

Translating the *Tao Te Ching*

Greetings, language enthusiasts (and others). Your job with this activity is to work with your group to translate one verse of the *Tao Te Ching* from the original Chinese into English.

Purpose

- To explore language in creative and critical ways
- To deepen our understanding of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, in preparation for the creation of our graphic novel adaptation
- To create a translation of a verse of the *Tao Te Ching* that has meaning for our class and people your age
- To practice actively creating a respectful, inclusive, positive, on-task work environment within a group

If you have been an obedient child, you began this process by turning to your closest people resources (your family) to gain some knowledge about the nature of Taoism and the *Tao Te Ching*; you are encouraged to build on this over the coming weeks with a little independent research. Use this knowledge to help you in this task.

You are going to do exactly what Ursula K. Le Guin did in creating her translation of the *Tao Te Ching*: create a word-for-word translation, and then use Paul Camus's 1898 transliteration (an interpretive translation) to help shape an English-language version of a verse of the *Tao*. Note: Le Guin had no knowledge of the Chinese language. But she did have a strong love of language in general, and an interest in unearthing meaning. Channel those two forces inside yourself for this task.

As you develop your version of your verse of the *Tao*, you will have three other guides to help deepen your understanding and shape your approach, in the form of translations by:

- Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English
- Dr. Wayne Dyer
- Ursula K. Le Guin

Your group will create a literal, word-for-word translation from the Chinese text, and then work together to explore the other translations to shape that version into something that makes sense in English and that conveys the Big Idea behind your section. If you are trying to Extend your

abilities, you might also be structuring this English version as a free-verse (non-rhyming) poem that looks and sounds pleasing and satisfying to read.

Keep in mind that this is an ancient text. Lao Tzu (the author) uses idioms (figures of speech) that are not used in modern Chinese. Also, idioms in general are tricky for people who don't speak the language! For example, in English there is a saying, "Kill two birds with one stone," which means using your time wisely and getting two beneficial results out of one action, like walking to school can save money *and* provide exercise; or telling Prof. Wu Wei what a great teacher he is makes him happy *and* distracts him from noticing you didn't do your homework. But can you imagine what hearing someone say "Kill two birds with one stone" would be like if you didn't speak English or understand the context? In Chinese, there is a similar idiom, but the literal translation would be "Two birds one stone," which would make it even more confusing!

Keep in mind, too, that in Chinese each character has meaning, but using characters in combination can alter that meaning. You will need to read the original text and the translations carefully and keep your mind open.

If you can find a Big Idea for your section, you might be able to use that to help you come up with "maybe ideas" of how to translate parts of your section that seem confusing. It is okay to get playful as you reach to find these ideas, but also remember our purpose: we are searching for meaning. When you do your final version, you can let go of being literal and instead try to convey the overall meaning and adapt the images in the text as needed, to try to make that meaning clear and to help our class find personal relevance (meaning) in the text.

This is also an exercise in group work. At the end of each session with your group, you will complete a Group Work Assessment form, assessing yourself and your group members. This is a private activity that is only shared with Prof. Wu Wei. It is not about tattling; it is about learning to view yourself and others objectively (from the outside), removed from feeling, so that you can see and experience what the traits of an effective group member are.

The first step is to choose a job you will be responsible for within the group.

PROJECT MANAGER

You are responsible for making sure your group completes this task. Your jobs include helping others feel comfortable sharing their ideas, helping people stay on task, and making sure your group is following the instructions. You are responsible for walking your group through the instructions and for making sure they don't skip or rush any of the steps.

MASTER TRANSLATOR

This is someone who can read Chinese. You will be responsible for helping your group create the literal, word-for-word translation. You (along with our parent and elder resources) will also help your group understand the subtleties of meaning that can exist in each character. As your group begins to work in English, you will help remind them of the meaning of and complexities in the original Chinese text.

TECH SUPPORT

You are the only person in the group who is allowed to have a computer, and you are only allowed to use it when it is needed to complete parts of the activity. These times are limited to: 1) opening a browser to go to translation tools to look up the meaning of a particular Chinese character, 2) opening a browser for your group to engage in research into the nature of the *Tao Te Ching*, and 3) opening Word to type up the final version of your group's translation. Other than those three times, the computer needs to be closed, and when in use no other tabs or apps may be open.

POET LAUREATE

You might be someone who loves words. Your job is to help your group explore possibilities while they create the final English version of your section of the *Tao*. You might use a thesaurus, or you might help your group brainstorm synonyms without one. You will encourage your group to focus on combining clarity of thought with precision of word choice as you move from your word-for-word translation to the final, more poetic form. You will also read your group's work out loud to the class when it comes time to share the translations.

Note: although you have a specialized area of individual responsibility, as outlined above, you all also have a collective responsibility: being on-task, respectful, inclusive, and positive, as you work toward group success.

INSTRUCTIONS

Please follow the instructions carefully and try not to rush any of the steps.

1. The Master Translator reads the section out loud, in Chinese, so that they and other Chinese speakers in the group can hear the work aloud. You are not expected to do this perfectly.

Tech Support can now get a computer. In Youtube, try searching for your group's verse by entering "Tao te ching verse [your number] Chinese language". You can try changing "verse" to "chapter" if you are not getting any good hits.

There are also some recordings of the whole of the *Tao*, but those may require a little searching to find your verse/chapter.

Non-Chinese speakers, you can be very useful here: aside from listening to the beauty of spoken Chinese, you can listen to see if you hear any repetition.

Then, Chinese speakers will help the non-Chinese speakers in the group understand what the general idea of the section is. Note that due to the nature of idioms (when you see four characters in combination), some confusion may arise. This is okay.

Here, focus on what images are being created with the text, even in its inexact form.

2. On the graphic organizer you were given, translate each character. Beside each character, write the possible meanings represented in the character.

If needed, Tech Support can get a computer and go to our class blog to use the translation tools posted on the Language Arts page to look up the meaning of any unknown Chinese characters.

Non-Chinese speakers: pay close attention here. Your noobie insights into the language as it emerges into English will be extremely useful to the group; you may be hear how the section unfolds in an interesting and useful way.

Everyone: notice how the image(s) unfold **as** the translation is being made. Keep track of your thoughts. Feel free to write down images in the graphic organizer as they occur to you.

3. Read the literal, word-for-word English translation out loud.

4. Now, compare your work to Paul Camus's transliteration of the text.
5. Is anything different? Work with your Master Translator to explore the "maybe ideas" behind the differences.

Make notes on your word-for-word translation pages of the graphic organizer of any changes you'd like to make to your initial translation.

6. Within your group, you will have some people who suggested that their family might be able to aid in translation. These people will bring the original Chinese text home to share with their families, and they will record the translation(s) that their family suggests.
7. Now—and this is important!—work with your Master Translator to reconsider the translation. Remember that each individual character has meaning, but characters in combination can also alter that meaning. See if you can find an example of this to illustrate this idea to your non-Chinese speakers.

Remember, too, that this is old-timey language, and Lao Tzu is using idiom's (figures of speech) that we might not use today. This is particularly true with characters that come in groups of four. Here, use context plus your imagination: what scene is being created?

Make notes on the word-for-word translation (first page[s] of the graphic organizer) of these new thoughts and the new possibilities they present.

Might there be layers of meaning within this verse that you are translating?

8. On the graphic organizer, brainstorm ideas about the Big Idea of the section. What is Lao Tzu trying to convey? What is the message?
9. Now, read through each of the other translations.

Consider the translations one at a time, first as a group, then as individuals, then once more as a group. Don't rush this step; instead, practice patience and thoughtfulness.

Make notes in the graphic organizer:

- What is the same?
- What is different?
- What do you like in the images and the language choices?

Repeat this process for each translation.

With the Wayne Dyer translation, read the whole chapter, as individuals. Then discuss as a group and record your ideas in the graphic organizer:

- How do his ideas help you deepen your understanding of the text?
- Write your own version of “Do the Tao Now,” with language and examples that are relevant to our class and people your age.

10. Discuss: how can what you have learned about Taoism and the *Tao Te Ching* help you here? Go around the circle of your group and share the notes you have taken.

In the graphic organizer, write down your ideas about how aspects of this research might be in play in your verse.

11. Work together to create a rough draft of your English version, allowing sense and meaning to now steer the ship, rather than literal translation.

Things to keep in mind:

- Word choice—especially verbs—what word best conveys the meaning of what you are trying to get the audience to understand?
- Structure—if you structure the words on a page like a non-rhyming poem, where might the line breaks be? Why?
- Meaning—are there multiple possible meanings within the section? Is there a way to write it in English that helps those meanings co-exist?

12. We’ve come up with one way of doing it; what’s another? Make notes on the rough draft of other possibilities. Work together to find consensus (having everyone feel good about agreeing). If there is disagreement, how do you work together to find a version that works for everyone.

13. Read it out loud. Listen for flow. Listen for clarity. Listen for opportunities for precise word choice and image-building.

14. Ask: is the Big Idea clear?

15. Give your verse a title.

16. Type up the final version of your English translation, including the title, and print it out.
17. Say a simple “Thank you” to each member of your group, with eye contact. Accept the thanks that you receive.
18. After each session, complete the Group Work Assessment form. Remember: this is not about tattling; this is about learning to step back and view yourself and others objectively (from the outside, removed from emotion). *These forms are private: respect others’ privacy as they complete the form.* Please place face-down in the in-box when complete.
19. After your group has completed step 17, above, ask Prof. Wu Wei for the Reflection sheet.

You will be asked:

- How did your research into Taoism and the *Tao Te Ching* help you with this translation?
- What connection(s) can you make from your verse of the *Tao Te Ching* to *A Wizard of Earthsea*?
- How might the ideas contained in your verse of the *Tao Te Ching* relate to your own life? How might it be useful to you? What might you do to practice it?