Insider vs. Outsider: A Contrastive Corpus Analysis of Two Italian Translations of the *Huangdi Neijing*

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Abstract: The cross-cultural transmission of foundational texts in TCM (i.e., Traditional Chinese Medicine) like the Huangdi Neijing ("Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon") presents significant translation challenges. This study posits that the effectiveness of such translations hinges on a crucial, often implicit, choice regarding the target audience: are we translating for a cultural "insider" or an "outsider"? This paper conducts a contrastive analysis of the two most influential Italian translations of the Neijing—the Ledvinka (1976) version and the Cantoni et al. (1994) version—utilizing a custom-built Chinese-Italian parallel corpus. Through a multi-level analysis of lexicometric, syntactic, and terminological features, the study reveals two starkly contrasting strategies. The Ledvinka translation consistently adopts a domesticating approach, reframing the text's concepts to align with the cognitive world of a Western "outsider" reader. In contrast, the Cantoni et al. version employs a foreignizing strategy, preserving the source text's conceptual integrity and cultural specificity for an "insider" audience of practitioners and cultural enthusiasts. The findings demonstrate that these divergent strategies are not accidental but represent coherent, audience-driven choices, highlighting the critical importance of audience segmentation in the effective translation and dissemination of complex cultural heritage.

Keywords: Huangdi Neijing; TCM translation; Parallel corpus; Insider vs. outsider; Audience segmentation

1. Introduction

The *Huangdi Neijing* (黄 帝 内 经 , lit. "Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon", hereafter *Neijing*), the cornerstone of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), is more than a medical text; it is a profound synthesis of philosophy, cosmology, and ancient Chinese science. Its translation into Western languages is fraught with difficulty, requiring the navigation of vast conceptual and cultural divides. The central challenge lies not merely in finding lexical equivalents, but in deciding for whom the translation is intended. This decision implicitly segments the potential audience into two archetypes: the "insider" and the "outsider."

The "insider" represents readers who are already practitioners of TCM, students of Chinese culture, or enthusiasts of Daoist thought. They approach the text with a pre-existing interest and a willingness to engage with unfamiliar concepts on their own terms. The "outsider" represents the general Western reader, likely educated in the modern scientific paradigm, whose curiosity about the *Neijing* is filtered through a different set of cultural and cognitive priors.

This study examines the two most prominent Italian translations of the *Neijing* as case studies for these two approaches. The first, by F. Ledvinka (1976, hereafter L-version), is a retranslation from Ilza Veith's renowned English edition of *Neijing* [1]. The second, by T. Cantoni, P. Longo, Y. Mollard, and A. Tubertini (1994, hereafter C-version), is based on the French translation by Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée and Claude Larre [2]. Drawing on a purpose-built Chinese-Italian parallel corpus, this paper aims to systematically demonstrate how the L-version and C-version employ divergent translation strategies tailored specifically to the "outsider" and "insider" reader, respectively.

This focus is particularly salient given the documented challenges in the field. The quality of Italian TCM translation has been identified as a primary bottleneck for TCM's wider dissemination in Italy. Despite this, specific academic inquiry remains scarce. To date, there has been no in-depth analysis of how canonical texts like the *Neijing* have been translated into Italian [3–4]. This paper, therefore, addresses a well-defined gap by providing the first systematic, corpus-based contrastive research of *Neijing* translations for an Italian readership.

2. Methodology: A parallel corpus approach to translation studies

This study adopts the methodology of Corpus-Based Translation Studies (CBTS), a paradigm that emerged in the 1990s from the confluence of Corpus Linguistics and Descriptive Translation Studies. CBTS utilizes electronic corpora of authentic source and target texts to investigate translation phenomena through statistical analysis and theoretical interpretation [5]. By emphasizing empirical evidence and large-scale data, this approach moves beyond the limitations of purely subjective or anecdotal assessments, enabling a more objective description and explanation of translation processes and products. This data-driven framework is particularly effective for uncovering latent translation strategies and grasping the implicit expectations of different target audiences, making it an ideal tool for our investigation into the "insider" vs. "outsider" reception of the *Neijing*.

To apply this framework, we constructed a "one-to-two" parallel corpus, aligning the original Chinese text of the *Suwen* (素问 , lit. "Simple Questions") with both the L-version and C-version translations. The L-version in our corpus covers the first 34 chapters, while the C-version only covers the first 11. For a focused comparison, the analysis in this paper primarily draws upon examples from Chapter 1, "Shanggu Tianzhen Lun" (上古天真论 , lit. "Discourse on Genuine Naturalness in High Antiquity").

Quantitative analysis, including readability metrics and part-of-speech frequencies, was conducted using READ-IT, a software tool specifically designed for Italian text analysis [6]. Qualitative analysis of terminological consistency and cultural concepts was performed using ParaConc to retrieve, compare, and contrast parallel concordances.

3. Analysis: Contrasting strategies for insiders and outsiders

The analysis reveals a consistent pattern of strategic divergence across multiple linguistic levels, mapping directly onto the insider/outsider framework.

3.1. Foundational readability: A common ground

At a surface level, both translations strive for accessibility. The C-version has an average sentence length of 15.9 words and a readability difficulty score of 13%, while the L-version has a slightly higher average sentence length of 16.6 words and a difficulty score of 16%. Both use a high percentage of basic vocabulary (C-version: 72.8%; L-version: 71.4%). This suggests that both translators understood the need for a readable text. However, beneath this shared foundation of clarity lie profound strategic differences.

3.2. Terminology: Insider-oriented conceptual fidelity vs. outsider-oriented functional analogy

The translation strategies employed for core TCM terminology provide valuable insights into who the intended readers might be. The C-version prioritizes conceptual fidelity, maintaining a one-to-one correspondence to preserve the theoretical integrity of the *Neijing*'s system for the "insider." The L-version, conversely, often breaks down single Chinese terms into multiple Western concepts, seeking functional analogies for the sake of "outsiders."

The following examples from the corpus data serve to illustrate such strategic disparity.

气 (*qì*): The C-version consistently uses Soffi ("breaths, vital puffs" in Italian), preserving *qi* as a unified, core concept. By contrast, the L-version fractures it into emanazioni ("emanations") and forza vitale ("vital force"), choosing whichever term seems more contextually familiar to a Western reader.

肾 (*shèn*): The C-version uniformly translates *shèn* as reni ("kidneys"), respecting its unified function within the TCM organ system. However, the L-version renders it as reni for females but as testicoli ("testicles") for males, mapping the term onto Western anatomical functions at the expense of the TCM theoretical framework.

天 癸 (*tiānguǐ*): The C-version uses the abstract and unifying term fecondità ("fecundity"), whereas the L-version offers a practical, gender-specific simplification for the outsider, translating it as mestruazioni ("menstruation") in women and seme ("semen") in men.

3.3. Culture-specific concepts: Foreignization for the insider vs. domestication for the outsider

The handling of culturally embedded concepts further sharpens this distinction. The C-version consistently chooses the strategy of foreignization, challenging the "insider" readers to embrace the worldview of the source text, whilst the L-version usually votes on domestication, smoothing over cultural differences for the "outsider."

Several representative cases culled from the parallel corpus are presented below.

春 秋 (*chūnqiū*, lit. "springs and autumns"): The L-version domesticates this to the generic anni ("years"), while the C-version preserves the original imagery with a foreignizing translation, employing primavere ed autunni ("springs and autumns").

术数 (*shùshù*): This complex term, referring to specific practices and numerological calculations in Chinese occultism, is domesticated by the L-version into the nearest available Western concept: divinazione ("divination"). Contrary to this strategy, the C-version foreignizes it by retaining both components: le Pratiche e i Numeri ("the Practices and the Numbers"), signaling to the insider that a deeper, specific meaning is intended.

The numerological phrases using 七 (*qī*, "seven") and 八 (*bā*, "eight"): The *Neijing* describes life cycles based on multiples of 7 for females (二七 /2x7, 三七 /3x7) and 8 for males (二八 /2x8, 三八 /3x8). The L-version completely erases this numerological logic, domesticating the terms into simple Arabic numerals: 14, 21, 16, 24. This differs markedly from the C-version, which explicitly preserves the logic for the insider, translating them into multiplication expressions such as Due volte Sette ("Two times Seven") and Otto volte Otto ("Eight times Eight"),

capitalizing the numbers to highlight their cultural significance.

3.4. Syntactic choices: Explicitation for the outsider vs. authenticity for the insider

Even syntactic patterns reflect the divergent strategies. The L-version's text is more syntactically explicit, as it uses significantly more adjectives (8.6% in stark contrast to C-version's 4.9%) to add descriptive layers, and more subordinating conjunctions (22.7% of all conjunctions, contrary to 11.7% in C-version) to spell out logical relationships. This syntactic "hand-holding," typically located in the L-version, is designed for the outsider.

The C-version, with its higher noun ratio (21.2% unlike the L-version's 19.2%) and simpler, more paratactic sentence structures, mirrors the concise, nominal style of the original Chinese. This strategy shows that the translators trust the "insider" readers to infer the relationships between concepts without the need for extensive syntactic guidance.

4. Conclusion

The contrastive corpus analysis demonstrates that the two representative Italian translations of the *Huangdi Neijing*, one by Ledvinka (1976) and the other by Cantoni et al. (1994), are not simply two different versions, but are products of two fundamentally distinctive translation philosophies rooted in audience design.

The L-version is a quintessential "outsider"-oriented translation. It systematically employs strategies of domestication, terminological fragmentation, and syntactic explication to make the text immediately palatable and comprehensible to average Italian readers, even at the cost of distorting the source text's internal theoretical coherence.

Juxtaposed against this, the C-version proves a dedicated "insider"-driven rendition. Through foreignization, terminological fidelity, and stylistic imitation, it prioritizes faithfulness to the source text's cultural and conceptual framework. Therefore, it demands more cognitive effort from its readership but offers a more authentic and theoretically integral representation of the *Neijing*.

The fact that both books have co-existed and found their own readerships (with Amazon sales data suggesting the insider-first C-version is currently more successful) validates the importance of "audience segmentation." In a word, there is no single "correct" way to translate a TCM text like the *Neijing*. Instead, the future of translating TCM and other complex cultural cannons may lie in consciously developing a diversified portfolio of translations, each precisely tailored to the needs and expectations of a different readership, be they insiders or outsiders.

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