

A triadic negotiation model for translating religious terminology in Dunhuang Art: a case of Duan Wenjie's English translation

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Abstract

The Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang embody a syncretic fusion of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, with their iconography functioning as theological text. Duan Wenjie's seminal scholarship, translated into English in 1994, serves as a primary conduit for Western audiences to access this religious depth. However, this translation is compromised by a systematic reliance on equivalence-based domestication, which forcibly aligns complex Chinese religious-philosophical terms with inadequate Western counterparts. This paper critiques three core modes of terminological failure in this translation: conceptual catachresis, theological substitution, and institutional misinterpretation. It argues that these inaccuracies stem from a translation paradigm that prioritizes "equivalence" over "negotiation", a paradigm intrinsically ill-suited to address the untranslatable dimensions of religious language. Drawing on Venuti's translational violence, Appiah's thick translation, and the model of the translator as cultural negotiator, this study proposes a triadic negotiation model for translating religious terminology in Dunhuang Art: transliteration with explanation for doctrinal concepts, analogical creation with thick annotation for cultural symbols, and precision paraphrasing for institutional terms. This approach prioritizes fidelity to religious meaning over mere readability, preserving Dunhuang's intellectual and spiritual integrity within global academic discourse.

1. Introduction

Nestled at the crossroads of the ancient Silk Road, the Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang constitute far more than a repository of artistic masterpieces. They are a living testament to religious devotion and philosophical inquiry, an immersive theological text rendered in pigment, stucco, and stone. To reductively frame Dunhuang as a mere "artistic site" is to fundamentally overlook its core identity: a sacred space where art and religion are inextricably fused, where every brushstroke carries layers of doctrinal meaning that demand precision in cross-cultural communication.

Central to bridging this profound cultural and religious divide for an international audience is the work of Duan Wenjie (1917–2011), former Director of the Dunhuang Academy. His lifelong, on-the-ground research on Mogao's art, spanning from the 1940s to the 2000s, has become the authoritative lens through which the grottoes are academically understood. His writings distill decades of meticulous on-site study and textual analysis. As the first major English translation of Duan's scholarship, the 1994 volume edited by Tan Chung remains the only comprehensive English-language introduction to his work. It continues to be cited in Western art historical and Buddhist studies publications and serves as a primary reading in university courses on Silk Road art (Sha, 2016, Wang, 2026). Its influence persists not because it is definitive, but because no alternative translation has yet been produced—a gap that makes its critical re-evaluation all the more urgent.

Yet the stakes extend far beyond mere accessibility; for Western audiences, Duan's work functions as a foundational text for understanding Dunhuang's religious worldview. The translation acts as a filter, determining what passes through: the authentic religious essence of Dunhuang, or a simplified version

tailored to Western expectations. Despite its pioneering value, a critical examination reveals a fundamental flaw: systematic terminological choices that obscure, rather than illuminate, the intricate religious ideas underpinning Dunhuang art. Key Buddhist concepts, doctrinal terms, and ritual references are consistently forced into narrow Western equivalents or stripped of contextual nuance, reducing complex theological constructs to familiar but inadequate labels.

These choices are not minor linguistic oversights; they produce tangible scholarly harm. For instance, the simplification of 禅 (Dhyana) as “meditation” (p. 68) erases its specific Buddhist connotations of intense concentration as a disciplined path to enlightenment (samadhi), potentially leading scholars to misinterpret Dunhuang’s meditation murals as depicting “spiritual relaxation” rather than rigorous doctrinal training. Cumulatively, these choices create a “domesticated” Dunhuang, where the grottoes’ authentic religious essence is distorted to fit pre-existing Western conceptual frameworks.

This paper argues that these inaccuracies stem from a translation paradigm that prioritizes “equivalence” over “negotiation”—a paradigm ill-suited to the untranslatable dimensions of religious language. Drawing on key concepts from translation theory, this critique examines how the 1994 translation’s adherence to familiar equivalents flattens the theological complexity and syncretic richness of Duan’s original work. In response, it proposes an alternative approach centered on “negotiating” meaning: embracing the untranslatability of religious terms through strategies including contextual annotation, hybrid neologisms, and transparent acknowledgment of cultural-linguistic gaps. By doing so, we can move beyond the false comfort of simplistic equivalence to foster a more authentic cross-cultural dialogue about Dunhuang’s religious heritage.

2. Literature Review

The translation of Dunhuang culture has been widely recognized as a critical conduit for its global dissemination, with scholars consistently emphasizing the profound challenges inherent in conveying its unique terminology and cultural depth (Jiang, 2018). Research in this field has advanced along two complementary tracks. On the one hand, theoretically oriented studies have applied frameworks such as Eco-translatology—a Chinese-originated paradigm that conceptualizes translation as the translator’s adaptive selection within a given translational eco-environment (Hu, 2004)—and Transknowletology to structure translation strategies (Chong, 2025). On the other hand, pragmatically oriented research has focused on developing specific methods, often categorizing terms into cultural, formal, and functional types and applying differentiated approaches such as transliteration with annotation or literal translation with explanation (Liu and Wei, 2022, Zeng, 2019). These studies reflect a growing consensus that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate and that translation quality is fundamentally contingent upon the translator’s deep cultural and terminological competence (Zeng, 2019, Liu and Zheng, 2025).

While this body of work provides a valuable foundation for approaching Dunhuang’s material culture and general artistic concepts, it often remains at a generalized level. A significant gap exists in its application to the specific complexities of religious and philosophical terminology. The literature consistently points

to the need for more practical application and audience-specific models (Bie, 2025), a need that is particularly acute in the specialized domain of religious translation where doctrinal precision is paramount. This gap is critical because religious terminology forms the core intellectual and spiritual framework through which Dunhuang's art must be understood. As research on religious translation has demonstrated, the translation of religious terms involves not merely linguistic transfer but a complex negotiation of cultural accommodation, doctrinal fidelity, and cross-religious dialogue (Xiong, 2013). Moreover, the standardization of culturally embedded terminology—long recognized as a persistent challenge across Chinese cultural translation projects—remains unresolved in the Dunhuang context, where the lack of a systematic Chinese-English terminology database has hindered effective scholarly communication (Liu and Zheng, 2025). The limitations of current approaches become starkly evident when examining the translation of key religious terms in foundational texts, an issue that will be critically analyzed in the case studies that follow.

It is at this juncture that the present study intervenes. We argue that existing scholarship, while valuable for general cultural terms, requires significant specialization and a paradigm shift when applied to the translation of religious concepts. This paper contends that the translation of Dunhuang's religious terminology demands a dedicated theoretical framework focused on untranslatability and an ethical approach that treats translation as cultural negotiation rather than a technical transfer. In doing so, it extends the current debate on the standardization of culturally embedded terminology into an underexplored domain, where Dunhuang's hybrid religious vocabulary—born of the syncretic encounter between Buddhism, Taoism, and indigenous Chinese traditions—resists conventional terminological equivalence. The following section will elaborate this specific theoretical framework, drawing on Venuti's concept of translational violence, Appiah's thick translation, and the model of the translator as a cultural negotiator to address the critical need for doctrinally precise translation of Dunhuang's religious heritage.

3. Theoretical Framework

Translation, particularly of religious and cultural texts, is never a neutral act of linguistic substitution. It is a complex interplay of meaning, context, and inherent power dynamics that fundamentally shapes how cultural knowledge is transmitted across linguistic borders. For Dunhuang's religious art, where every term carries significant doctrinal weight and layers of syncretic cultural history, the stakes of translation are dramatically amplified. Inadequate approaches risk reducing profound theological concepts to superficial equivalents, thereby erasing the very essence of the grottoes' spiritual legacy. This section grounds the paper's critique in three interconnected theoretical pillars: the inherent cultural untranslatability of religious terms, thick translation as an ethical response to translational "violence," and the redefinition of the translator as a cultural negotiator.

3.1. The Concept of Cultural Untranslatability: When Terms Resist Equivalence

The notion of untranslatability has long been a central concern in translation studies. While all translation involves a degree of loss, religious terminology presents a unique challenge because it is deeply woven into the unique cultural, philosophical, and ritual contexts that generate and sustain its meaning. Unlike more universal, concrete concepts (e.g., “water,” “mountain,” or even “joy”), terms such as the Buddhist 空 (Sunyata) or the Daoist 道 (Dao) do not map neatly onto pre-existing Western lexical equivalents. Their full significance emerges from centuries of theological debate, lived ascetic and devotional practice, and cultural adaptation, a dense web of connotations that cannot be fully captured by a single word or phrase in another language. This is the core of “cultural untranslatability,” a concept explored by translation theorists like Nida (1964). While Nida’s (1964) dynamic equivalence theory acknowledges the need to adapt the source message to the target culture’s cognitive and expressive patterns, it nonetheless presupposes that a functional “equivalence” is achievable—that the translator can, through careful adjustment, convey the same message in the target language. The present study challenges this presupposition in the specific domain of religious terminology, where the “message” itself is embedded in a web of doctrinal, ritual, and visual practices that resist functional transfer. The gap between source and target cultures is not merely linguistic but epistemological, rooted in fundamentally distinct ways of understanding reality, the divine, and the self.

For Dunhuang, this gap is widened exponentially by its syncretic identity. Terms used within its context often represent a unique blend of Indian Buddhist origins, Chinese Confucian ethical frameworks, and Taoist cosmological ideas, creating meanings that are specific to the grottoes’ historical and geographical context on the Silk Road. A term like 无为 (Wuwei), while Daoist in origin, takes on a distinct flavor in a Dunhuang Buddhist context, referring to a spontaneous, non-coercive action aligned with the Dharma, often visualized in the relaxed postures of Bodhisattva statues. The attempt to find a single English equivalent, such as “non-action,” fails to capture this syncretic layering. The problem is not a poverty of vocabulary in the target language but a fundamental divergence in the conceptual worlds that the languages inhabit.

The terminological dimension of this challenge further underscores the need for such a framework. From a terminological perspective, the difficulty posed by Dunhuang’s religious vocabulary can be understood through the lens of conceptual transfer (Cabr , 1999). Unlike technical terms, which often permit a relatively stable mapping between source and target concepts through established equivalence, religious-philosophical terms in syncretic contexts resist such stabilization because their meanings are embedded in distinct cognitive frames and cultural practices. Temmerman’s (2000) sociocognitive approach offers a relevant corrective: rather than treating terminology as a closed system of fixed correspondences, it recognizes that terms are dynamic units whose meanings are shaped by social, cognitive, and cultural forces. This perspective aligns with the present study’s argument that Dunhuang’s religious terminology demands negotiation rather than mere substitution.

Consider the foundational Buddhist concept 空 (Sunyata), which is often rendered as “Emptiness” in English. This translation, while common, entails a critical loss of doctrinal nuance. To a Western reader, “Emptiness” typically conveys a sense of absence, void, or meaninglessness. In contrast, Sunyata within

Mahayana Buddhism refers to the radical insight that all phenomena lack inherent, independent existence (svabhava), yet are dynamically interconnected through dependent origination (pratityasamutpada). It is neither nihilism nor mere nothingness; rather, it is a positive, dynamic state of interdependence that underpins Buddhist ethics, compassion, and meditation practice. The Heart Sutra famously declares, “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form,” pointing to this paradoxical unity. Reducing Sunyata to “Emptiness” forces it into a Western philosophical framework that equates “absence” with negation, thereby distorting its central role in the doctrinal teachings illustrated throughout Dunhuang’s murals, such as the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa scenes.

Venuti’s theory of translational “violence” provides a powerful lens for understanding why such distortions occur systematically (Venuti, 1995). Venuti argues that translation is an inherently violent act because it replaces one linguistic and cultural sign system with another, shaped by the values and power dynamics of the target culture. He identifies “domestication” as a particularly potent form of this violence—an approach that prioritizes fluency and familiarity for the target reader, thereby erasing the “foreignness” of the source text. The counterpart, “foreignization,” seeks to retain the strangeness of the source text. For specialized religious terms, domestication means sacrificing cultural specificity to fit pre-existing Western conceptual schemas. The 1994 translation of Duan’s work frequently falls into this trap. Rendering 禪 (Dhyana) as “meditation” or 經 (Yingluo) as “garland” prioritizes reader comfort over scholarly fidelity, reducing complex religious concepts to familiar but inadequate equivalents. As Venuti (1995) notes, this violence is often not malicious but structural and ideological, stemming from a translation paradigm that treats “equivalence” and “fluency” as achievable goals even where true equivalence is a philosophical impossibility.

3.2. Thick Translation as an Ethical Response to Translational Violence

If cultural untranslatability is an inevitable challenge, and domestication risks significant epistemic violence, what constitutes an ethically and methodologically sound translation practice for a hybrid context like Dunhuang’s? Appiah’s (1993) concept of “thick translation” offers a compelling answer. Appiah defines thick translation as the practice of translating “that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context” (Appiah, 2000: 427). This approach explicitly rejects the myth of perfect equivalence and instead prioritizes transparency about cultural-linguistic gaps. It recognizes that religious and philosophical texts cannot be fully “translated” in a narrow, word-for-word sense; they must be carefully mediated, with the translator providing the necessary contextual scaffolding for target readers to engage authentically with the source culture’s complexity. The term “thick” is borrowed from anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s (1973) concept of “thick description,” which emphasizes the interpretation of human behavior within its full web of cultural significance.

Appiah developed thick translation in response to the repeated failure of conventional translation methods to convey the cultural depth of non-Western texts. He argues that fluency alone leads to a “thin”

understanding: readers may grasp the superficial meaning but miss the historical, ritual, social, or doctrinal context that gives the text its true significance. For Dunhuang's religious terminology—which often explicitly ties textual concepts to specific visual iconography—this scaffolding must be multimodal, integrating linguistic explanation with visual and contextual cues.

Take the problematic translation of 璎珞 (*Yingluo*) as “garland.” A Dunhuang-adapted thick translation would employ a layered approach:

Transliteration and Core Identification

“Yingluo (a sacred jeweled ornament in Buddhist iconography).”

Doctrinal and Functional Explanation: A parenthetical note or footnote explaining its significance: “Worn by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in Dunhuang murals to symbolize spiritual wealth, enlightenment, and the purity of the Dharma; its intricacy often denotes the deity's level of attainment.”

Visual Cross-Reference: A specific reference to a key example within the grottoes: “For a prominent example, see the elaborate *Yingluo* adorning the Bodhisattvas in the Western Pure Land mural of Mogao Grotto 220 from the Northern Zhou dynasty.”

This tripartite approach bridges linguistic, doctrinal, and visual gaps, ensuring that readers do not reductively interpret the term as a mere decorative label. Similarly, translating 禅 (Dhyana) as “Dhyana (Buddhist meditative concentration aimed at cultivating wisdom and achieving enlightenment, as depicted in the detailed meditation scenes of Mogao Grotto 323)” preserves the term's specificity while immediately linking it to Dunhuang's visual record. The goal is to create a translation that is not a transparent window into the source text, but a guided tour, where the translator acts as an expert docent, pointing out the nuances and providing the necessary background.

The strength of thick translation lies in its versatility. It can be implemented through various tools: glossaries of key iconographic terms, extensive footnotes on syncretic influences, scholarly prefaces contextualizing Dunhuang's theological project, and visual appendices. A renowned example is Liu's (1997) translation of the Analects, where he supplements translations of core Confucian terms like 忠 (Zhong) with detailed notes explaining their historical context, clarifying that Zhong in the pre-Qin period meant “doing one's utmost” in a relational context, rather than the modern political connotation of “loyalty.” This prevents anachronistic readings.

Critics, such as Baker (2001), might argue that excessive annotations risk cluttering the text and distracting from the primary narrative. However, a targeted and strategic application—prioritizing annotation for terms central to doctrinal meaning (e.g., 佛, 菩萨, 禅) over more minor descriptive terms—can effectively balance clarity and depth. As Hermans (1999: 124) notes, thick translation is “an effective way to reduce cross-cultural misunderstanding and translation difficulty” precisely because it embraces, rather than denies, the inherent foreignness of the source text. For Dunhuang studies, adopting thick translation is an ethical imperative: it refuses to reduce the grottoes' rich religious terminology to

simplified equivalents, instead inviting Western audiences to encounter this spiritual legacy in its full richness.

3.3. The Translator as a Cultural Negotiator: Beyond the Quest for Equivalence

The effective implementation of thick translation requires a fundamental reimagining of the translator's role. Instead of seeing themselves as "seekers of perfect equivalence" or invisible conduits of meaning, translators of culturally dense texts should frame themselves as "cultural negotiators." These negotiators actively acknowledge the unbridgeable gap between source and target cultures and strive to build bridges of understanding through strategic compromise, contextual explanation, and intellectual transparency. This shift is rooted in the recognition that translation is not a one-way transfer of static meaning but an ongoing dialogue between cultures, requiring both rigorous fidelity to the source and empathetic understanding of the target reader's limitations.

Eco (2008) captures this negotiative role by comparing translation to a commercial transaction. Just as buyers and sellers negotiate a price that balances their respective needs, translators must negotiate between the source text's integrity, the target reader's expectations, and the broader communicative goals of the project. The negotiator accepts untranslatability as a given condition and uses strategies like thick translation to make the gap visible and intellectually productive for the reader. The goal is to create a text that bears the traces of its origin, inviting the reader into a relationship with a foreign culture.

For Dunhuang's syncretic terms, this negotiation must account for: (1) the fundamental differences between Chinese and Western philosophical frameworks, and (2) the unique hybridity of Dunhuang's Buddhism. For example, translating 无为 (Wuwei) in a Dunhuang context requires negotiating its Daoist roots ("non-action") and Buddhist adaptation ("spontaneous alignment with the Dharma"). A cultural negotiator would render the term as: "Wuwei (a Daoist-Buddhist concept of non-coercive action, visually expressed in the relaxed postures of Bodhisattvas in Mogao Grotto 45)." Similarly, 三教 (Sanjie Jiao) calls for: "Sanjie Jiao (the Three Stages Sect, a distinctive Chinese Buddhist school that emphasized the potential for universal salvation for all beings regardless of spiritual capacity, a doctrine widely represented in Dunhuang's late Tang murals and manuscript collections)." These translations honor the source terms' uniqueness (via Chinese pinyin) while actively guiding Western readers to understand their specific significance within Dunhuang's religious landscape.

This redefined role aligns with the "cultural turn" in translation studies championed by Bassnett and Lefevere (1990), which reframes translation as a form of cultural production and rewriting, influenced by patronage, ideology, and poetics. For religious texts, this means translators are active participants in shaping how religious ideas are received across cultures. The ideal translator of Duan's work would strategically highlight the foreignness of Dunhuang's religious terminology through annotations, glossaries, and visual cross-references, inviting readers to engage with the grottoes' spiritual legacy on its own terms. As Burke (2007: 38) argues, negotiation in cultural translation involves the exchange and

modification of meaning without sacrificing the core integrity of the source text. For Dunhuang's religious art, this means translating not just the words, but the entire doctrinal, syncretic, and visual context that makes those words meaningful.

The theoretical framework for this research can be illustrated visually in Fig. 1 below:

In sum, the theoretical framework outlined here—comprising cultural untranslatability, thick translation, and the translator as negotiator—provides a robust foundation for both critiquing the 1994 translation and proposing a more ethical and rigorous alternative. Cultural untranslatability, rooted in Dunhuang's unique syncretism, reveals why simplistic equivalence is destined to fail. Thick translation, especially when adapted for visual-textual contexts, offers a practical methodological solution. Finally, the redefinition of the translator as a cultural negotiator establishes the ethical role required to implement this approach successfully. Together, these three pillars support the paper's central argument: that negotiating, rather than forcing, meaning is the only way to produce translations that truly honor the complexity, richness, and sacred integrity of Dunhuang's religious art.

A potential objection to this theoretical framework is its reliance on Western translation theorists (Venuti, Appiah) to critique a Western-centric translation practice. This study does not invoke these theorists as universal authorities but as analytical tools whose insights can be mobilized for critical purposes. Their concepts—particularly “domestication” and “thick translation”—were themselves developed in critique of Anglo-American translation norms, and their applicability here is as instruments of deconstruction rather than as normative prescriptions. The goal is not to replace one universalism with another, but to open a space for terms to be understood on their own cultural and doctrinal terms.

4. Case Study: A Typology of Terminological Failure in Religious Translation

The 1994 English translation of Duan Wenjie's seminal work commits systematic and conceptually significant terminological errors that distort the religious and philosophical foundations of the grottoes' legacy. These errors are direct consequences of the translation's adherence to an equivalence-based domestication strategy, which forcibly aligns Dunhuang's nuanced, syncretic terms with incompatible Western frameworks. To systematically analyze these failures, this section develops a typology of three core failure modes: conceptual catachresis, theological substitution, and institutional misinterpretation. Each mode is illustrated with case studies drawn from the translation, demonstrating how these choices erase the doctrinal nuance and syncretic complexity that define Dunhuang's religious art. Proposed correctives are reserved for Section 5 as integral components of a comprehensive translation toolkit.

4.1. Conceptual Catachresis: Misrepresenting Philosophical Doctrine

Conceptual catachresis occurs when a translation maps a Chinese religious-philosophical term onto a Western equivalent that may share a superficial semantic similarity but diverges radically in historical context, epistemological roots, and doctrinal implications. This mode of failure is particularly damaging for terms that form the core of Dunhuang’s syncretism—concepts that bridge Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—as it collapses distinct intellectual traditions into a monolithic, and often misleading, Western concept.

Case 1

玄 (Xuanxue) translated as “Metaphysics”

Duan’s original text situates Dunhuang’s early art within the intellectual context of Wei-Jin Xuanxue (literally, “Mysterious Learning”), a major school of Chinese philosophy flourishing from the 3rd to 6th centuries. Centered on Neo-Daoist commentaries on the Dao De Jing and Zhuangzi, Xuanxue was deeply concerned with ontological questions of “being” (you) and “non-being” (wu) and their relationship to the cosmic Dao (p. 93). It emphasized intuitive insight and enigmatic discourse (xuantan) over systematic reasoning. The 1994 translation renders 玄 as “Metaphysics” (p. 92), a term derived from Aristotle’s work of the same name—focused on first principles, substance, and causality within a systematic, logical tradition. This equivalence is a prime example of conceptual catachresis. Xuanxue is not an abstract inquiry into ultimate reality but a specific Chinese intellectual movement born of post-Han socio-political turmoil, deeply intertwined with the lives and arts of the scholar-officials (*shidafu*). It emphasized intuitive insight over systematic reasoning and often rejected rigid Confucian ritualism in favor of “pure conversation” (*qingtan*) about transcendental truths and spontaneous naturalness (*ziran*). By labeling Xuanxue as “Metaphysics,” the translation imposes a foreign philosophical framework. For a Western reader, “Metaphysics” evokes abstract speculation divorced from lived practice. In contrast, Xuanxue was deeply embedded in the aesthetic and spiritual life of its time, directly shaping thematic and stylistic choices in Dunhuang’s early murals, such as the ethereal landscapes in Cave 249 (Western Wei Dynasty) blending Taoist cosmological symbolism with emerging Buddhist iconography.

Case 2

仁 (Ren) translated as “Benevolence”

Duan’s work demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the term 仁 (*Ren*), carefully distinguishing its usage within Buddhist versus Confucian contexts—a distinction critical to understanding Dunhuang’s syncretism. In his analysis, Buddhism frames the Buddha as a 仁者 (*Renzhe*)—the Benevolent One—based on karuna (compassion) and the universal equality of all sentient beings. Conversely, Confucianism defines the virtuous person as a 仁人 (*Renren*), rooted in hierarchical human relationships (*renlun*) and filial piety (*xiao*), where love is graded. The translation collapses this critical distinction by using the broad terms “Benevolence” and “benevolent” for all instances (p. 93).

This uniform translation erases fundamental doctrinal differences. Buddhist 慈 is unconditional, universal compassion extending to all sentient beings, reflecting the Mahayana ideal of the Bodhisattva who postpones their own nirvana for the salvation of all. Confucian 仁 is a graded love beginning with filial piety and expanding outward, intrinsically tied to social harmony, ritual propriety (*li*), and hierarchical obligations. The English “Benevolence” is far too vague to capture the specific doctrinal weight of either tradition. This flattening obscures how Buddhist compassion and Confucian graded love coexisted and complemented each other within Dunhuang’s donor portraits and narrative murals.

Case 3

礼义忠孝 (Li Yi Zhong Xiao) translated as “Etiquette, righteousness, loyalty and filial piety”

Duan frequently references 礼义忠孝 as the Confucian ethical backbone shaping Dunhuang’s donor culture and mural narratives (e.g., p. 92). This quartet represents a holistic system of social virtue. The translation renders it as a list of discrete virtues: “Etiquette, righteousness, loyalty and filial piety” (p. 93). While lexically accurate for each character, this fragmented approach distorts the holistic, hierarchical nature of Confucian ethics. In classical Chinese thought, these virtues form an interconnected organic system: 礼 (*li*, ritual propriety) is the external framework animating 义 (*yi*, righteousness); 忠 (*zhong*, loyalty) extends 孝 (*xiao*, filial piety) from family to state, with 孝 as the root virtue from which the others grow. The Classic of Filial Piety (Xiaojing) explicitly states that filial piety is the foundation of all virtue.

By presenting them as four separate nouns, the translation reduces a cohesive, hierarchical ethical system to a simple checklist of moral duties. This erases how Confucian ethics provided the cultural lens through which Dunhuang’s Chinese audience interpreted Buddhist teachings—a process key to Buddhism’s successful integration into Chinese society, as seen in Jataka tales that align Buddhist self-sacrifice with Confucian filial duty.

4.2. Theological Substitution: Replacing Religious Motifs

Theological substitution occurs when the translation replaces a Chinese religious motif—rooted in Taoism, Confucianism, or syncretic Buddhism—with a term drawn from Abrahamic traditions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam). This mode of failure is particularly egregious as it imposes a theistic, salvation-focused cosmology onto Dunhuang’s pluralistic and largely non-theistic religious landscape, fundamentally erasing the unique worldview of Chinese religions and creating a form of conceptual colonialism.

Case 1

羽人 (Yuren) translated as “Winged Angel”

Duan describes 羽人 as Taoist immortals (*xian*) depicted in Dunhuang’s ceiling murals, beings who achieve transcendence through spiritual cultivation and embody ideals of longevity, freedom from mortal constraints, and harmony with the Dao (p. 84). The translation renders 羽人 as “Winged Angel” (p. 84), a

term from Christian theology referring to divine messengers serving a monotheistic God. This substitution is theologically incoherent. Yuren are not divine servants but self-realized immortals who have attained perfection through their own efforts; their feathered wings symbolize liberation from the human form and cosmic freedom, not a role in a hierarchy of divine command.

This substitution catastrophically distorts Dunhuang's syncretic iconography. In Cave 249's ceiling mural, 羽人 appear alongside Buddhist flying apsaras (飞天), representing a fusion of Taoist transcendence and Buddhist celestial bliss. By labeling Yuren as "Winged Angels," the translation frames this sophisticated internal dialogue within Chinese spirituality as a collision between Chinese and Western theistic traditions. For Western readers, "Angel" evokes divine subordination, completely missing the Taoist ideal of self-mastery and cosmic freedom.

Case 2

四方神 (Sifang Zhi Shen) translated as "Chinese guardian angels of the four directions"

The 四灵—Xuanwu (Black Tortoise, north), Qinglong (Green Dragon, east), Baihu (White Tiger, west), and Zhuque (Vermilion Bird, south)—are rooted in ancient Chinese Yin-Yang and Five Elements (Wuxing) cosmology, governing seasonal changes, astronomical movements, and spatial order. The translation calls them "Chinese guardian angels of the four directions" (p. 84), substituting a Confucian-Taoist cosmological concept with a Christian theological category. Unlike angels, the Four Deities are not personal deities but symbolic, astral manifestations of cosmic forces: Xuanwu is linked to winter, water, and the color black; Qinglong to spring, wood, and green, and so on. Their "guardian" role is a passive, cosmological function of maintaining yin-yang balance and the orderly progression of the seasons, not active personal divine protection.

This substitution erases the scientific and philosophical dimensions of these symbols. They were integral to ancient China's holistic worldview, used in astronomy, calendrical science, geomancy (*fengshui*), and imperial symbolism. In Dunhuang's murals, they appear in celestial scenes alongside Buddhist deities, embodying the grottoes' synthesis of Chinese cosmology and Buddhist cosmogony. The translation's "guardian angels" reduces this syncretism to a superficial "Chinese version" of Western theism.

Case 3

神仙 (Shenxian) translated as "fairies"

Duan notes that Dunhuang's stucco statues and murals incorporate 仙人 thought, referring to Taoist immortals who attain eternal life and supernatural abilities through spiritual cultivation and alchemical practices (p. 70). The translation renders 仙人 as "fairies" (p. 70), a term associated with European folklore—small, whimsical nature spirits—rather than Taoist philosophy. Shenxian are transcendent beings who have mastered the Dao, embodying wisdom, longevity, and moral perfection. They represent a serious soteriological path, whereas fairies are peripheral, amoral figures in Western traditions.

This substitution trivializes the profound Taoist influence on Dunhuang's art. The serene postures of Tang Bodhisattvas (e.g., Cave 45), which reflect Taoist ideals of spontaneity (*ziran*), are reduced by the label "fairies" to a whimsical trope, obscuring how Taoist transcendence shaped Dunhuang's iconographic language.

Case 4

𪔐 (Yilong) translated as "pterodactyl"

Duan references 𪔐 as a mythological motif in Dunhuang's niche decorations, a symbol blending Chinese dragon culture with Buddhist guardian symbolism. The translation renders 𪔐 as "pterodactyl" (p. 70), a term from paleontology referring to an extinct flying reptile. This reduction reveals a prioritization of literal, visual resemblance over cultural meaning. The Winged Dragon is a sacred, syncretic symbol, combining the Chinese dragon's (*long*) potent associations with cosmic power, imperial authority, and beneficence, with the Buddhist garuda's (*Jialouluo*) role as a divine protector of the Dharma. In Dunhuang's art, 𪔐 appears on niche lintels (e.g., Cave 297) to ward off evil and symbolize the triumph of Buddhist truth.

By labeling it a "pterodactyl," the translation transforms a potent religious and protective symbol into a scientific curiosity, completely erasing its ritual, doctrinal, and cosmological meaning. A Western reader will inevitably read the motif as a prehistoric creature, missing its function as a Dharma protector.

4.3. Institutional Misinterpretation: Confusing Religious Sociology

Institutional misinterpretation occurs when the translation misrepresents the social, political, and organizational dimensions of Chinese religious life, imposing Western religious institutional models (e.g., Christian church hierarchy, sacramental authority, secular-sectarian divides) onto China's distinct state-religion collaboration tradition. This mode of failure distorts how religious roles, practices, and relationships actually functioned in Dunhuang's historical context, projecting a Western sociology of religion onto an Eastern reality.

Case 1

𪔐 (Huansu) translated as "excommunicated"

𪔐 is a voluntary and legitimate choice for Buddhist monks to return to lay life—a normal and accepted practice within the Buddhist community, often undertaken for reasons of family obligation, health, or personal circumstance. The translation renders 𪔐 as "excommunicated" (p. 67), a term from Christian canon law referring to a formal, punitive expulsion from the religious community and its sacraments as a penalty for heresy, schism, or serious sin. This misrepresentation inverts the very nature of the practice: 𪔐 is an individual, non-punitive decision, while excommunication is a hierarchical, disciplinary action intended to punish and isolate.

Buddhist Vinaya (monastic code) does not condemn 出; in fact, procedures for respectfully leaving the monastic order are outlined. It was a socially accepted practice in Dunhuang and China generally. By framing it as “excommunication,” the translation falsely portrays Buddhist monasticism as a rigid, punitive institution akin to medieval Christianity, thereby erasing the flexibility and permeability between monastic and lay life that were central to Buddhist practice in China. This error fundamentally distorts Duan’s analysis of Dunhuang’s religious sociology.

Case 2

居士 (Menshi) translated as “house guru”

Duan uses 居士 to describe the formal, public, and politically significant relationship between influential religious leaders and political rulers in Dunhuang—an institutional alliance where the religious figure served as both spiritual advisor and a participant in governance, often holding an official title. The translation renders 居士 as “house guru” (p. 66), a term that privatizes and informalizes the relationship. “house guru” evokes a personal, domestic spiritual advisor, rooted in Western church-state separation traditions where religion is relegated to the private sphere. This completely misses the public, institutional, and political role of the 居士 in China’s collaboration between governance and teaching system.

In Dunhuang’s context, a 居士 (e.g., the Kuchenan monk Dharmaksema advising Juqu Mengxun, ruler of the Northern Liang) played active, public roles in state affairs: advising on policy, performing rituals for state prosperity, legitimizing the ruler’s authority, and mediating between the ruler and the monastic community. The translation “house guru” erases this public, institutional dimension, obscuring how religion and state power were intertwined in Dunhuang’s governance.

Case 3

道士 (Daogong) translated as “Priest”

道士 is a Taoist clergy who performed rituals, guided community practice, and mediated between the laity and Taoist deities in Dunhuang. The translation renders 道士 as “Priest” (p. 157), a term laden with Christian sacerdotal connotations—specifically, a figure who has undergone Holy Orders, possesses authority to perform sacraments, operates within a clear hierarchical ordination system, and often lives separated from secular society. Taoist 道士, by contrast, operate within a less hierarchical, more community-centered tradition. Their roles encompass ritual performance, healing, moral guidance, and functions like astrology and divination, while maintaining strong ties to secular society. They are not defined by a sacramental authority analogous to the Christian priesthood.

By labeling 道士 as “Priest,” the translation forces Taoist clergy into a Christian institutional framework. Western readers will wrongly assume a sacramental authority that Taoist clergy do not possess. Across these ten cases, a consistent pattern emerges. Each error—whether conceptual, theological, or

institutional—stems from the translator's commitment to equivalence-based domestication. Taken together, these failures produce a systematically distorted portrait of Dunhuang's religious landscape.

5. Discussion: Towards a Hermeneutics of Fidelity in Translation

The terminological failures analyzed in Section 3 construct a coherent, yet deeply flawed, systematic misreading of Dunhuang's religious landscape, reducing its rich syncretic tapestry to a Western-centric approximation. To rectify this, we must move beyond critique and construct a new hermeneutic framework centered on "fidelity to religious meaning." This framework embraces untranslatability as a feature to be worked with, not a flaw to be overcome, and equips translators to act as ethical cultural negotiators. This section outlines the core principles, expands the proposed toolkit, engages with potential counterarguments, and reaffirms the ethical imperative of prioritizing doctrinal integrity over simplistic readability.

5.1. Synthesizing the Errors: The Construction of a Domesticated Dunhuang

The three typologies of error converge to produce a distorted portrait that aligns with Western expectations at the expense of historical and doctrinal accuracy. Conceptual catachresis collapses distinct Chinese philosophical traditions into monolithic Western categories, removing the intellectual tensions that drove Dunhuang's artistic and religious innovation. Theological substitution imposes a theistic, Abrahamic worldview onto Dunhuang's pluralistic and non-theistic spiritual environment, fundamentally altering the cosmological framework within which the art was created. Institutional misinterpretation maps Western models of religious organization onto China's distinct state-religion collaboration tradition, distorting the social reality of religious life at Dunhuang.

Collectively, these errors create a version of the grottoes where complex religious ideas are made familiar but rendered inaccurate, where sacred symbols are stripped of context, and where dynamic institutions are portrayed as rigid and misunderstood. For Western scholars, this filtered understanding obscures Dunhuang's role as a dynamic site where three great traditions merged to create a unique visual theology. Worse, it reinforces the hegemonic assumption that non-Western religious terms can and should be reduced to Western equivalents, perpetuating translational violence that marginalizes non-Western epistemologies. Breaking this cycle requires a practice that honors Dunhuang's complexity by negotiating meaning rather than forcing it.

5.2. Proposed Correctives: A Detailed Toolkit for the Translator-Negotiator

Building on the theoretical framework of Section 2, this part elaborates a three-pronged toolkit tailored to Dunhuang's syncretic, visual-textual context. The strategies—transliteration with explanation, analogical creation with thick annotation, and precision paraphrasing—are matched to the type of religious terms

being translated, balancing accessibility with fidelity. These are flexible strategies to be deployed by the translator as cultural negotiator.

5.2.1. Transliteration with Explanation: For Core Philosophical and Doctrinal Concepts

This strategy is essential for core religious-philosophical terms whose meanings are deeply embedded in centuries of doctrinal debate and syncretic development. For concepts such as 仁 (*Ren*), 玄学 (*Xuanxue*), and 空 (*Kong/Sunyata*), the goal of translation is not to find an equivalent, but to mediate meaning. Transliteration (using Chinese pinyin) preserves the term's cultural identity and signals its conceptual uniqueness, while a concise explanation guides the reader to its core meaning. This approach explicitly acknowledges untranslatability, inviting the reader into the conceptual world of the source text rather than reducing its complexity for target-language comfort. The following examples demonstrate how this method corrects the conceptual catachresis of the 1994 translation by providing nuanced, context-sensitive interpretations (Table 1).

Table 1
Correcting Conceptual Catachresis through Transliteration with Explanation

Term & Domesticated Error	Proposed Transliteration with Explanation	Contextual Nuance & Function
仁 (<i>Ren</i>) Error: Uniform “Benevolence” (erases doctrinal distinctions)	Buddhist Context: <i>Ren</i> (Buddhist compassion [karuna] extending to all sentient beings, embodying the Mahayana ideal of Bodhisattvahood). Confucian Context: <i>Ren</i> (Confucian graded love rooted in filial piety [xiao] and ritual propriety [li]).	This differentiated translation honors Duan’s original nuance, clarifying that Buddhist <i>Ren</i> is universal and unconditional, while Confucian <i>Ren</i> is hierarchical and relation-based. It prevents the conflation of two distinct ethical systems that coexist in Dunhuang’s art.
玄学 (<i>Xuanxue</i>) Error: “Metaphysics” (imposes Western philosophical framework)	<i>Xuanxue</i> (the Wei-Jin Philosophical School of “Mysterious Learning,” centered on Neo-Daoist commentaries of the <i>Dao De Jing</i> and <i>Zhuangzi</i> and debates on “being” [you] and “non-being” [wu]).	This formulation situates the term within its specific Chinese historical and intellectual context, preventing its misleading association with Aristotelian metaphysics and highlighting its role in shaping the intellectual milieu of early Chinese Buddhism.
空(<i>Kong/Sunyata</i>) Error: “Emptiness” (suggests nihilism or absence)	<i>Kong</i> (<i>Sunyata</i>), the foundational Mahayana Buddhist insight into the lack of inherent existence [svabhava] in all phenomena, which is not a nihilistic void but a dynamic state of interdependent origination [pratityasamutpada].	The transliteration of the Chinese term <i>Kong</i> , coupled with its Sanskrit equivalent <i>Sunyata</i> and a doctrinal explanation, pre-empts Western philosophical misunderstandings by correctly defining it as a positive principle of interconnection that underpins Buddhist ethics.

The strength of this strategy lies in its pedagogical value. It treats the reader as a learner, inviting them into the conceptual world of the source text rather than dragging the source text into the reader's world. For Dunhuang's syncretic terms, this is particularly valuable, as it can capture layered meanings, as demonstrated in Section 3.3 with the case of Wuwei, which negotiates its Daoist and Buddhist dimensions in a single annotated rendering.

5.2.2. Analogical Creation with Thick Annotation: For Culturally Specific Imagery and Symbols

This strategy is designed for religious symbols and imagery tied to Dunhuang's unique iconography and syncretic mythology. Analogical creation involves crafting a descriptive phrase that evokes the term's core imagery (e.g., "feathered immortal" for 羽人), while "thick annotation" provides the essential cultural, doctrinal, and visual context. This two-tiered approach builds a bridge of familiarity for the target reader while ensuring they arrive at an accurate understanding, not a simplified or distorted one. The failures of domestication are vividly illustrated by the 1994 translation's renderings, which can be systematically corrected through this method, as demonstrated in the following key examples (Table 2):

Table 2

Correcting Theological and Cultural Substitution through Analogical Creation & Thick Annotation

Term & Domesticated Error	Proposed Analogical Translation	Core Components of Thick Annotation
翔 (Yuren) Error: “Winged Angel” (imposes a theistic hierarchy)	Feathered Immortals	1.Cultural/Religious Roots: Taoist transcendent beings (<i>xian</i>) achieving liberation through Dao cultivation. 2.Doctrinal/Symbolic Significance: Wings symbolize spiritual freedom from the human form. 3.Visual Reference & Syncretic Meaning: Depicted alongside Buddhist apsaras (e.g., Mogao Grotto 249), illustrating a blend of Taoist transcendence and Buddhist celestial bliss.
翼 (Yilong) Error: “Pterodactyl” (reduces a sacred symbol to paleontology)	Winged Dragons	1.Cultural/Religious Roots: Syncretic symbol blending Chinese dragon cosmology (cosmic power, imperial authority) with the Buddhist garuda. 2.Doctrinal/Symbolic Significance: Serves as a protector of the Dharma, symbolizing the triumph of Buddhist truth. 3.Visual Reference & Syncretic Meaning: Commonly depicted on niche lintels (e.g., Mogao Grotto 297) for spiritual protection.
仙 (Shenxian) Error: “Fairies” (trivializes a soteriological ideal)	Transcendent Immortals	1. Cultural/Religious Roots: Taoist beings who attain longevity and perfection through mastery of the Dao. 2.Doctrinal/Symbolic Significance: Embodies the ideal of spontaneous harmony (<i>ziran</i>). 3.Visual Reference & Syncretic Meaning: Influence visible in the relaxed postures of Tang Bodhisattvas (e.g., Cave 45), reflecting a synthesis of Buddhist compassion and Taoist aesthetics.
四方神 (Sifang Zhi Shen) Error: “Guardian Angels” (imposes a monotheistic framework)	Four Directional Deities	1.Cultural/Religious Roots: Deities of Chinese Yin-Yang cosmology (<i>Xuanwu</i>, <i>Qinglong</i>, etc.) governing directions and seasons. 2.Doctrinal/Symbolic Significance: Represent the balance of cosmic forces and spatial order. 3.Visual Reference & Syncretic Meaning: Their presence in celestial scenes (e.g., Mogao Grotto 249) reflects the integration of Chinese cosmology into Buddhist sacred space.

5.2.3. Precision Paraphrasing: For Institutional and Ritual Terms

This strategy addresses the critical challenge of translating terms that describe religious roles, practices, and relationships unique to specific socio-cultural contexts. For concepts (Table 3) such as 還俗 (*Huansu*), 僧師 (*Menshi*), and 道公 (*Daogong*), the absence of direct equivalents stems from fundamental differences in the underlying social and religious structures between source and target cultures. Precision paraphrasing moves beyond the search for lexical matches, instead crafting a clear, context-specific description that captures the term’s functional meaning. This approach prioritizes descriptive accuracy and conceptual clarity over conciseness, systematically preventing the imposition of inappropriate Western institutional models onto Chinese religious sociology.

Table 3
Correcting Institutional Misinterpretation through Precision Paraphrasing

Term & Domesticated Error	Term & Domesticated Error	Contextual Nuance & Function
還俗 (Huansu) Error: “Excommunicated” (imposes a punitive Christian framework)	Huansu: to voluntarily return to lay life. This was a legitimate and non-punitive practice within the Buddhist monastic community, often undertaken for family or personal reasons.	This paraphrase corrects the fundamental misrepresentation of Buddhist monastic discipline by clarifying the voluntary, non-disciplinary nature of the act. It highlights the fluid relationship between monastic and lay life in medieval Chinese Buddhism, contrasting sharply with the punitive, sacramental exclusion denoted by “excommunication.”
僧師 (Menshi) Error: “House guru” (privatizes and informalizes a state-level role)	Menshi: a state-sponsored religious mentor. This was a formal, public title for a monk who served as both spiritual advisor and political counselor to a ruler.	This description restores the public, institutional dimension of the role, embodying the characteristic “state-religion collaboration” of Chinese governance. It effectively contrasts with Western models of church-state separation, where a “house guru” implies a private, apolitical relationship.
道公 (Daogong) Error: “Priest” (imposes Christian sacerdotal hierarchy)	Daogong: a Taoist cleric. This term refers to a community-based religious leader who performed rituals, provided healing and moral guidance, and maintained strong ties to secular society.	This paraphrase actively distinguishes the Taoist role by emphasizing its community-centered, non-hierarchical, and multifaceted nature. It prevents conflation with the Christian “priest,” whose identity is defined by sacramental authority, clerical ordination, and often a separation from secular life.

Precision paraphrasing is indispensable for terms describing dynamic relationships and practices, as it proactively prevents readers from projecting Western institutional assumptions onto Dunhuang’s historical context. The goal is unequivocal functional clarity, ensuring the social and religious reality of terms like *Menshi*—which denotes a formal political-religious nexus—is communicated without the distortion inherent in labels like “house guru.” By prioritizing accurate description over misleading brevity, this strategy ensures that the unique characteristics of Chinese religious sociology are preserved and understood on their own terms.

5.3. The Goal: Fidelity to Religious Meaning over Readability

The toolkit outlined above is guided by a single principle: the ultimate goal of translating Dunhuang's religious terminology is not smooth readability, but fidelity to religious meaning. As discussed in Section 3.1, Venuti's (1995) critique of domestication underscores the ethical imperative of retaining the source text's foreignness. For Dunhuang studies, this foreignizing approach is ethically imperative. The Mogao Grottoes are sacred spaces where religious ideas were lived, practiced, and transmitted over a millennium. To domesticate their terminology is to reduce this profound sacredness to comfortable familiarity, erasing what makes Dunhuang unique. A translation that feels slightly "foreign"—through Pinyin, explanatory annotations, and culturally specific phrasing—honors the grottoes' historical and doctrinal integrity. It invites readers to engage with religious meaning on its own terms, requiring an intellectual effort that is itself a form of respect.

This commitment to fidelity also has practical scholarly value. By preserving the specificity of Dunhuang's terminology, we enable Western scholars to engage with the grottoes' religious landscape accurately. For example: distinguishing between Buddhist *Ren* (as karuna) and Confucian *Ren* (as graded love) allows scholars to trace how these two ideals merged and were visualized differently in donor portraits versus Jataka tale illustrations; clarifying the syncretic nature of *Yilong* (winged dragon) helps art historians understand its specific role in Dharma protection and its connection to imperial symbolism in different historical periods.

Precision in translating institutional terms like *Men Shi* sheds accurate light on the complex power dynamics and collaborations between historical political powers and monastic communities—a relationship that, in its institutional formality, finds a structural parallel in the collaboration between modern entities like the Dunhuang Academy and the heritage of those historical communities.

Critics may argue that this approach risks alienating casual readers or making the text cumbersome. However, a targeted application—reserving the fullest thick translation for the most critical doctrinal and iconographic terms, while using simpler paraphrasing for minor terms—can effectively balance depth and accessibility. Glossaries, footnotes, and appendices are legitimate scholarly tools that allow the main text to flow while providing depth for those who seek it. The alternative—providing a smooth but inaccurate text—is a greater disservice.

5.4. Addressing Potential Counterarguments

It is important to anticipate potential objections to this negotiated approach. Some might argue that it places an unreasonable burden on the translator, requiring specialist knowledge in Buddhist studies, Taoism, Confucianism, and Dunhuang iconography. While this is true, translating a specialist like Duan Wenjie is fundamentally a specialist task. Collaboration between translators and subject matter experts is essential for producing a high-quality, faithful translation.

Another counterargument might be that this approach makes the translation “unreadable” for a broad audience. This critique confuses readability with ease. A text can be highly readable—clear, well-structured, and engaging—while still being conceptually challenging. The goal is a transparent text: clear about its own cultural situatedness and the gaps that must be bridged. The popularity of scholarly editions of classic texts that use extensive notes proves there is an audience for this kind of depth.

In sum, translating Dunhuang’s religious terminology requires a paradigm shift from “equivalence” to “negotiation.” By adopting a toolkit of transliteration with explanation, analogical creation with thick annotation, and precision paraphrasing, translators can act as ethical cultural negotiators, building bridges of understanding without erasing difference. The result will be a translation faithful to Dunhuang’s religious meaning, honoring its syncretic heritage, and fostering genuine and equitable cross-cultural dialogue—an ethical commitment to treating Dunhuang’s religious art with the respect it deserves.

6. Conclusion

This paper has presented a systematic critique of the 1994 English translation of Duan Wenjie’s seminal work on Dunhuang art, arguing that its terminological failures stem from a flawed equivalence-based paradigm ill-suited to translating religious and culturally saturated concepts. Through a detailed typology of errors, we have seen how the translation’s domestication flattens the richness of Dunhuang’s religious landscape, producing a “filtered” version tailored to Western expectations at the expense of historical and doctrinal accuracy. The rendering of *Xuanxue* as “Metaphysics,” Yuren as “Winged Angel,” and *huansu* as “excommunicated” are not mere linguistic infelicities; they are epistemic distortions that collectively construct a misunderstood Dunhuang for the English-speaking world.

The critique, however, reclaims “untranslatability” not as a barrier to be overcome, but as a necessary starting point for a more ethical and rigorous translation practice. By drawing on translation theory—specifically cultural untranslatability, thick translation, and the translator as cultural negotiator—this study provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding why simplistic equivalence fails. Religious terminology, deeply embedded in cultural, philosophical, and ritual contexts, cannot be reduced to one-to-one Western equivalents, especially in a uniquely syncretic site like Dunhuang. Embracing this untranslatability invites translators to shift their role from seekers of perfect equivalence to mediators who negotiate meaning through strategic, context-sensitive techniques.

The proposed alternative—a negotiated approach centered on “fidelity to religious meaning”—offers a practical path forward. The triad of strategies—transliteration with explanation for philosophical concepts, analogical creation with thick annotation for cultural symbols, and precision paraphrasing for institutional terms—provides a flexible toolkit. These three strategies correspond directly to the three modes of failure identified in Section 4: transliteration with explanation corrects conceptual catachresis, analogical creation with thick annotation redresses theological substitution, and precision paraphrasing rectifies institutional misinterpretation, thereby closing the loop between diagnosis and remedy. This

approach prioritizes the integrity of the source text's meaning over superficial fluency, allowing the translation to retain a deliberate “foreignness” that signals readers are engaging with a worldview distinct from their own.

The implications extend far beyond the specific case of Duan Wenjie’s translation. For Dunhuang studies, accurate translation of religious terminology is paramount: as the grottoes’ art and manuscripts continue to be studied by an increasingly global scholarly community, the integrity of its core concepts in translation directly impacts the quality and direction of research. Misleading translations can lead entire research trajectories down false paths, fostering misunderstandings about the nature of Chinese Buddhism, the relationship between the three teachings (*sanjiao*), and the social history of the Silk Road. More broadly, the critique of the 1994 volume serves as a case study in the dangers of domesticating translation when applied to non-Western religious traditions, highlighting how power dynamics of knowledge production often favor fluency over accuracy. The negotiated approach advocated here is a form of resistance against this epistemic violence—an argument for a more humble and hospitable approach to cultural difference that creates the conditions for a truthful encounter.

Beyond its immediate case study, this study makes three broader contributions. It offers a dedicated theoretical framework for translating religious-philosophical terminology in syncretic cultural contexts; it operationalizes the model of the translator as a cultural negotiator—grounded in Venuti’s critique of translational violence and Appiah’s thick translation—into concrete strategies for terms that resist conventional equivalence; and it extends current debates on the standardization of culturally embedded terminology into an area where such standardization is both most needed and most difficult to achieve. Taken together, these contributions position the study at the intersection of translation studies and terminology, offering a model that prioritizes ethical engagement and cultural dialogue over technical transfer.

Finally, this is an act of respect: for the grottoes themselves, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site embodying a millennium of spiritual inquiry; for Duan Wenjie’s meticulous scholarship, which deserves to be represented with accuracy and nuance; and for the global audience, which deserves access to a Dunhuang that is complex, challenging, and authentic. Translating Dunhuang is not about making it easy; it is about making it right. By advocating for a translation practice that honors untranslatability, we do more than correct a single text; we contribute to a more ethical and rigorous paradigm for understanding the world’s diverse religious and cultural heritage.

Declarations

Ethic Statements

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Author Contribution

Z.G. and H.T. translated *The Buddha in Dunhuang* (Springer, 2026), which provided the textual basis for this study. Z.G. conceptualised the paper's framework and structure, selected the illustrative examples, and developed the analysis of those examples. H.T. drafted the initial manuscript, and Z.G. substantially revised it. H.T. prepared the manuscript for submission, including formatting and reference organisation. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

All the data are taken from *Dunhuang Art through the Eyes of Duan Wenjie*, a Tang Chung translation of a Duan Wenjie's paper collection. The translation is available online at https://ignca.gov.in/eBooks/India_world_ks_19.pdf

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Figures

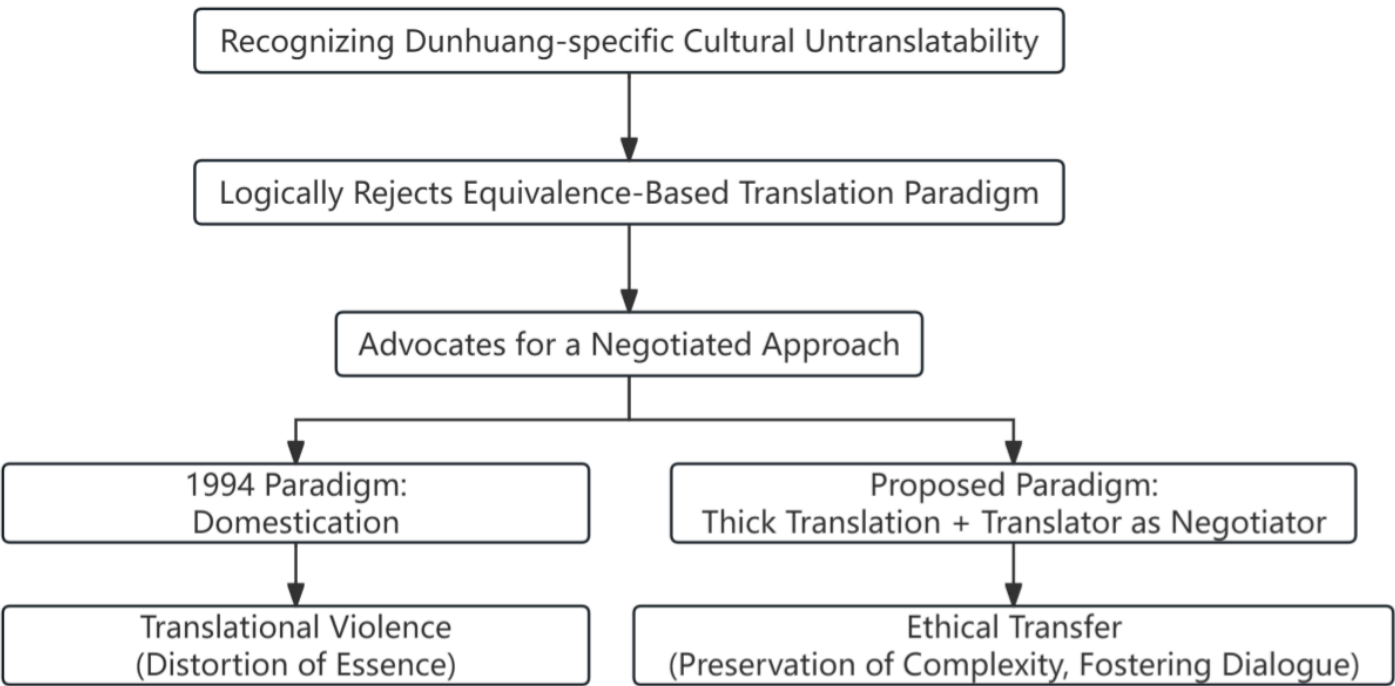


Figure 1

