2852-5249>

School of Foreign Languages, Qilu University of Technology, Jinan, China.

Suyunova Madina Uktam qizi

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8039-5558>

*The Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Finance program at
the University of Sunderland, Management Development Institute of Singapore in
Tashkent.*

Abstract

This article provides a comparative analysis of the rendering of *wuwei* in DDJ 1, 3, 37, and 48 across four influential English translations: Lau (1963), Henricks (1989), Ivanhoe (2002), and Ames and Hall (2003). It offers aligned close readings of wording, metaphor handling, syntax (parallelism, ellipsis), and paratext (prefaces, notes, glossaries) by combining Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), a hermeneutics of paratext (Genette, 1997), and Venuti’s foreignisation/domestication orientation (Venuti, 1995). I contend that translations that maintain the main line’s metaphor networks and paradox while moving clarification to succinct, strategically placed notes and a stable glossary consistently steer readers away from the cliché of “doing nothing” and towards a non-coercive, situation-responsive understanding of *wuwei*. The result is a repeatable template for teaching-appropriate paratext design and metaphor-sensitive translation. In order to emphasise depth and reproducibility, the scope is purposefully limited (four chapters; English translations); the useful deliverable is a succinct style sheet for instructors and translators.

Keywords

Daodejing; wuwei; paratext; Conceptual Metaphor Theory; domestication; foreignisation; translation pedagogy

1. Introduction

Wuwei is frequently caricatured in popular discourse as “doing nothing”, which obscures its function as a useful discipline of situation-responsive, non-coercive action in self-cultivation and governance (Slingerland, 2003). In order to make close reading possible while still revealing patterns that generalise, this paper takes a purposefully narrow approach, focusing on one concept (*wuwei*) across four brief, dense passages (DDJ 1, 3, 37, 48). I compare four popular English translations (Laozi, trans. Lau, 1963; Laozi, trans. Henricks, 1989; Laozi, trans. Ivanhoe, 2002; Laozi, trans. Ames and Hall, 2003) because they cover a significant range of translation stances and paratext strategies and are regularly taught, reviewed, and cited.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), paratext hermeneutics (Genette, 1997), and Venuti’s (1995) orientation serve as the foundation for the analysis. These lenses are used within each close reading to explain how lexical, metaphorical, syntactic, and paratextual choices affect the reader. This article expands and systematises the comparative close-reading approach, showing how lexical, metaphorical, syntactic, and paratextual choices shape readers’ construal of *wuwei*. This position is consistent with current Chinese research on the translation and reception of *wuwei* (Wang and Wang, 2020; Zhang, 2021).

Using Lau, Henricks, Ames, and Hall only as contextual contrasts, this paper treats Ivanhoe as the primary translator and argues that Ivanhoe’s “literal line + concise note” best supports *wuwei* as non-coercive efficacy across DDJ 1, 3, 37, and 48 (Ivanhoe, 2002, chs. 1, 3, 37, 48).

Guiding Questions

1. How does *wuwei* transition between quietist and efficacy-orientated readings through choices in lexis, metaphor, and syntax?
2. How can readers be guided by paratext (glosses, notes, glossary) without destroying useful ambiguity?
3. What useful advice is given to instructors, editors, and translators?

2. Theoretical framework and related work

CMT. Metaphors like *pu* (“uncarved wood”, unworked potential) and water (yielding strength, flow) in the *Daodejing* are conceptual carriers of practice rather than ornament (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Maintaining these networks preserves the text’s logical structure and prevents it from drifting towards abstract doctrine.

Paratext. Interpretive horizons are shaped by glossaries, notes, and introductions. Without rewriting the line, well-chosen paratext scaffolds understanding (Genette, 1997). Practically speaking, relocate clarification to

succinct, readable notes and a reliable glossary; maintain ambiguity and paradox where they are beneficial.

Orientation. Venuti (1995) makes a distinction between domestication (operationalising/smoothing) and foreignisation (retaining strangeness/paradox). I advocate for a hybrid approach that preserves metaphor and paradox through foreignization in the lines and enhances comprehension and instruction through clarification in the notes.

On *wuwei*. *Wuwei* is interpreted by Slingerland (2003) as effortless action—an emergent efficacy of non-forcing alignment rather than passivity. This encourages maintaining paradox while providing a mechanism with brief paratextual cues.

CNKI/CSSCI context. I also refer to Huang and Wang (2006; 2023), who address corpus-based translation tendencies and consistency, to situate this study in recent Chinese scholarship. Their methodological concerns (coding, terminology stability) fit this comparative task quite nicely. Maintaining the *water/水* networks stabilises *wuwei*'s semantic neighbourhood (Chen, 2019; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

3. Corpus, translators, and method

Corpus. Four chapters central to the *wuwei* field: DDJ 1 (naming vs. namelessness frames ontology/practice); DDJ 3 (governance via de-stimulation); DDJ 37 (the paradox “无为而无不为”); DDJ 48 (learning “adds”, following the *dao* “subtracts”, culminating in *wuwei*).

Translators.

- D.C. Lau (1963) — terse literalism; minimal paratext.
- R.G. Henricks (1989) — Mawangdui-aware; literal line + notes.
- P.J. Ivanhoe (2002) — literal rendering + explanatory notes.
- R.T. Ames and D.L. Hall (2003) — process-relational framing; “non-coercive action”; rich paratext.

Method. Align clauses/sentences across versions; compare (i) lexis, (ii) metaphor handling, (iii) syntax (parallelism, ellipsis, clause packaging), and (iv) paratext (notes/glossaries). Parallelism preservation, paradox retention versus operationalisation, metaphor preservation versus flattening, and brief versus heavy/in-line notes are all indicated by light coding. I deduce probable reader effects at each stage (quietism ↔ non-coercive efficacy). This reproducible design emphasises textual evidence and is an effective teaching tool.

4. Analysis: four close readings

4.1 DDJ 1 — “nameless/named”: keep the pair visible

Ivanhoe maintains the “nameless/named” pair while cueing practice-facing reading by using a literal line and adding brief orienting notes (Ivanhoe, 2002, ch. 1). Lau, on the other hand, keeps the pair with little paratext—high ambiguity,

greater danger of metaphysical drift (Lau, 1963, ch. 1). While providing process-relational notes and a glossary, Ames and Hall maintain the pair (Ames and Hall, 2003, ch. 1). Henricks's Mawangdui-aware notes are literal (Henricks, 1989, ch. 1).

CMT: Maintaining parallelism preserves the concept map (origin ↔ manifestation), which subsequently supports *wuwei*. Paratext: avoid metaphysical drift with brief remarks at first mention. Venuti: Ivanhoe and Henricks occupy a middle ground; Lau leans more towards foreignisation, while Ames and Hall adopt a more domesticating approach through paratext.

Interim inference: add one-line notes that emphasise practice over metaphysics while keeping the pair in line.

4.2 DDJ 3 – Governance via de-stimulation, not passivity

Ivanhoe. Ivanhoe employs a brief note to indicate the policy mechanism (de-stimulation instead of passivity): do not exalt the worthy; the people do not contend. He maintains the paired clauses “不尚贤，使民不争” in a tight, literal line. The note provides just enough orientation for classroom uptake, while the line carries the parallelism and cadence (Ivanhoe, 2002, ch. 3).

Comparator (Ames and Hall). In their explanatory framework, Ames and Hall maintain the pairing while clearly defining administration as a form of non-coercive governance. Although the account is instantly readable and helpful for discussion, it runs the risk of domesticating the sharp causal tension the verse uses to teach if its operational phrasing moves into the line (Ames and Hall, 2003, ch. 3).

Mini-evaluation. Prefer the paired line unaltered with a brief note indicating de-stimulation and first-mention glosses (e.g., 贤 “exalted worthies”, 欲 “arousal of desire”). This gives students the policy logic while preserving parallelism and cadence and avoiding a “hands-off” parody (Ivanhoe, 2002, ch. 3; cf. Ames and Hall, 2003, ch. 3).

4.3 DDJ 37 – “无为而无不为”: paradox vs operationalisation

Ivanhoe sketches the mechanism in a brief note (alignment, non-forcing) while maintaining the paradox “无为而无不为” (Ivanhoe, 2002, ch. 37). Lau and Henricks maintain the paradox as well, but they provide very little guidance (Lau, 1963, ch. 37; Henricks, 1989, ch. 37). The phrase is operationalised by Ames and Hall as “non-coercive action”, which makes it easier to read right away but runs the risk of losing hermeneutic tension if used in-line (Ames and Hall, 2003, ch. 37).

Venuti: The operational paraphrase is more domesticating, while the paradox in line is more foreignizing. Hermeneutics: paradox carries hermeneutic charge; causal logic (alignment, non-forcing) can be sketched in a single line without eliminating tension. CMT: Efficacy results from non-forcing alignment rather than effort; this paradox acts as a conceptual pivot.

Interim deduction: Hybrid best practice—the line’s paradox plus a brief statement (“efficacy emerges from non-forcing alignment”). This hybrid approach is also supported by classroom-facing studies in Chinese translation scholarship (Wang and Wang, 2020).

4.4 DDJ 48 – Adding vs subtracting: cadence teaches the concept

Ivanhoe. Ivanhoe maintains the scalar pair and rhythm of “为学日益，为道日损”，allowing cadence to do pedagogical work: study accumulates; adhering to the Dao subtracts coercive habits. The verse’s two-beat movement towards *wuwei* is maintained by a brief note that explains that 损 is removal/paring back rather than nihilistic “loss” (Ivanhoe, 2002, ch. 48).

Comparator (Lau). Lau also uses little paratext when rendering the pair, “in learning one increases; in the Way one decreases”. The line remains elegant, but without a small clarifying note, the “decrease” can be misread as devaluation rather than de-habitation, especially for first-time readers (Lau, 1963, ch. 48).

Mini-evaluation. Maintain the scalar pair and cadence in the line; add a one-line gloss to the note (de-habitation/removal of coercive tendencies). This retains rhythm and parallelism while preventing nihilist drift (Ivanhoe, 2002, ch. 48; cf. Lau, 1963, ch. 48).

5. Synthesis: cross-cutting patterns

DDJ 1/3/37/48 exhibits two recurring patterns:

(1) Philosophical depth: preservation of metaphors and paradoxes. The conceptual framework that enables readers to encounter *wuwei* as practice rather than just doctrine is preserved by keeping *water/水* imagery, parallelism, and paradox in the line.

(2) The practical application of paratext depth is also emphasised. First-mentioned glossing and succinct notes stabilise comprehension without taking over the line.

When combined, these point to a reliable recipe: clarify in notes to support non-coercive efficacy; foreignise in the line to preserve paradox/metaphor (Venuti, 1995; Genette, 1997; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The approach is easy to duplicate for class preparation while taking into account the philosophical tone of the text. First-mentioned glosses and succinct notes stabilise comprehension without taking over the line (Zhang, 2021; Genette, 1997). Standard terminology, maintained logic and parallelism, accurate chapter citations, formal register, and consistent usage are all consistent with the study’s quality criteria.

6. Implications

6.1 For translators and editors

- Maintain parallelism and metaphor networks. Steer clear of in-line paraphrasing that eliminates cadence and imagery (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

- Keep the paradox in the line and shift the mechanism to succinct, strategically placed notes (Genette, 1997).

- Use first-mention glossing of *wuwei*, *dao*, *de*, and *ziran* to stabilise terminology; maintain consistency in choices throughout chapters (Aixelá, 1996).

- Create instructional designs. A one-page glossary should be included; notes should be brief and easy to read; lines should be kept apart from explanations.

6.2 For instructors

- For each chapter, pair a translation that preserves metaphors (e.g., Lau; Ivanhoe/Henricks) with a page listing important terms and a few two-line notes.

- Instead of hiding the paradox, teach it; assign a quick task that involves tracing *water* or *道* throughout the selected chapters.

- Talk about how notes influence reading; use paratext to suggest causality (non-forcing alignment) rather than to determine meaning.

6.3 For translators and editors in practice

The balance between literal rendering and explanatory note is an operational issue in contemporary translation workplaces, such as academic presses, digital humanities projects, or bilingual teaching editions. Ivanhoe's methodical separation of line and note can be used as a useful style manual. This model aids translators in determining where to localise when working with a variety of readers: philosophical density belongs in verse, while meaning-level transparency belongs in paratext. Additionally, the approach is consistent with international translation-quality frameworks like House's (2008), which emphasise audience orientation and registration consistency. Editors can use a brief "paratext checklist" to ensure unit accuracy, cross-reference consistency, and first-mention glosses. Using these techniques could enhance both scholarly integrity and reader accessibility when teaching anthologies or bilingual corpora.

6.4 For future comparative studies

Other Chinese classics whose central ideas — *ren*, *li*, and *xin* — resist flattening can be subjected to the same hybrid policy. It would be possible to determine whether the "foreignize in line, clarify in note" approach extends beyond *Daodejing* by applying the current method to Zhuangzi or Xunzi translations. Global translation pedagogy would be enhanced by such replication, which would also put Venuti and Genette's theories to the test under fresh stylistic constraints.

7. Limitations and validity considerations

There are only four chapters and four English translations in this study. Although it limits generalisability, this limited scope enhances depth and classroom

applicability. The following are threats to validity: (i) selection bias (different dynamics may be shown in other chapters); (ii) translator spread (the addition of Slingerland or a more paraphrased version could increase stance coverage); and (iii) reader-effect inference (effects deduced from textual features rather than measured). Mitigations include consistent application of convergent frameworks (CMT, paratext, and Venuti), transparent coding, and textual alignment.

Additionally, no empirical reception data from Chinese or English readers were gathered; this study is limited to textual comparison and paratextual inference. These interpretive claims could be triangulated using a corpus-based collocation analysis or a small-scale reader-response survey. Future studies could more formally incorporate reception theory, examining how comprehension is influenced by note length, lexical density, or metaphor visibility. The link between theoretical and applied translation studies would be strengthened by these extensions (House, 2008; Zhao, 2020).

8. Conclusion

Minor translation decisions in lexis, metaphor handling, syntax, and paratext shift *wuwei* readings from quietism towards non-coercive efficacy. The aligned close readings of DDJ 1, 3, 37, and 48 demonstrate that maintaining metaphor and paradox in the line while providing explanations through succinct notes and a reliable glossary strikes the ideal balance. This hybrid approach is consistent with the text's conceptual architecture, repeatable, and teachable. It provides instructors with a way to convey the fundamental ideas of the *Daodejing* without flattening them, and it provides translators and editors with a useful style sheet.

9. Counterarguments and alternative stances

A common counterargument supports in-line operationalisation on the basis of readability: why not paraphrase directly in the line if beginners misunderstand the paradox? From a functional standpoint, the result is consistent with claims regarding cognitive “gravitational pull” towards target-language prototypes (Halverson, 2003) and domestication (Venuti, 1995). Excessive opacity has the potential to alienate general audiences, which is a valid concern. Nevertheless, the analysis shows that opacity vs. paraphrase need not be the trade-off. A hybrid approach that addresses processing load while maintaining conceptual architecture is to foreignise in the line and clarify in the paratext. According to House’s (2008) caution against oversimplifying “universals”, solutions should be calibrated by audience and purpose. A short, stable note at first mention is an inexpensive scaffold for classroom introductions that preserves the poetic line; advanced readers can omit it. As a result, paratext provides readability without compromising the nuance that metaphor and paradox convey.

A second counterargument is based on functional adequacy: operational paraphrase might seem ideal if the purpose is to teach practice rather than preserve strangeness. However, DDJ 1/3/37/48 already teaches the practice by demonstrating rather than telling by preserving the form of thought – parallelism, cadence, and paradox. When naming a mechanism, such as “non-forcing alignment” for *wuwei*, do so once in a brief note and then use consistent terminology to refer to it. This practice is easily transferable to an editorial style sheet and classroom handouts while maintaining fidelity and clarity.

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