

Special Issue Reprint

Global Laozegetics

Engaging the Multiplicity of *Laozi* Interpretations
and Translations

Edited by
Misha Tadd

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Global Laozegetics: Engaging the Multiplicity of *Laozi* Interpretations and Translations

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Guest Editor

Misha Tadd



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Contents

About the Editor	ix
Preface	xi
Misha Tadd	
What Is Global Laozegetics?: Origins, Contents, and Significance Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2022, 13, 651, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070651	1
Tobias Benedikt Zürn	
Reception History and Early Chinese Classics Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2022, 13, 1224, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121224	16
Thomas Michael	
The Original Text of the <i>Daodejing</i> : Disentangling Versions and Recensions Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2022, 13, 325, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040325	32
Daniel Sarafinas	
The Hierarchy of Authorship in the Hermeneutics of the <i>Daodejing</i> Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2022, 13, 433, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050433	49
Ai Yuan	
Rhetorical Questions in the <i>Daodejing</i> : Argument Construction, Dialogical Insertion, and Sentimental Expression Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2022, 13, 252, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030252	61
Andrej Fečh	
Avoiding the Trap of Parallelism: Interlocking Parallel Style in the Interpretation of <i>Laozi</i> 29 Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2022, 13, 788, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090788	75
Shuxun Ye	
“Non-Action” and “Assistance”: Laozi’s Thoughts on How to Treat Others Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2022, 13, 914, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100914	91
Paul Joseph D’Ambrosio	
Wang Bi’s “Confucian” <i>Laozi</i> : Commensurable Ethical Understandings in “Daoist” and “Confucian” Thinking Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2022, 13, 417, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050417	105
Yuhan Gao	
Rethinking Guo Xiang’s Concept of “Nothing” in the Perspective of His Reception of Laozi and Zhuangzi Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2022, 13, 593, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070593	120
Friederike Assandri	
Structure and Meaning in the Interpretation of the <i>Laozi</i> : Cheng Xuanying’s Hermeneutic Toolkit and His Interpretation of Dao as a Compassionate Savior Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2022, 13, 347, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040347	140
Suixin Zheng	
<i>Notes on the Laozi</i> and Yan Fu’s Theory of <i>Dao</i> Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2023, 14, 447, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040447	155

Heejung Seo-Reich

The Strategy of Interpreting the *Daodejing* through Confucianism in Park Se-dang’s *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2023, 14, 1550, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121550> 173

Misha Tadd

The Translingual *Ziran* of *Laozi* Chapter 25: Global Laozegetics and Meaning Unbound by Language

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2022, 13, 596, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070596> 194

Xiaojiao Cui

The Understanding and Translation of De 德 in the English Translation of the *Daodejing* 道德經

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2023, 14, 1418, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111418> 209

Xue Tang

Variated Cultural Imagery of the *Daodejing* in the German-Speaking World Based on “Foreignization”: The Case of *Dao* and *De*

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2023, 14, 918, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070918> 220

Yubo Zhu and Weihang Song

The Shifting Depictions of Xiàng in German Translations of the *Dao De Jing*: An Analysis from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Field Theory

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2022, 13, 827, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090827> 233

Sophie Ling-chia Wei

A New Portrait of a Daoist Sage: Jean-François Foucquet’s Interpretation of the *Dao*

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2023, 14, 263, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020263> 246

Hongyan Zhang and Jing Luo

Three Early Russian Documents about the *Daodejing*: An Analysis

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2023, 14, 766, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060766> 264

Hongyan Zhang and Jing Luo

Interpretive Trends and the Conceptual Construction of the *Daodejing*’s *Dao* in Russian Sinology: A Historical Overview

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2022, 13, 825, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090825> 282

Can Zhang and Pan Xie

Challenge and Revolution: An Analysis of Stanislas Julien’s Translation of the *Daodejing*

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2022, 13, 724, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080724> 298

Xiaoshu Li and Yuan Tan

A Paratext Perspective on the Translation of the *Daodejing*: An Example from the German Translation of Richard Wilhelm

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2023, 14, 1546, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121546> 311

Filippo Costantini

The LATAM’s *Laozi*: The Reception and Interpretations of the *Laozi* in Latin America

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2022, 13, 952, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100952> 327

Dadui Yao

Qian Xuexi and William Empson’s Discussion of Arthur Waley’s English Translation of the *Daodejing*

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2022, 13, 751, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080751> 343

Heejung Seo-Reich

Four Approaches to *Daodejing* Translations and Their Characteristics in Korean after Liberation from Japan

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2022, 13, 998, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100998> 354

Sana Hadhri, Zixiao Liu and Zhiyong Wu

The Dissemination of Laozi’s Text and Thought in the Arab World

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2022, 13, 1177, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121177> 375

Dimitra Amarantidou

Translative Trends in Three Modern Greek Renderings of the *Daodejing*

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2023, 14, 283, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020283> 385

Suixin Zheng

Reconsidering the Term *Dai* 待 in *Zhuangzi* 莊子

Reprinted from: *Religions* 2024, 15, 845, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070845> 399

About the Editor

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Misha Tadd is associate professor at the College of Philosophy at Nankai University. He is also the director of Nankai University's Global Laozegetics Research Center. In 2018 he was a visiting scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Philosophy, and from 2013–2017, he worked at Tu Weiming's Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies of Peking University as a postdoctoral fellow and researcher. He received his PhD from Boston University in 2013, having worked with Christopher Lehrich of BU, Michael Puett of Harvard University, and Harold Roth of Brown University. He is Vice President of the Professional Committee on Laozi, Zhuangzi, Yijing, and Daoist Culture, an executive board member at the International Association of I-Ching Studies, and a council member of the World Council of Sinologists at Beijing Language and Culture University. His research addresses pre-Qin and Han Daoist philosophy, comparative religion and philosophy, and Global Laozegetics (a concept that he developed). He has edited and translated multiple books (*Parasites, Worms, and the Human Body in Religion and Culture; Order in Early Chinese Excavated Texts; Comprehensive Summary Collection of the Classics of Chinese Philosophy*), and he has published in English-language journals like *Diogenes, Religions, and The Journal of the History of Ideas*, as well as top Chinese-language journals like *Philosophical Research, History of Chinese Philosophy, and Xinhua Digest*. He recently catalogued all the Laozi translations in the world (2052 works in 97 languages) in *The Complete Bibliography of Laozi Translations* (2022).

Preface

In 2021, Nankai University College of Philosophy in Tianjin, China, hosted the “International Conference on Global Laozegetics.” This event was launched to spread the idea of Global Laozegetics and its research. In 2022, Misha Tadd published *The Complete Bibliography of Laozi Translations: A Global Laozegetics Reference*, which is now a foundational resource for studying *Laozi* translations. In 2023, Nankai University established the Global Laozegetics Research Center, with 64 members from 12 different countries. In 2024, Misha Tadd and Shuxun Ye published a Special Issue on Global Laozegetics in the Chinese journal *Daoist Culture Research*, and now *Religions* is reprinting this Special Issue, titled “Global Laozegetics: Engaging the Multiplicity of Laozi Interpretations and Translations.”

“Global Laozegetics” translates the Chinese term *quanqiu Laoxue* 全球老學, also coined by Misha Tadd, and offers a novel framework for investigating the Daoist classic *Laozi* or *Daodejing*. Previous scholarship has mostly debated the “original” meaning of the *Laozi* text, yet this might not be the most important topic to research. The study of Global Laozegetics instead prioritizes investigating the 2052 *Laozi* translations in 97 languages and the 2185 native Chinese commentaries as the keys to understanding the text’s place in history. Even if it were possible to determine the original meaning of the text, that conception would only be relevant for a brief moment in time. It cannot explain the varied ways in which the *Laozi* has been understood and applied across the ages. Therefore, a focus on the complex history of *Laozi* exegesis in all languages to determine the entirety of its transmission, transformation, and reception can more fully comprehend the impact of the text around the globe.

The *Religions* Special Issue on “Global Laozegetics” includes 27 articles on this new interdisciplinary topic, many of which come from the 2021 conference. It is organized as follows: two theoretical articles begin the Special Issue; five articles address the original *Laozi* text; four articles cover issues related to traditional Chinese *Laozi* commentaries; one article investigates an East Asian *Laozi* commentary; four articles discuss the translation of key terms in the *Laozi*; ten articles cover translations of the *Laozi* text in a variety of languages; and one final article looks at a concept in the *Zhuangzi* as a development of the *Laozi*’s philosophy.

We hope that this Special Issue will spark further interest in the interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and trans-linguistic study of the *Laozi*.

Misha Tadd
Guest Editor

Article

What Is Global Laozegetics?: Origins, Contents, and Significance

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Abstract: Mainstream scholarship on the *Laozi* or *Daodejing* generally focuses on the “original” text and its “original” meaning. However, the Chinese study of *Laoxue* 老學 (translated here with the author’s neologism “Laozegetics”) offers a valuable alternative, as it shifts focus to the hermeneutical and historical value of the 2185 Chinese, 430 Japanese, and 91 Korean relevant interpretations and commentaries on the classic. The inclusive perspective of Laozegetics has further inspired the author’s creation of the term “Global Laozegetics.” This even broader topic assumes both *Laozi* commentaries and translations (all 2051 in 97 languages) belong within a single field of research. To better introduce the study of Global Laozegetics to an English-language readership, this article will explore the history of the term *Laoxue*, review contemporary related research, and present the content and significance of applying the notion of Laozegetics to the globalized *Laozi*.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy; global philosophy; *Laozi*; *Daodejing*; exegetics; translation; commentary

1. Introduction

The Daoist classic *Laozi* or *Daodejing* is written in a pithy, confounding, and abstract style. This type of language, along with the text’s broad cosmological, political, and self-cultivational content, makes it especially open to dynamic exegesis and interpretation. As a result, throughout Chinese history it has accrued a massive assortment of commentaries. Additionally, the *Laozi* has been translated over two thousand times, a phenomenon which reveals an even greater variety of ways to understand this classic.

Scholarship on the *Laozi* is plentiful as well. Yet, mainstream research generally focuses on identifying the one “correct” understanding of this work, with little recognition of its rich exegetical history. All that matters is the “original” text and its “original” meaning. However, the Chinese study of *Laoxue* 老學 (translated here with the author’s neologism “Laozegetics”) offers a valuable alternative, as it shifts focus to the hermeneutical and historical value of the numerous commentaries on the classic. The inclusive perspective of Laozegetics has further inspired the author’s creation of the term “Global Laozegetics” (Tadd 2022). This even broader topic situates all ways of interpreting the *Laozi* in Chinese and in translation as a single research object. To better introduce the study of Global Laozegetics to the Anglophone reader, this article will explore the history of the term *Laoxue*, review contemporary related research, and present the content and significance of applying the notion of Laozegetics to the globalized *Laozi*.

2. What Is Laozegetics?

To understand Laozegetics, we must offer the first general investigation of the history and usage of *Laoxue*. This is particularly needed, as this Chinese original has been barely discussed by English-language scholars. Basically, there was once a brief mention by Alan Chan (1998, p. 105), and more recently Thomas Michael has used it as a tool to incorporate the realms of philosophy and sinology (2021). Linguistic nuance in this account is especially required, as *Laoxue*’s meaning can be ambiguous. “*Lao*” might refer to *Laozi* the person or the *Laozi* text, while the particularly challenging word *xue* 學 has been glossed in this

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compound by Chinese scholars variously as *xuexi* 學習 (study), *xueshuo* 學說 (doctrine), *xuepai* 學派 (school of thought), *xuewen* 學問 (knowledge, learning, scholarship), or *xueke* 學科 (discipline, field of study). So, theoretically, *Laoxue* could mean the study of, doctrine of, school of, knowledge of, or field of study of Laozi the person or *Laozi* the text. To clarify the usage of this term, the following will review the assorted ways *Laoxue* has been employed in Chinese during its two main periods of popularity. This will then lead to a discussion of why I translate it as Laozegetics.

2.1. Early Ideas of *Laoxue*

The first tentative discussions on *Laoxue* appeared in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Alan Chan has suggested that the earliest instance originated with Yang Shuda 楊樹達 in 1924 (Chan 1998, p. 105), but there are some complications to this attribution. Yang's *Laozi guyi* 老子古義 (The Ancient Meaning of the *Laozi*) includes a chapter "Handai Lao xuezhe kao" 漢代老學者考 (An Examination of Han Dynasty Scholars of Laozi). It is important to note that the title could also be translated as "An Examination of Han Dynasty *Laoxue* Figures," if one instead parses the characters as "Handai *Laoxue zhe kao*." Chan, I assume, follows this latter reading because nowhere else in the chapter does the compound *Laoxue* appear.

Yang's very terse introduction provides hints to his intended meaning. There, he notes that "In the Han era, the study/knowledge of Laozi (*Laozi zhi xue* 老子之學) flourished," and he further explains that his list contains the Han people mentioned in the histories who "study the *Laozi*" (*xi Laozi* 習老子) or are "fans of its techniques" (*hao qi shu* 好其術) (Yang [1924] 1991, p. 104).¹ These two statements offer different solutions to the troublesome word *xue* in the expressions *Lao xue zhe* and *Laozi zhi xue*. "Study (*xi*) the *Laozi*" suggests that *xue* should be understood as *xuexi* (study), while "fans of its techniques" implies the *xue* of Laozi might also be a kind to *xuewen* (knowledge). So, which is it? Depending on the answer, one can parse Yang's title as *Laoxue zhe* or *Lao xuezhe*. If it is the former, he is the first to use the compound *Laoxue* and conceives of it as the knowledge of Laozi; if it is the latter, he cannot be properly credited with the term but at least initiates the investigation into the history of the study of the *Laozi*.

Chen Zhu 陳柱, a few years later, liberally and unambiguously employs the compound *Laoxue* in his 1928 book *Laoxue bapian* 老學八篇 (Eight Essays on *Laoxue*). His preface specifies his topic as *Laozi zhi xue*. Here, the expression, in contrast to Yang's uncertain usage, is introduced in parallel to *ziyou pingdeng zhi xueshuo* 自由平等之學說 (the doctrine of liberty and equality), thereby confirming *Laoxue* as *Laozi xueshuo* 老子學說 (the doctrine of Laozi) (Chen 1928, p. 1). While Chen takes the troublesome *xue* as *xueshuo* (doctrine) instead of *xuexi* (study) or *xuewen* (learning), it is important to further identify his sense of "doctrine." In his book, Chen first explains the *Laoxue* of Laozi but then expands his scope in three essays on the *Laoxue* of Zhuangzi, the *Laoxue* of Hanfeizi, and a comparison of these two. What does it mean for other pre-Qin "Masters" to have their own *Laoxue*? Surely, the term in this context cannot simply mean "the doctrines of Laozi."

Chen presents the *Laoxue* of these two later pre-Qin masters quite differently. In his view, Zhuangzi's *Laoxue* did not overturn Laozi's theories but filled in their blanks (Chen 1928, p. 88). To achieve this, Zhuangzi used many literary techniques engaging both Laozi the person and Laozi's ideas to develop and adapt a related cosmology, politics, and life philosophy (ibid., pp. 81–88). The result was that "[Zhuangzi] unleashed the doctrines of Laozi incisively at many points . . . exceeding Laozi." From Chen's perspective, Zhuangzi's *Laoxue* stayed close to its origins, while expanding and expressing the ideas in new ways.

Hanfeizi's *Laoxue* manifested quite differently, though more explicitly in his "Jie Lao" 解老 and "Yu Lao" 喻老 chapters. Chen asserts that Hanfeizi did not just simply build on Laozi's ideas but, due to various historical and environmental factors, instead employed them in a cruel fashion "contrary to Laozi's compassion." Chen explains, "In regard to Hanfeizi's *Laoxue*, although he was certainly able to realize its essence, he was born at the end of the Warring States . . . He observed that the survival of a state completely relies on

power” (1928, p. 92). Hanfeizi’s *Laoxue* was a product of its time, a new theory that both emerged from and in opposition to the *Laozi*.

These two contrasting approaches, one developing Laozi’s philosophy and one contorting it, are both called *Laoxue*. Chen clarifies this possible contradiction by saying:

Concerning Laozi’s theories, the two thinkers Zhuangzi and Hanfeizi each upholds a general understanding of one extreme. Thus, they both attack benevolence and righteousness. Zhuangzi only desires to achieve doing nothing, while Hanfeizi only desires to achieve [the state of having] nothing that he will not do. Both abandon sageliness and discard wisdom. (ibid., p. 117)

Chen’s work inaugurates a more developed concept of *Laoxue* that does not merely signify the “doctrines of Laozi,” “the study of the *Laozi*,” or “knowledge of the *Laozi*” but relates to the historical development of and engagement with the person Laozi and his doctrines by later thinkers.

Following two similar works by Chen Zhu and Liu Qixuan 劉其宣 in the early 1930s,² few mentions of *Laoxue* appeared during the mid-twentieth century, with the main exception being Wang Ming’s 王明 1948 *Laozi Heshanggong zhangju kao* 老子河上公章句考 (An Examination of *Heshanggong’s Commentary on the Laozi*). Wang describes the early *Laozi* commentarial tradition by explaining, “From the beginning the commentaries each followed the prevailing trend of their age, transmitting the words of one school” (Wang 1948, p. 1). With this in mind, he proposes that “three phases of *Laoxue*” (*Laoxue sanbian* 老學三變) occurred during the Two Han dynasties and the Three Kingdoms and employs this framework to place *Heshanggong* in the Eastern Han cultural context. Wang’s use of *Laoxue* comes closer to its contemporary sense, as a shorthand for the transformation of the “doctrine of Laozi” by commentarial authors. Wang Ming’s work was a rare engagement with *Laoxue* in this period, and it took almost forty years for *Laoxue* to reenter academic discussion.

2.2. Recent Conceptions of *Laoxue*

The second period of *Laoxue* research started in the late 1980s and early 1990s and continues into the present. With this resurgence, *Laoxue* became further developed and focused. It started with simple articulations such as Zhang Yunyi’s 张允熠 discussion of the place of *Laoxue* (meaning Laozi’s doctrine) in Chinese history (Zhang 1985) and Zhang Zhiyan’s 张智彦 examination of the original *Laoxue* (Zhang 1987). Zhang Zhiyan especially stresses the benefits of using the term *Laoxue* instead of the more common *Daojia* 道家 (Daoism) by saying, “Actually, *Daojia* is a name that emerges in the Western Han dynasty, and its meaning is much broader than *Laoxue*. When one researches the thought of Laozi the person and *Laozi* the book, calling it *Laoxue* seems more precise” (1987, p. 36). Zhang is basically proposing *Laoxue* as a term for what some in English call “Laoism” (See Graham 1990, pp. 118, 124; LaFargue 1992). Both Zhang Yunyi’s and Zhang Zhiyan’s visions of *Laoxue* remain more limited than Yang Shuda’s, Chen Zhu’s, or Wang Ming’s, as the earlier scholars imagine *Laoxue* relating to later transformations of or engagements with the doctrines of Laozi instead of simply an original philosophy.

In the mid-1980s, one other study by Qing Xitai 卿希泰 and Zhan Shichuang 詹石窗³ engaged *Laoxue* in a fashion that presaged important developments in the 1990s when a group of scholars including Zhu Bokun 朱伯崑, Tang Yijie 汤一介, Zhong Zhaopeng 钟肇鹏, and Xiong Tiejie 熊铁基 started developing the topic at conferences (Liu 2015, p. 126). In Qing’s and Zhan’s article, they discuss the *Laoxue* of the priest Li Daochun 李道纯 (fl. 1280–1290), portraying it as a meaningful component of religious Daoist philosophy that emerged from his interpretation of the *Laozi*. In addition, they mention the *Laoxue* of commentaries such as Bai Yuchan’s 白玉蟾 *Daode baozhang* 道德寶章 (Precious Chapters on Dao and De) (Qing and Zhan 1986, pp. 111–112). Throughout the article, they never define *Laoxue*, which they place in scare quotes, but one can surmise their vague sense of *Laoxue* extends beyond *xueshuo* (doctrine) towards the broader sense of *xuepai* (tradition).

A clearer articulation of *Laoxue*, closer to the form and meaning commonly seen today, finally comes from Zhu Bokun. In his 1993 article “Chongxin pinggu *Laoxue*” 重新评估老学 (Reevaluating *Laoxue*), he pointedly redefines the term:

If we can say that historical research on the doctrine of Confucius is called *Ruxue* 儒學, then we similarly have reason to say that historical research on the doctrine of Laozi can be called *Laoxue*. As with the transmission of the Confucian *jingxue* 經學 (exegetics of the classics), [*Laoxue*] has already become a form of specialized knowledge (*xuewen*) and an independent field of study (*xueke*). The commentaries and analyses of historical scholars concerning the *Laozi* each reveal characteristics of their historical periods. They reflect [both] how the people of their age understood Laozi and the spiritual outlook of that age. (Zhu 1993, p. 16)

By situating *Laoxue* as equivalent to *Ruxue* and *jingxue*, Zhu accomplishes two goals. First, he elevates *Laoxue* to equal its Confucian equivalent as a core Chinese tradition of research. Second, he confirms it as both *xuewen* (knowledge) and *xueke* (a field of study). Together these two moves present a valuable vision of *Laoxue*.

Zhu elsewhere articulates the significance of studying *Laoxue*, here understood as the inclusive corpus of commentaries on the *Laozi*:

There are two reasons to summarize [historical interpretations]. The first is to identify the historical and logical development process of *Laoxue* so that we can understand the historical status of *Laoxue* and its impact on Chinese culture. The second is to assist in understanding the original thought of the *Laozi*. By clearing away the later interpretations of Laozi, we can correct its form and purify its origins. In conclusion, we cannot solely study Laozi or take Laozi’s book to study Laozi. We should position Laozi’s thought within the historical process of its formation and development to understand Laozi’s value. Even if later commentaries do not accord with Laozi’s original meaning, we should not reject them because they have their own value in that they reflect different periods in the development of *Laoxue*. (Zhu 1993, p. 16)

Both of Zhu’s points are valid, though the first especially deserves praise. Too often scholars seek the essence of Chinese culture in classics such as the *Laozi*, believing that to understand the original meaning of such a work will unlock its mysteries. Aside from the immense challenge of reaching the true historical object, after peeling away the layers of interpretation as Zhu suggests, any supposed original meaning tells us little about the actual impact a classic has made. To understand the *Laozi* and its significance in Chinese culture, one must study how the classic has been understood and reimagined throughout its history. And to be clear, the history of *Laozi* exegesis reveals interpretations far beyond any narrow meaning the text might have had in the pre-Qin period.

In the conclusion to his article, Zhu expresses his hope that someone will write the history of *Laoxue*, it being at that time a major lacuna in contrast to the well-studied history of *Ruxue* 儒學 (Zhu 1993, pp. 16–17). Just two years later, Zhu’s wish was fulfilled when *Zhongguo Laoxue shi* 中国老学史 (The History of Chinese *Laoxue*) was published. That project, headed by Xiong Tieji 熊德基 and supported by Lianghuai 马良怀 and Liu Shaojun 刘韶军, can be credited with formally establishing the current field of *Laoxue* studies that has grown in the last few decades.

At various points in that work, Xiong provides different glimpses of his multifaceted definition of *Laoxue*. In the intro, he notes the lack of “a monograph describing the history of the development of Laozi’s doctrine (*xueshuo*)” (Xiong et al. 1995, p. 1), implying that this is the gap the book will fill. He further describes his topic, saying: “People have investigated, researched, written commentaries, and elucidated [the *Laozi*] from different perspectives. In this way, they have formed a vast and long-lasting academic school (*liupai*), and simultaneously have created part of the history of Laozi’s doctrine (*xueshuo*)” (ibid.). The start of chapter two “The Early Beginnings of *Laoxue*” also includes the statement, “Research conducted on the *Laozi* first began during the Warring States” (ibid., p. 63). This

suggests that *Laoxue* is equivalent to research on the *Laozi*. Lastly, in the “Conclusion,” Xiong presents the term more broadly, “*Laoxue* is a thought system (*sixiang tixi* 思想體系) built on the foundation of Laozi’s thought. Its content is very rich, including views on topics such as philosophy, politics, human life, nature, and society” (ibid., p. 518). To summarize, Xiong’s *Laoxue* is a doctrine, the study of that doctrine, a school of thought based on the study of that doctrine, and the resulting wide-ranging system of thought.

Though this polysemous understanding might leave some uncertainty about the concrete meaning of *Laoxue*, the content of the book affirms *Laoxue* as the totality of commentaries on the *Laozi*. It is an inclusive vision that does not favor one meaning for the classic. To support this idea of a pluralistic *Laozi* tradition, Xiong cites the Daoist priest Du Daojian 杜道堅 (1237–1318):

The Way descends into each age and varies with the times. Commentators mostly follow what is fashionable in their era with each master teaching from their own perspective. Thus, the Han dynasty commentators produced the Han *Laozi*, the Jin dynasty commentators produced the Jin *Laozi*, and the Tang and Song dynasty commentators produced the Tang *Laozi* and Song *Laozi*.

道與世降，時有不同，注者多隨時代所尚，各子其成心而師之。故漢人注者為漢老子，晉人注者為晉老子，唐人宋人注者為唐老子宋老子。(Xiong et al. 1995, p. 1)⁴

This quote depicts the fundamental view of *Laoxue*. Moreover, it confirms that the Chinese traditionally celebrated the plurality of *Laozi*’s meaning in contrast to contemporary fixations on the true “original.” Even for a Daoist devotee such as Du Daojian, the *Laozi* does not exist in eternal unchanging perfection but adapts to the ever-transforming needs of the people. As a result, no singular “authentic” Chinese *Laozi* exists.

The History of Chinese Laoxue represents the proper emergence of *Laoxue* as a topic of study in contemporary Chinese scholarship, and the term *Laoxue* has become common in academic usage. It is even to where Xiong’s student Liu Gusheng 刘固盛 could write a reflection on the state of the field in 2015. In his “Zhongguo Laoxue yanjiu de huigu yu zhanwang” 中国老学研究的回顾与展望 (Reflections on the Past and Future of Chinese *Laoxue* Research), Liu offers one of the clearest definitions of the term: “In this article, what we mean by *Laoxue* is the knowledge (*xuewen*) formed by historical persons’ interpretations and developments of the *Laozi*” (2015, p. 126). For Liu, *Laoxue* is a scholarly object, a historically constructed body of knowledge that emerges from different ways of interpreting the *Laozi*. He further explains that “*Laoxue* concerns all major academic disciplines, such as philosophy, history, literature, and religious studies. Not only does it form an extremely complex and broad academic system, but it also is closely related to the history of Chinese culture and Chinese thought” (ibid., p. 126).

The development of the term *Laoxue* reveals both its potential range of meaning and its current core definition as the totality of traditional *Laozi* interpretations. It reminds us that the historical usages and reconceptualizations of a text such as the *Laozi* are at least as worthy of attention as the original moment of the text’s emergence. Due to this crucial perspective, actually rooted in Chinese tradition, *Laoxue* deserves to be a respected term and topic of study among English-language scholars of Chinese philosophy and intellectual history.

2.3. Translating *Laoxue* as *Laozegetics*

The term *Laoxue* has yet to be popularized in English-language scholarship. A main impediment to this development is the challenge of its translation. The following reflects on various possibilities before arguing for the neologism “*Laozegetics*.”

The greatest obstacle to translating *Laoxue* again emerges from the uncertain polysemy of *xue* 學, as its various interpretations inform possible translations. First, I might consider it equivalent to “ism” that turns *Laoxue* into “*Laoism*,” a concept referenced above as an equivalent for Zhang Zhiyan’s sense of *Laoxue*. However, Zhang’s extremely narrow

definition makes *Laoxue* merely equivalent to a term such as Kantianism, as the philosophy of Laozi (*zhexue* or *xueshuo*) or the philosophical school of Laozi (*xuepai*). Neither of these senses are appropriate to the current Chinese usages of *Laoxue*. Second, “Laoology” or just “Laozi Studies,” as the field of study (*xueke*) concerning Laozi, the *Laozi*, and its philosophy are similarly unsuitable.⁵ *Laoxue* is primarily an object of study and not an activity or field, and this object concerns the development and interpretation of the text and philosophy instead of the *Laozi* text itself. These two possible translations are furthermore ambiguous because as one researches the history or philosophy of *Laoxue*, it would be unclear to say that one studies Laoology or Laozi Studies, when one actually studies the research of others on that topic. Lastly, Alan Chan suggests translating the compound as “Laozi learning,” which implies taking *xue* as *xuewen* (學問). This has the advantage of allowing for the historical development of the interpretive tradition, a point Chan makes himself (Chan 1998, pp. 105–106), but it remains an odd way to use “learning” in English. No one would ever call the teachings and traditions of other classics “learning.” It would be strange to have *Republic* learning, *City of God* learning, or *Phenomenology of Spirit* learning.

I propose translating *Laoxue* with the portmanteau “Laozegetics,” thereby highlighting the unique and valuable aspect of *Laoxue* as a topic for research.⁶ Unlike the vague “Laoology” or “Laozi Studies,” “Laozegetics” specifies its content directly: the exegesis or even eisegesis of the *Laozi*. The construction of this term conveniently obscures the Greek prefixes of these two opposites—“ex-” (out of) or “eis-” (into)—as Laozegetics incorporates these two contrasting hermeneutics or what Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–1193) and modern Chinese scholars call *liujing zhu wo, wo zhu liujing* 六經注我, 我注六經 (the six classics explain my [thoughts] and I explain the six classics). Translating *Laoxue* as “Laozegetics” means the term cannot be reduced to the doctrine (*xueshuo*) of the *Laozi* but must indicate both a broad ranging tradition of interpretation and a topic of research that appreciates the text as the locus of a living and metamorphosing philosophy.

Another value to the “Laozegetics” translation relates to how it shifts focus away from questions of Laozi the person, which sometimes can be implied in older usages of the original Chinese or in other possible translations. One great benefit of Laozegetics research as an approach is that the unresolvable issues of the text’s author or its earliest content and meaning can be bracketed in favor of the more attainable subject of how the text—once it was formed or even canonized—was read and thus how it impacted individuals, communities, and cultures.

One final point about my term Laozegetics. Though generally a topic of study, I suggest one can also *do* Laozegetics, as the practice of interpreting the *Laozi* text.⁷ This, in fact, includes the mainstream historical-critical approach to reading the *Laozi*. However, I especially encourage researching Laozegetics, studying how others interpret the *Laozi*. This meta-level perspective, focused not on the text but on interpretations of the text, reminds us that the philological or historical methods so often employed to do Laozegetics are both one among many hermeneutics that each has its own context. They lack the ultimate value they claim in the face of the Laozegetics phenomenon that comprises two thousand years of diverse exegesis. Zhu Bokun explains that Laozegetics (*Laoxue*) helps reveal the historical transformations of the *Laozi* and thus enables us to peel away received biases to aim for the original. I agree with this logic in principle, except that this process should not simply generate self-reflection in the researcher but also a deeper contemplation on why the historically informed philologist cannot claim ultimate meaning for the text. Philology is but one way of extracting meaning, being just a small part of the richness that is Laozegetics.

3. Modern Research on Traditional Laozegetics?

Having traced the Chinese usage of *Laoxue* and argued for its translation as Laozegetics, it is beneficial to look closer at previous research on this topic. This work on “Traditional Laozegetics,” a more specific term useful to differentiate “Laozegetics” from “Global Laozegetics,” is not solely Chinese, as it also includes all Korean and Japanese commentaries

written in classical Chinese on the *Laozi*. According to Ding Wei’s 丁巍 calculations, there are 2185 historical Chinese works, 430 in Japanese, and 91 in Korean, with many within the latter two collections being in classical Chinese (Ding 2004). Furthermore, I must stress this Traditional Laozegetics is not exclusively Daoist but incorporates many different East Asian philosophical and religious perspectives—including the three teachings and nine schools—that have engaged the *Laozi* in dialogue. Traditional Laozegetics represents the totality of all types of readings of the *Laozi*, and so no one “native” classical Chinese or East Asian reading exists.

3.1. Traditional Laozegetics Research in Chinese

The study of Traditional Laozegetics has grown during the last few decades, though the focus on the original text continues to vastly overshadow it. In China, Traditional Laozegetics research’s expansion especially followed the publication of Xiong’s *The History of Chinese Laoxue*. Xiong further advanced this trend by co-editing the *Laozi jicheng* 老子集成 (Complete Collection of the *Laozi*) (Xiong and Chen 2011) in fifteen volumes, a massive work that essentially includes all preserved Chinese *Laozi* commentaries and is a precious resource for scholars of Laozegetics.

Many other Chinese researchers have contributed to developing Laozegetics as a topic. Particularly vital to this is Xiong’s student Liu Gusheng, who has written a voluminous quantity of articles on different commentaries, along with his *Daojiao Laoxue shi* 道教老学史 (A History of Religious Daoist Laozegetics) (Liu 2008), and his forthcoming five volume *Zhongguo Laoxue tongshi* 中国老学通史 (A Complete History of Chinese Laozegetics) (Liu 2022). One also encounters other important contributions, such as Yin Zhihua’s 尹志华 (Yin 2004) *Bei Song Laozi zhu yanjiu* 北宋老子注研究 (A Study of Northern Song *Laozi* Commentaries), and Liu Sihe’s 刘思禾 (Liu 2017) *Qingdai Laoxue shigao* 清代老学史稿 (A Preliminary History of Qing Dynasty Laozegetics).

At present, there are 256 articles in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database with *Laoxue* specifically mentioned as a topic. For example, consider the studies on Wang Fuzhi’s 王夫之 Laozegetics (Yang 2021) or on Lin Xiyi’s 林希逸 highly influential but under-researched commentary *Laozi Yanzhai kouyi* 老子齋口義 (Yanzhai’s Oral Explanations of the *Laozi*) (Zheng 2020). This topic now even has a dedicated periodical called *Zhonghua Laoxue* 中华老学 (Chinese Laozegetics) edited by Zhan Shichuang 詹石窗 and Xie Qingguo 谢清果.

To be clear, Chinese research on the topic that I term Laozegetics does not always adopt the language of *Laoxue*, as it has not become a universally accepted framework for research on traditional commentaries. If one includes all work done in Chinese on *Laozi* commentaries, the field becomes significantly larger. Unsurprisingly, Wang Bi’s 王弼 philosophy and *Laozi* commentary have been heavily studied (Wang 1996; Zhou 1998; Han 2001; Wang 2002; Jiang 2012). However, there are likewise many rarer topics that have received attention. For example, Satō Rentarō 佐藤鍊太郎 has compared Song Confucian Su Zhe’s 蘇轍 commentary and that by the Ming iconoclast Li Zhi 李贽 (Satō 2002), Huang Xi 黄熹 has studied the relationship between Dao 道 and *xing* 性 (nature) in Jiao Hong’s 焦竑 *Laoziyi* 老子翼 (*Laozi*’s Wings) (Huang 2011), Chiang Shu-Chun’s 江淑君 has examined the art of war commentary by the Tang dynasty general Wang Zhen 王真 (Chiang 2015), and Han Huanzhong 韩焕忠 has analyzed a Yuan dynasty commentary by Buddhist Mengshan Deyi 蒙山德異 (Han 2017). Lastly, I must note a few rare investigations classifiable as research on Traditional Laozegetics from the greater Sinographic Sphere: a study on Yulguk’s Korean Confucian commentary (Kim 1999), a short summary on the Japanese reception of the *Laozi* (Wang 2019), and a detailed analysis of the popularization of Lin Xiyi’s commentary in Japan (Wang 2000). Whether or not employing the language of *Laoxue*, related research in Chinese has become fairly developed. Nonetheless, many commentaries still lack preliminary studies let alone in-depth investigations.

3.2. Traditional Laozegetics Research in English

Scholars outside of China engage the contents of Laozegetics (*Laoxue*), i.e., traditional *Laozi* commentaries, without the use of the term itself. Yet, as in China, such research is growing. The most widely discussed commentary remains that of Wang Bi. It has been translated or been the topic of major studies multiple times (Lin 1977; Rump 1979; Chan 1991; Lynn 1999; Wagner 2000, 2003). *Heshanggong zhangju* 河上公章句 is another historically significant commentary that has begun to gain more attention (Erkes 1958; Chan 1991; Tadd 2013, 2018, 2019; Michael 2022).

Beyond these two, a range of other rarer interpretations have also been studied. For example, there are two works on Hanfeizi's earliest preserved commentaries "Jie Lao" 解老 (Explaining *Laozi*) and "Yu Lao" 喻老 (Illustrating *Laozi*) (Queen 2013; Di Fiori 2018). Yan Zun's 嚴遵 Han dynasty *Laozi zhigui* 老子指歸 (The Essential Meaning of the *Laozi*) (Vertoorn 1988; Chan 1998) and Zhong Hui's 鍾會 Wei dynasty commentary (Chan 2003) both have preliminary studies. Commentaries emerging from religious or organized Daoism are also topics of interest, including the *Xiang'er* 想爾 (Bokenkamp 1997; Puett 2004), those by Tang dynasty Chongxuan experts Cheng Xuanying and Li Rong 李榮 (Assandri 2019, 2021), and even those that reveal the text as a manual for inner alchemy (Pregadio 2018). Chinese Buddhist commentaries have received some attention with both a general review (Wagner 1999) and a couple special investigations of the wonderful commentary by Ming dynasty monk Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 (Hsu 1975; Yen 2004). Even general Wang Zhen's 王真 commentary has been translated and analyzed (Sawyer 2000). Lastly, Isabelle Robinet once summarized multiple *Laozi* commentaries in a preliminary account of the whole phenomenon (Robinet 1999).⁸

Traditional Laozegetics includes all *Laozi* commentaries and interpretations written in classical Chinese, and English-language scholarship has also engaged a smattering of works from the greater Sinographic Sphere. For example, there are a few articles on Korean Confucian readings of the classic (Kim 2007; Glomb 2016; Glomb 2020), while Mark Teeuwen has written a fascinating piece on how the *Laozi* and its commentaries were repurposed to help construct Japanese Shinto as a unique religion (Teeuwen 2015). One might even include Thomas Cleary's popular translation of Japanese Zen master Takuan Sōhō's 澤庵宗彭 (1573–1646) commentary *Rōshi kōwa* 老子講話 (Discourse on the *Laozi*) within this category of Traditional Laozegetics research (Cleary 2011).

While the increase attention on Traditional Laozegetics in both Chinese and English is promising, there remains a vast catalogue of unstudied and understudied commentaries. Scholars continue to prefer debating the pre-Qin context of the *Laozi* rather than the life of the classic that came after. Regardless of what remains to be researched, I can unequivocally state that within Traditional Laozegetics a great range of native Chinese or East Asian readings of the *Laozi* exists. There is no true or correct understanding of the classic because the varied traditions, even including "foreign" Buddhism, of each interpreter and commentator inevitably inform their encounter with the classic.

4. Laozegetics Globalized

Having described the history of the topic *Laoxue*, its translation as Laozegetics, and its contemporary study, let us now turn to the core of this paper—Global Laozegetics. The vision of Global Laozegetics emerges from the reality that Chinese or Traditional Laozegetics is fundamentally pluralistic, including countless voices regardless of their varied philosophical or religious backgrounds. What does it mean for Laozegetics to become global? It expands an already inclusive concept to incorporate the proliferation of all new interpretations of the *Laozi* as it has traversed the globe and encountered a wide array of non-Chinese traditions and languages.

4.1. The Global Laozegetics Perspective

Global Laozegetics assumes a basic continuity between traditional Chinese-language *Laozi* commentaries and the 2051 *Laozi* translations in 97 languages (author's count. For

more on this, see Tadd 2022). This view rests on the argument that interpretation undergirds all such translations, and that these translations continue the age-old phenomenon of reimagining the *Laozi* in countless ways regardless of their presentation in different languages. This enables Global Laozegetics to encompass both Chinese-language commentaries and non-Chinese-language translations within a single historical and exegetical (or eisegetical) framework. Its perspective further rejects the idolization of the “original meaning” of the text, reframing the significance of the translated forms of the classic by elevating them from flawed approximations to valued representatives in the grand tradition of Laozegetics.

Making this shift requires acknowledging the active role of the translators, thereby identifying them as a type of commentator. Consider how the early French sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat translates the word Dao 道 as “*la raison*” to represent his assumption that Dao is comparable to the mind of God (Abel-Rémusat 1823, p. 23), or how Roger Ames and David Hall’s translation of Dao as “Way-making” explicitly conveys their philosophical stance that prioritizes process over static ontology (Ames and Hall 2003, pp. 57–59). In both cases, one might critique these translations as projections of Catholic theology or process philosophy onto Chinese thought, and that may be a debate worth having, but from the perspective of Global Laozegetics the conspicuousness of interpretation in these translations simply confirms that these distinctive and thoughtful readings of the classic deserve study as unique creations.

While Traditional Laozegetics includes *Laozi* from different dynasties or sinographic traditions, Global Laozegetics extends its inclusive frame across any linguistic, cultural, philosophical, and religious boundaries. As such, it incorporates a large range of transformations that at least include the Catholic *Laozi* (Wieger 1906), the Protestant *Laozi* (Breed 2014), the Islamic *Laozi* (Nasr and Izutsu 2021), the Jewish *Laozi* (Buber 1942), the Buddhist *Laozi* (Hutanuwat 2005), the Hindu *Laozi* (Aggarwal 2018), the Theosophical *Laozi* (Ervast 1925), the mystical *Laozi* (Mitchell 1988), the naturalist *Laozi* (Chan 1963), the feminist *Laozi* (Anderson 2021), the anarchist *Laozi* (Yamaga 1962), the communist *Laozi* (Ân 1950), the fascist *Laozi* (Evola 1923), and the liberalist *Laozi* (Chung 2013). Each *Laozi* interpreted and translated in light of these different “foreign” viewpoints belongs to the same phenomenon as the diverse commentaries in the Chinese tradition. Furthermore, this very interaction between the text and this broad spectrum of philosophies is what produces the global reality of Laozegetics.

4.2. Chinese-Language Research on the International Side of Global Laozegetics

The concept of Global Laozegetics (*Quanjü Laoxue* 全球老學) has not been widely accepted in China. However, as with the study of *Laozi* commentaries, research on its non-Chinese-language side—*Laozi* translations—has been increasing. In fact, this topic has already developed into an academic cottage industry. The following will offer a simple overview of these works so to consider the benefits of reconceptualizing them within the framework of Global Laozegetics.

In Chinese, there already are over a thousand articles with *Daodejing* or *Laozi* and *fanyi* 翻译 (translation) in the title. While many of these merely summarize certain translations and add little to the discussion, some studies are quite valuable. Especially noteworthy are major works on English *Laozi* translations, such as the pioneering 2008 monograph *Daodejing zai yingyuji: Wenben xinglü yu shijie xiangxiang* 《道德经》在英语界：文本行旅与世界想象 (The *Daodejing* in the Anglophone World: A Traveling Text and World Imagination) by Xin Hongjuan 辛红娟 (Xin 2008). Yang Yuying 杨玉英 (Yang 2013), Wu Xuemeng 吴雪萌 (Wu 2016), and Zhang Yuan 章媛 (Zhang 2021b) similarly provide broad discussions of the English *Laozi*. There are many other more focused investigations as well, such as Yao Dadui’s 姚达兑 study and transcription of the earliest English *Laozi* that he discovered in the Yale University Library (Yao 2016) or Cai Juemin’s 蔡觉敏 work on the relationship of popular translations by Stephen Mitchell and Wayne Dyer to American Daoism (Cai and Qin 2012; Cai Juemin 2014).

Research on non-English translations exists as well, such as the monograph on Thai translations by Chen Li 陈利 (Chen 2021) or articles on topics such as the Tang dynasty Sanskrit translation (Yang 2011), Latin missionary translations (Xiao 2018), early French translations (Yao and Chen 2018), early German translations (Tang 2019), and Spanish translations (Zhao 2020). Due to the growing popularity of the topic, China East Normal University initiated a 1.5-million-dollar study of the *Laozi* in the world, and Professor Deng Lianhe 邓联合 of Sun Yat-sen University (Zhuhai) is soon to inaugurate a new journal called *Guoji Laoxue* 国际老学 (International Laozegetics) that specializes in *Laozi* translations and their international reception. Clearly, the future for this subject in China is bright.

4.3. English-Language Research on the International Side of Global Laozegetics

English-language scholarship on *Laozi* translations is also on the rise. This trend partially originated with criticisms of how translations diverge from the “real” original *Laozi*, a view promoted by scholars such as Russell Kirkland in his broad critique of Western “imagined” Daoism (Kirkland 1997) or Paul Goldin in his essay “Those Who Don’t Know Speak” that specifically maligns amateur *Laozi* translations (Goldin 2002). However, these positions have become much less representative as the topic has developed and intersected fields such as translation studies, history of sinology, transcultural philosophy, religious studies, and world literature.

For example, there are general studies concerning English translations, such as Julia M. Hardy’s classic essay on Western readings of the text (Hardy 1998), Hsiu-Chen Chang’s analysis of the topic from the perspective of comparative philosophy (Chang 1998), Owen Aldridge’s overview of American *Laozi* translations (Aldridge 1994), Damian J. Bebell’s and Shannon M. Fera’s comparative study of different translations (Bebell and Fera 2000), and Lucas Carmichael’s dissertation on the *Laozi* as American scripture (Carmichael 2017). Overviews concerning the reception or translation tactics of the *Laozi* in other languages similarly exist, for example, Florian C. Reiter’s discussion of the text in Germany (Reiter 1996), or Pauw Budianto’s look at translations in Indonesian (Budianto 2019).

Scholars also have investigated single translations. The earliest Latin translation has both been approached as part of missionary history (Von Collani 2015) and as an example for translation studies (Wei 2018). Two Czech translations have also merited individual articles: Marián Gálik analyzed Berta Krebsová’s translation (Gálik 1994), and Lomová Olga addressed that by Rudolf Dvořák (Olga 2018). Admittedly, this type of scholarship remains limited.

More popular than directly analyzing translations is the examination of the *Laozi*’s impact on literary and philosophical greats. We have studies on the historical and artistic connections between *Laozi* and Tennyson (Benton 1962), Kafka (Zhang 2021a), and Benjamin (Hashimoto 2016), as well as analysis of Tolstoy’s translation and philosophical uses of the Daoist classic (Chu 2021). Kwok-Kui Wong has considered Hegel’s (Wong 2011) and Schelling’s (Wong 2017) encounters with the *Laozi*. Additionally, much has been written on Heidegger’s connection to Daoism, with Lin Ma providing a detailed account of Heidegger’s translation of the *Laozi* (Ma 2006). English-language scholars are clearly discovering the historical and philosophical value of the *Laozi* in translation, yet I argue that the understanding of the impact and significance of this phenomenon remains limited without a broader view.

4.4. Benefits of the Global Laozegetics Perspective

As confirmed above, scholarship on both *Laozi* commentaries and translations already exists in Chinese and English. So why should we frame these as one topic called Global Laozegetics? What does this add to our research? The key value of Global Laozegetics lies in revealing connections only visible when the entire phenomenon of *Laozi* interpretation and reception is viewed together.

For example, previous engagements with the topic of *Laozi* translations have focused on only one or two languages, especially English or German, resulting in a limited com-

prehension of how these translations may have inspired retranslations and thus readers in other languages such as Persian or Thai. Likewise, without a detailed foundation in Chinese commentaries—a topic still understudied—one cannot unpack where certain modern readings emerge. Situating Global Laozegetics as a single phenomenon also underscores the plurality of the *Laozi* throughout its entire history and calls us to explore the many intricate interconnections between different commentaries and translations. If one truly wishes to understand the *Laozi*'s place in world history or in the history of philosophy, one must trace which conceptions of the text have been transmitted by whom and to whom.

The links unearthed by viewing all forms of Global Laozegetics together are not minor but often form broad networks of what I call interpretive lineages. These are sometimes heavily ideological, and they can cross both linguistic and cultural boundaries. My notion of interpretive lineages recognizes that although every commentary or translation epitomizes a unique exegetical stance, many draw inspiration from others' commentaries or translations (Tadd 2022, pp. 99–108). Thus, each Chinese or Non-Chinese interpretation forms a node within one or more lineage transmitting particular conceptions of the text.

The Global Laozegetics framework further assists in shifting from an essentialized East-West view to a nuanced global one. This broader vantage point is crucial for understanding the elaborate networks of influence between different types of *Laozi* commentaries and translations. The *Laozi* did not just travel in a single direction from a single origin. For example, consider Mohammad Tabatabai's Persian retranslation of Hans-Georg Moeller's English (Tabatabai 2015), Hiroshi Aramata's 荒俣宏 Japanese retranslation of Marce de Smedt's French (Hiroshi 1996), Serge Mairet's French retranslation of Tam C. Gibb's English rendering of the famous Taiji master Cheng Man-ch'ing's 鄭曼青 *Laozi yizhi jie* 老子易知解 (*Laozi* is Easy to Understand) (Mairet 1998), Alfredo Cadonna's Italian translation of Bai Yuchan's 白玉蟾 commentary (Cadonna 2001), Alejandro Pareja Rodríguez's Spanish (Rodríguez 2000) and Zdzisław Płoski's Polish (Płoski 2009) retranslations of Ralph D. Sawyer's English rendition of general Wang Zhen's "art of war" commentary, or Wang Qiang's 王强 and Liu Sa's 刘飒 Chinese back-translation of Wayne W. Dyer's English self-help *Laozi* (Wang and Liu 2009). These are just a few cases among hundreds that particularly highlight the unexpected travels of various *Laozi* interpretations.

The study of Global Laozegetics affirms the inherent plurality of the *Laozi* in the world, and this comprehensive perspective enables a full appreciation of the way the text's interpretations and translations have spread and interacted.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, the author has explored the history and usage of the term *Laouxue*, argued for its translation as Laozegetics, expanded the concept to include *Laozi* in all languages, given an overview of Chinese and English scholarship on commentaries and translations, and explained the significance of the inclusive topic Global Laozegetics.

The coining of "Global Laozegetics" aims to encourage more expansive scholarship on the *Laozi* text by asserting the value of its commentaries and translations. This both results from engaging *Laouxue* studies in China and broadly critiquing the limits of the dominant hermeneutic that searches for the *Laozi*'s "original" text and its "original" meaning. Identifying the diversity and impact of its commentators and translators reveals the *Laozi* as a pluralistic and globalized nexus of philosophical debate instead of being merely a record of pre-Qin ideas. Realizing the full history and development of this Chinese classic expands our understanding of what Chinese philosophy encompasses, what Daoism encompasses, and what the philosophy of the *Laozi* encompasses, thereby demonstrating how the text becomes unbound to time, place, language, or culture, belonging instead to a complex network of interpretations that span the globe.

Lastly, the Global Laozegetics framework does not just offer a broad perspective on the phenomenon of the *Laozi* in the world. It also functions as a foundation for building an inclusive and collaborative community of scholars who study all the manifestations of the

text around the world. This is not merely an abstract ideal, as the author is establishing a Global Laozegetics research center this fall at Nankai University to help fulfill this aim.

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Notes

- ¹ Yang includes a few other relevant notes, but none of them resolve this ambiguity (Yang [1924] 1991, pp. 106, 111, 112).
- ² Chen Zhu's work on Laozi and Zhuangzi (Chen 1931) repeats his sense of *Laoxue*, while Liu Qixuan uses it to simply mean *Laozi xueshu* 老子學說 (Laozi's doctrine) (Liu 1934).
- ³ Note that in this article Zhan Shichuang's name is written with an older simplified form: 占石窗.
- ⁴ For this quote's original context, see *Xuanjing yuanzhi fahui* 玄經原旨發揮 DZ 703, 12:773a.
- ⁵ Thomas Michael translates *Laoxue* as "Laozi Studies" and understands it as "the study of the social, political, philosophical, and religious history of the *Daodejing*" (2022, p. 126). This interpretation and translation emphasize the *xue* (field of study) meaning of the term; however, that is not suitable for the most popular usage in China or the author's personal definition, as what he describes would more accurately be called *Laoxue* Studies or *Laozi* Studies Studies.
- ⁶ One might wonder why I do not use "Laozietics" instead to more clearly preserve the title *Laozi*. This choice results from etymological concerns. Exegetics and eisegetics both have the Greek root ἡγήομαι (*hēgómāi*) "to guide," as one either guides meaning out of (ex-) or into (eis-) a text. Therefore, breaking the word at "getics" contradicts logic. Another option, Laozietics, is also just too unwieldy.
- ⁷ In this regard my understanding diverges from Liu Gusheng. He, as mentioned above, depicts *Laoxue* as only including historical interpretations, implying that it precludes contemporary efforts.
- ⁸ Robinet also published, in French, the most comprehensive discussion of *Laozi* commentaries in a European language (Robinet 1977).

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Reception History and Early Chinese Classics

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Abstract: Thus far, the study of early China and its texts is dominated by originalist approaches that try to excavate the authentic meaning of the classics. In this article, I promote the idea that a shift in focus from the intentions of the authors to the readers' concrete responses could meaningfully accompany our research on the classics' "original" meaning. Beyond merely illuminating the cultural and intellectual environments in which the various receptions were produced, such research on the classics' myriad interpretations could also serve as a postcolonial catalyst, helping us identify field-specific trends and reading strategies that, often unnoticed, impact our understandings of early Chinese texts. In other words, reception history would not only give us insights into the history of early Chinese classics and the variegated worlds they inhabited. It would also help us illuminate and reflect upon the ways we researchers shape and preconfigure our visions of premodern China and its texts.

Keywords: classics; reader response theory; reception history; *Laozi*; *Daode jing*; *Zhuangzi*; Daoism; originalism; philology; commentary

1. Introduction

The *Laozi* 老子 or *Classic of the Way and Virtue* (*Daode jing* 道德經) is one of very few premodern texts in world history that have garnered a truly global audience. As reflected in this Special Issue, it played a significant role throughout imperial China, peaking in the Tang 唐 (618–907) when Emperor Gaozu 高祖 (r. 618–626) claimed Laozi 老子, sometimes also called Lao Dan 老聃, to be the ancestor of the imperial Li 李 clan (Assandri 2022, p. 3). Moreover, the *Laozi* spread beyond the Middle Kingdoms (*zhongguo* 中國) due to its myriad translations resulting from an increasingly globalized world over the last few centuries (Tadd 2022a). In other words, it is a text with an impressive reception history. When one looks at the contributions in this Special Issue, one could thusly get the impression that Laozi studies or Laozegetics (*Lao xue* 老學) has been a thriving field in sinology. As Misha Tadd rightfully bemoaned, however, even though "scholarship on the *Laozi* is plentiful . . . mainstream research generally focuses on identifying the one 'correct' understanding of this work, with little recognition of its rich exegetical history" (Tadd 2022c, p. 1). Therefore, it is commendable to see this desideratum being addressed by a Special Issue, and its publication indubitably marks the beginning of a change in scholarly perspective on early Chinese classics like the *Laozi*.¹

Because of this paradigmatic shift in studying early Chinese classics, I decided to write a short, programmatic piece engaging with the project's theoretical side rather than contributing another analysis of a concrete reception of the *Laozi*. In this essay, I will demonstrate how the study of early China and its texts could benefit from utilizing methods developed in the field of reception history, or reader response theory as it is more commonly called in the United States. I suggest that exploring the various interpretations of the Chinese classics as enshrined in commentaries, translations, and artistic re-inventions could favorably accompany our research on their "original" meaning beyond merely illuminating the cultural and intellectual environments in which the various receptions were produced (Tadd 2022c, pp. 10–11). In fact, it could also help us critically investigate how Eurocentric frameworks often operate unknowingly in the shadows of our argumentations.

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I present this change of scholarly orientation in four steps. First, I provide a few examples of what I would term “originalist approaches” to the study of early Chinese classics; that is, scholarship whose focus lies in the excavation and retrieval of a text’s “authentic” meaning.² In a second step, I suggest that this orientation assumes a clear boundary between a text and its readings. I propose, however, that such an approach that reads the various commentaries as strictly separate, since their annotations inevitably color our understandings of the classics, is neither historically evident through all stages of premodern Chinese history nor is it necessarily the only useful method at our disposal. In a third step, I therefore recommend adding reception history to our methodological apparatus. To account for this change in orientation, I broaden the definition of “text” as utilized by originalist scholars and introduce Karel Kosík’s idea of “work.” Kosík suggests that no cultural object or work is inherently infused with meaning that their creator(s) or author(s) left behind for us to excavate. Rather, meaning is generated by the continuous interaction between a work and its various audiences. Following Kosík, I propose that a reception historical approach to the classics would not only allow us to shine light on the various interpretive layers and biographies of the texts we study.³ It would also enable us to gain a better understanding of our own positionality toward them. To substantiate this last claim, I paradigmatically showcase in the last part of the essay how reception history may provide valuable opportunities for self-reflection. By comparing the *Zhuangzi*’s 莊子 earliest reception with A. C. Graham’s (1919–1991) evaluation from the 1980s, which still influences current engagements with the proto-Daoist classic, I demonstrate that at least some of the text’s earliest readers—in my case Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–86 BCE) and the authors of the *Grand Scribe’s Records* (*Shi ji* 史記)—did not share Graham’s evaluation of Master Zhuang or Zhuangzi 莊子 (fl. 4th century BCE) as a philosopher uninterested in politics and its mere quotidian concerns.⁴ In other words, an evaluation of the *Zhuangzi*’s earliest explicit reception aside from the “All under Heaven” (“Tianxia” 天下) chapter reveals that Graham’s reading of the proto-Daoist classic as first and foremost a philosophical text is less obvious than often assumed. Hence, the shift in focus from author-centered to reader-response-centered engagements with the classics bears the potential to offer eye-opening readings that may induce fruitful self-reflections on the history of Chinese studies and its institutionalized reading strategies. So let me begin this journey by providing a brief personal anecdote about how distinct disciplines perceive and engage texts differently.

2. How We Learn to Read Texts: A Personal View on Interpretive Communities

As an undergraduate student at Humboldt University in Berlin during the early 2000s, I was privileged to study in two distinct fields of area studies: premodern Scandinavian literature and sinology. I genuinely enjoyed the distinct knowledge I acquired during my study and my stays in Taiwan and Iceland. Particularly the experiences I gained during the two study abroad trips transformed my life and put me on the path of pursuing an academic career outside of Germany. In hindsight, however, I would say another element of my undergraduate education unsuspectedly had a major impact on my intellectual outlook. I realized firsthand during this formative period of my life how distinct academic fields train their students differently. At that time, I was not yet aware of Stanley Fish’s work and his concept of interpretive communities that describes any scholar’s inevitable embeddedness in a field of practice, so I did not have the terminological and intellectual apparatus at hand to grasp fully what I encountered (Fish 2001, pp. 36–38). Nonetheless, I was already quite aware that my two fields, Scandinavian studies and sinology, asked very different questions toward the texts we were reading and, in fact, had very different standards of what would comprise analytical evidence.

This distinction that I sensed in the early years of my college experience manifested most clearly in the training I received in both disciplines. Scandinavian studies, for example, introduced me to a postmodern canon of literary theory of which the majority was published in the post-1960s. This tendency was not surprising since the Institute of Northern European Studies (*Nordeuropainstitut*) at Humboldt University was shaped by scholars

like Bernd Henningsen, Stefanie von Schnurbein, Lann Hornscheidt, Kirsten Wechsel or Stephan Michael Schröder, who all focused on gender and cultural studies. I still remember vividly a conversation in Kirsten Wechsel's seminar that erupted after I presented an intimate love poem called "Hair" ("Hár") by Guðrún Eva Mínervudóttir, from the book *On the Brink of Pure Joy: Poems for Hrafn* (*A brún alls fagnaðar: ljóð handa Hrafn*). The book contains two parts in which the two lovers Guðrún and Hrafn Jökulsson (1965–2022) wrote love poems to each other. In my presentation, I provided an author-focused reading of "Hár," arguing that it explicates Guðrún's attraction toward Hrafn's hair. My classmates attacked me for this interpretation, wondering why I was reading the poetic ego as the author and, more importantly, why I chose such an obvious, straightforward, and heteronormative piece for class discussion. In other words, I was critiqued for my approach to texts that emphasized an author's intent and a text's "original" meaning.

My experience in sinology was drastically different. The training in Chinese studies at Humboldt University's Department of Sinology, spearheaded by Florian Christian Reiter and Mathias Obert, focused almost exclusively on reconstructing the meaning of any given text at the time of its production. To achieve this goal, we received a very rigorous language training and were exposed to a few pragmatic aspects of philological analysis like the navigation of the imperially sponsored *Complete Library in Four Sections* (*Si ku quan shu* 四庫全書) or the consultation of commentaries as a means to decipher the meaning of a text. In other words, the intentions of the author(s) dominated and shaped our conversations about premodern Chinese writings, creating a stark contrast to the theoretical and methodological concerns I encountered in my Scandinavian studies courses. It instilled in us a vision of commentaries as separate and in service of the texts we read, sidelining, or perhaps even muting, any larger considerations of what we as scholars can do with writings beyond excavating their "original" meaning.

Of course, this experience was specific to my time as a student in Berlin in the early 2000s and should not easily and prematurely be projected onto any other place of higher education that offers these two fields of study. And more importantly, I do not suggest here a clear-cut hierarchy between theory and praxis as it is often displayed in the judgmental contrast between disciplines and area studies that one frequently encounters (Chen 2010; Davis 2015). In fact, I primarily consider myself a philologist that tries to combine elements of my text-critical and -analytical skillset with my training in comparative literature and cultural studies (Spivak 2003). Nonetheless, it was poignant that my experience in these two departments displayed such distinct approaches to texts, and I do think that my personal story at least partially illuminates a phenomenon that one repeatedly encounters in publications on premodern China: namely, the tendency in the study of Chinese classics to search almost exclusively for their "original" meaning and the intentions of their author(s), an ur-philological concern (Pollock 2014, 2015).⁵

3. Originalist Readings of the Chinese Classics

Let me substantiate this claim with the help of three cases. Take for example A. C. Graham's attempt at excavating the "original" teachings of Master Zhuang. Even though he admits that we scarcely know anything about this mysterious master beyond what is mentioned in the text named after him, Graham nonetheless tried to separate Zhuang Zhou's 莊周 authentic words from those portions that later authors presumably mixed into the text we read today (Graham 1981, pp. 29–30). In other words, Graham tried to identify Master Zhuang's voice in the extant *Zhuangzi* with the help of a careful philological analysis, so he may parse out the most "original" parts of the proto-Daoist classic from the rest (Graham 1981, p. 1; Liu 1994).

This type of philological dissection of classical texts into more or less authentic layers is typical for the sinological work that dominated the second half of the twentieth century. For example, E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks followed a similar path in their analysis of Kongzi's 孔子 (c. 551–479 BCE; latinized Confucius) *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語). In fact, they aimed at reconstructing an "original" version of the Confucian classic in order to preserve

“an authentic glimpse of the historical Confucius” (Brooks and Brooks 1998, p. 1). According to this approach, philology would enable us to sift through the extant versions of the classic to identify and sort out the later insertions that hinder a clear understanding of the historical figure Kongzi and the intentions behind his teachings.

This heightened attention to authors’ intended, “original” meanings that are hidden somewhere in the written traces of their teachings and therefore may be rescued from the classics’ often messy textual formations and history (sometimes with the help of commentaries) may be traced back to both biblical studies and its impact on the humanities in Europe and the US, as well as the evidential scholarship movement (*kaozheng* 考證 or *kaoju xue* 考據學) from the Qing 清 dynasty (1644–1911). Both groups that seem to have impacted the onset of sinology and its philological orientation were particularly concerned with the reconstruction of authentic texts (i.e., the bible and the Confucian classics) in order to gain an unmediated access and unobstructed vision of Jesus and the sages.⁶ Hence, it is not surprising that the study of early Chinese texts is dominated by an originalist approach that largely separates the various historical readings of these works from their “real” meaning.⁷

The focus on a text’s “original” meaning rather than its historical interpretations was so dominant in the field of premodern Chinese studies that its framework even appeared in scholarship that generally would not share the same kind of originalist goals of dissecting the extant texts into more or less “authentic” remnants. For example, Stephen Bokenkamp’s superb translation and discussion of the *Xiang’er* 想爾 commentary to the *Laozi* 老子 uses the same kind of argumentation to draw a clear distinction between the *Laozi*, which in Bokenkamp’s assessment is not a Daoist text, and the *Xiang’er* commentary, which contains a Daoist interpretation of the proto-Daoist classic. As he remarks,

The *Xiang’er* commentary is the earliest Daoist interpretation of the *Laozi* [and] the *Laozi* itself tells us nothing of the Daoist religion. Although the Celestial Masters accorded the *Laozi* primacy over other revealed texts as a catechism of their faith, their veneration seems to have been directed more to the figure of Laozi (or Lord Lao, as he was called) than to the ideas contemporaries found in the *Laozi* itself, for their interpretations often run counter to the clear intent of the text. (Bokenkamp 1997, pp. 29–20)

As we can see in this example, Bokenkamp uses the idea of a text’s intent to distinguish between the early Chinese classic and the later interpretation of the *Laozi* by the Celestial Masters (*Tianshi dao* 天師道), the earliest Daoist community that settled in the region of modern-day Sichuan between the second and third century CE (Kleeman 2016). As Stephen Bokenkamp explained to me in an email conversation on 28 November 2022, he attempted “to translate the *Laozi* as the commentary suggested I read it. I thought that the Celestial Masters’ readers would know the *Laozi* by heart, but my particular audience would not, so the separation of text from commentary was necessary.” Accordingly, Bokenkamp materialized this concern in the page design of his translation, in which he visually disjoined the “classic” written in italics from the blocked off “commentary.” Interestingly, this distinction of commentary and text is not present in the extant manuscript of the proto-Daoist classic housed in the British Library. There, the *Xiang’er* commentary presents itself as a text fully integrated in the *Laozi* (see Figure 1). Although it is possible that the early Celestial Masters community did not strictly separate between commentary and “original” text as suggested by the Dunhuang manuscript’s textual design, it is also likely that differences in rhyme schemes, rhythm, content, and diction offered enough clues to distinguish between the two texts, particularly when read aloud.⁸ Hence, it is understandable that Stephen Bokenkamp responded to this situation by comparing the manuscript with the various versions of the *Laozi* extant today to parse out the commentary from its main text. Even though the Celestial Masters might not have clearly separated the *Laozi* from their instructions and exegeses, Bokenkamp considered it nonetheless important to treat the “original” text and commentary as two distinct entities that need to be clearly distinguished.

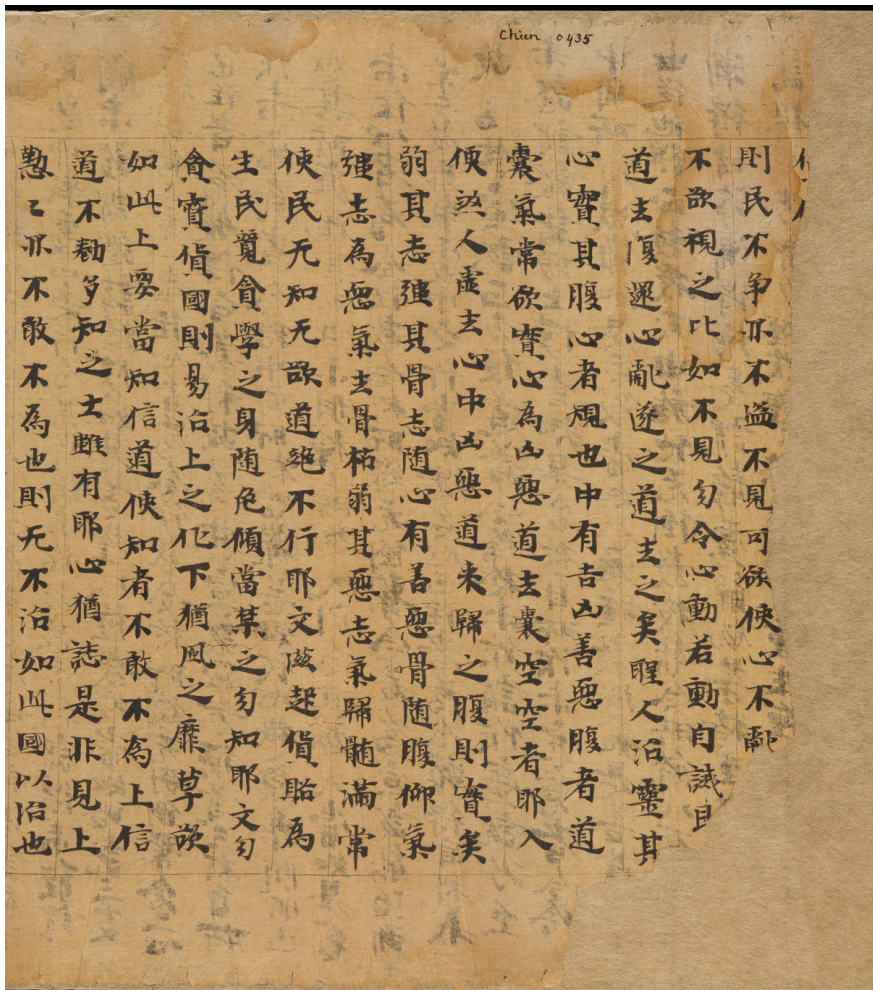


Figure 1. Beginning of the extant *Xiang'er Commentary to the Laozi* (*Laozi Xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注) mainly displaying *Laozi* 3 and its commentary. Found in the Dunhuang caves and purchased by Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862–1943). Photo courtesy of the British Library, Or.8210/S.6825, © The British Library Board. The title, main text and commentary are all written in the same style, blurring the boundary between main text and commentary.

Interestingly, his reason for distinguishing authentic and “original” layers of the *Laozi* from later additions is the exact opposite of Graham and Brook’s goals. While the latter disentangle the early texts into layers to find the most valuable textual nuggets of an imagined authentic author, thus devaluing later layers as less significant contributions of later interpretive communities, Bokenkamp uses the distinction between commentary and main text to shine light onto the *Xiang'er* by de-emphasizing the importance of the *Laozi* and its intent for any understanding of early Daoist communities. Despite their differences though, the hard division between an “original” text and later additions—in the form of a commentary in Bokenkamp’s case or “original” contributions by later communities “falsely” attributed to an early Chinese classic in Graham and Brooks’ cases—seems inevitably to evince a more originalist mentality toward the classics that is not necessarily shared by premodern Chinese interpretive communities, to which I will return below.

All of the above-mentioned studies provided extremely valuable contributions to the fields of early and early medieval China. Particularly Stephen Bokenkamp's translation of the *Xiang'er* commentary into English offers an important alternative to Richard John Lynn's translation of Wang Bi's 王弼 (226–249 CE) commentary to the *Laozi* and Eduard Erkes' (1891–1958) dated rendering of the Heshang Gong 河上公 (fl. presumably 1st c. CE) commentary (Lynn 2004; Erkes 1945, 1946, 1949). However, we will see that originalist attitudes toward texts as demonstrated by Graham and Brooks should not be treated as the only meaningful engagement with the classics, since neither postmodern theorists, Renaissance humanists, nor premodern Chinese readers necessarily shared their orientation. In other words, it might be worthwhile to engage with Chinese classics beyond the scope of searching for a text's authentic and earliest meaning. To address this issue, let me briefly raise the question of what we consider a text in premodern China.

4. What Is a Text in Premodern China?

So far, I have suggested that the excavation of a text's essence, its authentic and "original" meaning, underlies a lot of scholarship on premodern China. Such originalist approaches, however, are far less natural and common throughout humanity's engagement with texts than many colleagues in the field of sinology assume. Postmodern theorists such as Roland Barthes (1915–1980) and Julia Kristeva, for example, aimed at decentering the author's claim to authority and the idea that a text's meaning must be rooted in an understanding that comes closest to readings prevalent at a work's time of production (Barthes 1977; Kristeva 1969). Particularly, their conceptualizations of intertextuality played a central role in weakening the importance of the author, since any given text is created in a web of cultural references that precede and at the same time exceed the personal and historical situatedness of its creator(s). As valuable as their contributions to the study of literature were, their concerns and ideas, however, developed during the cultural upheavals of the 60s and 70s. During this time, countercultural movements fought against traditional values including the romantic ideal of the author as a genius and *spiritus rector*, who embodies God's creative powers (Tomaševskij 2000). As a result, one might say that such postmodern visions would not fit a premodern context.

Interestingly, we find such anti-originalist approaches to texts not only in postmodern literary theory but also in premodern Europe. In the Renaissance, humanists who reconstructed ancient Greek and Roman classics often incorporated their commentarial and text critical work in the main text they were working on without marking these additions, blurring the boundaries between both texts and their interpretations, "original" authors and later editors. In fact, this practice was so common that writers such as Niccolò Perrotti (1429–1480)—like Graham and Brooks—publicly complained about the extant editions of classics, since contemporaneous humanists frequently inserted their own interpretations into manuscripts and changed the text (Grafton 2015, p. 165). Or as Anthony Grafton powerfully summarized, "the authors and the commentators were really all the same person" (Grafton 2015, p. 174). In other words, even though it might feel logical to clearly separate commentaries from their main text, I do think we should not assume that this separation is as universal and natural as it seems to many of us.

If we consider the context of premodern China, this separation becomes increasingly arbitrary. In fact, the cultural phenomenon of classics and their commentaries raises a sequence of questions that we oftentimes leave unanswered. What do we consider to be a text in premodern China? And was there a clear separation of text and commentary?⁹ At first sight, these questions might seem nonsensical, since a commentary is an interpretation of a text and therefore should be treated as a separate, intentional reading. And in fact I do not try to simply conflate these two layers of a text. It is indeed often useful to read commentaries as separate from the main text. However, I would like to provide a few examples that pose some problems for our "obvious" distinction between main text and commentary.

First, premodern Chinese classics were almost always presented with and read through the lens of commentaries. Even though archeologists unearthed excavated manuscripts over the last few decades that do not contain commentaries, most classics like the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), the *Book of Changes* (*Yi jing* 易經), the *Book of Songs* (*Shi jing* 詩經) or the *Laozi* were handed down and read in conjunction with one or multiple commentaries (*zhu* 注 or 註) and sub-commentaries (*shu* 疏) from the Han 漢 dynasty (206–220 BCE) onward. In fact, people throughout Chinese history rarely read the classics without the accompanied commentaries. Perhaps the most famous example of such exegesis based on companion traditions is the three schools of Kongzi's *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu san zhuan* 春秋三傳): the commentaries of Gongyang (*Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳), Guliang (*Guliang zhuan* 穀梁傳), and Zuo (*Zuo zhuan* 左傳). As Anne Cheng claims, "The three extant commentaries must have stemmed originally from different schools of interpretation, and were the objects of passionate discussion during the Han dynasty, with each school of thought claiming to be the bearer of Confucius' authentic teaching" (Cheng 1993, p. 68). According to Cheng, these schools did not only provide interpretations of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* but construed themselves as a powerful, perhaps even sole gateway to the "authentic" thoughts and actions of Confucius. Hence, commentaries were sometimes thought to be integral to "original" texts since only their mastery would provide exclusive access to the meanings and intentions of the main text's author(s). In other words, these traditions responded exactly in the opposite manner to Graham and Brooks. Rather than dissecting and liberating the main texts of anything "superfluous" to unearth and explore their "original" meaning, the three schools increased materials associated with the classics by creating and including later commentaries and additional passages.

Second, the difference between commentary and main text is sometimes hard to discern visually. Contrary to footnotes that place a comment in a space that is clearly marked as separate from the main text, writers in early China often embedded commentaries into the source texts they were discussing, as we have seen in Figure 1 above. Although they commonly interspersed the main texts with their summaries, glosses, and explanations, these posthumous paratexts, to use Gérard Genette's terminology, were not consistently differentiated by the size of their characters, as evinced in the contrast between Figures 1 and 2 (Genette 1991, p. 264). This at times close relationship between commentary and main text might be the reason why we may find several passages in early Chinese writings nowadays that look like insertions of textual materials that previously might have belonged to commentaries—like the end of the *Zhuangzi*'s "Butterfly Dream" (*Zhuang Zhou meng hudie* 莊周夢蝴蝶 or simply *Mengdie* 夢蝶), which summarizes the short vignette in the style of an interlinear commentary by saying "This is called the Transformation of Things" (*ci zhi wei wuhua* 此之謂物化)" (Guo 1954, pp. 53–54; Mair 1994, p. 24).¹⁰

Third, the integration of commentaries into the main text was probably reflected in the conceptualization and understanding of texts (*wen* 文) as woven patterns (*wen*). For example, Liu Xie's 劉勰 (fl. late fifth century CE) *Patterned Hearts and Carved Out Dragons* (*Wenxin Diaolong* 文心雕龍), the first comprehensive and systematic treatise on early Chinese literary thought from imperial China, used weaving imagery to describe the "Ten Wings" ("Shi yi" 十翼) to the *Book of Changes*, a commentarial work traditionally attributed to Kongzi (Liu 1978, p. 2). In this vision, the classic is a textual pattern that consists of Fu Xi's 伏羲 trigrams that function as the warp (*jing* 經) of the *Book of Changes* while the various comments attributed to Kongzi serve as the textual fabric's weft strands (*wei* 緯) that, read together, make the text's pattern crystallize. Liu Xie strongly contrasts his evaluation of the *Yi jing* and the "Ten Wings" with his assessment of Han Weft-Writings (*chen wei* 讖緯), which according to his estimation falsely claim that "they bear to the classics the same relationship that the woof bears to the warp in weaving" (蓋緯之成經, 其猶織綜; Liu 1978, p. 30; Shih 2015, p. 27). In other words, the *Wenxin diaolong* seems in these two instances to respond to a common perception in early imperial China: namely, that texts, intertextual writing practices, and the production of commentaries were thought through and discussed in weaving terms (Puett 2021, pp. 99–101; Zürn 2020).

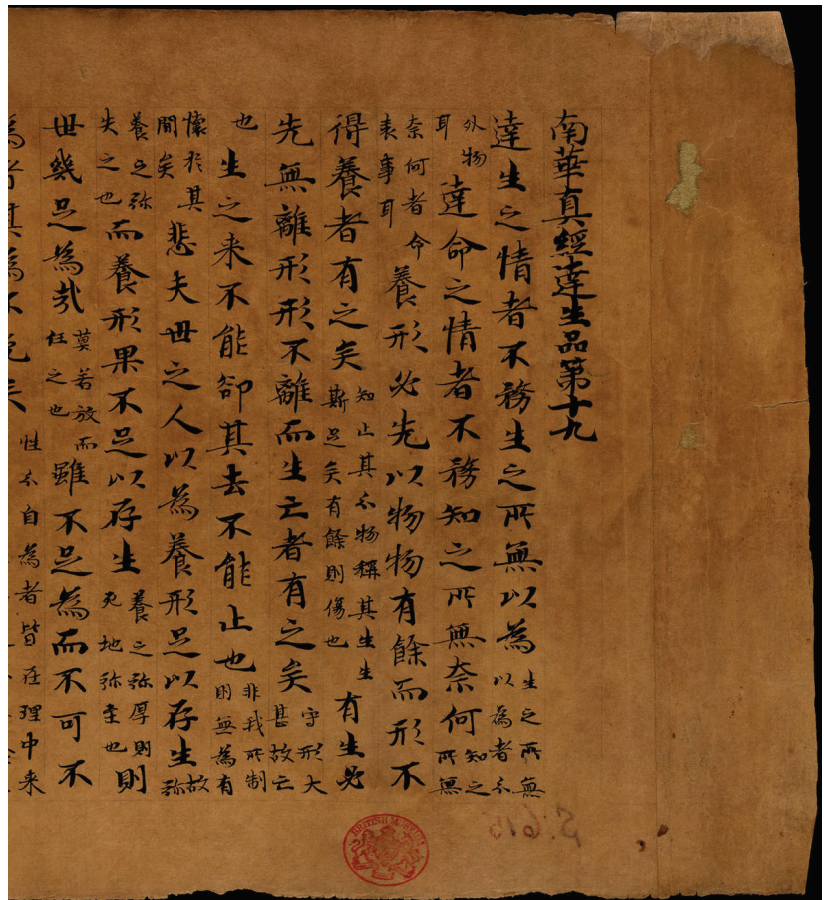


Figure 2. Beginning of the *Zhuangzi*'s chapter 19, titled "Understanding Life" ("Dasheng" 達生). Found in the Dunhuang caves and purchased by Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862–1943). Photo courtesy of the British Library, Or.8210/S.615R, © The British Library Board. The title and main text are printed using large characters. Guo Xiang's 郭象 (c. 252–312 CE) commentary to the *Zhuangzi*, however, is printed in two columns using smaller fonts.

To summarize, none of these cases provide hard evidence that the separation between main texts and commentaries did not exist in premodern China. And I do not suggest that we should simply dispose of this separation. Of course, the blurring of the boundaries between commentary and main text might stem from practical considerations such as the necessity to save writing materials. Nonetheless, I think that the examples from early Chinese hermeneutic traditions, the material manifestations of commentaries, and contemporaneous conceptualizations of writings as textual fabrics as mentioned above should make us wonder whether the clear separation between main text and its annotations that dominates current engagements with early Chinese classics was evident throughout premodern China. Take, for example, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) who prominently bemoaned that his contemporaries were focusing so much on the commentaries and their exegeses of the sages' classical texts that they became "unacquainted with the master [i.e., the classics]" (Gardner 1990, p. 159). In fact, he complained that some of his contemporaries completely stopped reading the classics and based their understandings solely on commentaries. Hence, Zhu Xi's critique implies that there existed a debate on the value of com-

mentaries and their relationship with the classics during the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279). And at least some readers, namely the ones who engendered Zhu Xi’s strong criticism, apparently considered commentaries to provide exclusive access to the authors’ intentions enshrined in the written traces of the classics.

The same attitude seems to be shared by the producers of a specific version of Cheng Xuanying’s 成玄英 (fl. 7th c. CE) *Laozi* commentary. As Friederike Assandri remarks regarding the textual design of Dunhuang Manuscript P 2517 in her contribution to this Special Issue:

Before the reader gets to see the first line of the base text, he has already read a structuring comment which relates the chapter to the previous one [and] an outline of the arguments the chapter will propose . . . In the Dunhuang manuscript P 2517 . . . these parts are in regular-sized characters, just like the cited base text. Only the interlinear commentary to the single lines is in smaller-sized characters. (Assandri 2022, p. 7)

Apparently, Cheng Xuanying’s structuring comments were so integrated and strategically placed at prime positions of the main text that his voice could hardly be ignored. Hence, the examples of Zhu Xi’s critique of contemporaneous reading practices, Dunhuang Manuscript P 2517, and the *Xiang’er* housed in the British Library show that commentary and classic were sometimes so interwoven that it almost seemed inconceivable for at least some premodern Chinese readers to point at the meaning of the classics without engaging in the interpretations offered by the commentarial traditions, a matter reflected in the fact that commentaries frequently refer to each other rather than the base text.¹¹ Hence, it seems as if we deal here with multiple, distinct attitudes toward the classics and their commentaries, and the originalist approach shared by Graham, Brooks, and apparently Zhu Xi is but one of many ways one may engage with these materials. Accordingly, I suggest it might be productive to think of a classic not just as a single (ur-)text whose one “original” meaning we must excavate. For the purpose of a reception history, it is even more fruitful to consider classics as multifarious cultural textures—what Kosík will call “works” in the next section—that accumulated various versions, diverse readings and reworkings over their existence.

5. A Shift in Focus: From Author- to Reader-Response-Centered Interpretations

If we accept for the time being that the distinction between author(s), main text, and commentary might not have always been clear and discernible (or we might say the distinction was less significant at times), it raises questions about how we might meaningfully engage with these texts. Clearly, we can read Graham and Brooks’ work as an exclusionary or restrictive response to such a distinct understanding of authorship and text that might have been present in early China (Du 2018). The multi-layered textual formation of the *Zhuangzi* and *Analects*, as well as the existence of their many versions, apparently led these scholars to search for the one text that contains the “original” voices of the Warring States masters. In the remainder, however, I would like to suggest an alternative, more inclusive response that in my opinion can productively accompany the originalist approach: in some of our projects, we could de-emphasize authorial intent as the prime target of any hermeneutic enterprise and, instead, focus on a text’s readership or what Sheldon Pollock termed “the second dimension of philology” (Pollock 2014, pp. 409–11). Such anti-originalist approaches were not only important for postmodern groups like Tel Quel, Renaissance humanists, and some premodern Chinese textual traditions, as suggested above. They were also formative for neo-Marxist understandings of cultural products. Karel Kosík, for example, emphasized the importance of the audience for the existence of any “work,” that is, a cultural object created by human labor (Kosík 1976, pp. 66–77).¹² In his understanding,

[The work] lives as long as its influence lasts. The influence of a work includes an event that affects both the consumer of the work and the work itself. What happens to the work is an expression of what the work is . . . The work is a work and

lives as a work because it *calls for* interpretations and because it has an *influence* of many meanings. (Kosik 1976, p. 80)

In this short passage from his early 1960s book *Dialectics of the Concrete*, Kosik describes the study of a work's "influence of many meanings" and reception history, a phenomenon that in English publications in the field of premodern China has received relatively little attention thus far.¹³ Contrary to an institutionalized reading strategy in sinology that frequently judges divergent interpretations of a text as varyingly successful attempts at recapturing its "original" meaning, Kosik claims that differences in readings are concretizations of a work's internal powers that are reflected in readers' manifold responses to it.¹⁴ Therefore, meaning is not only a crystallization of authors' intentions. One might rather say that readers repeatedly actualize a text by interacting and "working" with it. As Kosik claims, "[b]y outlasting the conditions and the situation of its genesis, a work proves its vitality . . . The work's life is not the result of its autonomous existence but of the *mutual interaction of the work and mankind*" (Kosik 1976, pp. 80–81). In other words, he perceives texts not to be static entities, that is, fossils whose "original" shape and meaning we try to excavate in the hermeneutic process. Rather, he treats them as analogous to living entities that realize themselves over time and therefore call for multifarious interpretations.¹⁵

Consequently, Kosik called for a paradigmatic shift in our understanding of the relationship between authors, their works, and their audiences. Instead of focusing on the ingenious intention behind a work, an idea that finds its roots in the Enlightenment movement and Romanticism's fetishization of the lives of authors, he emphasized the importance of the audience for the continuous recreation of a text's meanings (Tomaševskij 2000). According to his depiction, it is thus important not to reconstruct one authentic meaning but to explore people's concrete responses throughout various historical periods to any given work (Jauss 1982; Sarafinas 2022, pp. 8–11), a focus shared by several contributions to the Special Issue on Global Laozegetics (Assandri 2022; Constantini 2022; D'Ambrosio 2022; Gao 2022; Hadhri et al. 2022; Seo-Reich 2022; Tadd 2022b; Yao 2022; Zhang and Xie 2022; Zhang and Luo 2022; Zhu and Song 2022).

6. Conclusions: Why It Is Worthwhile to Explore the Reception History of Classics

One may wonder now why we should care what various audiences had to say about early Chinese texts. How does such an approach help us "better" understand the classics? Let me briefly present the potential value that the study of early Chinese texts through the lens of reception history may offer to us. To do so, I will paradigmatically discuss an example that is related to the international research project on the "Global Reception of the Classic *Zhuangzi*" (www.zhuangzi-reception.org) Mark Csikszentmihalyi and I founded in 2018. Despite excellent scholarly work on individual receptions, current engagements with the *Zhuangzi* in classrooms and journals around the world barely reflect the text's long-lasting influence (Hoffmann 2001).¹⁶ Based on an assumption deeply rooted in Karl Jaspers' (1883–1969) vision of an Axial Age according to which the Han dynasty serves as a transition between the philosophical golden age of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) and the rise and dominance of religious movements during the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE), most interpretations of the *Zhuangzi* in the last four decades followed A. C. Graham's influential assessment of the text that I introduced above (Graham 1981, 1989; Jaspers 1954; Roetz 1992). They focused on its "Inner Chapters" ("Neipian" 内篇), since these portions were thought to provide the most coherent and authentic picture of Master Zhuang's philosophy (Cook 2003; Kjellberg and Ivanhoe 1996; Mair 1983). In fact, Graham was so convinced Master Zhuang was a philosopher according to modern Western standards that he proposed, "the last of the *Inner chapters*, centered on a theme in which Chuang-tzŭ was hardly interested, the government of the empire," should be considered a flawed insertion of inauthentic materials since "one has an especially strong impression, not of an author approaching his topic from different directions, but of an editor going to great pains to find even remotely relevant passages" (Graham 1981, p. 29). As a result,

concerns that people nowadays would attribute to the fields of politics, arts, religion, and literature, to name only four other disciplines, have had little impact on Graham's reading of the *Zhuangzi*, which heavily impacted the classic's academic discourse over the last few decades, even though the long reception history of the proto-Daoist classic—and even the text itself—does not support such a dominance of one discipline over any other (Angles 2020; Hoffmann 2001; Meulenbeld 2012; Qiu 2005; Saso 1983). In other words, A. C. Graham provides here a case that substantiates Daniel Sarafinas' claim in this Special Issue: that "notions of authorship of a text influence, often unconsciously, a reader's interpretation such that the possible meaning generated within that text becomes limited, reduced, or terminated" (Sarafinas 2022, p. 1).

However, when we compare this trend with the reception of the *Zhuangzi* found in Sima Qian's *Grand Scribe's Records*, the earliest extant evaluation of the proto-Daoist classic, we see a quite different reading. In the *Shi ji's* "Biographies of Laozi and Han Fei" ("Laozi Han Fei liezhuan" 老子韓非列傳), Sima Qian claims:

There was nothing on which his [i.e., Zhuangzi's] teachings did not touch, but in their essentials they went back to the words of Laozi. Thus his works, over 100,000 characters, all consisted of allegories. He wrote "Yufu" 漁父 (The Old Fisherman), "Dao Zhi" 盜跖 (The Bandit Zhi), and "Quqie" 胠篋 (Ransacking Baggage) in which he mocked the likes of Confucius and made clear the policies of Laozi. (Sima 1994, pp. 23–24)¹⁷

其學無所不闢，然其要本歸於老子之言。其著書十餘萬言，大抵率寓言也。作漁父、盜跖、胠篋，以詆訛孔子之徒，以明老子之術。 (Sima 1962, p. 2143)

In this passage, the *Shi ji's* reception of the *Zhuangzi* emphasizes three subsections all of which come from the "Outer" ("Waipian" 外篇) and the "Miscellaneous Chapters" ("Zapian" 雜篇). Thus, it seems as if at least the *Shi ji's* authors were less concerned with the scant philosophical value of the supposedly less coherent portions of Master Zhuang's text as Graham propagated throughout his work (Graham 1981, pp. 27–39). Instead, some people in the Han apparently showed interest in political aspects and "inter-school" mockeries as the *Shi ji's* account insinuates, attaching importance to different sections of the *Zhuangzi* beyond Graham and the modern assessment of the classic (Klein 2011).

In my opinion, this brief comparison concisely illustrates the importance of what Karel Kosik means when he says "what happens to the work is what the work is." The *Zhuangzi* seems to take on quite different lives in these two examples depending on which portions of the text an audience privileged—or even altered as in the case of A. C. Graham (Michael 2022, p. 4). On the one hand, the *Zhuangzi* and particularly its "Inner Chapters" appear to be, per Graham, a philosophical text engaging with questions of language and epistemology. On the other hand, Sima Qian presents the *Zhuangzi* and particularly its "Outer" and "Miscellaneous Chapters" as a text full of traces recording a polemical battle between two social groups associated with the figures Kongzi and Laozi. In other words, Graham's originalist readings of the *Zhuangzi*, and by extension the field's general orientation to texts, do not represent an objective approach to early Chinese classics. They are—like Sima Qian's interpretation—a historically contingent trend and a rather short episode of the work's long life story.

As a result, I am not calling for a postmodern revolution of the field or a complete dismissal of textual critical work and philological methods, since these approaches have yielded immensely valuable insights into premodern China and its texts. Rather, I suggest a rigorous diversification of our methodological apparatus (van Norden 2007, p. 6). In addition to the common practice of searching for the "original" meaning of a text, it would be beneficial to explore the various topics that guided historical interpretations of classics like the *Zhuangzi* or the *Laozi*. In so doing, we would not only learn more about the intellectual and cultural environments within which the classics' various interpretations were shaped, but we would also provide voice to all those traditional readings and practices that are

repeatedly marginalized in the academic discourse, since they do not conveniently fit into our visions of the classics (Denecke 2011).

Hence, reception history would allow us to reflect critically on our own thrownness, to use Hans Georg Gadamer's (1900–2002) terminology (Gadamer 1989). In contrast to its general reputation as a conservative method, it would grant us an opportunity for personal and institutional self-reflection that could unearth how our own, modern and oftentimes Eurocentric categories and divisions into academic disciplines secretly impact the way we read these early texts, as displayed in A. C. Graham's take on the *Zhuangzi*. Since each generation approaches the classics with its own concerns and frameworks, research into reception history is a prerequisite for a historically embedded understanding of these texts and our own interpretations. Thus, a focus on the classics' reception history would inevitably create more awareness regarding the fact that meaning is not simply inherent to a work or any of its envisioned authors. Rather it is generated in the power- and interplay between specific audiences, their cultural and historical horizons, and their texts. Or as Sheldon Pollock summarizes, "what a text means can never be anything but what the text has been taken to mean by the people who have read it. Its one true meaning can be nothing but the assemblage of all these other meanings . . . what the text may have meant to the first audience; what it meant to readers over time; what it means to me here and now" (Pollock 2014, p. 410).

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Notes

- ¹ In this article, I use the term classic in a wider sense than the Chinese term *jing* 經 is commonly used. In my understanding, it refers to any text that has accumulated a significant exegetical tradition in the form of commentaries, translations, and reworkings in various cultural products.
- ² For a discussion of the same hermeneutic phenomenon, see the section "Authorial Intentionalism and Its Limits" in (Sarafinas 2022).
- ³ I use the term biography in relation to books since it reflects the idea that a text goes through different stages of existence, like human beings. The same vision is reflected in Princeton University Press' series "Lives of Great Religious Books." See <https://press.princeton.edu/series/lives-of-great-religious-books>, accessed on 10 December 2022.
- ⁴ I agree with most scholars of "religious" Daoism that we may only find a concrete community of people in the first and second century CE that formed a distinct group we may nowadays term Daoist. But unlike most scholars of early China or Michel Strickmann (1942–1994) and his students of later Daoist movements, who see a strict division between what scholars in early China oftentimes call early "philosophical" Daoism and later "religious" Daoism, I perceive a discontinuous continuity between these two "movements" in the form of shared terminologies, concepts, and practices. In other words, I follow Kristofer Schipper's (1934–2021) vision and call texts like the *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, or even by extension the *Huainanzi*, proto-Daoist, since they at least partially informed the lifeworlds and *imaginaires* of later Daoist practitioners.
- ⁵ Sheldon Pollock divides philology into three "dimensions": a text's genesis, its tradition of reception, and its presence to the philologist's own subjectivity (Pollock 2014). In my opinion, the first dimension outplays the other two in the field of early China.
- ⁶ For a discussion of "kaozheng-scholarship [as] a step toward indigenous development of an empirical mode of scholarship, even of modern science" (Quirin 1996, p. 36), see (Elman 1984). For a critique of readings that see the rise of modernity and scientific methods detached from ethical and moral concerns central for Confucian discourse in the Qing dynasty, see (Quirin 1996). For a discussion of the racist undertones of the purity discourse that guided the rise of the discipline of philology, see (Lin 2016).
- ⁷ Interestingly, rabbinic readings of the bible emphasize the multivalency of the text of which "multiple meanings [can] be derived from and are inherent in every [biblical] event, for every event is full of reverberations, references, and patterns of identity that can be infinitely extended" (Handelmann 1982, p. 37). I learned about Handelmann's work from (Wagner 2012, p. 65).
- ⁸ I would like to thank my colleague Alexei Ditter who reminded me that the performance and recitation of texts can enable an audience to experience stylistic differences between texts even if these distinctions are not reflected in the visual design of a manuscript. In that sense, separating commentary and main text on a visual level would be similar to the practice of adding

punctuation to early Chinese manuscripts: apparently, neither of these technologies were needed by early audiences according to such a reading since they knew their texts by heart.

Hans van Ess argues that from the Han onward linguistic changes rendered the language of ancient classics so obscure to readers at the time that commentaries and phonetic glosses became a necessity for any engagements with the classics (van Ess 2009, pp. 216–25). According to Michael Puett, this attitude to commentaries as “the only source of access to the earlier material” changed only with Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) in the twelfth century, whose orientation toward the classics I present on pages 8–9 (Puett 2021, pp. 105–6).

I would like to thank Mark Csikszentmihalyi who made me aware of this possible reading of the “Butterfly Dream’s” coda.

As a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, I met a colleague who displayed a similar take on the relationship between main text and commentary. In my first class on the *Zhuangzi*’s reception history in 2008, the said classmate repeatedly responded to the question of what is the meaning of a cryptic *Zhuangzi* passage by simply translating or summarizing Guo Xiang’s commentary, effectively equating the main text with one of its interpretations.

For a radically different interpretation of the term “work” that reads it as the “receptacle of the Author’s meaning” (Sarafinas 2022, p. 2), see (Barthes 1977).

There is a sizable amount of scholarship that could be categorized as studies in readings of early Chinese classics. However, very few of the examples mentioned in this footnote explicitly frame their work in such terms and engage with commentaries without referencing the field of reception history. For a few examples that engage with the reception history of the *Lunyu*, see (Ashmore 2010, pp. 111–97; Fuehrer 2002, 2009; Makeham 2003; Swartz 2008). For a few examples that engage with the reception history of the *Yi jing*, see (Schilling 1998; Smith et al. 1990; Smith 2008, 2012). For a few examples that engage with the reception history of the *Laozi*, see (Tadd 2022a; Chan 1991; Wagner 2000). For a few examples that engage with the *Zhuangzi*’s reception, see n.16 below.

For an example of a scholarly work that “shifts the emphasis from the author as the main creator and ultimate arbiter of a text’s meaning to the editors and publishers, collectors and readers, producers and viewers, through whose hands a text, genre, or legend is reshaped, disseminated, and given new meanings” (pp. 1–2), see (Zeitlin et al. 2003).

For two projects that explore the varying images of Confucius, see (Csikszentmihalyi 2001; Nylan and Wilson 2010).

For a few examples of excellent work on the *Zhuangzi*’s reception, see (Angles 2020; Brackenridge 2010; Chai 2008; Chapman 2010; Choi 2010; Epstein 2006; Fang 2008; Harack 2007; Idema 2014; Liu 2016; Möller 1999; Qiu 2005; Saso 1983; Saussy 2017; Specht 1998; Swartz 2018; Tang 1983; Wang 2003; Xiong et al. 2003; Yu 2000; Zhang 2018; Ziporyn 2003).

I changed the transliterations from Wade-Giles to Pinyin in this quotation.

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Article

The Original Text of the *Daodejing*: Disentangling Versions and Recensions

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Abstract: The *Daodejing* is counted among the greatest works of world philosophy and literature, but it is a short work that is exceedingly difficult to comprehend. Among several reasons for this is that no one knows the actual words and form of its original text. Assessing the differences between any two editions of it is a simple task when they are laid next to each other, but it is not possible to lay any edition of the *Daodejing* next to its original text to assess their differences, because no one has ever seen the original text of the *Daodejing*, and no one knows its actual words and form. Approaching the original text is only made possible through its representations and reflections in later editions that we do possess, some of them transmitted and others excavated. Any possible access to the original text, to any degree whatsoever, is dependent on how these later editions are managed. Sinology manages them with the recension category whereas *Laozi* Studies manages them with the version category. This study examines, disentangles, and assesses the different ways that these two categories are used with the intended effect of approaching the original text of the *Daodejing*.

Keywords: *Laozi Daodejing*; *Laozi* Studies; Chinese Philosophy; textual history

1. Introduction

This paper examines the early textual history of the *Daodejing*, paying particular attention to its original text; it is an appropriate contribution to this special issue of *Religions*, called “Global Laozegetics: Engaging the Multiplicity of *Laozi* Interpretations and Translations.” The term “Laozegetics” is one rendering of the Chinese phrase *Laoxue* 老, which this paper renders as “*Laozi* Studies”.¹ Approaching the early history of the *Daodejing* with a *Laozi* Studies perspective and methodology, this study contrasts its characteristic features with those of sinology and philosophy at various points. The emphasis on these contrasts is a feature, not a bug of this study, because what is at issue in approaching the early history of the *Daodejing*, is a matter of understanding the nature of the work’s original orality, so it is important to understand why *Laozi* Studies is capable of approaching the original text in ways that sinology and philosophy are not.²

This study is particularly focused on the question of the original text of the *Daodejing*, which refers to the state of the text in its first transmission (i.e., its first edition), thereby acquiring its status as a text, as far as we understand the term. To recognize the original text of the *Daodejing* in this way does not mean to imply that it was the complete text that we have today, and three points are worth noting up front. First, although this study supports notions of an original orality for the *Daodejing* and its continuing oral transmission throughout the Warring States, there may have been many more written editions of it than we are presently aware of, and *Laozi* himself might even be personally responsible for composing the first one, but if so, those written editions were only incidental, and left no mark on its early textual history. Second, of the 81 chapters of the received text, it seems likely that the last fifteen were not part of the original text but were later additions (Perkins 2014). Third, any examination of the excavated manuscript editions reveals the text’s fluidity both in form and content, at least until its canonization in the mid-Western Han by Emperor Jing, which served as a kind of template for the received text as we have

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it (Ding 2017). These considerations do not affect our understanding of the original text as such, but they serve as a temper for our understanding of its form and content.

Sinology also searches for the original text of the *Daodejing*, but it is restricted to written editions, of which the earliest complete ones date only as far back as the early Han dynasty. Its consensus view is that the original *Daodejing* is dated to just before then, at the end of the Warring States period, since there are no earlier textual records attesting to it. This study analyzes sinology's basic methodological category, namely the recension, and it shows how it is employed with the intent to either uncover the original text of the *Daodejing*, or to produce a critical edition of it by connecting or separating different historical editions.

For its part, philosophy is less interested in the original text, largely because the earliest manuscript editions demonstrate a dizzying array of textual variants, in addition to a plethora of other uncertainties concerning its form and content. Instead, philosophy is interested in the philosophically authentic text that is understood in terms of textual intent (see Jiang 2016).³ The authentic text refers to the text of the *Daodejing*, in which the philosophical and other linguistic weaknesses found in earlier editions have been repaired, or even, from philosophy's point of view, restored; an example of this is seen in Liu Xiaogan's suggestion that Wang Bi brought the thought of the *Daodejing* to its "logical completion" (Liu 2014, p. 158).

Different from sinology in that it seeks the original written text and what it linguistically says, and different from philosophy in that it seeks the authentic text and what it philosophically means, *Laozi Studies* is interested in how the text was interpreted by different groups; more specifically, it is interested in the hermeneutical horizons from which sinology's "original text" and philosophy's "authentic text" both emerged. Thus, the final parts of this study attempt to display the interpretive value of approaching the early textual history of the *Daodejing* through a different category, that of the version.

Whereas the recension category relied on by sinology identifies the various editions of the *Daodejing* based on their textual lineages, the version category relied on by *Laozi Studies* identifies the various early editions through their alignments and associations with their own separate interpretive communities, of which this study recognizes three: the Yangsheng version of the *Daodejing*, the Huang-Lao version, and the Tianshi version. This study demonstrates that the earliest version of the *Daodejing*, the Yangsheng version, was originally an oral text that circulated as such throughout most of its early history up to the end of the Warring States, and it is this version that is most proximate to the original text of the *Daodejing*. The concluding section of this study discusses the hermeneutic value of recognizing the unique features of each of these three versions in terms of how they complement and serve as counterpoints to each other, thereby shedding light on the early history, not just of the *Daodejing*, but of Daoism itself.

2. Laozi Studies

The *Daodejing* is a worldwide phenomenon, and it has been translated into most of the world's languages that are in use today. Quite short and devoid of ornate language, it is among the simplest of early Chinese texts to read and translate. Generations of its translators throughout the world's history have an agreed upon form of the *Daodejing* as a text; in 81 chapters and a bit over 5000 words, new translations are often motivated by the simplicity of its language in conjunction with the abstruseness of its thought.

Many people through the ages have asked what the *Daodejing* is about, but this paper raises a different question: what is the text of the *Daodejing*? We can turn to Merriam-Webster for a working definition of the text as "the original words and form of a written or printed work" or "an edited or emended copy of an original work". This definition, however, is based on a traditional understanding of a text, which regards it as a specifically written artefact, but there are reasons to consider the *Daodejing* as an originally oral text. This leads me to adopt a simpler understanding of a text, as not more than the actual words of an authoritative source that may or may not be considered an "author". Nevertheless, directing the question of what a text is specifically to the *Daodejing*, more precise informa-

tion is needed pertaining to its “original words and original form”. Moreover, of equal importance for understanding the early textual history of the *Daodejing*, is understanding the interpretive communities that formed around the presence of the authoritative source that “authored” the “original text”.

There are different ways to go about trying to approach the original text of the *Daodejing*, and most of them employ the tools and methods of sinology. For them to be effective in uncovering the original text, there must be a solid understanding of its words and its forms. Modern understandings invariably conceive it as written—or inscribed or brushed or chiseled—onto physical objects—paper or bamboo or silk or stone, although there is no certainty even on these points.

There is every reason to question the sinological assumption that the original text of the *Daodejing* was in fact written. One way to do so is to turn to a somewhat different methodological approach, *Laozi Studies* (*Laoxue* 老), which can be considered a subfield of Daoist Studies that is exclusively committed to the *Daodejing*, and that does not parse the text into “Daoist religion” (*daojiao* 道教) and “Daoist philosophy” (*daoia* 道家).

Although the origins of the *Daodejing* are shrouded in ancient mystery, by the end of the Warring States it had become widely popular, and by the beginning of the Han dynasty, its ideas were dominating political and philosophical discourse. As thinkers began to contemplate the meanings of the text, they also began to comment on and write about them; this marks the beginning of *Laozi Studies*.

Yang (1936) identified his research with *Laozi Studies*, and his article on the Han dynasty *Daodejing* exegesis and interpretation refers to some fifty notable Han period experts, and a dozen lost works on it. Referring to it, Alan Chan notes, “[b]efore the Han dynasty, references to the *Laozi* were already found in such works as *Zhuangzi* and *Hanfeizi*; but complete commentaries did not appear until the Han period. In this respect, certainly not all of the fifty or so figures identified by Yang Shuda as *Laozi* experts had actually written on the subject; but the list does attest to the rapid growth of ‘*Laozi* learning’ [“*Laozi* Studies”] in the Han dynasty” (Chan 1998, p. 106).

In Chinese scholarship, *Laozi Studies* generally refers to the study of historical interpretations of, and commentaries on, the *Daodejing*. Following the publication in China of a profusion of twentieth-century *Laozi Studies* scholarship, Chan’s article introduced the term to a Western audience, where it even appears in the title. The term lay dormant in Western scholarship until Misha Tadd revived it with his translation of *Laoxue* as “Laozegetics”, a kind of play on “*Laozi*” and “exegetics”. Tadd writes:

“Laozegetics”, as a framework and methodology, offers a valuable path to studying the *Daodejing* that redirects attention from the endless debates about the classic’s “original” meaning toward the plurality of ways it has been understood throughout Chinese history . . . Prioritizing this abundance of interpretation shifts scholarly focus away from the supposed original or “true” text and allows for an analysis of the text in the world . . . [Laozegetics] both describes the tradition of *Laozi* and the interpretation of his text by many different types of people, including those far outside the bounds of “Daoism”. (Tadd 2021, pp. 71–72)

I have adopted the term for my own work on the *Daodejing*, where I highlight its methodological relationship to sinology and philosophy.

To discuss the *Daodejing* more clearly in the context of what in Chinese is called “*Laozi Studies*” 老學, this study relies on a set of conventions differently tailored from other scholarly works, and their application throughout represents one effort to bring sinology and philosophy closer . . . It is a challenging label for Western scholars because it does not necessarily distinguish between the values of what philosophy and sinology separately contribute, and it approaches the *Daodejing* as a cultural phenomenon more than a historical artefact. (Michael 2021, p. 4)

Where Yang and Chan's perspective primarily centers on the Chinese dimensions of *Laozi Studies*, and Tadd's emphasizes its global dimensions, mine intends to recognize a space for it that is next to, but separate from, sinology and philosophy. Tao Jiang points out the differences between sinology and textual history on one hand, and philosophy and exegesis on the other, and discusses "the two sets of scholarly objects operative" in each: the former has insight on the "original text . . . historical author . . . and authorial intent", while the latter has the "inherited text . . . textual author . . . (and) textual intent" (Jiang 2016, p. 35).

We can gain a perspective on the difference between sinology and *Laozi Studies* from two telling claims, the first of which comes from Harold Roth in an article that will be discussed more in a later section; he writes, "[i]t is the stated goal of textual criticism [i.e., sinology] to locate—in the unlikely event it still survives intact—or to re-establish, if it does not, this original text. This is indeed the commonly accepted goal of textual criticism" (Roth 1993, p. 225). The second claim comes from Wang Bo, who identifies his work on the *Daodejing* with "the history of thought" or intellectual history, which is perfectly congruent with *Laozi Studies*; he writes, "[t]he mainstream approach of the previous century—that of debating the authenticity of texts—is currently on the wane, while the perspectives of hermeneutics and the history of thought have become increasingly important" (Wang 2017, p. 115).

Sinology seeks the "original text" to tell us what it says, and philosophy seeks the "authentic text" to tell us what it means, but *Laozi Studies* explores the hermeneutical horizons from which both emerged. Although heavily informed by both, *Laozi Studies* is closely aligned with intellectual history and comparative and cultural approaches to the *Daodejing*, whether in the Chinese context pace Yang and Chan, or the modern global context pace Tadd. Relying on both sinology and philosophy in its commitment to the *Daodejing*, *Laozi Studies* focuses on the text "in the world" by examining its role in religion, science and medicine, and culture and the arts. It equally explores Han dynasty understandings of the *Daodejing*, as well as contemporary global ones, whether in temples on Mount Wudang or in *taiji* studios in San Francisco.

Laozi Studies does not judge any particular version of the *Daodejing* as more faithful to the original text than others, nor any particular interpretation of the authentic text as more correct than others. This realization informs the claim by Du Daojian 杜道堅 (1237–1318), a noted Song dynasty commentator of the *Daodejing*: "[t]he Dao descends into each age and varies with the times. Commentators mostly follow what is fashionable in their historical period with each master teaching from their own perspective. Thus, the Han dynasty commentators produced the Han *Laozi*, the Jin dynasty commentators produced the Jin *Laozi*, and the Tang and Song dynasty commentators produced the Tang and Song *Laozi*" (Du n.d.).

The continuing cultural significance of the *Daodejing* is borne out by the profusion of its editions and commentaries which are available in most world languages. *Laozi Studies* approaches this profusion with an awareness of the diverse cultural forces, beginning thousands of years ago, that have conditioned its transmissions, receptions, and interpretations.

It is these diverse cultural forces that were primarily responsible for the changes to the text of the *Daodejing*. Although it is a singular work, its many editions and commentaries have given birth to very different philosophies. These different philosophies formed around innovative changes to the text that were crystallized in their respective commentaries. These commentaries reflect the powerful presence of the interpretive communities behind them, and the different philosophies that those interpretive communities generated from the text are inseparable from the distinct textual changes that differentiate one version of the *Daodejing* from another. Sinology and *Laozi Studies* both focus on these textual changes. In his important (Liu 2003) study, Liu Xiaogan gives representation to the former, where he analyzes three sources of textual alteration, namely "scribal error" (Liu 2003, p. 338), "linguistic assimilation" (Liu 2003, p. 351) that seeks textual uniformity, and "conceptual focusing" (Liu 2003, p. 363) that seeks to highlight philosophical points. The resulting

textual alterations can be documented and explained by comparing different editions of the *Daodejing*.

Wang Bo distinguishes Liu Xiaogan’s “textual alterations”, that prioritize text over interpretive community, from the “interpretative alterations”, that prioritize interpretive community over text; nonetheless, *Laozi Studies* values both explanations equally. We see this in Wang’s discussion of two early and variant interpretations of the *Daodejing*: “the life of the hermit” paradigm adopted by Zhuangzi and “the political philosophy” paradigm adopted by Han Feizi, and he writes, “[t]his divergence directly led to the formation of different paradigms of understanding Laozi’s thought in the Han dynasty” (Wang 2017, p. 116). Wang means that the former paradigm became associated with the Xiang’er edition and commentary to the *Daodejing*, whereas the latter was associated with the Heshang Gong edition and commentary. His following comments demonstrate how this can lead to a “textual transformation”:

[i]n Section 7, the *Daodejing* states: “Isn’t it simply because he is impartial (*wusi* 无私) that he can satisfy his own partiality (*si* 私: partial, selfish)?” The *Xiang’er* commentary renders *si* twice as body (*shi* 尸), which more naturally brings the *dao* of longevity into play. There are many such cases, which can be rationally understood from the perspective of the history of thought. (Wang 2017, p. 116)

Is the *Daodejing* text that was read by the political philosopher Heshang Gong and the hermit ecclesiast Xiang’er the same or different?⁴ This question gains more immediacy when surveying the early Chinese field which reveals around a dozen different editions of the *Daodejing* that often demonstrate important differences among them. Feng Youlan’s modern distinction between a “philosophical” and a “religious” Daoism is incapable of containing these differences, and such distinctions serve to muddle the early history of the *Daodejing*. Furthermore, although Wang Bo’s distinction between a “hermit” Xiang’er *Daodejing* and a “political” Heshang Gong *Daodejing* is generally inarguable, it too is incapable of containing the multiple other early *Daodejing* editions with their fluid contents and profusion of forms that were repeatedly subjected to persistent “textual transformation” and “interpretive transformation”.

There is just one “original text” of the *Daodejing*, the source text that stands behind all of these multiple editions. Different communities, for example hermits or politicians, altered it according to their own interpretive tastes, as if that source text equally but murkily contained the religious, the political, and the philosophical that each interpretive community emphasized differently. Consensus states that any given edition of the *Daodejing* is, to one degree or another, reflective of that original text, and editions that are deemed more faithful to it are accorded higher value than those deemed more divergent. However, as every known edition of the *Daodejing* demonstrates that it has already deviated from the original text, the only way to reliably gauge the extent of its deviation is to compare the edition against the original, and yet Liu Xiaogan and Wang Bo, who discussed the reasons for such textual alterations, have never seen the original text that was only subsequently altered.

Laozi Studies, however, makes no judgments about the authenticity of any historically circulating edition of the *Daodejing*—they each have their own individual stories to tell, and this is the hermeneutical horizon inhabited by *Laozi Studies*. Understanding that horizon begins with the earliest editions of the text.

3. The Earliest Editions of the *Daodejing*

There are two general accounts for the origins of the *Daodejing*, and the line separating them is 280 BC, the approximate date of the closing of the Guodian tomb by which the Guodian *Laozi* acquires its terminus ante quem. The first is the synthetic account that sees the *Daodejing* as, more or less, an already complete text before 280 BCE, and it takes the Guodian *Laozi* as a partial transcription of it; it would be many more decades before the earliest complete transcriptions began to publicly circulate. The synthetic account is generally held by people who believe Laozi himself composed the whole thing in the Spring and Autumn periods, and although it is quite possible that he did, it is also quite

possible that the *Daodejing* is no more than the record of his oral teachings; in addition, even the received text of the *Daodejing* cannot hide the overwhelming evidence of its long history of oral transmission.

The second is the syncretic account that sees the *Daodejing* becoming a text only after 280 BCE, and the Guodian *Laozi* is taken as one early batch, among other collected sayings, that would later be compiled into the complete text. In the following sections, I first discuss the syncretic account that relies on the notion of a *recension* to make sense of the early textual history of the *Daodejing*, and then I discuss the synthetic account that relies on the notion of a *version* to make sense of its early history.

However incompatible these two accounts are, they dovetail in seeing the initial production of the first publicly circulating written editions of the *Daodejing* in the last years of the Warring States. In 249 BCE, the scholar-statesman Lü Buwei gathered the important spokespeople of the various philosophical trends of the time at his court, including some who were familiar with Laozi's philosophy of the Dao and who publicly announced and articulated it there. This philosophy attracted like-minded thinkers who formed a philosophical school known as Huang-Lao, and they took essential possession of the *Daodejing* as their own. No matter if, according to the synthetic account, they heard the oral text of the *Daodejing* and then transcribed it, or if, according to the syncretic account, they gathered its various pieces and compiled it, it is precisely here that the original written text of the *Daodejing* is to be found.

From the moment that original written edition first circulated, it was subjected to manifold changes and transformations, visible in its dozen or so early physical records in our possession. Sinology relies heavily, almost exclusively, on these records for understanding the early textual history of the *Daodejing*, so it is necessary to consider what they are and how sinology manages them.

The first six early physical records of the *Daodejing* appear as stand-alone manuscript editions:

Physical Records 1–3: the three editions of the Guodian *Laozi* excavated in 1993 from a tomb that was sealed around 280 BC. These records were written on bamboo slips, which appear in three separate groups standardly recognized as Guodian *Laozi* "A", Guodian *Laozi* "B", and Guodian *Laozi* "C", and they contain around 40% of the received edition.

Physical Records 4–5: the two editions of the Mawangdui *Laozi* excavated from a tomb in 1973 that was sealed in 168 BC. These records were written on silk manuscripts, which appear in two complete editions called Mawangdui *Laozi* "A", composed prior to 200 BC, and Mawangdui *Laozi* "B", composed after that but prior to 180 BCE.

Physical Record 6: the Beida *Laozi* edition donated to Peking University in 2009 that, because it was not archaeologically excavated, can only be roughly dated to around 100 BCE. It was written on bamboo slips.

The next physical record appears as a stand-alone redacted edition.

Physical Record 7: the Fu Yi edition that was recovered and subsequently edited by Fu Yi in 574 CE, from a tomb whose female occupant was a consort of Xiang Yu (d. 202 BC), the general who battled Liu Bang before the latter founded the Han dynasty. During the Song dynasty, Fan Yingyuan produced a redaction of this record, which is known as the Fu Yi *Laozi* or the *Guben Laozi*.

The next three records of the *Daodejing* appear as stand-alone redacted editions with appended commentaries. The question of their textual authenticity, stability, and reliability is minimized because they were transmitted together with their commentaries, guaranteeing, for the most part, their resistance to alteration.

Physical Record 8: the Yan Zun 嚴尊 edition, called *Laozi zhigui* 老子指歸, written at the end of the Western Han, for which only the “De” section and commentary survive, namely chapters 38–81.

Physical Record 9: the Heshang Gong edition, called *Laozi Heshang Gong zhangju* 老子河上公章句, likely composed in the first half of the Eastern Han, for which both the text and the commentary are complete.

Physical Record 10: the Xiang'er edition, called *Laozi Xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注, likely composed in the second half of the Eastern Han and recovered from Dunhuang in the early twentieth century, for which only the text and commentary to chapters 3–37 survive.

In addition to these early stand-alone *Daodejing* records, large parts of the text are displayed in other independent works.

Physical Record 11–12: the “Jie Lao” 解老 and “Yu Lao” 喻老 chapters of the *Hanfeizi*. Despite attribution to Hanfeizi, the two chapters were written by different people and are datable to the early Western Han.

Physical Record 13–15: the *Heguanzi* and the *Wenzi*, large portions of which are datable to the end of the Warring States, and the *Huainanzi*, written in the middle of the Western Han, judiciously quote content from the *Daodejing*.

Each of these records point to the original text of the *Daodejing*, but none are identifiable with it. Generations of scholars who worked before the discoveries of the manuscript editions have tried their luck at producing a critical edition of the original text, but they were severely limited by the comparative lateness of the earliest editions upon which they primarily relied, namely the Fu Yi, the Heshang Gong, and the Wang Bi, and they often debated which of them was the earliest, and which was the most authentic. Thus, William Boltz, writing after the discovery of the Mawangdui *Laozi* but before the discovery of the Guodian *Laozi*, says:

“[a]lthough the Mawangdui manuscripts, either individually or taken together, cannot be said to represent the “original” *Laozi*, the *editio princeps*, so to speak, they cannot but be regarded as having more authority to approximate the original than any other known version of the text. They are, by a period of more than four centuries, our oldest witnesses, and can therefore be regarded as the most faithful extant representative of the original *Laozi* text.” (Boltz 1982, p. 99)

It is worth noting here that, in terms of “our oldest witness”, the Guodian *Laozi* is itself substantially older than the Mawangdui *Laozi*.

Nonetheless, because of the absence of the original text and the large number of textual variations seen in all later editions of the *Daodejing*, it was convenient to consider the movement from the original text to the later editions as one from clarity and coherence to dissonance and variation. Adhering to the sinological tenet that later editions invariably mystify the clarity of the original text, Roth writes that “the later an edition appears within a lineage, the greater is the number of textual variants not present in the original edition of that lineage but rather the result of emendation, conflation, poor editing, and so on” (Roth 1993, p. 225). Oddly, however, neither the Mawangdui nor the Guodian *Laozi* brought us any closer to the original text; Liu Xiaogan writes:

[s]cholars, as well as ancient editors, tend to believe that [. . .] the original or earliest text should be the most logical and coherent in style and wording. One may think that that the editors and collators believed that their alterations were restoring the original version and improving on the extant versions. However, the bamboo [Guodian] and silk [Mawangdui] versions give evidence that the earliest versions were not as logical and coherent as later scholars thought and wished. (Liu 2003, p. 382)

As Liu recognized, the excavated manuscripts are rife with variations, even when just compared to each other. The strikingness of some of these variations compel reconsideration of many of the most fundamental notions established in the transmitted editions of the *Daodejing*.

One such fundamental notion is from *Daodejing* chapter 25, that the constant Dao “does not change” (*bugai* 不改). Its earliest rendition is found in the Guodian *Laozi*; it states that the Dao “stands on its own and does not *hai*” 獨立不亥. The primary reference of *hai* is to one of the twelve Terrestrial Branches, but as Scott Cook notes, the Mawangdui *Laozi* writes *hai* with the jade radical, the Beida *Laozi* writes it with the dog radical, Ding Yuanzhi interprets it with the earth radical in the sense of “limitless”, Liu Xinfang interprets it with the speech radical in the sense of “dual”, and Donald Harper interprets it with the sun radical in the sense of “unique” (Cook 2012, p. 46). The meaning of *hai* here is anything but decided.

The Fu Yi, Heshang Gong, and Wang Bi editions, among others, in fact do write “does not change” (*bugai* 不改), but this interpretation is already permeated with the metaphysics that follows from identifying the Dao as an “unchanging” substantive entity to begin with; its use demonstrates a textual transformation that reflects a Huang-Lao metaphysical philosophy of the Dao that is in many ways antithetical to Laozi’s earlier phenomenological philosophy of the Dao. Recognizing the difficulty of reading *buhai*, as a quality of the constant Dao, to mean *bugai* 不改 (“not changing”), Roger Ames and David Hall write: “[w]hile ‘does not change’ [*bugai*] might fall within the semantic tolerance of *gai* [改], this translation is hard to square generally and not insignificantly with everything else that is said about *dao* in the literature”. (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 210). They consider two variants of *hai*, one with the jade radical, meaning “without counterpart”, as seen in the Mawangdui *Laozi*, and the other with the sun radical, meaning “never complete”, and they write that “perhaps the text is making both of these points—*dao* has no counterpart and is never complete—at the same time” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 210).

The excavated manuscripts demonstrate the unsustainability of the notion that the Dao “does not change”, but this is just one textual instance among many that seriously challenge sinology’s hope for producing a critical edition of the original text of the *Daodejing*, as well as philosophy’s hope for producing an authentic one. Nevertheless, sinology manages these dozen or so early *Daodejing* records in terms of literary theory and historical sequence, and it is important to see how it does so before turning to the somewhat different methods of *Laozi* Studies.

4. Sinology and the Recension Category

Sinological tools and methods employed in the production of textual histories of early Chinese works are already complex, but their application to the early editions of the *Daodejing* is particularly fraught since none of them are identifiable with the original text. The findings of Harold Roth’s (1993) essay, written after the discovery of the Mawangdui *Laozi* but before the discoveries of the Guodian and the Beida *Laozis*, continue to provide standard understandings of the early textual history of the *Daodejing*. This sinological understanding is worth discussing because it can be taken as both complement and counterpoint to that of *Laozi* Studies.

Roth discusses a set of basic sinological categories applied to Chinese writings that begins with the *text*, which he defines as “the unique complex and expression of ideas of an author or authors” (Roth 1993, p. 225). This definition only slightly diverges from Merriam-Webster’s noted above, which more clearly identifies a text with “a written work”, seemingly excluding oral texts, and the reference in Roth’s definition to “an author” also directly implies that the text is a written artefact; thus, sinology has some difficulty accounting for originally oral texts such as the *Daodejing*, which are, by definition, not written.

In the best-case scenario, the text is directly present in the words and form of the *original text* written by a specific author(s) at a specific time(s). The complications in the case of the *Daodejing* are multiplied, not only because there is no original text available,

but also because scholars have no clear idea about its words and form. Looking just at their forms, we can note that the Mawangdui *Laozi* in 81 chapters, and the Beida *Laozi* in 77 chapters place the *De* section first, as does Yan Zun's edition. The Xiang'er edition places the *Dao* section first, but it is without chapter divisions. The editions by Heshang Gong and Wang Bi, which also place the *Dao* section first, have the standard division of 81 chapters, but some of their chapter divisions and sequences differ from the Mawangdui *Laozi*. Finally, only Heshang Gong's edition has chapter titles (although they were likely added after the Song dynasty).

No matter its words and form, the existence of the original text is guaranteed by the *textual records* that reflect it, which Roth defines as "the actual physical objects in which the forms of the message or states of the text are embodied" (Roth 1993, p. 215), which in this case, are the early *Daodejing* records introduced above. Stand-alone records of the *Daodejing* constitute an *edition* of the text, defined by Roth as "the actual physical record of a particular state of a text" (Roth 1993, p. 221) and as "a distinct record containing a unique state of a text" (Roth 1993, p. 227).

Much like the term *physical record*, the term *edition* is value-neutral and here refers to stand-alone written records of the *Daodejing*, but it is not used for classifying different editions. For that, sinology uses a different category, *recension*, which is a notably literary notion that groups together similar editions and separates dissimilar ones based on their textual features; Roth defines it as "a foundational version of a text that exhibits a distinctive pattern of textual variants and sometimes a unique textual organization and which is often associated with a particular ancient commentary on the text" (Roth 1993, p. 223).

As "revised foundational versions of canonical works" (Roth 1993, p. 222), recensions are not identifiable with the original text, since once it is revised it is no longer original. Standing between an original text and its recensions are redactions, a category that refers to the first or founding written edition of a new recension, and "each recension of a text began as a distinct redaction" (Roth 1993, p. 224). Roth makes an interesting observation: "[i]n the vast majority of cases in early Chinese philosophical literature, the redaction that contained the very first record of a recension is no longer extant. Although I have not been able to examine this question in detail, one possible exception might be the case of the Mawangdui recension of the *Laozi*" (Roth 1993, p. 225).

As a "canonical work", the different recensions of the *Daodejing* are primarily distinguished by their "textual variants [and] textual organization". Sinologists use the recension category to group or separate the various editions, without that recension being defined or identified by any edition; Roth writes that "a recension is a foundational state of a text, but it is not a 'record', that is, an actual physical object" (Roth 1993, p. 224). He explains this by writing that a recension "is a version of a text that can persist through many generations of editions [but] a recension itself is not an edition: it is . . . a foundational state of a text that is contained in its many different records. Hence the Mawangdui recension of the *Laozi* is contained in both manuscripts A and B" (Roth 1993, p. 224).

Roth recognizes four distinct early *Daodejing* recensions: the Mawangdui recension that contains the two Mawangdui editions, the Fu Yi recension that contains the much later Fu Yi and Fan Yingyuan editions, the Heshang Gong recension that contains the Yan Zun, Heshang Gong, Wang Bi, and the much later Su Tan editions, and the Xiang'er recension that contains the Xiang'er edition. In this way, sinology relies on the recension as its principal category that organizes and accounts for these several editions based on strictly textual features, which ought to be sufficient for producing a reasonable textual history of the *Daodejing*, if only we had a clearer idea of the words and form of its original text.

There is only one text of any given work, such that any two texts, no matter how similar, represent two different works. The textual history of a work becomes an object of research only when the text itself is written or otherwise recorded; especially in the modern age, an author's original text is transmitted through reproductions of its first or revised critical editions. Transmitted editions of early Chinese texts dating from the early Western Han and before are normally revised redactions initially produced in close

relationship with their original texts. Based on “a distinctive pattern of textual variants and sometimes a unique textual organization”, as judged in comparative relation to other editions, occasionally there appears a new edition of a text whose words and forms are so distanced from previous existing editions that sinology distinguishes them according to their recension.

First there is the original text, and it transmits through different recensions. A recension can be populated by any number of editions that share the same variants and organization. When a new and different edition appears or is produced, sinology calls it a redaction, “a synonym for edition”, that Roth defines as “a new edition, created from one or more ancestors, that exhibits a unique format, a unique arrangement of text and commentary, and certain characteristic textual variations . . . Remembering that a recension is a foundational state of a text, but that it is not a ‘record’, that is, an actual physical object, we can say that each recension of a text began as a distinct redaction” (Roth 1993, p. 224).

The characteristic features of a new redaction, its unique textual variations, can establish a new recension if they remain consistent in succeeding editions. Nevertheless, grouping similar editions according to the recension category reveals the contours of a work’s textual history, but it does not reveal the different interpretations of it that are inseparable, as both cause and effect, from the production of new redactions that establish new recensions.

Redactions are also often further distinguished by signature commentaries, which, taken by themselves, are already virtually sufficient for distinguishing, for example, the Xiang’er recension from the Heshang Gong. Such commentaries, when they exist, invariably display the textual interpretations standing behind new redactions, in two ways. First, they provide concise definitions or explanations for discrete terms in the text as the author of the commentary would like them to be understood, and second, they also provide the writer’s total interpretation of the text as a whole; they are a central component of the hermeneutical horizon, which is the primary concern of *Laozi* Studies. Its focus is on the hermeneutical horizon, which makes it complementary and counterpoint to sinology, since, next to being limited to written editions, sinology’s recension category neither accounts for how the text was interpreted nor who was doing the interpretation.

5. The Original Text of the *Daodejing*

The text itself, understood as “the unique complex and expression of ideas of an author”, is the foundation of sinological studies. The best demonstration of a text is the original text, but if it is either absent or unclear, then sinology turns to revised critical editions as the “best approximation of the authorial original by careful analysis of the extant testimony to that text” (Roth 1993, p. 215). However, the words and forms of the early *Daodejing* editions are not neatly identifiable with those of the original text, and without it, sinology’s ability to manage the text is made exponentially more complicated. If the origins of an oral text are proximate to its earliest transcriptions, then the complications are minor, but if there is a long separation between them, as with the *Daodejing*, then they are major.

These issues make us question the text itself: what kind of a thing is it? Roth notes that “[t]he Mawangdui manuscripts are, at the very least, editions of the *Laozi*; they are not texts [. . .] There is only one ‘text.’ It may—and invariably does—change over time; it is transformed into the many states contained in the records that are its editions” (Roth 1993, p. 221). A text is not a physical object, it only becomes one upon being recorded, and there are two senses to its non-physicality: one is as the original text, the other is as the “one text” that changes over time, in other words, the received text or *textus receptus*. Both senses refer to the same text but from different perspectives, and when the original text is virtually identical to the received text, they are indistinguishable. However, this is not the case with the *Daodejing*. Many visible features of the original text, as far as we can tell, starkly differ from the received text, the most important of which is the excavated manuscripts’ use of *heng* 恒 to describe the Dao in contrast to all later editions that uniformly use *chang*

常 to describe it, showing both the identification of the original with the received text, as well as the differences between them. The political reason for this substitution was that the term *heng* became taboo when Emperor Wen, whose name was Liu Heng 劉恆, ascended the throne in 180 BCE, but it also reflected a philosophical shift from the original phenomenology of the Yangsheng *Daodejing* to the derived metaphysics of the Huang-Lao *Daodejing* (this is a central topic of analysis in Michael 2021).

The category of received text refers to the text as we have inherited it through its recensions, and more specifically to “the authoritative source that only bold scholars dared to question”, Bedier’s “best-text”, and LeBlanc’s “best ancient edition” (Roth 1993, pp. 223–24). The notion of the received text as “the best text” directs our attention to certain privileged editions, for example, the Xiang’er edition that represents the received text of the Xiang’er recension, and the Heshang Gong edition that represents the received text of Heshang Gong recension.

Despite the *Daodejing*’s representation in physical records, its text remains a non-physical object, and because there is no clear idea about it, modern studies do not clearly discuss it. Still, the syncretic account locates the original text after the Guodian *Laozi* and at the end of the Warring States, when its collection of sayings was initially compiled by community-less editors, significantly different from an author’s individual composition, whereas the synthetic account locates the original text before the Guodian *Laozi* and at the end of the Spring and Autumn, when its body of sage teachings initially began to orally circulate within an interpretive community before they were first transcribed into a complete written edition centuries later.

Although the stubborn differences of these two accounts make consensus on the original text contentious, thirty years of continuing research on the Guodian *Laozi* is finding that the original text of the *Daodejing* almost certainly predates it. Among the first Western scholars to address its ancient orality, Kristofer Schipper wrote that “a good part of the *Daodejing* comes from an ancient oral tradition” (Schipper 1993, p. 185). Alan Chan makes the interesting observation that, just on its own, recognition of the text’s original orality is already sufficient to debunk the syncretic account; he writes:

[t]he idea of an oral tradition that preceded the writing of the *Daodejing* has gained wide acceptance in recent years; yet it is not always clear what that entails. On the one hand, it could lend support to W. C. Chan’s view that Laozi’s disciples kept alive the teachings of the master orally before some later student(s) committed them to writing. On the other hand, it could also mean that redactor(s) or compiler(s) had access to disparate sayings originated from and circulated in different contexts. (Chan 2002, p. 5)

Nevertheless, it is contemporary research on the Guodian *Laozi* that dictates the terms of what we can know of the ancient orality surrounding the *Daodejing* approached within the totality of its early textual history. To investigate the text in the period before its first written editions is to analyze the prominent features of the ancient orality from which it emerged, and this begins with the recognition of its particular oral features that remain visible even in the received text, whose condensed points include the following:

1. Interlocking Parallel Style.
2. Rhymed passages integrated with unrhymed portions of text.
3. Absence of narration in relation to persons, places, or times.
4. Restricted vocabulary.
5. Generalized present except for depictions of cosmogony.
6. Introductions, transitions, or summaries that frame units of verse, often in tetrasyllables.
7. Rhythm of rhymed tetrasyllabic lines.
8. Literary gestures of questioning and exclamation and use of the first person.
9. Semantic parallelism and/or antithesis with corresponding words in adjacent lines.
10. Patterns of repetition of individual words or chains of words in consecutive lines.
11. Foregrounding of dichotomies.

12. Paradox.
13. Binoms that are mostly limited to descriptions of cosmic and natural phenomena.

Each of these features of the original orality of the Laozi *Daodejing* is already present in the Guodian *Laozi*. Although they mostly concern the words of the text, of equal importance for understanding the ancient orality of the *Daodejing* is the form it took. Thus, next to demonstrating the stability of the internal content of the *Daodejing*, its early records also demonstrate their structural fluidity, seen in the order of the *Dao* and *De* sections, the sequence of chapters, and where they begin and end. These differences imply that the early *Daodejing* consisted of different and movable pieces that had become mostly stabilized by the time of the Mawangdui *Laozi* when they were recognized as independent “chapters” (*zhang* 章).

Laozi Studies recognizes an authoritative source that initially articulated, or otherwise produced, separate pieces of the text; the tradition identifies this source with Laozi, a title that can refer either to a single individual (Old Master) or a collective (Old Masters). The text’s initial production likely did not occur at a single time, and its content needed to be gathered and synthesized into a manageable form, able to be regularly reproduced in its oral transmissions, regardless of whether the order of the *Dao* and *De* sections or the order of chapters had yet been stabilized.

The Guodian *Laozi* clarifies that the different pieces of the *Daodejing* text, consisting primarily of numerous discrete units of thought, are the vehicle through which the text presents its ideas. In his study of the Guodian manuscripts, Dirk Meyer recognized two main types of early Chinese philosophical writings. The first he calls “authority-based texts”, which present their arguments in progressive step-by-step fashion where particular ideas serve as building blocks in the construction of relatively complete philosophical positions concerning, for example, virtue or ritual. The second he calls “context-dependent texts”, in which the discrete units of thought “put forward one isolated concern [and] every new unit reflects a different concern . . . ” (Meyer 2009, p. 836). The *Daodejing* falls into the latter category because it does not attempt to produce a complete argument on any single theme, but rather weaves a vast tapestry of individual units of thought together, from which emerges a canvas of total meaning.

The discrete units of thought, orally transmitted in the form of what Meyer calls “movable modules”, or manageably transmissible forms of the units of thought, were packaged and polished by the interpretive community. An important element of this was the incorporation of introductions, transitions, or summaries often in tetrasyllabic forms of four characters (points 6 and 7 above) that framed the units of thought contained in the modules. As modules do not link as progressive steps in a formal argument, they remained formally separate from each other, thus there could be no ordained sequence from one module to the next. They represent the basic measure of the original text of the *Daodejing* in terms of both words (the unit of thought) and form (the movable module), and they supplied the basis for the later organization of the received text into 81 “chapters” (*zhang*).

Early Chinese texts predominantly circulated in the form of *pian* 篇 (section, book, volume); Liao Mingchun and Li Cheng write, “[i]n comparison with the works of other pre-Qin masters such as the 71 *pian* of the *Mozi*, the 52 *pian* of the *Zhuangzi*, and the 55 *pian* of the *Han Feizi*, the *Daodejing* is much shorter with only two *pian* and 5000 words. Thus compiling it was the easiest and the time of compilation was the earliest” (Liao and Cheng 2017, p. 153). Explaining the *pian* sequence of the Mawangdui *Laozi* that differs from the received text, they write, “[t]he *Daodejing* at its earliest was not an integrated monograph, not a work written at one time and place, but rather a collection of Laozi’s sayings. The two *pian*, “*Dao*” and “*De*”, were originally two independent parts that Laozi wrote at different times, and that circulated separately. There was originally no fixed order between them” (Liao and Cheng 2017, p. 151).

Between the *Daodejing*’s oral origins and its transmission in the form of a full-fledged oral text in two sections, there stands the question of the text’s authority. Its original authority originated with “Laozi”, the masters or master who initially articulated the

separate units of thought, deemed worthy of monumentalization by those to whom they were addressed, namely the interpretive community. Once the units of thought were packaged, bundled, and embedded in movable modules, and thus separated from the original source, the authority transferred to the units of thought themselves, whereas the masters from that point forward acquired a different authority based not on their articulations of additional units of thought, but on their position as teachers and interpreters of those already existing ones.

In addition to being movable and without fixed sequence, the modules containing the units of thought were subject to the sorts of textual changes examined above by Liu Xiaogan and Wang Bo, but the high number of textual “variants” found in the Guodian *Laozi* (in comparison to later editions) were the result of the oral nature of the text, in which accurate spelling was of less import than accurate pronunciation: a good number of the Guodian *Laozi* “variants” do not concern variant words with different meanings, but rather the same base character with variant radicals, which could only be recognizable when the oral text was being transcribed into written editions. In addition, the Guodian *Laozi* is written in an ancient script, which itself is not fully understood by modern readers. So “textual variants” is not the right phrase for this earliest known *Daodejing* record, because there is nothing contemporaneous to compare it against. If not for these considerations, then the Guodian *Laozi* could nicely serve as the base text against which later texts diverged.

In the movement from the oral text to its first transcriptions to its canonization, the continuity of meanings in the *Daodejing* was not disrupted but remained consistent: virtually nothing seen in the Guodian *Laozi* is not seen in later editions, and the portions of the received text not seen in the Guodian *Laozi* also did not challenge its overall canvas of coherency, as judged by the standards of its context-dependent teachings. This speaks to the integrity of the early interpretive community that kept the oral transmission of the text relatively stable until written editions superseded oral transmissions.

If the origins of the *Daodejing* are placed at the end of the Spring and Autumn, it means that the text orally circulated for several centuries before its first surviving written records in the Guodian *Laozi*. During that long timespan, it is certainly possible that the text may have otherwise been incidentally transcribed, but if so, those transcriptions played no apparent role in the early textual history of the *Daodejing*, and there are no records attesting to them. Either way, it took yet another long span of time, from the Guodian *Laozi* to the court of Lü Buwei around 249 BCE, for the teachings of Laozi to be recorded into written editions that were thereupon publicly circulated.

From its origins in the Spring and Autumn to Lü Buwei, the original interpretive community maintained primary control of the content and interpretation of the oral text until it was introduced into the public domain, the result of Lü Buwei’s conferences. The *Lüshi Chunqiu* is the massive work that resulted from those conferences, and it is the first written text that mentions Laozi and discusses his philosophy. However, it oddly does so without directly quoting anything from the *Daodejing*, which strongly implies that even at that time, the text of the *Daodejing* had not yet been recorded into a written edition.

By the time that the *Daodejing* first began to circulate in written editions at the end of the Warring States, it had already been in oral circulation for many centuries. This places a very long gap between its origins and the Mawangdui *Laozi*, which currently stands as the earliest complete edition of the *Daodejing*. Therefore, we might now be in a position to ask two poignant questions: once the textual history of the *Daodejing* reaches Mawangdui, can its further textual history be safely placed in the care of sinology and managed with the recension category? Does understanding that textual history not urge a deeper exploration of the role and identity of the interpretive community(s) through categories other than those of literary criticism?

6. Laozi Studies and the Version Category

Sinology understands the early textual history of the *Daodejing* in terms of redactions and recensions, but because it remains within the text, uncovering lines of relationships

between the different recensions does not come naturally to it. For example, the Mawangdui recension was born, and it died with the two editions of the Mawangdui *Laozi*; about four hundred years later, there separately appeared the Xiang'er recension that was also born, but died with the Xiang'er edition; but then the Heshang Gong recension, with its Heshang Gong edition, survived by acquiring the status of *textus receptus* ("best ancient text"). Sinologically understanding the relations between them is a textual affair that is not by itself compelled to consider other extra-textual social and cultural trends which are able to uncover the hermeneutical horizons within which those recensions moved; this is the domain of *Laozi* Studies.

The redaction category used for analyzing lines of textual transmission, which the *Daodejing* has undergone, can only apply once the text has been committed to written editions, but the earlier oral *Daodejing* is not so easily contained within them. Sinology excels at comparing textual variations between recensions, but it is less effective at analyzing them in relation to the interpretive communities that made the variations, because such connections are extra-textual. Sinology looks upon textual alterations in later editions as either improving or worsening the text, but the editions that were produced cannot be separated from the interpretive communities that produced them.

Laozi Studies gives as much attention to historical interpretations of the *Daodejing* as it does to the text itself. Instead of approaching editions in terms of recensions, it relies on a different category to group or separate different ones, namely the version, because this label identifies an edition by referencing it with its interpretive community in the first instance, rather than to its textual recension. *Laozi* Studies seeks to uncover the particular hermeneutical principles that undergird a community's textual interpretation, the analysis of which is greatly facilitated by commentaries appended to the edition, as with the Yan Zun, Heshang Gong, and Xiang'er commentaries (the excavated manuscripts are without commentary).

When used to characterize any given community, the Daoism label proves tricky and contentious, but a less ambitious framing of the historical field under consideration can be more simply described as "*Daodejing* communities", for which I recognize three important ones: Yangsheng, Huang-Lao, and Tianshi. Although they can be and often are tagged with the Daoism label, as in "Yangsheng Daoism", "Huang-Lao Daoism", and "Tianshi Daoism" ("Celestial Master Daoism"), they do not share a common Daoist identity but a common *Daodejing* identity, related by nothing more than a shared commitment to the text. Nevertheless, this commitment to the text necessarily entails a commitment to its philosophy, for which the term "philosophy of the Dao" seems most appropriate (Michael 2005). Each community interpreted that philosophy differently, as can be determined through analysis of their editions with guidance from their commentaries, when available.

There is just one text of the *Daodejing* that comes to us in three early versions that are recognizable by their editions: the Yangsheng Daoist version reflected in the Guodian and Mawangdui editions, the Huang-Lao Daoist version represented by the Mawangdui, Yan Zun, and Heshang Gong editions, and the Tianshi Daoist version represented by the Xiang'er edition.⁵ None of these texts are particularly controversial, since the Guodian and Mawangdui *Laozis* come to us as excavated manuscripts and the Yan Zun, Heshang Gong, and Xiang'er editions were transmitted together with their appended commentaries serving as a check against scribal error and other kinds of textual alteration.

The *Daodejing*'s philosophy of the Dao presents a Dao-centered worldview, but the different versions interpret it differently, and this provides a comparative baseline against which to distinguish them. The Yangsheng version concerns the hermit-sage and his/her *yangsheng* bodily cultivation, and it was directed to other specialists in bodily techniques, primarily masters and disciples. The Huang-Lao version concerns the sage-ruler and his governing policies, and it was directed to other specialists in government, primarily statesmen and philosophers. The Tianshi version concerns the Celestial Master and his religious policies, and it was directed to specialists in religion, primarily priests and congregants.

Each version of the *Daodejing* sees the world as generated from the Dao, but their understandings of it are different. The Yangsheng version only celebrates the temporalizing Dao (*heng dao* 恆道), which the sage embodies by successful *yangsheng* bodily cultivation, thereby assisting the transformation of the world into a natural harmony (Michael 2015). In the Huang-Lao version, nothingness is identified with the constant Dao (*chang dao* 常道, which reflects a metaphysical connotation of *chang*); it does not speak but can be known through its natural ordering principles, which the sage-ruler is to implement in the political realm, thereby assisting in the transformation of the world into in political harmony. In the Tianshi version, Lord Lao 老君, who is the deified form of Laozi himself, is identified with the eternal Dao (*chang dao* 常道, which reflects a different, theological connotation of *chang*), who will save the congregants from the conflagrations soon to engulf the world, and the Celestial Master is responsible for guiding the people to that end.

Sinology discusses “patterns of textual variants” that are easily documented by comparing their editions, but understanding their deeper significance requires an understanding of the underlying hermeneutical principles that motivated them. The commentaries make such understandings much easier, so that when the Xiang'er edition says that the Dao speaks, the Xiang'er commentary explains why, and when the Heshang Gong edition says that the Dao cannot be spoken, the Heshang Gong commentary also explains why. In other words, the Xiang'er edition and commentary systematically announce the “religious” meanings of its Tianshi version, and the Heshang Gong edition and commentary systematically announce the “political” meanings of its Huang-Lao version; being an oral text without a complete written edition or commentary, the Yangsheng version has less opportunity to demonstrate its “bodily” meanings, but in any case, the task is not impossible.

Approaching the early editions of the *Daodejing* in terms of their version opens up several additional dimensions to its textual history. The perspective of the recension category is exclusively directed to written editions, whereas the version category allows multiple other perspectives on the *Daodejing*'s textual history to come forth, the most important of which concern the interpretive communities.

Since a text does not interpret itself, the different versions are primarily distinguished by their identification with an interpretive community that possesses the authority to either alter or interpret it in the best way that they see fit. We can assess these versions according to the terms of their hermeneutical principles: those of Yangsheng Daoism center on the bodily cultivation of the sage; those of Huang-Lao Daoism center on the political governance of the state; and those of Tianshi Daoism center on the religious orthodoxy of the church. One text in three versions.

7. Conclusions: The *Daodejing* and Early Daoism

The Laozi Studies approach adopted here supports the main elements of the synthetic account of the original text of the *Daodejing*, namely its oral antiquity, its philosophical coherence, and the presence of an interpretive community standing behind it. We refer to that community as Yangsheng Daoism: “Yangsheng” because *yangsheng* bodily cultivation appears as its primary concern, and “Daoism” because of its profound connection to the *Daodejing*. This paper has discussed two other Daoist communities, Huang-Lao Daoism and Tianshi Daoism, both of which also acquire their “Daoism” label by way of their direct connection to the *Daodejing*.

These three early Chinese communities are immediately distinguished based on the version of the *Daodejing* that they produced; furthermore, the Yan Zun and Heshang Gong commentaries to the Huang-Lao version and the Xiang'er commentary to Tianshi versions reinforce those distinctions, and the absence of a commentary to the Yangsheng version does not mean there are not other ways to distinguish it from those two.

The single-most important distinguishing feature of the Yangsheng version is its use of the term *heng*, whose ancient meaning coheres around “temporalization”, rather than *chang*, to characterize the Dao. This significantly differs from the Huang-Lao and Tianshi versions, both of which use the term *chang*, whose meaning by the Han dynasty had

come to coalesce around “constancy/permanence/eternity”, to characterize the Dao. The Huang-Lao version interprets *chang dao* in terms of “constancy” in the sense of constant laws, and the Tianshi version interprets *chang dao* in terms of “eternity” in the sense of divinity. These recognitions allow us to characterize the Yangsheng version of the *Daodejing* as a phenomenology, the Huang-Lao version as a metaphysics, and the Tianshi version as a theology.

There is another important participant in the field of early Daoism, namely the *Zhuangzi*, which deserves mention. The thought of the work, or at least the “Inner Chapters” and other sections directly related to them, is both an expression and an extension of Laozi’s philosophy of the Dao, specifically the philosophy of the temporalizing Dao; however, it replaces *yangsheng* bodily cultivation with *zuowang* spirit cultivation, and we distinguish it from Yangsheng Daoism by referring to it as Zuowang Daoism.

Approaching the *Daodejing* through the version category rather than the recension category helps to clarify our understanding of the early textual history of the *Daodejing*, but more than that, it also provides a kind of map for understanding the many different forms of early Daoism seen in historical relation to each other, and also for understanding the central position, in relational and comparative context, of the *Daodejing* for all of them: Yangsheng Daoism, Zuowang Daoism, Huang-Lao Daoism, and Tianshi Daoism.

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Notes

- ¹ The term “Lao” in the phrase “Laozi Studies” refers not to the man but to the text, which is also called the *Daodejing*, for which the full Chinese title is *Laozi Daodejing*. Accordingly, in the Chinese academy, there is no difference between calling it the *Laozi* or the *Daodejing*, but referring to it as the *Laozi* is more common. In the Western academy, on the other hand, referring to it as the *Laozi* is relatively more common among sinologists, who are, in any case, more focused on the “original” text, and referring to it as the *Daodejing* is relatively more common among philosophers, who are, in any case, more focused on the “authentic” text (the difference is explained in a later section of this paper). There is an important historical point that can clarify the distinction: the title *Daodejing* explicitly recognizes the text as a *jing* 經, a “classic”, a status it acquired during the reign of Han dynasty Emperor Wen (r. 180–157 BCE), and it was the imperial librarian, Liu Xiang (77–6 BCE), who edited and arranged the first-known canonized edition that received the imperial imprimatur, thereby laying the basis for what is often called the received text. Although this canonized edition was still open to textual changes in terms of its words and its organization, for the most part, transmitted editions from that time on had much less wriggle room. Before that canonization, what we have are a number of excavated manuscripts that are often distinguished by their place of excavation, but nowhere in the Chinese or the Western academy are any of these excavated manuscripts recognized as a “classic”: they are systematically referred to with the title *Laozi*, as with the Guodian *Laozi* or the Mawangdui *Laozi*. This paper supports and recommends maintaining this distinction between referring to the pre-canonized, excavated editions with the title *Laozi*, and referring to the post-canonized, transmitted editions with the title *Daodejing*. Nevertheless, when referring to the text globally, without distinguishing excavated from transmitted editions, I use the title *Daodejing*, as for example in the phrase “the textual history of the *Daodejing*”.
- ² Introducing the *Daodejing* as the product of an initially oral tradition may appear to doom, once again, the quest for the original text for two reasons: first, there is no record of that oral text, and second, there is no way to gauge its identity with or proximity to the original text, for which there is also no record. Nevertheless, the goal of this study is not to definitively locate that original text, but rather how to forge a viable approach to it.
- ³ Although it should be noted that philosophical approaches may be more pluralistic than described, Jiang’s study remains an authoritative source. Many philosophers do acknowledge the historical and archaeological complications of deciphering a singular, “authentic” *Daodejing*, but this is just one philosophical project among others, albeit perhaps a common one. Philosophers are, certainly, as interested as sinologists in finding ways to interpret the *Daodejing* that are more or less viable. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
- ⁴ Heshang Gong did not compose the Heshang edition and commentary to the *Daodejing*, and the term *xiang'er* does not refer to a person (it means that the Dao is “thinking of you”), but I use them in this way for reading convenience.

- ⁵ This refers only to early versions; recalling the comments of Du Daojian quoted above, there were many more versions to come, beginning with the Xuanxue version of the *Daodejing* that is most famously represented by the Wang Bi edition.

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Article

The Hierarchy of Authorship in the Hermeneutics of the *Daodejing*

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Abstract: The question of the authorship of the *Daodejing*, otherwise known as the *Laozi*, is a hotly contested debate, and one's stance on the existence and role of the author can have potential implications for one's interpretation of the text. This paper explores how notions of authorship of a text influence, often unconsciously, a reader's interpretation such that the possible meaning generated within that text becomes limited, reduced, or terminated. Three hermeneutic frameworks, Authorial intentionalism, reader-oriented readings, and intention of the text, are problematized, revealing both how they contribute to the production of meaning, but more importantly how a lack of critical awareness of one's own hermeneutic stance regarding authorship might terminate potential significance. These hermeneutic frameworks are applied to the work of contemporary scholars and translators of the *Laozi* in order to assess how implicit notions of authorship contribute to strengths and weaknesses in interpretations of the *Laozi* as it regards the production of meaning and significance. Being critical in nature, this paper is meant only to reveal how the reader's unreflexive engagement with their attitude toward authorship can lead to problematic results in interpretation and translation of any work in general and the *Laozi* in particular.

Keywords: *Laozi*; hermeneutics; authorial intentionalism; reader-oriented text

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1. Introduction

There are few works of literature whose authorship is more debated than the *Laozi* 老子, particularly within the last fifty years. The traditional view regarding the authorship of the *Laozi* is derived from scattered references in Pre-Qin and Han dynasty texts to a figure referred to as Laozi, Lao Dan 老聃 or 老耽, and Li Er 李耳 often portrayed promoting central themes found in the *Laozi*. The *Lüshi Chunqiu* 吕氏春秋 (Master Lü's Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals) for example, describes "Lao Dan esteems *rou* 柔 (suppleness, softness, flexibility)" (Zhang et al. 2011, p. 526), the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang) portrays Lao Dan as having recognized the interrelated nature of binaries such that "life and death [is] a single thread," (Ziporyn 2009, p. 35), and in the *Liezi* 列子 (Book of Master Lie) he is depicted directly quoting the *Laozi* "the soft and weak are the disciples of life". (Yang 1979, p. 82). The most commonly cited source attributing the authorship of the *Laozi* to a historical figure is Sima Qian's 司马迁 (145–86 B.C.E.) description of Laozi in his *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記). Despite this account being written some four hundred years after the historical figure Laozi supposedly existed, this is the widely accepted story of the *Laozi*'s authorship within China and without. For those who do not accept the story of Laozi as author of the titular manuscript, many still maintain that the extant editions of the *Laozi* point to an urtext from which all received editions are ultimately derived. Others are more skeptical of the idea of a single person named Laozi having written the eponymous work, the majority of whom support variations of accretion models regarding the coming-to-be of the received manuscript, or "an edited accumulation of fragments and bits drawn from a wide variety of sources" (Hansen 1992, p. 201). Over the past fifty years, manuscripts related to the *Laozi* have been unearthed, most importantly the Mawangdui

马王堆 silk texts dating to around 168 BCE found in 1973 and the Guodian 郭店 bamboo slips dating to around 300 BCE found in 1993, adding fuel to the debate concerning the historicity of Laozi-the-man and the existence of an ancient urtext.

Disregarding the veracity of claims for Laozi-the-person having written the *Laozi* or the existence of an ancient urtext, this paper will bracket off questions regarding who authored the text or how it was compiled and reflexively direct our awareness towards how one's stance on the existence of Laozi and his "original intention" behind the text affects one's hermeneutic position when interpreting it. With this reflexive attitude, the problem of providing a standard for interpretation as it regards notions of authorship will be explored, utilizing hermeneutic theories as they might be applied to interpretations of the *Laozi*. Examples of interpretations from contemporary scholars in the field will help reveal how the quest to discover the author's original meaning or, the other extreme, the complete rejection of authorial intention and historical context might generate or limit the production of meaning within the *Laozi* and influence the reader's (often unconscious) perception of the boundaries of acceptable interpretations. The first hermeneutic model which directly addresses the problem of authorial intention is that of Roland Barthes.

2. Authorial Intentionalism and Its Limits

In his groundbreaking paper *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes¹ implores us to reconsider the role of "the Author"² in relation to the reader's relationship with "the work". This "Author" is not merely the writer of the work, or the empirical author, but is also what that empirical author represents; the historical time period, political context, and the semiotic relationship between signifier and signified which existed when the empirical author penned the work. According to Barthes, not only is the Author always already removed from the reading of the work because of our lack of access to the empirical author's inner thought, historical context, and the immediacy of the process of semiosis, of but also, as Barthes says:

Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'-victory to the critic. (Barthes 1997a, p. 147)

Removing the Author from the work makes deciphering it futile because it simultaneously removes the idea of the Author's intention and final signified. Once the reader relinquishes this presupposition of discovering what the Author *really* meant, as if solving a complicated math problem, the reader also destroys all the limits which this assumption presupposes. The work ceases to have a single, static, "correct" interpretation, which is really not an interpretation at all, but rather a discovering of the authorial intention. Barthes' concept of the Author is closely related to its correlated concept: the work.

"The work" is the product of the Author, the space of actual words-as-signifier into which the Author places their intention, and through which the meaning-as-signified is to be grasped by the reader. Barthes' describes the work thusly:

The work closes on a signified . . . either it is claimed to be evident and the work is then the object of a literal science, of philology, or else it is considered to be secret, ultimate, something to be sought out, and the work then falls under the scope of a hermeneutics, of an interpretation (Marxist, psychoanalytic, thematic, etc.) . . . the Author is reputed the father and owner of his work: literary science therefore teaches *respect* for the manuscript and the author's declared intentions. (Barthes 1997b, p. 158)

The work is the receptacle of the Author's meaning, and the passive reader (or consumer) is meant to search this meaning out and, such as a piece of pottery from an archeological excavation, it should be studied for clues as to how and where the author's intention

lies. Barthes depicts and problematizes the work as being either the object of scientific investigation or a sort of talisman which contains a truth for which the reader must find the correct interpretation. The search for “authorial intention” represented by such notions as “Author” and “work” posit a single, definite, and unchanging meaning within the work and treats the work as a sacred object: sanctity for the Author, deference for the reader.

Bringing attention back to the *Laozi* and the ideas surrounding its authorship, the modern debate within China concerning authorship of the *Laozi* can be traced to late 19th century and early 20th century China’s National Learning (*guoxue* 國學) movement, which included trends in evidential learning (*kaoju xue* 考據學), textual exegesis (*xungu xue* 訓詁學), and “skepticism toward antiquity” (*yigu sichao* 疑古思潮). The influential thinker Zhang Dainian 張岱年 (1909–2004) summarized the positions of major thinkers active in this movement on the time during which Laozi existed or the *Laozi* was compiled as follows:

In the 1920’s skepticism towards antiquity become popular and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 put forward the idea that the *Laozi* was not a work from the Spring and Autumn period. In his *History of Chinese Philosophy*, Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 placed the *Laozi* after the *Mengzi*, but before the *Zhuangzi*. Qian Mu 錢穆 and Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 went even further and placed the text after the *Zhuangzi*. Hu Shi 胡適 and Guo Moruo 郭沫若, however, persisted in the belief that Laozi the person and Confucius were of the same time period and that Laozi was older in years than Confucius . . . In the 1950’s I rethought the problem of the time period in which Laozi lived and realized that The Records of the Historian could not be ignored and once again placed Confucius and Laozi in the same period, Laozi being the elder . . . (Zhang 1992, pp. 74–78)

These changes in the Chinese intellectual community, influenced by western ideas of textual exegesis, represent a move towards more scientific rigor and had a tremendous effect on how Chinese scholars conduct textual research and how they understand the intellectual history of China. Despite this increased emphasis on evidential research which led to suspicion of the *Laozi*’s authorship, the traditional belief regarding the authorship of the *Laozi* is widely maintained to this day in China, whereas in English language literature disbelief and ambivalence is more common. The reader’s position on the authorship of the *Laozi*, whether that be belief in Laozi as author, disbelief, or ambivalence, often carry important implications for one’s interpretation of the text.

As a result of its poetic language, a wider range of possible meanings can be read into the *Laozi* than, for example, *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine, *On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies* by Albert Einstein, or directions to building a cabinet bought at Ikea. Given the dearth of historical information about its authorship, this becomes more complicated by those who read it as a *work* produced by an *Author* whose original intention and meaning must be searched out. This is evidenced by the usage of “*yuanyi*” 原意 (original meaning) commonly used in Chinese literature about the *Laozi*. While belief in the existence of a wise author whose profound wisdom can be found within this work (whether that be the empirical author or Author as a web of contexts) certainly provides a sense of significance and invests it with meaning in many regards, it also leads to a number of implications which limit the reading of a text, especially when dealing with one which has been altered over many years. Placing the position of the Author atop the hierarchy of considerations forces the reader to think of their interpretation as a deciphering of the original intention of the Author. This presumption places limitations on the production of meaning and restricts the many possible interpretations to those which strictly coincide with the historical contexts of the late Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE). Additionally, the earliest accessible version of the *Laozi*, in this case the Guodian bamboo slips, must be valued over and above all other versions as it is the closest to the supposed urtext authored by Laozi. Such attitudes can be found in the work of two contemporary scholars of early Chinese thought, Guo Yi 郭沂 and Chen Guying 陳鼓應.

Guo Yi (b. 1962) believes that there existed an original *Laozi* text authored by Laodan which was altered over the centuries. Guo argues for the superiority of the Guodian bamboo edition over the received editions, citing 26 ways in which the Guodian edition is superior to the received edition. He pays particular attention to passages of the Mawangdui and received versions of the *Laozi* which appear to be critical of the *ru* (儒 Confucians) but which do not contain a sense of criticism in the Guodian bamboo slips, arguing that the *Laozi* should be read as compatible with the traditional Confucian ethos. The received edition and the Mawangdui silk scripts contain lines and chapters which seem to directly criticize traditional *ru* values, such as chapters 18 and 19, “when the great Dao is dispensed with, then there is humanity and righteousness” (Moeller 2007, p. 47) and “abandon humaneness and discard righteousness and the people will return to filial piety and care”. (Moeller 2007, p. 49) Guo Yi argues against this reading citing the Guodian edition.

The bamboo edition does not have pointed language against the *ru* ethical perspective, and those passages in today’s edition which obviously negate the *ru* ethical perspective are either different characters from the bamboo edition or additions and subtractions . . . In today’s edition chapter 19 says “Discard sageliness and get rid of wisdom” and “discard humaneness and get rid of responsibility,” while in the bamboo edition it reads “discard wisdom and get rid of distinctions” and “discard artificiality and get rid of deliberation”. With one character being different the thought is completely opposite. (Guo 1998, p. 51)

The existence of passages which appear to be critical of the *ru* ethos poses somewhat of a problem for those who believe that the *Laozi* was written in the late Spring and Autumn period by a teacher of Confucius. The older Guodian version of the *Laozi* being uncritical of the *ru* can serve as evidence for the existence of a Spring and Autumn Period author or urtext because the lack of criticism might point to the original text having been written before the *rujia* 儒家 (Confucian school) and *daojia* 道家 (Daoist school) became distinct or even oppositional schools. Reading the Guodian edition of the *Laozi* as uncritical of the *ru* is still a contentious issue, with some scholars arguing that the Mawangdui and received editions are more specifically anti-Mencian, while the Guodian edition is critical of the pre-Mencian *ru* orthodoxy. (Henricks 2000).

Such an interpretation is constructed around the belief that an author or urtext existed prior to the traditionally dated *lunyu* 論語 (Analects of Confucius), which compels the reader to disregard any interpretation which reads the *Laozi* as critical of the *ru*. The idea of accepting a single ancient author while recognizing the lack of hard evidence for this supposition (one could call it an act of rational faith) does indeed contribute to making significance of the text insofar as it imbues it with a sense of sanctity. However, the idea that the oldest edition of the text is necessarily more valuable or more “right” than later editions because it is closer in terms of language and ideas to the presumed original work dismisses later editions. This prevents the reader from accessing new meanings generated from an evolving text which has responded to new cultural stimuli and developed new language and concepts as a result. Guo Yi’s belief in the Guodian edition’s temporal proximity to an original urtext written by the ancient author Laozi colors his belief in the superiority of the Guodian edition. This in turn influences his interpretation such that the Guodian version must necessarily be superior to later editions which are more distant in content from the sanctity of that imbued by the original Author. It is perhaps due to the importance he places on finding the author’s intention that he rejects interpretations of the *Laozi* which would place the text in some sort of hostile discourse with the *ru*.

Similar attitudes can be found in the work of another esteemed scholar, Chen Guying (b. 1935), who holds the belief that Laozi and pre-Han Daoism had many similarities with the *ru* and, such as the *ru*, wished to affirm humaneness and positively effect society. Defending this view of Laozi’s original intention, he writes that chapter 19’s promotion of abandoning humaneness and righteousness was an alteration by later scholars.

The reality is, however, that the heated antagonism between competing schools of thought, particularly Daoism and Confucianism, did not appear until the

later part of the warring states period. If this chapter attacks the Confucian, and possibly Mohist, advocacy of humaneness and responsibility, as many scholars have claimed, then the original words of Laozi were altered, a theory that fits well historically. The transmitted Laozi's push against sages, humaneness, and responsibility is most likely a mid-to-late Warring States addition. The original *Laozi*, on which the Guodian editions were based, lacks such a focused statement against Kongzi (Confucius). The additions occurred in accord with popular post-Zhuangzi Daoist arguments. (Chen 2015, p. 68)

This is another example of how attachment to an Authorial intentionalist perspective of the *Laozi*, or any work that went through a historical evolution, can lead one to believe there is a more 'correct' edition amongst its various incarnations. Although both Guo Yi and Chen Guying use the same chapters of the *Laozi* for their arguments, the Chen Guying passage quoted above highlights another way in which an Authorial intentionalist perspective can limit the possible meaning found within the work.

Whereas Guo Yi's attachment to the Authorial intentionalist perspective leads to a stronger emphasis on the *elevation* of the oldest edition of the *Laozi* to which we have access (i.e., the Guodian edition), for similar reasons Chen Guying emphasizes the *depreciation* of the later editions as alterations of "the original *Laozi*, on which the Guodian editions were based". Rather than understand the Mawangdui and received editions as valuable instances of a work which emerged through the evolution of the text and from which new meaning and significance can be generated, Chen devalues them as corruptions of an ancient urtext which should be omitted because they are a few more degrees of separation away from the supposed original text written by the supremely wise Laozi. Regardless of any distinctions between Guo and Chen's approach, they lead to the same result in the prioritization of the Guodian version over others. In Chen's commentary to chapter 18 he advocates rejecting the lines found in the Mawangdui and received versions which appear to criticize the values that would become associated with traditional Confucianism on the grounds that "these phrases are not present in the Guodian Bamboo Slips version and they should be omitted. The superfluous addition of these phrases is probably the result of the influence exerted by the theories of extremist followers of Zhuangzi in the late Warring States period, who preposterously added them to the text". (Chen 2020, p. 139) Furthermore, by regarding the traditional model of Authorship as the paramount standard of interpretation, the text must necessarily be strictly constrained by a historical, cultural, and political context which renders it of little use to a contemporary reader living in a world which is historically, culturally, and politically vastly different from 6th century BCE China.

This Barthesian critique of "the Author" as applied to the *Laozi* reveals how the reader's assumption that the goal of interpreting the *Laozi* is to discover Laozi's original intent might limit the potential interpretations and possible significance generated by the reader. The elevation of the Guodian edition as the text closest to the ancient urtext forces one to interpret it in such a way that it corresponds with the cultural milieu of 6th century BCE China, the time during which the supposed author lived. It also forces one to devalue all other editions, including the Mawangdui, Heshang Gong, Wang Bi, etc. as alterations and corruptions of the original *Laozi*. Being oriented toward discovering the Author's intention might lead the reader to casually overlook or devalue the meaning inherent in these alterations, alterations which occurred because of real historical, cultural, and political events, in favor of deciphering what Laozi "really meant". Because the Author's intent is the final arbitrator of such a reader's interpretation, the depth of potential meaning found in the text as a result its evolution might be ignored by the monomaniacal seeker of the Author. While the authorial intentionalist hermeneutic position does indeed provide ways which open potential significance within the text, it is also worthwhile to recognize the ways it limits the text's plurality of meanings and reduces it to a work with a single, static interpretation placed within a specific locus of history. Given the problematic nature of searching for the Author's original intent within the work, Barthes offers a way of reading

which opens the reader up to infinite possible meanings within the text which will be referred to as the “reader-oriented Text”.

3. The Reader-Oriented Text and Its Limits

While “the work” is related to “the Author” as that empirical space into which the Author’s intention is deposited, he proposes the notion of “the Text”³ which is related to “the reader” as “a methodological field . . . *the Text is experienced only in an activity of production . . . the Text is radically symbolic: a work conceived, perceived and received in its integrally symbolic nature is a text*”. (Barthes 1997b, p. 159) Rather than regarding the Author as the sole supplier of meaning, Barthes shifts the focus onto the reader, who ultimately is the sole creator of meaning. Although words on the page are being read, the Text cannot be said to have started until the reader begins to *play* with relationship between signifier and signified to produce meaning. Barthes writes:

A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author . . . the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single feild all the traces by which the written text is constituted. (Barthes 1997a, p. 148)

The reader, being unrestricted by the delusion of deciphering the Author’s intention, becomes open to the infinitude of meanings which can be derived from the unstructured intertextuality that occurs in the act of reading. With this newfound freedom, engagement with the text as a “work” transforms into engagement with the process of semiosis itself, or the “Text”. Barthes often describes this act of reading as one which is radically detached from any attempt to read into the text an authorial and historical context, which can be described as a radical reader-oriented hermeneutic stance.⁴

In the case of the *Laozi*, such interpretations which treat it as “the Text” rather than “the work,” unburdened by the exclusive interpretive standard oriented around the Author’s intention, often use semantics such as grasping “the spirit of the book” (Le Guin 1998, p. 115) as opposed to finding the Author’s “original meaning” and “the freest translation is often the most faithful” (Mitchell 2006, p. xii) as opposed to attempting to strictly translate the words of the Author. Despite Stephen Mitchell’s belief that the ancient author Laozi did exist (Ursula Le Guin seems relatively ambivalent about this), this sort of language exposes a very different hermeneutic stance than that of the authorial intentionalist, one according to which the potential for significance of the text lies much more emphatically in the reader’s contribution to it. While not quite representing a *radical* reader-oriented position, neither of these translators are able to read Chinese and thus forego any presumption of a faithful rendering of the Author’s words. Furthermore, external historical, linguistic, or intertextual standards cannot be applied to the “spirit” of a text in the same way they might to the historical context of the Author, thereby allowing the reader much more leeway in depicting the “spirit of the book”. Such an attitude can extend the realm of potential significance within the text far beyond the constraints of Authorial intentionalism, fostering novel connections with other non-native cultures and ideas, a fusion with modern trends and phenomena which might breathe new life into the ancient text, or the possibility of applying the text to a wider set of socio-political problems in contemporary society. This more open attitude can be found in interpretations which read the text as promoting a libertarian or anarchic approach to the political economy, (Boaz 1998; Stamatov 2014) something akin to new age spirituality, (Kohn 2019) or environmentalism (Girardot et al. 2001; Nelson 2009; Schönfeld 2014) amongst many others.⁵ Some examples cited to defend such interpretations as valid include interpreting “act through non-action, then there will be nothing that is not ordered” (Moeller 2007, p. 9; translation modified) as a parallel to *laissez faire* ideas such as Friedrich Hayek’s “spontaneous ordering,” “concentrate the and attain softness” (Moeller 2007, p. 25) as teaching a form of spiritual cultivation which allows one to connect to the *dao*, and “[the sage] is able to support the nature of the ten-thousand

things" (Moeller 2007, p. 149; translation modified) as an exhortation for human society to be in ecological harmony with the natural world.

While these interpretations are indeed helpful in lending new significance to the text, such as the authorial intentionalist position, an excessively reader-oriented interpretation can also lead to problematic results. In diminishing, or in the case of the *radical* reader-oriented stance completely ignoring the historical, political, intellectual, and linguistic context in which the *Laozi* was compiled in favor of capturing a decontextualized "spirit of the book", the "freest translation" often becomes more of a portrait of the interpreter's own beliefs, sensibilities, and experiences than a reflection of the content of the *Laozi*. Barthes himself recognized this pitfall, emphasizing the importance of re-reading because "those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere". (Barthes 1974, p. 16) Prejudiced and biased interpretations in which the interpreter *excessively* projects their own ideas and personal beliefs into the text can be seen in the use of cherry picking, highlighting chapters which validate one's reading while ignoring those parts which are unrelated or even contradict it, a common phenomenon in both academic and popular literature on the *Laozi*. The reader always carries within themselves a world of experiences, biases, knowledge, culture, in short, a worldview, through which they make sense of the world and turn this 'blooming, buzzing confusion' into something able to be navigated. The unreflexive projection of these internal and prejudiced worldviews, which is to some degree unavoidable, and the corresponding diminishing of external standards of interpretation can potentially lead to the very opposite of what is intended, a reduction in the production of meaning. By creating a sort of zero-gravity interpretive environment in which no external standards tether the reader to the ground, beliefs, ideas, and modes of thinking already affirmed by the reader prior to textual engagement are merely re-established. Having external standards for what counts as a good or bad interpretation, whether it be historical, conceptual, or linguistic, helps contribute to the production of significance and meaning by challenging the reader to break out of habitual thought, a theme which ironically can be found in the *Laozi* itself (chapter 44). These standards for interpretation serve as a tool to challenge the reader, breaking them out of their own complacency and creating new realms of significance for both the text and the reader.

The disadvantages of a reader-oriented theory can further be seen from a more pragmatic perspective as, there being no standard to judge any interpretation as better or worse than another, putting it into practice would lay waste to all discourse concerning any particular text. For there to exist discourse about anything in general there must exist some agreement amongst the interlocutors on a standard of evaluation, otherwise the discourse must pivot towards what is the best standard of evaluation, which assumes yet another agreed upon standard. This is what Richard Rorty calls "normal discourse," which is the agreement on a "set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it" (Rorty 1979, p. 320). This "normal discourse" then allows for "the sort of statement that can be agreed to be true by all participants whom the other participants count as 'rational'" (Rorty 1979, p. 320). Along similar lines, Stanley Fish argues that while it is through the reader's interpretation that the literary work is created, this does not invite an unchecked proliferation of interpretations because "it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or reader, that produce meanings". (Fish 1980, p. 14) The idea of producing meaning outside of any discourse within a community is not only contradictory because all concepts, beliefs, and worldviews ultimately derive from discourse within a community, but it is also antithetical to all academic disciplines, especially philosophy, for which the idea of dialogue and discourse serves as a foundation. Indeed, it is even necessary for knowledge of the physical sciences which, as Kuhn points out, exists within the matrix of scientific communities (Kuhn 2012).

4. Intention of the Text and the Production of Meaning

We are faced with two extremes: the dogmatic authorial intentionalist perspective and the radical reader-oriented perspective. The strengths each of these particular perspectives cannot be denied, but they carry with them a number of limiting factors and disadvantages which makes an uncritical attachment to them untenable. We are thus led to take a stance which avoids adherence to the specter of the Author while having some sort of grounding on which discourse and interpretations of the text can exist. Umberto Eco attempts to create a theory of semiosis which does just this by allowing for numerous interpretations of any given text while also providing external standards to which any given interpretation might be subjected. While influenced by thinkers who extended conceptions of the field of semiosis and particularly by Barthes himself, he argued that there must exist some standards for interpretation on the grounds that “the notion of unlimited semiosis does not lead to the conclusion that interpretation has no criteria. To say that interpretation (as the basic feature of semiosis) is potentially unlimited does not mean that interpretation has no object and that it ‘riverruns’ merely for its own sake” (Eco 1994, p. 6). Regarding the opposition between the authorial intentionalist theory and the radical reader-oriented theory, Eco points out “one can object that the only alternative to a radical reader-oriented theory of interpretation is the one extolled by those who say that the only valid interpretation aims at finding the original intention of the author . . . there is a third possibility. There is an *intention of the text*” (Eco 2004, p. 25).

The “intention of the text” is the interplay between the model reader and the model author. The model reader can be thought of as the act of reading in which conjectures are made about the intention of the text, a sort of reading in which infinite conjectures are allowed. The model reader’s activity and productivity lie in this act of making conjectures. These conjectures, however, are limited by the model author (as opposed to the empirical one, which Barthes refers to as the Author). The model author is an interpretation (one of many possible interpretations) that coincides with the intention of the text. Regarding the relationship between model reader, model author, and intention of the text, Eco says “more than a parameter to use in order to validate the interpretation, the text is an object that the interpretation builds up in the course of the circular effort of validating itself on the basis of what it makes up as its result” (Eco 1994, p. 59).

But how does one know which model author, which is to say, which interpretations, coincide with the intention of the text? Eco provides the standard for this judgement as “any interpretation given of a certain portion of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed and must be rejected if it is challenged by another portion of the same text. In this sense, the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader” (Eco 1994, p. 59). Here we see a simple, yet powerful concept in textual theory which reigns in the excessive freedom of the Barthesian reader: coherence. He further develops the concept of textual coherence with a more concrete standard for what is considered textually coherent, that of isotopy, an umbrella term which includes many different types of isotopies, but all exhibiting a common trait which is defined as “constancy in going in a direction that a text exhibits when submitted to rules of interpretative coherence” (Eco 1980, p. 153).

The many different types of isotopies widen the limits of possible acceptable interpretations, i.e., interpretations with high levels of interpretive coherence. These limits are simultaneously restricted by the language of text, to which these isotopes must refer. Here Eco’s standards for textual coherence can once more be found in the interplay between author and reader, or what he refers to as “interpretive cooperation”, which he defines as:

an act in the course of which the reader of a text, through successive abductive inferences, proposed topics, ways of reading, and hypotheses of coherence, on the basis of suitable encyclopedic competence . . . determined by the nature of the text. By the “nature” of the text I mean what an interpreter can actualize on the basis of a given Linear Manifestation, having recourse to the encyclopedic competence toward which the text itself orients it Model Reader. (Eco 1980, p. 154)

The various ways in which different isotopies can be read into a text, creating a plurality of interpretations, provides semiotic freedom, while the “nature of the text” and a general standard of coherence tethers the interpretation to the text and provides a sort of semiotic foundation.

Freeing one’s interpretation from the search for the intention of the empirical author as the paramount goal of reading, yet still holding one’s interpretation to the standard of textual coherence (which may include philological, historical, or conceptual coherence) may open the potential meaning produced when engaging with each particular edition of the *Laozi* while still being grounded in possible discourse. If this model is extended further to intertextual coherence with, let us say a tradition of texts, the evolution of the *Laozi* may likewise be opened up to greater potential meaning. Similar hermeneutic positions can also be found within Chinese intellectual history and the commentarial tradition of the *Laozi* in particular. The legitimacy of interpretations within Chinese commentarial traditions are established according to whether or not the ideas therein are *tong* 通 (continuity, connection), which implies internal coherence or continuity as well as continuity within the larger tradition. Within the Chinese commentarial tradition “the goal of ‘explaining the classics’ is achieving *tong*, going from character, to word, to sentence, to paragraph, to chapter, and extending to the entire internal text and its intertextual relationships, gradually generating a network of connections and organic system” (Bao 2015, p. 3). Likewise, Rudolph G. Wagner describes Wang Bi’s hermeneutic position in regard to the existence of Laozi in similar terms to those of Eco’s, writing “the assumption of the *Laozi*’s being written by an author called Laozi is an assumption about the philosophic homogeneity of this text” (Wagner 2000, p. 120). It should thus not be surprising that the notion of hermeneutic coherence, whether it be linguistic, conceptual, or historic, can also be found in contemporary Chinese scholarship on the *Laozi* in such a way that it allows for equal estimation for the various editions of the *Laozi* as opposed to the authorial intentionalist, while still holding those interpretations to external standards.

An example of such a reading of the *Laozi* can be found in that of another esteemed scholar, Liu Xiaogan 刘笑敢. Liu believes that there did exist an urtext from which the other editions eventually developed and also agrees with Chen Guying and Guo Yi about the Guodian edition of the *Laozi* being at least much less critical of the *ru*, perhaps even compatible. As with Chen and Guo, he regards the attitude towards *ruist* values to be one of the major differences between the Guodian edition and later versions.

As for the relationship between Daoists and Ru, a popular perspective is that the two are at battle . . . In fact, before the Song Dynasty there was not any textual foundation for mutual antagonism or criticism between the Ru and Daoists . . . the sentences “eliminate sageliness, get rid of wisdom” and “eliminate benevolence, get rid of righteousness” found within the received edition of the *Laozi* is the result of language being inserted into the text by later editors. This sort of insertion is the most serious kind of tampering done within the evolution of the various editions of the *Laozi*, but it is not completely without basis. In any case, the received edition clearly projects and intensifies a critical attitude towards Confucianism . . . the hierarchy and position of Laozi’s *dao* and *de* is higher than Confucian morality, but does not simply deny or replace Confucian morality. (Liu 2016)

An important distinction between Liu and Chen/Guo’s positions, however, is that when Liu discusses the differences between the Guodian edition and received edition, he does not elevate the status of the Guodian edition as being “more correct” or “more authentic,” nor does he denounce the later received editions as corruptions and therefore less meaningful than the earlier editions. He seems to recognize the alterations made by editors and compilers of the later editions without making any value judgement.

Rather than dismissing the alterations as deviations from the *original* manuscript, he uses the evolution of the various manuscripts as something which can potentially provide meaning. Just as Eco provided ways of testing coherence in individual texts in the form of isotopes, Liu provides ways of testing coherence in the evolution of a text in the form of

linguistic assimilation and conceptual focusing, which he defines as “the general tendency of editors of the Laozi to replace some words, phrases, or passages with common terms or patterns according to their understanding of the message and style of the text” and “processes designed to bring out the intellectual insights and key concepts of the *Laozi*” (Liu 2003, p. 338). Conceptual focusing in particular indicates that Liu sees these alterations to the text as contributing to valid and valuable concepts.

Making a much more explicit statement on his stance regarding the search for Authorial intention, he writes:

One may think that the editors and collators believed that their alterations were restoring the original version and improving upon the extant versions. However, the bamboo and silk versions give evidence that the earliest versions were not as logical and coherent as later scholars thought and wished. Approximating the original or earliest texts did not necessarily accord with the goal of improving the extant editions or creating the best version. The received versions show improvement in that they have a more regulated pattern and style than the antique versions, but they are not closer to the antique versions. Likewise, modern textual studies may improve ancient texts according to modern logic and assumptions, but they do not necessarily preserve the intent and style of the original or earliest versions. (Liu 2003, p. 381)

He regards textual coherence according to his standards of linguistic assimilation and conceptual focusing as a more valuable contribution to the received versions of the text than would have been attempting to simply make it as similar to the original or earliest versions as possible. It seems that in his interpretation of the evolution of the *Laozi*, Liu, much in the same way as Eco, navigates between the Scylla of searching for authorial intent and the Charybdis of an ungrounded reading of the text. Such an interpretation opens the field of possible meaning to include the evolution of the texts, which in turn reveals the possible, and now legitimate, significance that can be found in each individual edition in their own particular way. This interpretation is quite distinct from those of Chen Guying and Guo Yi, but this distinction all stems from a very subtle difference in hermeneutic stances regarding authorial intention.

5. Conclusions

The debate regarding the existence of Laozi the author is perhaps an example of misplaced energy for those on both sides of the debate, particularly those working on reading the *Laozi* from a philosophic perspective. There is no doubt that any advancements or findings on the historicity of Laozi-the-person would be exciting, but those reading the *Laozi* from a philosophic or literary perspective would be better suited considering how the perceived authorship of the *Laozi* influences their *interpretation* of the text. The intention of this paper has not been to prove any one interpretation over and above others, but is meant to bring attention to how any interpretation which lacks a critical, and thus reflexive attitude toward one’s own hermeneutic position might easily succumb to problematic elements which exist for any position whatsoever. Chen Guying and Guo Yi’s positions are certainly not *dogmatically* authorial intentionalist, nor are Mitchell and Le Guin’s translations mere flights of fancy, but a lack of critical awareness of one’s own hermeneutic position can lead to problematic results, such as an adherence to the Author’s “original meaning” for the former or reading into the text a decontextualized, borderline mystical “spirit of the book” for the latter. Without a critical awareness of the hermeneutic principle according to which one interprets a text, even the principle of coherence could lead to problematic results. Whereas Liu Xiaogan’s reflexive awareness of his use of the principles of linguistic assimilation and conceptual focusing allows him to point out in what ways the later editions were a continuation of aspects of the Guodian edition, yet distinct in their own right, one can easily imagine an uncritical interpreter blindly and dogmatically affirming the coherence of all editions expressing the same “spirit” of Laozi, thereby overlooking each version’s unique contributions.

Conscious recognition and critical awareness of the utilization in one's interpretation of hermeneutic concepts such as authorial intention, textual coherence, "tong" 通 (continuity), or many possible others not only help avoid potentially problematic pitfalls, but also open new paths of interpretation, new ways of meaning, and new roles for the reader to take on. At the expense of withdrawing into naval gazing, discourse on hermeneutic principles which guide our interpretations and translations of the *Laozi* might prove to be a great source of insight, scholarship, and inspiration. For example, to further use the notion of coherence as a hermeneutic standard, a concept such as "coherence validity," similar to Lee J. Cronbach and Paul E. Meehl's explication of construct validity, (Cronbach and Meehl 1955) could be used as a general principle for the interpretation of the *Laozi*, amongst other texts. While the act of interpretation is not the sort of thing to which a hard and fast scientific method can be ascribed, discourse surrounding a notion such as coherence validity might produce new perspectives on how the already existing wealth of scholarship on the historical, linguistic, and conceptual context of the *Laozi* are related to one another in novel and creative ways, revealing new networks of significance within the text(s). This would perhaps represent a shift in focus from *what* the Author meant to *how* the text means.

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Notes

- ¹ Barthes is used to represent a trend of 20th century thinkers and schools of thought which resisted the "intentional fallacy," including T.S. Eliot, Stanley Fish, and, as will be discussed later in the paper, Umberto Eco. While many of the thinkers who represent the resistance to Authorial intent have literary works like poetry, novels, or plays in mind, similar arguments can be and have been extended to the authorship of works of philosophy (Deleuze 1985) and even to history itself. (White 1966) Problematizing Authorial intent in the *Laozi* is also defensible considering the text's literary and poetic nature.
- ² The Author is capitalized to distinguish it from the "empirical author" as the constellation of contexts which orient the work's supposed intention.
- ³ Like "Author", "Text" is capitalized to distinguish it as a "methodological field" and "activity of production" rather than "text" as a work containing written text.
- ⁴ It should be noted that this more "radical" position might be read within Barthes' work as a gesture to merely problematize the notion of Authorial intention and reveal the significance of intertextuality in the act of semiosis rather than an outright rejection of historical contextualization. This more radical position is likewise being used in this paper for the same purpose while also problematizing the position itself.
- ⁵ The examples cited here are not necessarily examples of the *radical* reader-oriented hermeneutic as they are certainly more thorough in terms of historical contextualization. The tomb in which the Mawangdui version, for example, was found also included the *Daoyin tu* 導引圖 manuscript containing illustrations of a form of Qigong spiritual cultivation practice, providing some historical evidence for Kohn's spiritualist interpretation. Such interpretations might be considered merely reader-oriented as compared to that of the strictly Authorial intentionalist.

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Article

Rhetorical Questions in the *Daodejing*: Argument Construction, Dialogical Insertion, and Sentimental Expression

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Abstract: This paper provides a typology of rhetorical questions in the *Daodejing* and examines their functions on rhetorical effects and argumentative construction. This paper argues against a reading of rhetorical questions that translates them directly into propositional statements. Instead, the fact that rhetorical questions appear in one version of the text but not in others shows us the unique subtleties of meaning that rhetorical questions deliver. An awareness of the performative and dialogical functions elicited through rhetorical questions deepens our understanding of the persuasive power of the *Daodejing*. Furthermore, emotional sentiments within the text can be detected through the use of rhetorical questions which function to impress the readers/listeners while urging a point. A study of rhetorical questions in the *Daodejing* reveals textual differences across versions that transcend their wording, all the while motivating a new understanding of rhetorical questions based on classical Chinese texts enriches current definitions proposed in the field at large.

Keywords: rhetorical questions; *Daodejing*; meaning constructions; parallel texts; rhetorical effects

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“If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh?

If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?”

(William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*) (Greenblatt et al. 2016, pp. 467–521)

1. Introduction: Rhetorical Questions, and What Is New?

The famous opening phrase of the first chapter of the *Analects* has Confucius utter three rhetorical questions:

“學而時習之，不亦說乎？有朋自遠方來，不亦樂乎？人不知而不愠，不亦君子乎？”

“Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application? Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distant quarters? Is he not a man of complete virtue, who feels no discomposure though men may take no note of him?”. (Cheng [1990] 2008, pp. 1–8)

In the “Fu賦” chapter of the *Xunzi*, the text presents a series of conversations possibly between a minister and king, or a teacher and disciple, or a questioner and shaman, to whom the second speaker consistently replies with series of rhetorical questions (Lewis 1999, p. 180). In the Wang Bi version of the *Daodejing*, I estimate that 18% of chapters (a total of 16 chapters: 5, 7, 10, 13, 15, 20, 21, 23, 26, 44, 50, 58, 62, 73, 77, and 79) use rhetorical questions either individually, consecutively, or in a string (Lou 2016, pp. 14, 19, 23, 29, 33, 46, 53, 58, 69, 121, 134, 151, 161, 181, 186, and 188).¹

The prevalence of rhetorical questions in classical literature raises the question, why are they used at all? Does it make a difference? If so, how? This paper explores these questions, focusing on the parallel texts of the *Daodejing*. This paper argues against reading rhetorical questions as propositional statements. Instead, this paper examines their rhetorical effects and use in argument construction.

First, a few words on the definition of “rhetorical” questions. In English literature, the discussion of what defines a rhetorical question has been controversial. A rhetorical

question (RQ) has the syntactic form of a question but the semantic value of a declarative statement (Sadock 1971; Han 2002). On the one hand, scholars such as Džemal Špago show us that in modern English literature, there are syntactic and semantic elements that are more likely to be identified as rhetorical questions (Špago 2016), arguing not only for a rhetorical use of questions, but for a distinct form of rhetorical questions. On the other hand, others insist that the co-occurrence of interrogative pronouns or adverbs and sentence-final particles does not conclusively indicate a rhetorical reading since genuine information-seeking questions can share the same features (Xiang et al. 2021, p. 6). This means that RQs are not a special category of questions with a distinct form, nor are they bound to any particular language or linguistic structure. This has directed scholars' attention to the special use that defines rhetorical questions (Jung and Schrott 2003). Unlike ordinary information-seeking questions, RQs do not expect answers from the addressees (Xiang et al. 2021, p. 2).² They are "meant to be heard as questions and understood as statements" (Ilie 1994, p. 130). This is also why RQs are different from standard questions that mainly seek information.³ To what extent RQs center on the function of making a statement in the *Daodejing* will be evaluated in the conclusion of this paper.

Research on RQs covers the processes and mechanisms through which they exercise their cognitive pragmatic force (Wang 2014), their varying persuasive effects (Blankenship and Craig 2006),⁴ and how their recipients are expected to respond within the circle of debate (Cacioppo et al. 1981).⁵ The study of RQs has moved into philosophical, political, and theological literature in recent years. For example, Cornelia Ilie has examined the complex and loaded RQs during parliamentary question periods and other political speech (Ilie 2010). Christine Padesky describes the process of Socratic questioning in psychological and cognitive therapy as a guide to discovery rather than an attempt at changing others' minds (Padesky 1993). Stephen Salkever discusses the wide use of RQs and questioning in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* (Salkever 2007). Douglas Estes examines the questions and the questioning of the Bible's New Testament in the original Greek and alerts readers that we might be only looking at 15% of the text (Estes 2017, p. 22). Furthermore, Jim Adams shows us the performative nature of RQs in the original Hebrew of the Old Testament from the perspective of "indirect speech acts" and how they facilitate active self-involvement (Adams 2020).

To locate literature reviews of RQs in early Chinese studies is not an easy task, mostly because it is not yet a distinctive research topic that has received due attention. Another possible reason is that it has long been categorized as a linguistic "problem". Previously, RQs in Chinese scholarship have mostly been studied from a linguistic and grammatical perspective. In his *Categorical Dictionary of Old Chinese (Interrogatives)*, Wang Haifen 王海芬 not only lists more than 170 terms for RQs (in Chinese, *fanjie yiwen* 反詰疑問) but also categorizes them into three types, focusing on the underlying statements they express (Wang 2015, pp. 368–437).⁶ Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 and He Leshi 何樂士 also point out four features and grammatical indicators of RQs in classical Chinese (Yang and He 1992, vol. 2, pp. 889–93).⁷ Many other contributions collect and classify sets of RQs in a variety of classical Chinese literature (Li 2003).

Research involving the *Daodejing*, the *Analects*, and *Zhuangzi* has discussed the relevance of RQs for effective persuasion and to construct meaning. First, Mark Lewis insightfully suggested that RQs employed amidst riddles, prose, and paradoxes are used as argumentative features of proto-Daoist texts to express an "individual and poetic voice" and demonstrate the breakdown of ritual communication. He argues that RQs in the *Daodejing*, on the one hand, challenge existing ideas, a common practice used by theoreticians of arguments, which are also found in *Zhuangzi*. On the other hand, RQs in the *Daodejing* indicate what one ought to do; for example, a series of RQs in Chapter 10 provides a detailed account for the procedure of meditation (Lewis 1999, p. 180).

While Lewis clearly and rightly points out the argumentative functions of RQs, Christoph Harbsmeier reminds us of the expressive power of RQs in the *Analects* (Harbsmeier 1990), which I argue can also be found in the *Daodejing*. While illuminating the

humor in the *Analects*, he points out a perspective on the informal tone and expletive particles including the colloquial RQ “Isn’t that X?” (original text: *bu yi X hu* 不亦X乎?) and the use of sentence-final particle “*fu* 夫”, all of which are used to elicit an impulsive and sarcastic reading of the texts (Harbsmeier 1990, p. 141). Harbsmeier believes that Confucius’s famous claim “You don’t yet understand even life. How can you understand death?” (the *Analects* 11.12) is argumentative and emotive, namely “a straightforward witticism and an expression of irritation” (Harbsmeier 1990, pp. 143–44). Another use of RQs in the *Analects* shown by Harbsmeier gives us a closer look at the spontaneous and personal comments on excessive emotions expressed by RQs. In the *Analects* 11.10, when being accused of “showing excessive emotions” (*tong* 慟) while facing the death of his beloved disciple Yan Yuan, Confucius replies with rhetorical anger: “So, I’m showing excessive emotion?! But if I’m not to show excessive emotion for this person, whom should I show it for?” (Harbsmeier 1990, p. 145).

Mingjian Xiang and Esther Pascual take RQs in *Zhuangzi* as “situated face-to-face interaction”. Applying Pascual’s communication framework of “fictive interaction blends”, they discuss the use of such RQs as providing a conceptual integration for mental space that cannot be clearly observed in a communicative situation while highlighting the turn-taking structure between participants. (Xiang and Pascual 2016).⁸

Building upon previous scholarship, this paper further explores the argumentative and rhetorical functions in the *Daodejing*. I argue that, first, RQs not only facilitate argument construction to serve the coherency of the chapter but also illuminate changing compositional motivations in “parallel texts” of different versions beyond differences in mere wording. This can be shown in comparing the received Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 C.E.) version with the Guodian 郭店 *Laozi* bamboo-slip manuscripts excavated from a late fourth-century B.C. Chu-state tomb at Guodian, Hubei, in 1993, and the Mawangdui 馬王堆 *Laozi* silk manuscripts which were discovered at the Mawangdui site in Changsha, Hunan, in 1973.⁹

While Lewis points to the use of RQs for expressing an individual voice as opposed to communal ritual performance, a focus on the persuasive and communicative functions of RQs can further facilitate our understanding of the “dialogical” characteristic of the text, highlighting the self-reflective and self-discovery features of the teachings of the *Daodejing*.¹⁰ Such a focus on self-discovery also differs from the “authoritative” sayings used in later receptions such as in the “response to the way” chapter of the *Huainanzi*, wherein citations of *Daodejing* texts are introduced with the formula “therefore *Daodejing* says” (*gu Laozi yue* 故老子曰) (Queen 2008). Furthermore, in agreement with William Baxter’s observation that the *Daodejing* is a text with a “lack of narration” and no anchor to a particular person, time, or event (Baxter 1998, p. 240), RQs however evoke a sense of conversation between the text and the audience, and therefore presents the text as “dialogical” and reflective.

RQs can express a sense of urgency, anger, and ridicule. Consecutive and strings of RQs draw on performative and dramatic elements of language, revealing the relationship between tone of voice and linguistic force beyond conceptual and grammatical concerns. A string of RQs may be used to hammer down a point by adding emotive force. They can provide criticism and imply anger and ridiculousness; they may repeat an argument by suggesting universal validity and an unacceptable doubt; and they can set the stage for an audience before providing the conclusion.

In this paper, I firstly situate RQs in the received Wang Bi version within parallel texts to compare their use in meaning construction and their compositional motivations. Next, I examine the self-discovery dialogical features of RQs in the *Daodejing*. Thirdly, I speculate about the feelings expressed by the *Daodejing*, focusing on its various “body” (*shen* 身) related RQs. Lastly, I discuss how RQs reveal the differences between the *Daodejing* versions beyond mere wording, and how their use of RQs further enriches current definitions of the concept.

2. Receptions of RQs in *Daodejing* Parallel Texts

In this section, I show three case studies that reveal different uses of RQs in the parallel texts. While the textual parallels are similar in vocabulary and concepts, the internal logic and philosophical differences marked by changes in particles, adverbs, and sentence initials are nonetheless clear. These differences serve their respective contexts and indicate the different ways meaning can be constructed.¹¹

First, let us compare Chapter 15 of the Wang Bi version with its parallel text in the excavated Guodian version.¹² The Wang Bi version Chapter 15 reads:

“古之善為士者，微妙玄通，深不可識。夫唯不可識，故強為之容。豫兮若冬涉川；猶兮若畏四鄰；儼兮其若容；渙兮若冰之將釋；敦兮其若樸；曠兮其若谷；混兮其若濁；孰能濁以靜之徐清？！孰能安以久動之徐生？！¹³ 保此道者，不欲盈。夫唯不盈，故能蔽不新成。” (Lou 2016, p. 33)

“Of old he who was well versed in the way, was minutely subtle, mysteriously comprehending, and too profound to be known. It is because he could not be known, that he can only be given a description by compromise. Tentative, as if fording a river in winter, hesitant, as if in fear of his neighbours; formal like a guest; falling apart like thawing ice; thick like the uncarved block; vacant like a valley; murky like muddy water. Who can be muddy and with tranquility, slowly become clear? Who can be at rest yet stirring, slowly come to life? he who holds fast to this way, desires not to be overfill. It is because he is overfilled, that he can be worn and yet newly made.” (Lau 2001, p. 34)

In the Wang Bi version, the text clearly shows an unwillingness to manipulate language and an uncertainty towards how language might be representing reality in the text. Similar to the point made at the beginning of the chapter, language is considered a forced compromise (*qiang wei zhi* 強為之) to describe the profound and imperceptible sage, so RQs function to make a statement without directly telling people what to do.

Accordingly, two RQs marked by “who can” (*shu neng* 孰) in the text discuss the importance and difficulty to “be muddy yet with tranquility . . . rest yet stirring” without explicitly issuing commands or giving prescriptions. They describe a natural result of “slowly becoming clear and slowly coming to life” without making promises or predictions. RQs can be used to suspend propositional arguments and may feature a didactic, decisive tone. They open up room for describing the imperceptible and paradoxical. Presenting ideas in an interrogative form further strengthens the non-prescriptive tone of teaching.

The parallel RQs in the Guodian slips instead read as conditional sentences, which supports the directive tone expressed throughout the Guodian text. This is a stark difference from the Wang Bi version, which discusses language as a forced choice when describing someone unknowable and imperceptible. The Guodian slips read:

“古之善為士者，必微妙玄達，深不可識，是以為之容。豫乎若冬涉川，猶乎其若畏四鄰，敢乎其若客，渙乎其若釋，屯乎其若樸，沌乎其若濁。孰能濁以靜者將徐清。孰能牝以主者將徐生。保此道者不欲尚溼。”

“Of old he who was well versed in the way, they must be minutely subtle, mysteriously comprehending, and too profound to be known. It is because he could not be known, that he can only be given a makeshift description. Tentative, as if fording a river in winter, hesitant, as if in fear of his neighbours; formal like a guest; falling apart like thawing ice; thick like the uncarved block; vacant like a valley; murky like muddy water. Whoever can be muddy with tranquility will slowly become clear; whoever can be at rest yet stirring will slowly come to life. Those who preserve this way desire not to overfill. He who holds fast to this way, desires not to be overfill.”. (Revised from Cook 2013, p. 241)

Similar to the adverb “necessarily” (*bi* 必), which indicates a “deduction of an inevitable consequence flowing from the principle enunciated earlier” (Wagner 2015, p. 63), the Guodian version makes unknowability and imperceptibility a necessary condition for those

who have embraced this version, instead of a general description in the previously stated Wang Bi version. “Who can?” (*shu neng* 孰能) types of RQs within the Guodian context constitute a conditional sentence clearly marked by “will” (*jiang* 將), promising a future of clarity and vitality, both of which deliver a sense of certainty towards the features of the sage and their power.

The second case appears in Chapter 5 of the Wang Bi version and its parallel text in the Guodian version. The use of RQs in Wang Bi version gives a clearly contextualized argument. The Guodian text provides a description of heaven and earth using “bellow” (*tuo yue* 橐籥) presented with RQs. The Guodian *Laozi A* reads:

“天地之間，其猶橐籥與？虛而不屈，衝而愈出。”

“The space between Heaven and Earth, is it not like a bellow?! Emptied, it is not in exhaustion; set in motion, it produces even more.”. (Revised from Cook 2013, pp. 261–62)

Donald Harper insightfully argues that the *Yinshu* 引書 (a medical text found at the Zhangjiashan 張家山 tomb) also uses the bellows analogy to describe a macrobiotic technique (Harper 1995). It reads:

“治身欲與天地相求猶橐籥也虛而不屈動而俞（：愈）出閉玄府繆門闔（？/達？）九竅利闔（腠）理此利身之道也。” (Harper 1995, p. 382)

“When cultivating the body you want to seek conformity with heaven and earth. It is like the bellows bag and tube: when empty not expended; when moved, emitting even more. Close the dark cavity, open the winding gate, shut the five depots, penetrate(?) the nine apertures. Benefit opening and shutting in the skins’ webbed pattern-this is the way to benefit the body.”. (Harper 1995, p. 382)

Furthermore, while the *Yinshu* text uses this metaphor of the bellows bag to talk about the precise technique to benefit the body, the Wang Bi *Daodejing* does not use it to talk about the physiology of the body, but to argue against the intellectual exhaustion arising from “much speech” (*duo yan* 多言), as shown:

“天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗；聖人不仁，以百姓為芻狗。天地之間，其猶橐籥乎？虛而不屈，動而愈出。多言數窮，不如守中。” (Lou 2016, p. 14)

“Heaven and earth are not humane, they treat the myriad things as straw dogs. The sage is not humane, he treats the people as straw dogs. Is not the space between Heaven and Earth like bellows? It is empty without being exhausted; the more it sets in motion the more comes out. Much speech leads inevitably to exhaustion. Better to hold the void inside.”. (Revised from Lau 2001, p. 9)

In the Wang Bi *Daodejing*, the metaphor is presented in the form of a RQ to suggest a protection of the inner emptiness of the body and a source of vitality (Harper 1995, pp. 382–83), which differs from the descriptive nature of the Guodian parallel text.

Unlike the *Yinshu* text, which introduces the bellows metaphor with clear statements marked by “*ye* 也”, the Wang Bi and Guodian texts use RQs. One possible reason may be that RQs assume an audience’s familiarity with the argument. As Harper argues, the bellows analogy might have originated from medical literature, such as the *Yinshu* text, and gradually found its way into *Daodejing*-related narratives (Harper 1995, p. 384). If so, the use of RQs may be a way of signaling a distinctive use of the bellows in *Daodejing* texts, which differed from the, at the time, common understanding of the bellow metaphor for macrobiotic techniques. RQs may, therefore, be used to draw the audience’s attention to a new usage of the metaphor.

The third case appears in Chapter 66 of the Wang Bi version, as compared to the Mawangdui parallel texts.¹⁴ The Wang Bi text presents a logical chain of argument, marked by a consecutive use of “that by which” (*suo yi* 所以), “therefore” (*gu* 故), and “that is why” (*shi yi* 是以).¹⁵

Wang Bi *Daodejing* Chapter 66:

“江海所以能為百谷王者，以其善下之，故能為百谷王。是以聖人欲上民，必以言下之；欲先民，必以身後之。是以聖人處上而民不重，處前而民不害。是以天下樂推而不厭。以其不爭，故天下莫能與之爭。” (Lou 2016, p. 169)

“The reason why the river and the sea are able to be king of the hundred valleys is that they excel in taking the lower position. Therefore they are able to be king of the hundred valleys. That is why desiring to rule over the people, one must in one’s words humble oneself before them; and, desiring to lead the people, one must in one’s person follow behind them. That is why the sage takes his place over the people yet is no burden; takes his place ahead of the people yet the people causes no obstruction. That is why the empire supports him joyfully and never tires of doing so. It is because he does not contend that no one in the empire is in a position to contend with them”. (Lau 2001, p. 99)

The negation of the “contention” (*bu zheng* 不爭) in the Wang Bi version is understood as the reason to justify the effective political power of the sage’s rule by non-contention. The negative verb “*bu* 不” also shows the focus of negation on the action “*zheng* 爭” that coincides with the intended actions of people “to attach no great importance to it” (*bu zhong* 不重), “to cause no danger” (*bu hai* 不害), and “to not get tired of it” (*bu yan* 不厭), all focusing on the negation of actions.

From the perspective of literary form, Joachim Gentz analyses the parallel texts of Wang Bi *Daodejing* Chapter 66 and argues that both Mawangdui versions are closer to the Wang Bi and Beida versions, as compared to the Guodian version. This is due to the parallel Guodian text A2 construction as a textual unit, as it mainly relies on the parallelisms that combine two parts, each expressing a particular idea (e.g., one on how to posit oneself and the other about the fact that no one wants to harm but to support the ruler), into one textual unit. However, the Beida and Wang Bi versions form a contextual unit that instead relies on explicit logical markers, such as in the use of “*shi yi* 是以”, which “translates the connective literary form of a parallelism into a logical connector on a linguistic level” (Gentz 2015, p. 121). However, if we direct our attention to RQs and the focus of the discussion expressed by the meaning of it, we find further differences between the Wang Bi and Mawangdui versions.

The Mawangdui version A proposes the idea of a state of “non-contention” (*wu zheng* 無爭) with RQs marked by the question particle “*yu* 與 (歟)” at the end of the text: “Is not it because he is with no contention?” (“*fei yi qi wu zheng yu* 非以其無爭與?”).¹⁶

Mawangdui A:

“海之所以能為百谷王者，以其善下之，是以能為百谷王。是以聖人之欲上民也，必以其言下之；其欲先民也必以其身後之。故居前而民弗害也，居上而民弗重也。天下樂舉而弗厭也。非以其無爭與?! 故天下莫能與之爭。”

“The reason why rivers and oceans are able to be the kings of the one hundred valleys is that they are good at being below them. For this reason they are able to be the kings of the one hundred valleys. Therefore in the sage’s desire to be above the people, he must in his speech be below them. And in his desire to be at the front of the people, he must in his person be behind them. Thus he dwells above, yet the people do not regard him as heavy; and he dwells in front, yet the people do not see him as posing a threat. The whole world delights in his praise and never tires of him. Is it not because he is not contentious, that, as a result, no one in the world can contend with him?!”. (Henricks 1992, p. 35)

The use of an RQ in this Mawangdui version differs from the statement shown in the Wang Bi version since it describes “not contentious” as an ideal state of being, which coincides with the description of “people being at the state of causing no danger” (*min fu hai ye* 民弗害也) and “people giving no weight (to the sage)” (*min fu zhong ye* 民弗重也), and is nominalized by the final particle “*ye* 也”. In the Wang Bi version, the negation of action is expressed by the negative “*bu* 不”. Furthermore, the use of RQs in the Mawangdui

A text also gives “not contentious” a universal touch, presenting it as if it were a well-acknowledged reason and in line with its general description of no contention being a state beyond a justifying reason or an issue of action.

The use of RQs further shows a different perception of textual composition, as compared to the Beida version. The Mawangdui A text relates “*gu . . . ye . . . ye . . . ye* 故 . . . 也 . . . 也 . . . ” as a textual unit governed by the explicit logical marker “thus” (*gu* 故), followed by an RQ “Is it not because he is not contentious?!” (*fei yi qi wu zheng yu* 非以其無諍與?), highlighting the ideal consequences achieved by maintaining the state of non-contention. On the other hand, the Beida version, as Gentz suggests, marks the textual unit by “*shi yi* 是以”, thus directly relating the RQ as the reason to justify only the very last stanza, namely “all under Heaven enjoy pushing him forward without getting tired of it” (*tian xia le tui er fu yan ye* 天下樂推而弗厭也). That is to say, from the perspective of textual composition, the Mawangdui versions have a stronger focus on the idea of “not being contentious”.

Previous case studies have shown that RQs indicate differences in meaning constructions beyond simple wording. A comparison of RQs in parallel texts of the *Daodejing* reveals different compositional motivations. The different uses of RQs further indicate the tendency towards a contextualized use of RQs. A slight change of wording may also reveal a different emphasis on either actions or a state of being. In the next section, I focus on the insertion of questions and answers in the Wang Bi version and examine these RQs against the arguments of William Baxter and Mark Edward Lewis on the rhetorical characteristics of the *Daodejing*. I argue for an emphasis in the text on self-reflection and self-discovery by means of RQs.

3. Dialogical Features in the *Daodejing*

In the Wang Bi *Daodejing*, five chapters (13, 21, 50, 54 and 57) show seven instances of an insertion of a question and answer. Such an insertion of RQs includes “asking for justifications” (*fu he gu* 夫何故) following empirical observations; “asking to assert trustworthiness of statements” (*wu he yi zhi* 吾何以知) after making prescriptions; and “asking to clarify a statement” (*he wei* 何謂) to questions intended to be argumentative, trustworthy, and conceptual.

Chapter 21 stands out by proposing questions regarding the credibility of one’s previous statement (*he yi zhi* 何以知), at the very end of the text.

“孔德之容，唯道是從。道之為物，唯恍唯惚。忽兮恍兮，其中有象；恍兮忽兮，其中有物。窈兮冥兮，其中有精；其精甚真，其中有信。自古及今，其名不去，以閱甫。吾何以知甫之狀哉？以此。” (Lou 2016, p. 52)

“In his every movement a man of great virtue follows the way of the way only. As a thing the way is shadowy, indistinct. Indistinct and shadowy, yet within it is an image; Indistinct and shadowy, yet within it is a substance. Dim and dark, yet within it is an essence. This essence is quite genuine, and within it is something that can be tested. From the present back to antiquity its name never deserted it. It serves as a means for inspecting the origins of the multitude. How do I know the origins of the multitude? By means of this”. (Revised from Lau 2001, p. 33)

A reading of self-justification is less likely here since the *Daodejing* has derided the concept of claiming a universal truth (Chapter 2) and frequently advocates not-knowing (Chapters 3 and 10). As Christoph Harbsmeier has suggested, early Daoist texts show a strong negative attitude towards sophist debates and the kind of “intellectual excellence” and “scientific knowledge”, or knowledge that resembles “academic knowledgeable-ness” (Harbsmeier 1993, p. 21). Such a definite claim to knowing is also at odds with the Daoist skeptical use of language for absolute distinctions based on names (*ming* 名) and disputations, as noted by Lisa Raphals (1992, pp. 75–82).¹⁷

From the perspective of communication and effective persuasion, RQs create the effect of a dialogue and invite the audience’s participation in the argument without losing their interest, attention, and trust, as opposed to a monologue. The authority and the trustwor-

thinness of the statement are delivered through a question and an answer, suggesting a process of teaching through self-reflection and self-discovery, which differs from passing down existing knowledge and appealing to authority or experience.¹⁸ It is about enabling one's self-awareness. In Chapter 21, discussed above, the answer of "it is by means of this" (*yi ci* 以此) serves the function of evoking a Dao experience and the self-discovery of its essence and trustworthiness, as opposed to only making verbal claims.

Moreover, in the Wang Bi version of Chapter 57, the text reflects on "How do I know that what I have just said is so?" (*wu he yi zhi qi ran zai* 吾何以知其然哉?), and the text continues the argument by providing an answer:

"以正治國，以奇用兵，以無事取天下。吾何以知其然哉？以此...". (Lou 2016, p. 149)

"Manage the state with straitforward means, employ soldiers with extraordinary ones, [but] capture the world with absence of intent. How do I know that this is so? It is because this...". (Lau 2001, p. 83)

The Guodian A version reads:

"以正之邦，以奇用兵，以亡事取天下。吾何以知其然也？夫... 是以聖人之言曰..."

"Manage the state with straightforward means, employ soldiers with extraordinary ones, [but] capture the world with absence of intent. How do I know that this is so? It is argued that... This is why the sage says that...". (Revised from Cook 2013, p. 274)

The "dialogical" effect of the rhetorical question and answer can be compared with what Lewis calls the "individual" voice of the *Daodejing* and proto-Daoist texts. In comparison to the Zhou odes, which "through [a] shared recognition of phrases formed and empowered a distinctive group," Lewis suggests that the *Daodejing* presents an individual voice using paradoxes, new images that confound traditional values, and evocative sounds (Lewis 1999, p. 180). This insightful argument can be further clarified if we take RQs into account and how they invite audiences into a dialogue. RQs invite audiences to participate in the thought process of the author, presenting a reflective attitude instead of presenting authority through legitimate "old sayings" (*gu yue* 古曰) or from a universally recognized argument marked by "fu 夫" (Wagner 2015, p. 38).¹⁹ In the Wang Bi version, RQs invite readers to think for themselves while the answers to the questions position audiences to consider new values along with the author, thus forming a different knowledge community based neither on universal truth nor on ancient authorities, but on self-reflection.

The dialogical feature of RQs can also be compared with what Baxter called a "lack of narration" in the *Daodejing* that has separated this text from other philosophical discourses in early China. According to William Baxter, if we compare the text of the *Daodejing* with that of the *Mencius* and *Zhuangzi*, which present conversations involving particular personas, times, locations, and contexts, the *Daodejing* presents statements that are general and not anchored to any particular situation or personas (Baxter 1998, p. 240). Rhetorical questions, however, show that the text still intends to present a feeling of dialogue, although without a particular conversational context, and thus sets itself apart from preaching values via monologues. Instead, the insertion of questions and answers in the *Daodejing* creates an effect of having a "conversation."

When the *Daodejing* proposes the question "how do I know this is so?", it seems that we are transported back to the personal teaching moment between Confucius and his four disciples when the master says:

"以吾一日長乎爾，毋吾以也。居則曰：「不吾知也！'如或知爾，則何以哉？'". (Cheng [1990] 2008, pp. 797–806)

"Though I am a day or so older than you, do not think of that. From day to day you are saying 'We are not known.' If some rulers were to know you, how would you like to do?"

Confucius did not directly teach what his disciples should have done or thought, neither did he criticize what he obviously disagreed with but only responded with a smile (*shai* 囁). The questions proposed by Confucius were intended to inspire self-realization, as in the *Daodejing*. When Confucius comments, “I give my approval to Dian!” (*wu yu Dian ye* 吾與點也!), it certainly should have pushed for deeper self-reflection in the disciples themselves. The *Hanfeizi* also imposes a self-reflective attitude by saying “how do I know this is so?” (*he yi zhi qi ran ye* 何以知其然也?) (Wang [1998] 2021, p. 11). Equally without a clear context, time, and location, *Hanfeizi* presents itself as if a minister were having a private meeting with his ruler, as the beginning of the text indicates: “as what I have heard that” (*qie chen wen zhi yue* 且臣聞之曰) (Wang [1998] 2021, p. 11).

4. Expression of Feelings through RQs

When Christoph Harbsmeier points out the use of RQs to express anger, sarcasm, or a sense of spontaneity in the *Analects* (Harbsmeier 1990), he draws our attention to the relationship between the tone of voice and the force of language, beyond conceptual and grammatical concerns.²⁰ One distinctive example is the use of RQs in relation to misconceptions and misbehaviors towards one’s body or self (*shen* 身), a central topic in the *Daodejing*. The criticism of the inattention towards the body/self in Chapter 26 expresses a sense of anger:

“重為輕根，靜為躁君。是以聖人終日行不離輜重。雖有榮觀，燕處超然。奈何萬乘之主，而以身輕天下! 輕則失本，躁則失君。” (Lou 2016, p. 69)

“The heavy is the root of the light; The still is the lord of the restless. Therefore the gentleman when travelling all day never lets the heavily laden carts out of his sight. It is only when he is safely behind walls and watch-towers that he rests peacefully and is above worries. How could a ruler of ten thousand chariots make light of his own person towards things under Heaven! If light, then the root is lost; If restless, then the lord will lose his position”. (Revised from Lau 2001, p. 39)

The text expresses the ridiculousness of a ruler’s taking light of his own person towards things under Heaven. The anger towards such an irresponsibility can also be detected, not only due to how nonchalant the ruler acts towards the general rule and sets himself as opposite to the sage, but also from the final warnings given to the ruler that challenge the legitimacy of the rulership (“losing his position” *shi jun* 失君), which was an uncompromised criticism no longer seen by advisors in the Xunzi or Li Si’s 李斯 memorials (Pines 2013).

In addition, a string of RQs elicits the sense of urgency to correct the common intention towards one’s body and self while setting a common ground between the audiences of the texts. Chapter 44 discusses the importance of the body using RQs:

“名與身孰親?! 身與貨孰多?! 得與亡孰病?! 是故甚愛必大費; 多藏必厚亡。知足不辱, 知止不殆, 可以長久。”

“Your name or your body, which is dearer?! Your body or your possessions, which is more considerable thereby can you long endure?! Gain or loss, which is more debilitating?! Therefore, Extreme cherishing inevitably leads to great expense; Profuse hoarding inevitably leads to considerable loss. If you know your limits, you will meet with no peril; Thereby can you long endure”. (Revised from Cook 2013, p. 281)

Three series of RQs indicate a sense of seriousness and urgency towards dealing with the body. Scholarly interpretations are varied regarding the answers to the three RQs. Liu Xiaogan interprets these RQs as indicating what one ought to think and thus consistently providing the readings of self/body as answers (Liu 2006, p. 456).²¹ In comparison, Rudolf Wagner understands “*yu* 與” as “joined to” and sees the RQs as descriptive and thus providing the answers with names, goods, and gains (Wagner 2000, p. 270).²²

There is yet a third reading of these RQs when focusing on the implications of self-reflections and self-discovery. The RQs function to raise our awareness of our whole being, and how it has been compared to that of others for the sake of getting more, or perhaps it should be considered “dearer”, all of which lead to contradictory consequences. As such, the responses these RQs inspire in readers are not necessarily the ultimate answers to the questions. Instead, they may only be temporary answers, which the author warns against and reminds the audience that whatever they hold dear could very well lead to considerable loss in the end, including their own body. What is more important is the ability to reflect on our attitudes towards attaching absolute values to objects. In this sense, neither the perspectives of Liu nor Wagner will influence the argument’s “therefore” (*shi gu* 是故) segment, upon which it is built. What matters is the process of self-discovery and the consciousness of self-reflection that is elicited by the RQs.

Chapter 13 also uses a series of RQs to warn readers against prioritizing oneself and causing harm. In this case, the RQs clarify the argument while lending it a universal perspective and showing a sense of certainty.

“寵辱若驚，貴大患若身。何謂寵辱若驚？寵為下，得之若驚，失之若驚，是謂寵辱若驚。何謂貴大患若身？吾所以有大患者，為吾有身，及吾無身，吾有何患？！故貴以身為天下，若可寄天下；愛以身為天下，若可托天下。” (Lou 2016, p. 28)

“Favour and disgrace are things that startle; high rank is like one’s body, a source of great trouble. What is meant by saying that favour and disgrace are things that startle? Favour when it is bestowed on a subject serves to startle as much as when it is withdrawn. This is what is meant by saying that favour and disgrace are things that startle. What is meant by saying that high rank is like one’s body, a source of great trouble? The reason I have trouble is that I have a body. When I no longer have a body, what trouble have I?! Hence he who values his body more than dominion over the empire can be entrusted with the empire. He who loves his body more than dominion over the empire can be given the custody of the empire”. (Lau 2001, p. 18)

The first RQ on the body provides a definition of the general argument marked by “what does it mean by” (*he wei* 何謂). It is firstly answered by a statement illuminating the correlation between body/self and harm (“*shen* 身” and “*huan* 患”, respectively), and closely followed by the repetition of the argument expressed from the opposite point of view: “when I no longer have a body of my own, what trouble have I?” (*ji wu shen, wu you he huan* 及吾無身，吾有何患?). If the first RQ aims at justifying the argument, the reaffirmation of the relationship between the body and harm expressed by a later RQ implicitly expresses the validity of the idea introduced by the RQ and thus giving it a touch of universal validity and a sense of certainty.

5. Conclusions

This paper examined the rhetorical functions, argument constructions, logic, effects, and generative functions of RQs. (1) Texts such as the *Daodejing* have been read in widely divergent ways; one key element underlying such variance in reception is a different understanding of RQs and the resulting divergence in understanding the argumentative logic of the text as a whole. (2) Different degrees of reliance on RQs in different versions of the *Daodejing* change the nature and meaning of individual segments across editions, as seen in the changing contexts surrounding the bellow metaphor. (3) RQs engage the audience by drawing on performative and dramatic elements of language. Proposing questions and answering them immediately creates a sense of conversation to enable self-discovery and self-reflection, supporting a dialogical function of the text. Such knowledge transmission differs dramatically from claiming authority through old sayings or by appeals to the sages. (4) Consecutive RQs are used to reinforce a point by adding emotive force while

providing a common understanding with audience. The urgency of an issue, anger towards misbehaviors, and the sense of universal validity can be communicated using RQs.

A focus on RQs further provides a different aspect from which to explore the subtle textual differences between versions. As Edward Shaughnessy points out, there is a widely acknowledged position regarding the source of the Guodian *Daodejing*, namely, “that the Guodian *Daodejing* manuscripts were anthologized from an already existing complete text of *Daodejing* and thus prove the antiquity of *Daodejing* in all (or most) of its particulars.” This argument naturally leads to the comparison of versions of the *Daodejing* as “fundamentally identical” in contents but varied in wording and sequences (Shaughnessy 2005, p. 445). However, from the examples provided that focus on RQs and the tone of the argument, RQs mark textual differences beyond wording. A realization of the rhetorical uses of questions enriches the discussion regarding the nature of *Daodejing* texts, whether as individual, non-narrative, or dialogical. An investigation into the possible tones of voice expressed by RQs sensitizes us towards the feelings they express. By developing an awareness of the disparate textual constructions of RQs and their use for meaning construction, we are motivated to reflect on the assumption of comparing meaning constructions between the Guodian and Wang Bi versions of the *Daodejing*.

A final point for reflection is the application of existing definitions of RQs to the *Daodejing*. To be specific, in Cornelia Ilie’s definition, a RQ “is a question used as a challenging statement to convey the addresser’s commitment to its implicit answer, in order to include the addressees’ mental recognition of its obviousness and the acceptance, verbalized or non-verbalized, of its validity” (Ilie 1994, p. 128). Such a definition of RQs focuses on using one statement to replace the other implicitly and effectively. Mark Lewis’s analysis of the proto-Daoist use of RQs to challenge ideas and make new individual claims fits with this definition. This is definitely true for the *Daodejing*, but it is incomplete. The dialogical nature of a RQ proposed in this paper shows that an RQ serves to motivate audiences for self-discovery and personal experience, rather than replacing one statement with another. The *Daodejing* welcomes challenges to traditional and ritual social rules governed by social-cultural language while celebrating a new level of non-commitment, as proposed in the new reading of Chapter 44.

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Notes

- ¹ Several examples show rhetorical questions that start with markers, such as ten examples of “*shu* 孰” (“who” or “which”); seven examples end with the particle “*zai* 哉”; nine examples end with the particle “*hu* 乎”; and three examples are indicated by the particle “*qi* 其 (豈)”.
- ² There is a weaker argument suggesting that rhetorical questions evoke no answers from the hearer or the speaker. In addition, there is a stronger claim, arguing that under certain political social conventions, rhetorical questions should be prevented from being answered and thus minimizing the emphasis on information (Athanasiadou 1991, p. 109).
- ³ For a general survey on questions and questioning, see (Ilie 2015).
- ⁴ As pointed out, many scholars recognize the strong persuasive effects on communication, which may be mitigated depending on the relationship to participants. There is also an argument focusing on the effect of rhetorical questions causing resistance when participants are not involved.

- 5 Scholars further note that the persuasive effect of rhetorical questions are probably strong for those who are already in the circle of the argument: “When the message was of low personal relevance and recipients were not naturally processing the statement form of the message diligently, the use of rhetorical enhanced thinking: A message with strong arguments became more persuasive.” (Athanasiadou 1991, pp. 107–22).
- 6 Wang categorizes rhetorical questions into three types. First are the general rhetorical questions making either positive or negative statements; second are the rhetorical questions delivering reinforced statements through a combination of negative and rhetorical terms, such as the expression in the *Zhuangzi*: “How could you go everywhere and not be liked”? This is similar to the use of the “do you know” phrase in rhetorical questions, which is used in capturing the interest of the listener and to give emphasis to a particular point (Wang 2015, p. 108). Third involves interrogative sentences, indicating a definite right or wrong answer.
- 7 Yang and He show markers to identify rhetorical questions. They claim that markers of rhetorical questions frequently appear at the end of a complex sentence or in the last part of the phrase. In addition, there are interrogative pronouns and adverbs as markers that express rhetorical questions, and they form relatively stable phrases with auxiliary adverbs and adjectives.
- 8 Differing from the focus on the blending of views using rhetorical questions, Lewis draws attention to how *Zhuangzi* uses rhetorical questions to argue against intellectual rivals by using their own narratives. Lewis also suggests that many questions in the “Tianwen 天問” (“Heavenly Questions”) chapter should not and need not be answered so as to deny secure knowledge while presenting the cosmos with a set of impenetrable riddles (Lewis 1999, pp. 182–83).
- 9 Edward Shaughnessy’s article draws our attention to the ongoing debate of the textual nature of the Laozi-related versions (Shaughnessy 2005). For the sake of examining the uses and arguments of rhetorical questions, I follow Harold Roth’s example and temporarily reject models to compare and interpret versions of the *Daodejing*. Instead, I also use “parallel texts” that assume “hypothetical source(s)” from which the text transmits (Roth 2000, p. 80).
- 10 My discussion of “self-reflection” in the *Daodejing* assumes a sense of agency. For the explanation of agency in the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, see (Fech 2018, pp. 1–10 and 1–11; Virag 2017, chp. 3, pp. 1–29; Slingerland 2004, pp. 322–42).
- 11 At least for the cases we discussed later on, their differences are no less clear than in the parallel texts between the *Daodejing*’s Chapter 26 and the quasi-quotation in the “Shenshi 慎” (“Being Mindful of Conditions”) chapter of the *Lüshi Chunqiu* that have been pointed out by Gu Jiegang, and as cited by Edward Shaughnessy (2005, p. 426).
- 12 For details about the Guodian manuscripts, see Jingzhou Shi Bowuguan (1998).
- 13 I change the punctuation to highlight the rhetorical effects.
- 14 For more details on the Mawangdui texts, see Guojia Wenwuju Guwenxian Yanjiushi (1980).
- 15 Christoph Harbsmeier argues that “there are forty-three chapters of the fairly non-argumentative text in the book *Daodejing* in which the word *gu* figures and often establishes a fairly vague semantic link between what precedes and what follows (. . .) [it is] needed to show an argumentative systematicity rather than a mere general coherence.” (Harbsmeier 2015, p. 166). Hans Van Ess also shows the importance of explicit logical markers for the understanding of texts such as the *Huainanzi* (Van Ess 2005).
- 16 The Guodian version continues the statement nominalized by the final particle “*ye* 也”, with: “Because he is someone who has been in no competition with others. Therefore in all under Heaven nobody is able to compete with him.” (*yi qi bu zheng ye, gu tian xia mou neng yu zhi zheng* 以其不爭也，故天下莫能與之爭) (based on Cook 2013, p. 956).
- 17 Raphals argues for the Laozian metalanguage focused on the idea of “illuminations” (*ming*明), which requires a grasp of constancy that underlies phenomenal change, and such a metalanguage and metaknowledge certainly cannot be pinned down with the polarities and conventions of language (Raphals 1992, pp. 80–82).
- 18 Carine Defoort discusses the unique educational method employed by Zhuangzian masters as self-discovery that builds upon personal conversions. Such a feature shows great difference from modern public speech, which focuses on knowledge transmission. In other words, she points out the philosophical traditional in early China focusing on know-how and personal, self-discovery that go beyond know-what (Defoort 2012).
- 19 As pointed out by Rudolf Wagner, “*fu* 夫” should be read as a phrase status marker that expresses a general principle, or as an exception or a side comment that provides understanding for the “argumentative procedure” that constructs the text in line with its philosophical nature (Wagner 2015, p. 38).
- 20 Related ideas by Joachim Gentz and Dirk Meyer were summarized in the recent scholarly discussion on the marking of particles with argument construction (Gentz and Meyer 2015, p. 23, footnote 92). Yang Xiao, in his article “The Pragmatic Turn: Articulating Communicative Practices in the Analects,” evokes a systematic study of the pragmatic aspects of communicative practices in classical Chinese texts through “commenting on the roles of particles and the tone of voice”. He also shows us that ancient and modern scholars treat particles as a force that is pragmatic and the context-dependent features of utterances while cautiously reminding us that particles cannot be used as a specific force indicator since a particle can serve different pragmatic functions. This means that while grammatical mood and practical force should be considered together, their strict correlation cannot yet be concluded (Xiao 2005).
- 21 Liu argues that, “Throughout the text, the answer to the questions regarding which one of the two is dearer is ‘*shen*身’ for sure. The *Daodejing* emphasizes on valuing life and valuing the body. The life and body refer to both physical, and social, cultural” (Liu 2006, p. 456).

- 22 Wagner reads “*yu*與” as “joined to”, and translates the whole segment as: “When fame is joined to the person, which [of the two] does [in fact] become dearer? [Fame of course] When the person is joined by goods, which [of the two] is [in fact] increased? [The goods, of course]” (Wagner 2000, p. 270).

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Article

Avoiding the Trap of Parallelism: Interlocking Parallel Style in the Interpretation of *Laozi* 29

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Abstract: The present paper deals with a specific argumentative feature found in the *Laozi*, namely, “interlocking parallel style” or IPS. It shows how knowledge of this structure can be helpful for the understanding and interpretation of the text. At the same time, the paper demonstrates that, in some cases, rigorously imposing IPS can be counterproductive. To this end, the paper analyses *Laozi* 29, the commentary to it penned by Wang Bi, as well as a close parallel in the fifth chapter of the *Wenzi*.

Keywords: *Laozi*; IPS; Wang Bi; *Wenzi*; Heshang Gong

1. Introduction

The short ancient Chinese treatise *Laozi* 老子, also known as the *Daodejing* 道德經, belongs among the most studied and revered texts in the world. It has been subject to diverse, often radically different, interpretations in China and other Asian cultures throughout the centuries. Since its introduction in the West, the cryptic sayings of the text have been scrutinized and appropriated by a diverse readership: from proponents of Christian faith to followers of Leo Tolstoy’s moral teachings but also philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and spiritual teachers like Eckhart Tolle, as well as individuals in search of personal growth or remedies for the ills of modern Western society.¹ To many of its readers, the *Laozi* has indeed become a valuable source of intellectual inspiration and emotional relief, addressing their specific concerns. To a large extent, this ability to speak to people across time, space and cultural restraints is grounded in the style and the main theme of the work. The absence of historical references, which are otherwise so common in early Chinese philosophical writings, and the text’s appeal to the level of reality that supposedly transcends the world of manifold particularities do, indeed, make the precepts of the *Laozi* appear timeless and valid.

Their openness to interpretation, however, should not be equated with the absence of compositional principles or random textual arrangement. While on the macrolevel, there is indeed evidence that the two parts of the *Laozi* were arranged differently and divided into a varying number of chapters or *zhang* 章², the nuclei of most *zhang* remained largely consistent and untouched by this process³. Moreover, as some studies have demonstrated, the textual organization of an individual *zhang* is often based on some distinct principles.⁴ Familiarity with these principles is thus often deemed essential for grasping the meaning of the relevant textual unit.

The present paper deals with a specific argumentative feature found in the *Laozi*, namely, “interlocking parallel style” or IPS, a term that was introduced by Rudolf Wagner.⁵ It shows how knowledge of this structure can be helpful for the understanding and interpretation of the text. At the same time, the paper demonstrates that, in some cases, rigorously imposing IPS can be counterproductive.⁶ To this end, I investigate closely related passages from Chapters 29 (the main goal of this study) and 64 of the transmitted *Laozi* as well as their counterparts in the excavated versions of the text. I also analyze the interpretation of *Laozi* 29 as provided by Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) and the related passage in the text *Wenzi* 文

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子. The commentary ascribed to Heshang Gong 河上公 is consulted at some junctures for comparison.⁷ The next section provides a brief discussion of the interlocking parallel style.

2. Interlocking Parallel Style in the *Laozi*

According to Wagner, the prime example for IPS can be found in the following passage from the transmitted *Laozi* 64:

為者敗之，執者失之。是以聖人無為，故無敗；無執，故無失。(Lou 2008, p. 166)

He who acts fails;

He who grasps loses.

This is why the sage does not act and thus does not fail;

[He] does not grasp and thus is without loss.

This seemingly simple passage has an intricate structure consisting of several constitutive elements. To distinguish between these elements, Wagner gives them different designations. Accordingly, Arabic numbers stand for the order of the respective sentences in this passage, while Roman numerals connote sentences that have the same “argumentative status” or, simply, the same syntactic structure. Then there are letters a, b, c, which demonstrate the thematic affiliation of the respective lines (Wagner 2000, pp. 63–64).⁸ Consequently, the structure of the passage can be depicted as:

I	1a 為者敗之 He who acts fails	3c 是以聖人 This is why the sage	2b 執者失之 He who grasps loses
II	4a 無為故無敗 does not act and thus does not fail		5b 無執故無失 does not grasp and thus is without loss

As can be seen, letters a and b connoting different thematic strands constitute the “vertical” structure of the passage. Strand a (sentences 1 and 4) deals with the topic of taking action (*wei* 為) and failing or ruining things (*bai* 敗), while strand b (sentences 2 and 5) features the notions of grasping (*zhi* 執) and losing (*shi* 失). Letter c indicates phrases, in this case: *shi yi sheng ren* 是以聖人 (This is why, the sage), which refer to both juxtaposed strands. At the same time, the “horizontal” elements I and II signify a general rule (level I) and the sage’s application thereof (level II).

The structure contains a number of nonverbal statements simply by virtue of juxtaposing different elements with each other. That is, it first implies a close connection between “taking action” and “grasping” and, secondly, it suggests that a sage bases his actions on his mastery of universal rules.

While the number of thematic strands in this structure is usually confined to three (a, b and c), each strand can contain several elements (not just two as in the above example). The relationship between them can have varying degrees of transparency, corresponding to what Wagner calls either the “open” (established by the same notions) or “closed” (established by synonyms or related terms) interlocking parallel style. In one of these two variations, IPS appears in almost half of the chapters of the transmitted *Laozi*, 39 out of 81 (Wagner 2000, p. 95).

3. Interlocking Parallel Style in the Interpretation of the *Laozi*

According to Wagner, one of the most prominent commentators of the *Laozi*, Wang Bi, was well aware of the prominent role this structure played in the text and interpreted it accordingly. For instance, the opening of Chapter 3 reads:

不尚賢，使民不爭；不貴難得之貨，使民不盜；不見可欲，使心不亂。(Zhu 2000, p. 14)

Not to elevate the worthy will keep the people from contention;
 not to value goods which are hard to come by will keep the people from thieving;
 not to display what is desirable will keep the hearts (of the people) from being
 unsettled.

Rather than understanding this passage as consisting of three parallel sentences, Wagner views it as exhibiting the conventional IPS structure (note the change of subject from the “people” in the two preceding sentences to the “heart” in the last sentence⁹). Accordingly, the first two sentences are thematically juxtaposed, addressing the issues of social status (i.e., elevation of the worthy: *shang xian* 尚賢) and material wealth (goods difficult to come by: *nan de zhi huo* 難得之貨), respectively. As for the third sentence, it functions as a summary of the first two. The resulting structure can be depicted as follows:

<p>1a 不尚賢，使民不爭 Not to elevate the worthy will keep the people from contention</p>	<p>3c 不見可欲，使心不亂 not to display what is desirable will keep the hearts (of the people) from being unsettled</p>	<p>2b 不貴難得之貨，使民不為盜 not to value goods which are hard to come by will keep the people from thieving</p>
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In Wagner’s opinion, Wang Bi was aware of this tripartite structure and had commented on the classic accordingly (Wagner 2000, pp. 108–10). The lines from Wang Bi’s commentary, which correspond to the above sentences from the *Laozi*, can be arranged in the familiar IPS manner:

<p>1a 尚賢顯名，榮過其任， 為而常校能相射¹⁰ If, in elevating the worthy and glorifying the famous, the fame exceeds the assignment, then [the people] will constantly compare their abilities as if in a shooting contest.</p>	<p>3c 故可欲不見，則心無所亂 也。(Lou 2008, p. 8) That is why, if desirable things are not displayed, then the hearts (of the people) will have nothing to be unsettled by!¹¹</p>	<p>2b 貴貨過用，貪者競趣， 穿窬探篋，沒命而盜 If valuing goods exceeds their use, then the greedy will compete to rush for them, they will “break through walls and search in chests,” and will steal without regard for their life.</p>
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The fact that the third sentence opens with *gu* 故 indicated that Wang Bi indeed understood the mention of desirable things (*ke yu* 可欲) as summarizing and concluding the foregoing argument. That is, the people’s hearts are disturbed by elevated social status and material wealth.

This is different from another early prominent commentary on the text, attributed to Heshang Gong 河上公. There, the third sentence is not treated as a concluding summary but, interpreting *xin* as the heart–mind of the ruler, it is taken as pointing to measures pertaining to the “self-government of the ruler” (Chan 1991, p. 135). These measures consist

of banishing the “sounds of Zheng” (*Zheng sheng* 鄭聲) and keeping away the “beauties” (*mei ren* 美人).¹² Thus, we see how the understanding of the text’s structure affects the interpretation of its meaning. According to Wang Bi, the text, after giving two concrete examples for the causes of popular disorder, moved to a more abstract level of discussion. On the other hand, Heshang Gong views it as providing three examples of what a ruler should avoid.

In the next section, I show how different views regarding the arrangement of *Laozi* 29 have affected its interpretation.

4. IPS or Not? (Chapter 29)

This example concerns the opening of Chapter 29, which reads as follows:

將欲取天下而為之，吾見其不得已。天下神器，不可為。為者敗之，執者失之。
(Zhu 2000, p. 115)

For those who would like to take over the world and act on it —

I see that with this they simply will not succeed.

The world is a sacred vessel;

It cannot be acted upon.

Those who act on it destroy it.

Those who grasp it lose it.¹³

Three distinct positions can be singled out regarding the structure of this passage among different scholars. The first posits that it contains no IPS, the second is that it is built entirely on IPS in its received form, and the third contends that the transmitted text is corrupted at this juncture, containing only a garbled version of the original parallel structure. Yet this parallelism can be reconstructed with recourse to other parts of the *Laozi* and other texts.

The first position is represented by Thomas Michael, who, while applying discernable IPS structures to his translation of the work, does not find here anything resembling IPS (Michael 2015, p. 246).

The proponent of the second view, Rudolf Wagner, analyzes the structure of the chapter in the following way:

1a 將欲取天下 For those who would like to take over the world		2b 而為之 and act on it
	3c 吾見其不得已 I see that with this they simply will not succeed	
	4c 天下神器 The world is a sacred vessel	
	5c 不可為 It cannot be acted upon	
7a 執者失之 Those who grasp it lose it		6b 為者敗之 Those who act on it destroy it

Accordingly, this is a case of closed interlocking parallel style, where the right element addresses the topic of taking “action”, while the left counterpart deals with similar notions of “taking (over)” (*qu* 取) and “grasping” (*zhi* 執). Moreover, in this arrangement, the sentence *bu ke wei* 不可為 belongs to the common thematic line (5c). Thus, Wagner concludes that the verb *wei* 為 as it appears there takes on the meaning of both *qu* 取/*zhi* 執 and *wei* 為 (Wagner 2003a, p. 454).

My reservations against this standpoint are mainly based on the fact that the *Laozi* draws a clear line between *qu* and *zhi*. The text speaks affirmatively about the possibility of “taking over the world” (*qu tianxia* 取天下) on several occasions (Chs. 48 and 57). As for *zhi*,

its most natural objects appear to be the highest principles the work promulgates: the Way in Chapters 14, 35 and the “One” in the excavated equivalent of Chapter 22 (see below). Furthermore, the suggested polysemy of the verb *wei* 為 in line 5c appears rather odd.

The main advocate of the third position, Chen Guying 陳鼓應¹⁴, in his early *Laozi jinzhu jinyi ji pingjie* 老子今注今譯及評介, reconstructs the relevant passage of *Laozi* 29 to the following effect:

天下神器，不可為也，[不可執也。] 為者敗之，執者失之。[是以聖人無為，故無敗；無執，故無失。] (Chen 1970, p. 125)¹⁵

The world is a sacred vessel;
 It cannot be acted upon.
 It cannot be grasped.
 Those who act on it destroy it,
 Those who grasp it lose it.
 This is why the sage does not act and thus does not fail;
 [He] does not grasp and thus is without loss.¹⁶

One can easily recognize that Chen does not only insert the line *bu ke zhi ye* 不可執¹⁷ but also adds the aforementioned IPS passage from Chapter 64, maintaining that it originally belonged here and was misplaced at some point in the text’s transmission.¹⁸ This second addition was rendered untenable by the publication of the manuscript versions of the *Laozi*, where the sentences in question appear in a textual context that, in the transmitted version, largely corresponds to Chapter 64.¹⁹ Therefore, it seems logical that eventually Chen came to reconsider his opinion regarding this matter.²⁰ As for the insertion of *bu ke zhi ye*, it is likewise not supported by the excavated materials.²¹ Yet Chen still appears to view this line as an integral part of Chapter 29. His more recent *Laozi jinzhu jinyi* 老子今注今譯, arguably the most influential commentarial contemporary work on the Daoist classic, reads:

天下神器，不可為也，[不可執也。] 為者敗之，執者失之。 (Chen 2006, p. 188)

The world is a sacred vessel;
 It cannot be acted upon.
 [It cannot be grasped.]
 Those who act on it destroy it,
 Those who grasp it lose it.²²

There are several reasons why this reading appears convincing, even though it is not supported by any known rendition of the *Laozi*. First, in this case, the passage obtains a parallel structure that can be represented as follows:

	1c天下神器 The world is a sacred vessel	
2a不可為也 It cannot be acted upon		(3b不可執也 It cannot be grasped)
4a為者敗之 Those who act on it destroy it		5b執者失之 Those who grasp it lose it

Even though Chen and other scholars advocating the insertion of *bu ke zhi ye* do not operate with the notion of IPS, the formally complete juxtaposition of relevant sentences seems to be a very compelling reason to validate their assumption.²³

Moreover, in their view, the present reading is supported through Wang Bi’s commentary on Chapter 29 as well as a Laozi-influenced passage from the fifth chapter of the *Wenzi*, which both feature the line *bu ke zhi (ye)* 不可執(也).²⁴ In the subsequent sections, I analyze

the two mentioned instances beginning with Wang Bi before returning to the discussion of this chapter’s structure.

5. Wang Bi’s Interpretation of Laozi 29

Explaining the passage from Chapter 29 dealing with the sacred nature of the world, Wang Bi writes:

萬物以自然為性，故可因而不可為也，可通而不可執也。物有常性，而造為之，故必敗也。物有往來而執之，故必失矣。(Lou 2008, p. 76)

The myriad things have *ziran* as their nature. Therefore, it is possible to follow them but impossible to act upon them, it is possible to merge with them but impossible to grasp them. Things have constant nature, and so by deliberately acting upon them, one is sure to destroy (them). Things have their coming and going, and so by grasping them, one is sure to lose (them).²⁵

It would appear that the line *ke tong er bu ke zhi ye* 可通而不可執也 was written to interpret the phrase *bu ke zhi* 不可執, which is absent from the received *Laozi*. The commentary exhibits the familiar symmetrical IPS arrangement:

	1c 萬物以自然為性 The myriad things have <i>ziran</i> as their nature	
	2c 故 Therefore	
3a 可因而不可為也 it is possible to follow them but impossible to act upon them		4b 可通而不可執也 it is possible to merge with them but impossible to grasp them
5a 物有常性，而造為之，故必敗也 Things have constant nature, and so by willfully acting upon them, one is sure to destroy (them).		6b 物有往來而執之，故必失矣 Things have coming and going, and so by grasping them, one is sure to lose (them).

It is evident that Wang Bi used this IPS structure to address the impossibility of “acting” (*wei* 為) upon things together with the unfeasibility of “grasping” (*zhi* 執) them.²⁶ The question remains, however, of whether we can infer from this that the copy of the *Laozi* that the eminent scholar had at his disposal really contained the line *bu ke zhi* 不可執. The fact that this line is missing from all the transmitted and unearthed editions suggests that it is highly unlikely.²⁷ Rather, it seems that his interpretation was informed by the standards of parallelism, which Wang Bi also applied in his own writings as well as his hermeneutic endeavors of ancient classics.²⁸

As we shall see in the next section, another text in which the sentence *bu ke zhi* 不可執 appears, the *Wenzi*, is also characterized by a high degree of symmetrical organization of argument into juxtaposed strands.

6. Laozi 29 in Light of the *Wenzi*

As numerous studies have shown, since the Dingzhou 定州 discovery of 1973, when talking about the *Wenzi*, we need to distinguish between the transmitted version and the excavated manuscript, fragments of which were discovered in the grave of a Han dignitary, for these two texts differ in regard to their length, literary form, philosophical outlook and main protagonists.²⁹ While in the received text, the main protagonists are Laozi and a by far less significant Master Wen 文子, who is depicted as the former’s disciple³⁰, the excavated manuscript features Master Wen advising King Ping 平王, but their identities are not further specified.³¹

Therefore, in the transmitted text, the passage in question is attributed to Laozi, who is answering Master Wen’s questions. In the excavated version, these words are pronounced by Master Wen in his conversation with King Ping. Let us start with the received text:

文子問曰：古之王者，以道蒞天下，為之奈何？老子曰：執一無為，因天地與之變化，天下大器，不可執也，不可為也，為者敗之，執者失之。執一者，見小也，見小故能成大也，無為者，守靜也，守靜故能為天下正。處大，滿而不溢，居高，貴而無驕，處大不溢，盈而不虧，居上不驕，高而不危。盈而不虧，所以長守富也，高而不危，所以長守貴也，富貴不離其身，祿及子孫，古之王道，期於此矣。³²

Master Wen asked: “The kings of antiquity used the Way to rule over the All-under-Heaven. How did they do this?”

Laozi said: “They grasped the One and did not act. They followed heaven and earth and changed together with them. All-under-Heaven is a great vessel, it cannot be grasped, it cannot be acted upon. Who acts upon it, ruins it. Who grasps it, loses it. In grasping the One they saw the small.³³ Seeing the small, they thus became able to accomplish their greatness. In not acting they kept still. Keeping still, they [thus] became able to be the paragon of the world. Dwelling amidst the great (wealth), they were full without overflowing. Occupying a high (position), they were noble without arrogance. Dwelling amidst the great (wealth) without overflowing, they were full without waning. Occupying the top (position) without arrogance, they were high without imperiling themselves. Being full without waning was their way to continually preserve wealth. Being high without imperiling themselves was their way to continually preserve nobility. Neither wealth nor nobility parted from their side, and their endowment reached descendants—the Kingly Way of antiquity was complete in this.”³⁴

The passage is an example of IPS of a scope that exceeds anything seen in the *Laozi*. The argument is consistently developed in two juxtaposed strands (a and b) that are connected and/or summarized through the units belonging to the middle strand c. In fact, the development of argument in parallel style is highly characteristic of the *Wenzi*, and, as is sometimes claimed, it reflects the authors’ understanding of the Way (Fech 2016, pp. 240–43). The structure of the above passage looks as follows:

1a 執一 [They] grasped the One	3c 因天地與之變化 [They] followed heaven and earth and changed together with them	2b 無為 [They] did not act
	4c 天下大器也 All-under-Heaven is a great vessel	
5a 不可執也 it cannot be grasped		6b 不可為也 it cannot be acted upon
8a 執者失之 Who grasps it, loses it.		7b 為者敗之 Who acts upon it, ruins it.
9a 執一者，見小也 In grasping the One they saw the small.		11b 無為者，守靜也 In not acting they kept still.
10a 見小故能成其大也 Seeing the small, they thus became able to accomplish their greatness.		12b 守靜能為天下正 Keeping still, they [thus] became able to be the paragon of the world.

13a 處大，滿而不溢 Dwelling amidst the great (wealth), they were full without overflowing.	14b 居高，貴而無驕 Occupying a high (position), they were noble without arrogance.
15a 處大不溢，盈而不虧 Dwelling amidst the great (wealth) without overflowing, they were full without waning.	16b 居上不驕，高而不危 Occupying the top (position) without arrogance, they were high without imperiling themselves.
17a 盈而不虧，所以長守富也 Being full without waning was their way to continually preserve wealth.	18b 高而不危，所以長守貴也 Being high without imperiling themselves was their way to continually preserve nobility.
19c 富貴不離其身 Neither wealth nor nobility parted from their side,	
20c 祿及子孫 And their endowment reached descendants	
21c 古之王道其於此矣 —the Kingly Way of antiquity was complete in this.	

Evidently, the understanding of this passage is contingent upon grasping its strictly symmetrical structure. The well-ordered arrangement is astonishing given that it results from different combination patterns of involved sentences: abba (sentences 5 to 8), aabb (sentences 9 to 12) and ababab (sentences 13 to 18). Impressive also is the amount of borrowed material, which can be mainly traced back to two sources: the *Laozi* (sentences 1 to 12) and the *Xiaojing* 孝經 (sentences 13 to 21).³⁵ In order to connect these materials in the given manner, the authors of the *Wenzi* must have been aware of their structural similarities. The resulting philosophical message is unusual in the context of early Daoism as “grasping of the One” (*zhi yi* 執一) and “Non-Action” (*wu wei* 無為) are identified as the main preconditions for preserving wealth (*fu* 富) and nobility (*gui* 貴), respectively.

Despite its similarities to the two mentioned sources, the transmitted *Wenzi* is far from being identical to them. While the parallels to the *Xiaojing* are not going to be discussed here³⁶, the connection to the *Laozi* deserves a closer look. When juxtaposed with each other, the corresponding passages of the two texts look as follows:

	Received <i>Wenzi</i>	<i>Laozi</i>	
1.	文子問曰：古之王者，		
2.	以道蒞天下，為之奈何？	以道蒞天下	§ 60
3.	老子曰：執一無為	執一 ³⁷ 無為	§ 22 § 2, 3, 37 ...
4.	天下大器也，不可執也，不可為也，	天下神器，不可為也。	§§ 29, 64
5.	為者敗之，執者失之。	為者敗之，執者失之。	
6.	執一者，見小也	抱一	§ 22
7.	見小	見小曰明	§ 52
8.	故能成大也	故能成其大	§§ 34, 63
9.	無為者，守靜也	守靜	§ 16
10.	守靜故能為天下正	清靜為天下正	§ 45

Clearly, the *Wenzi* features a great number of notions and phrases stemming from the *Laozi*, but it creates a new philosophical symbiosis by establishing connections between borrowed materials that cannot be found in its source, such as, for instance, the equation of “grasping the One” and “seeing the small”. Likewise, we see that some phrases are deliberately modified, thus resulting in the designation of All-under-Heaven as a “great vessel” (*da qi* 大器) instead of “sacred vessel” (*shen qi* 神器).

As was mentioned above, there are currently two main versions of this text, the received and the excavated. The excavated fragments, for all their piecemeal nature, are important as they shed light on the content and organization of a *Wenzi* that existed prior to the creation of the transmitted text. While they also demonstrate heavy influence by the *Laozi*, the latter is never quoted verbatim and is treated as nonchalantly as in the transmitted version³⁸. This practice of *Laozi* exegesis is remarkable in the context of early Chinese philosophy.³⁹ Most likely it is due to the status of Master Wen as a close disciple of Laozi. Hence, while the former’s ideas have a distinct Laozi “feel”, they are not identical to those of the master.

The parallels to the *Laozi* influenced passage are (preceded by the inventory numbers of the respective bamboo slips) as follows:

	〔王曰。吾聞古聖立天下，以道立天下〕
2262	King [Ping] asked: “I heard that when the sages of antiquity ordered All-under-Heaven, they used the Way to order All-under-Heaven 〔口何。文子曰。執一無為。平王曰〕
0564	How [did they do that]?” Master Wen replied: “They grasped the One and did not act.” King Ping asked 地大器也，不可執，不可為，為者販（敗），執者失
0870	[Heaven and] Earth are a big vessel. It cannot be grasped; it cannot be acted upon. Who acts, fails; who grasps, loses.
0593	是以聖王執一者，見小也。無為者 This is why, the sage kings’ grasping the One, was to see the small; [their] non-action 也，見小故能成其大功，守靜口
0908	Seeing the small, they were thus able to accomplish their great achievements. Keeping still, [X]
0775	下正。平王曰。見小守靜奈何。文子曰 of [All-under-Heaven].” King Ping asked: “How did they see the small and keep still?” Master Wen said

As can be seen, the differences between these lines and the *Laozi* are even greater than in the transmitted version. For instance, while the latter reads “All-under-Heaven” (*tianxia* 天下), the former evidently speaks of the cosmic pair “Heaven and Earth” (*tiandi* 天地) (slip 0870). Moreover, the exemplary rulers in the excavated *Wenzi* are said to be able “to accomplish their great achievements” (*neng cheng qi da gong* 能成其大功), adding the character *gong* 功 to what otherwise would have constituted a verbatim quotation from *Laozi* 34 or 63.

Based on the parallels in the transmitted text, we can reconstruct the structure of this passage in the Dingzhou manuscript, which looks as follows:

	1c [天]地大器也 Heaven and Earth are a big vessel	
2a 不可執 It cannot be grasped		3b 不可為 It cannot be acted upon
5a 執者失 who grasps, loses		4b 為者販（敗） who acts, fails
	6c 是以聖王 This is why, the sage kings’	

7a 執一者，見小也 grasping the One, was to see the small	8b 無為者，[守靜]也 non-action, [was to keep still]
9a 見小，故能成其大功 Seeing the small, they were thus able to accomplish their great achievements	10b 守靜，[能為天]下正 Keeping still, [they were thus able to become] paragons of All-under-Heaven

While the textual arrangement largely corresponds to the transmitted *Wenzi*, the line *shi yi sheng wang* 是以聖王 (6c) can be found only in the excavated text. The appearance thereof is significant as it distinguishes the general rule (expressed in lines 2a to 4b) from the sagely principles of action (dealt with in lines 7a to 10b). In this particular case, the “sage kings” chose a way of action that opposed common practices (especially evident in the opposition of *wei* 為 and *wu wei* 無為). As such, the content and structure of sentences 2a to 8b appear to result from a combination and modification of the textual materials corresponding to the above-mentioned parts from the transmitted *Laozi* 29 and *Laozi* 64.

Philosophically, there are several points that are worth mentioning at this juncture.⁴⁰ In the excavated *Wenzi*, the sage is identified as a powerholder, while the *Laozi* remains ambiguous in regard to the social rank of the exemplary person to the point that it might be considered carrying a subversive message (Fech 2020, p. 374). This implies that the behavior associated with “grasping the One” and “non-action” might have been promoted with a ruler in mind and was not suitable for everyone. Moreover, the reason for the impossibility of grasping and acting upon the world is identified (in both the excavated and the transmitted *Wenzi*) as its greatness and not its sacred nature (as in the *Laozi*). In other words, the world-vessel is not different in kind from regular “vessels” (things created for the very purpose of being subjected to different manipulations), which would preclude the possibility of any (conventional) operations on it. Had the world been “smaller”, then the grasping thereof and acting thereupon would be perfectly valid actions. This seems to be the reason why the sage king is said not to refrain from grasping altogether but to grasp the One, which is uniquely associated with smallness.⁴¹ The change of framework from the rather sociopolitical “All-under-Heaven” to the cosmological “Heaven and Earth” might have taken place because in the Dingzhou manuscript, the “One” was defined as the beginning of the myriad things that were, again rather uniquely, equated with Heaven and Earth.

The emphasis on the world’s greatness might also explain why in the excavated *Wenzi*, it is the agent who suffers the consequences of his own activities in the world and not the entities of the world. One who approaches the diverse phenomena of the vast world head on is bound to fail. The sage kings of the past are shown here to have thrived exactly because they understood how to direct their attention to the source of things. As such, the *Wenzi* presents a clearer appearance of being a governance manual.

In the above passage, the *Wenzi* operates with a great number of notions and expressions from the *Laozi*, yet it produces a philosophy that is markedly different from it. In their use of the literary form of IPS, its authors were not necessarily influenced solely by the foundational work of Daoism. As the example of *Xiaoqing* shows, they were also aware of the occurrence of this practice of textual organization in other texts.⁴² At the same time, the examples of IPS in the *Wenzi*, which are more abundant, large-scale and complex when compared with the *Laozi*, might reflect its different conception of the Way. That is, *Dao* is no longer something unfathomable, impenetrable and obscure but a pattern emerging from a combination and correct arrangement of several distinct principles as reflected in its textual manifestations.

As for the line “it cannot be grasped” (*bu ke zhi* 不可執), in view of the numerous modifications and accretions to which the text of the *Laozi* was subjected in the *Wenzi*, there is no compelling reason to assume that it was actually borrowed from the former. It seems to have been inserted at this juncture to facilitate the development of the argument

in parallel strands. In addition to parallelism, one of the reasons why some scholars were compelled to take this view might have been the fact that in the transmitted *Wenzi*—the only version of the work available until very recently—the present line is ascribed to Laozi. But as we have already seen, originally the whole passage expressed Master Wen’s insights.

When comparing the above passage with the corresponding passage in Wang Bi’s commentary, it becomes evident that in these two instances, the respective strands are arranged in a different order. Namely, in Wang Bi, the treatment of *wei* precedes that of *zhi*, whereas in the *Wenzi*, the opposite scenario is the case. This adduces further evidence that the existence of a copy of the *Laozi* featuring the line *bu ke zhi* 不可執 in Chapter 29 (or its early counterparts) was rather unlikely.

With this in mind, I return to the discussion of that chapter in the next section.

7. Laozi 29 Revisited

The foregoing discussion showed that attempts to interpret or reconstruct the first part of *Laozi* 29 using IPS either did not yield compelling results or were not supported by textual evidence. Does this mean that this chapter contains no IPS? To answer this question, let us take a look at it again (this time in its entirety⁴³):

	Rhyme	
1 將欲取天下而為之，		For those who would like to take over the world and act on it —
2 吾見其不得已。		I see that with this they simply will not succeed.
3 天下神器，		The world is a sacred vessel;
4 不可為。	哥	It cannot be acted upon.
5 為者敗之，	月祭	Those who act on it destroy it,
6 執者失之。		Those who grasp it lose it.
7 夫物		Now, as for the things:
8 或行或隨，	哥	Some go forward and some follow,
9 或噓或吹，	哥	Some breathe slow and some breathe fast,
10 或強或贏，	哥	Some are strong and some are weak,
11 或接或隳。	哥	Some are continued and some are destroyed.
12 是以聖人		This is why, the sage
13 去甚，去奢，去泰。	月祭 ⁴⁴	Removes the extreme, removes the extravagant, the excessive.
(Zhu 2000, p. 115)		

First, it seems that the first two occurrences of *wei* 為, that is in “act on it” (*wei zhi* 為之) (line 1) and “It cannot be acted upon” (*bu ke wei* 不可為) (line 4) correlate. Therefore, the opening of the chapter deals with the unfeasibility of action in regard to the world (lines 1–4).⁴⁵ Thus, the fact that the latter phrase is not juxtaposed with *bu ke zhi* (*ye* 不可執也) does not imply at all that *Laozi* 29 was incomplete.

In view of this, the two parallel sentences addressing the issue of “acting” and “grasping” (lines 5 and 6) can be understood as explication (by depicting the negative results of acting) as well as expansion (by addressing the harmful implications of grasping) of the foregoing discussion. The resulting small-scale list of impermissible actions and their deplorable outcomes appears to correspond to the “catalogue” of “things” (*wu* 物) and their ways of existence listed further below in lines 7–11. Indeed, these two “lists” similarly mention negative examples in the second position and feature close end-rhymes.⁴⁶ Therefore, even though lines *wei zhe bai zhi* 為者敗之 and *zhi zhe shi zhi* 執者失之 have exact counterparts in *Laozi* 64, thus creating a cross-reference to that chapter⁴⁷, they are not necessarily linked by juxtaposition, as it is the case in the latter.

8. Conclusions

In the present paper, I follow Rudolf Wagner in arguing that IPS can be a powerful tool for uncovering aspects of meaning in early Chinese texts which emerge from the spatial arrangement of the argument. At the same time, I contend that overemphasizing IPS can be just as counterproductive to text interpretation as not recognizing the presence of this structure. As for the attempts to reconstruct the “original” reading of the *Laozi* based on parallelism or IPS, they are problematic for several reasons. To begin with, there is a general assumption that there was an *urtext*, often, as a superior version, where textual and structural ambiguities were not present and logical connections were all laid bare. However, recent scholarship on the manuscript literature shows that efforts to establish the ideal “original” version run counter to conventions in early China, where it was common for texts to exist in various (equally valid and accepted) versions (Hein 2019, pp. 55–58). In the case of the *Laozi*, as some studies suggest, endeavors to create an authoritative edition were undertaken only after the text had reached a certain degree of influence during the Western Han dynasty and came to be instrumentalized politically (Ding 2017, p. 177). Furthermore, parallelism constitutes only one (albeit important) aspect of literary composition. Thus, a textual sequence which might seem problematic from the standpoint of parallelism or IPS might be intact from a thematic point of view. After all, its ostensible incompleteness might have been deliberate to make a specific point. This shows that in view of the multifaceted nature of texts attempts at textual reconstruction which are not supported by textual evidence are bound to remain speculative regardless of how sound the ideas informing them might appear.

As I argued above, neither the *Wenzi* nor Wang Bi’s commentary provide compelling evidence for the appearance of the sentence *bu ke zhi* 不可執 in *Laozi* 29. Certainly, they demonstrate that the tendency to interpret the beginning of this chapter in light of the juxtaposition between *wei* 為 and *zhi* 執 (akin to the one found in Chapter 64) gained currency already among some of the earliest exegetes of the work. Yet, it does not seem to be a coincidence that the sentence appeared only in these two writings, which heavily relied on IPS. Therefore, its presence can only be taken as evidence for their authors’ strict adherence to IPS. Exegetic endeavors of Chapter 29 should take this into account.

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Notes

- ¹ For main positions in the Chinese interpretation of the text, see (Robinet 1999, pp. 130–54). For an overview of the Western reception of the *Laozi*, see (Hardy 1998).
- ² On chapter divisions in the text, see (Henricks 1982; Han 2012, pp. 210–13; Ding 2017).
- ³ Even the excavated Guodian materials, which are significantly divergent from the transmitted editions in wording and structure, are still “remarkably close to those we find in the received *Daodejing*” (Cook 2012, p. 198). On the two main positions regarding the connection between the Guodian manuscripts and the transmitted text, see (Shaughnessy 2005, pp. 445–52).
- ⁴ See (Liu 1997, pp. 23–32; Wagner 2000, pp. 53–96; 2003a; Gentz 2015, pp. 118–28; Michael 2015, 2021; Lebovitz 2021).
- ⁵ Wagner (2000, p. 62). This form of parallelism should be distinguished from “double-directed parallelism”, examples of which were studied by Gentz (2015, pp. 118–28). While some scholars, most notably Michael (2015, p. 134; 2021, p. 57), view IPS as indicative of the oral origin of the *Laozi*, I refrain from any definitive conclusions in this regard in the present study. However, as will be partly shown below, some cases of IPS demonstrate such a high degree of structural complexity and intricacy that it appears doubtful that oral transmission would be a suitable means to convey the meaning resulting from the interplay of different structural elements.
- ⁶ On how parallel passages in the *Laozi* were increased in the course of its transmission, see (Liu 2003, pp. 359–63; 2014, p. 43).

- 7 For brief introductions of Heshang Gong's commentary, see (De Meyer 2004, pp. 72–74; Barrett 2008, pp. 619–20; Tadd 2020, pp. 104–7). For Wang Bi's version and commentary, see (Boltz 1993, pp. 277–78; Robinet 2008).
- 8 According to Wagner (2000, pp. 91–94) there is also another variant of IPS in the *Laozi*, which received the designation “binary series”. This form of textual arrangement allows a piece to contain a larger number of argumentative and/or thematic strands than just three, as shown here.
- 9 The subject of the third sentence varies across different editions of the *Laozi*. In the two Mawangdui 馬王堆 versions, it is the “people” (*min* 民) (Gao 1996, p. 235). In the Beida 北大 manuscript, as well as the text annotated by Heshang Gong, this role is played by the notion “heart” (*xin* 心) (Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 北京大學出土文獻研究所 [The Institute for Research of the Excavated Documents of the Peking University] 2012, p. 145; Wang 1993, p. 10). In Wang Bi's version, we find a combination of the two characters: “the heart of the people” (*min xin* 民心) (Lou 2008, p. 8). The philosophical implications of these variations are significant, focusing on either internal or external manifestations of disorder (Liu 2006, p. 116).
- 10 On the interpretation of this passage, see (Lou 2008, p. 9, note 4).
- 11 Compare translation in (Chan 1991, p. 73; Lynn 1999, pp. 55–56; Wagner 2003a, p. 129).
- 12 Wang (1993, p. 10). For translation, see (Erkes 1945, p. 133; Chan 1991, p. 133).
- 13 Translation adapted from (Henricks 1992, p. 244).
- 14 Chen (1970, p. 126n5) identifies his influences in regard to this view as Liu Shippei 劉師培 (1884–1919) and Yi Shunding 易順鼎 (1858–1920).
- 15 Despite its apparent problems, this rendition of the text came to be accepted by some contemporary scholars, such as Charles Wu in his translation of the work (Wu 2016, p. 66).
- 16 Compare translation in Chen (1981, p. 159).
- 17 Unlike Liu Shippei, Yi Shunding also refers to the IPS passage from Chapter 64 to corroborate his view.
- 18 Here, Chen (1970, p. 127n6) says to be following Xi Tong 奚侗 (1878–1939).
- 19 It is noteworthy that in the Guodian manuscripts, they are to be found in the two documents, commonly designated as the Guodian *Laozi* A and C. For differences in their wording, see (Henricks 2000, pp. 43–44, 120–22). On different thematic concerns of textual units constituting Guodian *Laozi*, see (Henricks 2000, pp. 6–8; Cook 2012, pp. 219–23).
- 20 Note that the second edition of the *Laozi zhuyi ji pingjie* 老子註譯及評介, which already discusses Mawangdui manuscripts, still retains this modification (Chen 1988, p. 183). This implies that Chen changed his opinion only after the discovery of the Guodian *Laozi*.
- 21 For a juxtaposition of the excavated versions, see (Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 北京大學出土文獻研究所 [The Institute for Research of the Excavated Documents of the Peking University] 2012, p. 201).
- 22 Compare translation in Chen (2020, p. 198).
- 23 Wang Shumin 王叔岷 (Wang 2007, p. 469) and Roth (2010, p. 71) both amend an unmarked quotation of this passage in the first chapter of the *Huainanzi* by adding *bu ke zhi ye* based on the idea of “parallelism”.
- 24 This view is espoused by Liu Shippei, Yi Shunding (as quoted in Chen 1970, p. 126n5) and He Ning 何寧 (He 1998, pp. 72–73).
- 25 Compare translation in Lynn (1999, p. 105) and Wagner (2003a, pp. 217–18).
- 26 According to Wang Bi, the impossibility of any interventionist measures regarding the entities populating the world is rooted in their respective “constant nature”, which cannot be changed and is to be followed. Doing so will naturally bring about “prestabalized harmony”, which is “encoded” into the nature of things. For more, see (Wagner 2003b, pp. 110–11, 130, 160).
- 27 Even Wagner, who maintains that the text which Wang Bi once commented was different from the text to which his commentary is attached now, calls this possibility “remote” (Wagner 2003a, p. 454).
- 28 Note that Wang Bi did not attempt to underscore the affinity between *qu* and *zhi* in his commentary to this passage. In fact, the meaning of *qu* was not elucidated there at all. This casts additional doubts on the validity of Wagner's arrangement of the passage.
- 29 On studies comparing the two *Wenzi* versions, see (Ho 1998; Ding 1999a, 1999b; Zhang 2007; Van Els 2018).
- 30 In view of the prominent role of the person and the text *Laozi* in the transmitted *Wenzi*, some scholars view the latter as a commentary to the foundational work of Daoism. See (Jiang 1983). On a comprehensive list of the correspondences between the transmitted editions of the *Laozi* and *Wenzi*, see (Ding 1999a, pp. 175–83).
- 31 On the question of the *Wenzi* protagonists, see (Fech 2015).
- 32 Lau (1992). Compare a slightly different version in (Wang 2000, pp. 233–34).
- 33 The character *jian* 見 in the phrase to “see the small” can be also read as *xian* in the meaning “to appear”, yielding the translation to “appear small”. For this translation, see (Lévi 2012, p. 204; Van Els 2018, pp. 62–63).
- 34 Compare translation in Cleary (1992, p. 68).
- 35 For the parallels between this passages and other early texts, see (Ho et al. 2010, pp. 139–41).

- 36 The main difference concerns the subject of the passage. In the transmitted *Wenzi*, it is the kings of antiquity, while the *Xiaojing* addresses *zhuhou* 諸侯, the feudal lords. For the Chinese text and English translation, see (Rosemont and Ames 2009, p. 106).
- 37 The notion “grasping the One” can be found only in the excavated versions of Chapter 22. In the transmitted versions, it is replaced through “embracing the One” (*bao yi* 抱一). On the different connotations of these two metaphors, see (Behuniak 2009).
- 38 Mukai (2001, pp. 758–60) cites as many as twenty Dingzhou fragments of the *Wenzi* which, while showing proximity to the *Laozi*, are never identical to it. See also (Van Els 2015, pp. 327–28).
- 39 For a comparison with the status and use of the *Laozi* in the *Huainanzi*, see (Le Blanc 1985, p. 84).
- 40 For some in-depth discussions of the topic, see (Li 1995; Ding 1999b, pp. 238–40; Zhang 2004, 2007, pp. 110–18).
- 41 The notion “grasping the One” appears in a large number of the texts from the late pre-Qin and early imperial eras, including the *Laozi*. On the “Legalist” connotations of this term, see (Behuniak 2009, p. 366).
- 42 Note that the *Laozi* is sometimes regarded as a critical response to the *Shijing* 詩經, as the “anti-*Shi*”, meaning that “the poetics of the *Laozi* tradition developed in direct opposition to *Shi* poetics” (Hunter 2021, p. 115). For an example of “double-directed parallelism” in the *Shijing*, see (Gentz 2015, pp. 116–18).
- 43 Note that, in the Beida manuscript, the sentence “great cutting does not sever” (*da zhi wu ge* 大制無割), which in the received versions closes the preceding Chapter 28, is placed at the beginning of this chapter (Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 北京大學出土文獻研究所 [The Institute for Research of the Excavated Documents of the Peking University] 2012, p. 158).
- 44 Rhymes in this passage were identified based on Jiang Yougao 江有誥 (1773–1851) (Jiang 1993, p. 9b), Lau and Ames (1998, p. 122) and Zhang (2010, p. 145).
- 45 In a similar way, Heshang Gong interprets *wei zhi* 為之 as “wish to govern the people by means of action” (*yu yi youwei zhi min* 欲以有為治民 (Wang 1993, p. 118. Compare translation in Erkes 1945, p. 175). The subsequent *bu ke wei ye* 不可為也 is then explained as “they cannot be governed by means of action” (*bu ke yi youwei zhi* 不可以有為治) (*ibid.*), thus establishing a connection between the two instances of *wei* 為.
- 46 There are multiple examples of “irregular” rhymes between characters belonging to the rhyme groups Ge 歌 and Yue 月 in early Chinese philosophical works. For the examples in the *Huainanzi*, see (Zhang 2010, pp. 93–94).
- 47 For some examples, see (Liu 2003, pp. 356–59).

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Article

“Non-Action” and “Assistance”: Laozi’s Thoughts on How to Treat Others

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Abstract: How to treat others is a key topic in Laozi’s thought. Laozi not only advocates “non-action” (*wuwei* 無爲), or not interfering with others, but also hopes that actors will take some positive responsibilities for others. He expects that actors can implement the instructions of Dao 道 and fulfill the role of “assisting others to achieve their self-so-ness but not daring to interfere” (chapter 64). He believes that “one person will become more abundant when he contributes to others” (chapter 81); that is to say, actors and others are always in the process of mutual attainment. What he claims can be summarized by the dual assertion “to do V_1 , but not to do V_2 ” (V means a type of action), containing two kinds of responsibilities: the situations represented by “not to do V_2 ” are concrete manifestations of “non-action,” which refers to the negative responsibility of non-interference with others, while the situations signified by “to do V_1 ” are essentially a kind of action of assisting others, which is a positive responsibility for others. There is a subtle cooperative relationship between “assistance” and “non-action.” In a nutshell, what Laozi expects is a responsibility to support others to actualize their authentic self on the premise of earnestly respecting the spontaneity and autonomy of others. When the focus on “non-action” is broken through, we can grasp Laozi’s thinking deeply and expand our understanding of his thought.

Keywords: Laozi; ethic; others; non-action (*wuwei* 無爲); assistance (*fu* 輔); self-so-ness (*ziran* 自然)

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1. Introduction

The ethical issue of how to treat others is often discussed in the *Laozi*.¹ The sages function as the text’s main subjects and ideal actors, and there are rich statements on the relationship between the sages and others, which contain Laozi’s deep thinking and fundamental propositions on the issue mentioned above. When we try to understand his claim on this issue, the first thing that comes to our mind is quite probably the famous concept of “non-action” (*wuwei* 無爲),² on which there is a basic consensus from researchers that it cannot be a negation of all actions, but only those improper actions or actions against Dao. Based on this, when discussing the issue of others, we will gain an opinion that what *wuwei* negates is interfering actions, and Laozi advocates that the actors should not interfere with others.

This kind of understanding is in line with Laozi’s thinking. However, only paying attention to *wuwei* is not enough to fully grasp Laozi’s rich thinking on the issue of how to treat others. In fact, “non-action” or not interfering with others is only one aspect of his proposition. He also advocates that the actors should take some positive actions directed towards others. For example, chapter 64 in the *Laozi* says: “The sages . . . assist the myriad *wu* to achieve their self-so-ness but not dare to interfere” (聖人 . . . 以輔萬物之自然而不敢爲).³ This suggests that “not daring to interfere” as a manifestation of “non-action” is only one aspect of the sages’ practice, for at the same time they should also assist others to achieve their “self-so-ness” (*ziran* 自然). Laozi also talks about the positive actions that are even more forceful than “assistance.” For instance, chapter 37 says: “When their greed breaks out during their development, I will suppress it with plainness which is nameless” (化而慾作, 吾將鎮之以無名之樸). Another example appears in chapter 56: “Block up their

apertures, close their doors, dissolve their sharpness, and relieve their troubles” (塞其兌, 閉其門, 挫其銳, 解其紛).⁴ All these statements suggest that actors should take some kinds of positive actions beyond “non-action.”

In previous studies on Laozi’s thought, although most scholars focus on the famous concept of “non-action,” some scholars have noticed that there are some theories of positive actions in the *Laozi*. A. C. Graham points out that Laozi describes the behavior of the sage as “doing nothing” (*wuwei* 無爲), though there are other contexts, however, in which it will be described not as “doing nothing” but as “doing but . . . ,” such as “to generate but without taking possession, to do but without presuming on it, to lead but without managing” (生而不有, 為而不恃, 長而不宰) in chapters 10 and 51 (Graham 1989, p. 232). Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall interpret *wuwei* as “Noncoercive action that is in accordance with the *de* of things” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 67), and Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 summarizes the sages’ activities following the rule of *wuwei* as a kind of “soft effect” (弱作用力) (Wang 2013). Both of the two viewpoints have affirmed that some positive actions are allowed in Laozi’s thought. In addition, Li Ruohui 李若暉 inspects the terms *xing* 行, *dong* 動, *zuo* 作, and *wei* 為 in the *Laozi*, and emphasizes that Laozi advocates that all actions can be taken as long as they are in line with Dao (Li 2016). Ding Sixin 丁四新 points out that *wuwei* is a principle used to regulate *wei*, and *wei* is free and open on the premise of *wuwei* (Ding 2018). Both Li and Ding have noticed Laozi’s thoughts on how to “act” (*wei*) and believed that, premised on a certain rule, actions are totally free. All in all, compared with the researchers who only pay attention to *wuwei*, these researchers have noted Laozi’s theories of positive actions, providing important inspirations for understanding Laozi’s thought. Of course, it will be found that although the other aspect outside of *wuwei* has been noticed in these studies, Laozi’s theories related to it still need to be examined in more depth. Especially, the nature of those positive actions and the relationship between positive actions and *wuwei* have not been revealed in enough depth.

This paper intends to present Laozi’s thought on the topic of how to treat others, on the basis of the studies mentioned above, trying to advance our understanding of Laozi’s theory. It will show that *wuwei* and positive actions are two basic aspects of Laozi’s proposition on how to treat others, and there is a subtle cooperative relationship between these two. So, how does Laozi express these two propositions? In particular, how does he talk about those positive actions? Would not those positive behaviors—such as “assisting” and “suppressing” cited above—contradict the idea of *wuwei*? Furthermore, the concept of “self-so-ness” is usually understood as a situation where things can exist spontaneously and not be affected by external forces. When an actor has taken actions such as “assisting” or “suppressing” towards others, is the state of those others still “self-so”? All of these are important questions needing to be discussed in detail. In this process, we will be able to break through the focus on the concept of “non-action,” so as to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Laozi’s thought.

2. Two Situations as Background

In order to facilitate the discussion on the questions mentioned above, it is needed to explain two basic issues. The first concerns the relationship between ethics and politics in Laozi’s thought, and the second involves the terms Laozi uses to refer to “others.”

The treatment of others is by its very nature a kind of ethical activity. However, the actions towards others that Laozi cares about are often related to the practices the rulers take while governing the people. This then raises the question of the relationship between ethics and politics. We know that Aristotle divides human practice into two types, which are ethical practice and political practice, and what the former seeks is the good for a single man, while what the latter pursues is the good for a state (Aristotle 1984, p. 3).

The actions that Laozi addresses also involve these two fields, but he does not clearly differentiate them. In his view, the actions of sages as the ideal actors not only seek the good for the individual but also pursue the good for “the-world-under-heaven” (*tianxia* 天下) as a political place. Simply put, ethics represents a broader field that includes politics

in his thought. This is related to the purpose of Laozi's philosophy, i.e., to reorganize the order of *tianxia*. He hopes to guide people's actions through some influential actors, and the most influential actors are the sages as the rulers of *tianxia*, who are also called "nobles and kings" (*houwang* 侯王). Thus, his propositions on the issue of how to act focus on these men. In this system, politics, as a kind of field of ethics, should accept the guidance of ethical norms, and this situation can be called "the ethicalization of politics." Of course, it does not mean that the treatment of others belongs to the realm of political activities completely. Afterall, the role of the sages is not limited to politics.⁵

Laozi uses several terms to signify "others" when discussing how they should be acted upon, including *min* 民, *baixing* 百姓, *ren* 人, and *wu* 物. *Min* and *baixing* refer to "others" in the political context. *Ren* has a broader meaning than those two above and contains all other people toward whom the sages act, not limited to politics. The usages of *wu* are a little complicated, and its meanings depend on contexts. Since the texts where this term appears are involved in the following discussion, let us examine the meanings of it here, so as to provide a background for the following.

The word *wu* appears frequently in the *Laozi*, and it is usually understood as all the existences in the world. A detailed inspection of the texts shows that this understanding is not clear enough, and the meanings of this term need to be further analyzed. In Laozi's expressions of *wu*, it always appears as one side of a relationship, either between Dao and *wu* or between sages and *wu*. From this, we can see that *wu* contains two basic meanings. One appears in cosmology, where it refers to all phenomenal things in the world originating from Dao, including human beings and natural things other than humans. The other appears in the context related to ethics, and signifies "others" with a broad sense, including other people and natural things toward which the sages act. Furthermore, it needs to be noticed that in the second situation *wu* sometimes has specific meanings, either referring in particular to natural things to which the sages face, or referring specifically to other people toward whom the sages are oriented. Chapter 27 provides an example of the former: "The sages are always good at saving other people, so other people will not be abandoned; The sages are always good at saving *wu*, so *wu* will not be abandoned" (聖人常善救人，故無棄人；常善救物，故無棄物). Additionally, the latter will be found in the following passages:

The sages engage in non-action, teach without words, and the myriad *wu* are prosperous though the sages do not initiate them.

是以聖人處無爲之事，行不言之教，萬物作焉而不辭。(Chapter 2)⁶

Wu may be disgusted by this, so the persons who follow the principle of Dao do not allow themselves to be in this situation.

物或惡之，故有道者不處。(Chapter 24)

As for the way of *wu*, some move ahead while others follow behind... It is for this reason that the sages eschew the excessive, the superlative, and the extravagant. 物或行或隨... 是以聖人去甚，去奢，去泰。(Chapter 29)

If the nobles and kings can follow it, then the myriad *wu* will be able to develop along their own lines. When their greed breaks out during their development, I will suppress it with plainness which is nameless.

侯王若能守之，萬物將自化。化而慾作，吾將鎮之以無名之樸。(Chapter 37)

What the sages desire is no desire, and they do not prize property that is hard to come by. What the sages study is not studying, and they will remedy the masses when the latter are at fault. By these ways, the sages will assist the myriad *wu* to achieve their self-so-ness but not dare to interfere.

聖人慾不慾，不貴難得之貨，學不學，復眾人之所過，以輔萬物之自然而不敢為。(Chapter 64)

The mysterious virtue runs so deep and distant, turning back along with *wu* to reach the great concordance.

玄德深矣，遠矣，與物反(返)矣，然後乃至大順。(Chapter 65)

In these examples, *wu* ostensibly refers to all others to which the sages face, but it can be seen from contexts what this word mainly signifies is other people: In chapter 2, the myriad *wu* as the object of education refers to men; in chapter 64, the myriad *wu* corresponds to “the masses” (*zhongren* 眾人) that appeared in the preceding statement; and in chapters 24, 29, 37, and 65, *wu* means the people who take those actions such as “being disgusted” (*wu* 惡), “moving ahead” (*xing* 行), “following behind” (*sui* 隨), “their greed breaking out” (*yuzuo* 慾作), and “returning back” (*fan* 返). In previous studies, some scholars have noticed that *wu* refers to people in a few sentences of the *Laozi*.⁷ Here, I further illustrate this situation. First, in the preceding quotations, I try to show all the passages where *wu* might have this meaning. Secondly, I want to point out that, in these passages, it is not enough to recognize that *wu* signifies people, but more specifically, what *wu* signifies is other people toward whom the sages act, which is a critical part of “others” in Laozi’s thought.

It is worth noting that *wu* had already been used to refer to people before the *Laozi*, as in:

The monarch of Jin cannot get close to *wu*, so it can be inferred that Jin will be in trouble.

物以無親，晉之不能，亦可知也。(Du and Kong 1999, p. 1286)

A particularly beautiful *wu* is enough to make people’s minds change.

夫有尤物，足以移人。(Du and Kong 1999, p. 1493)

If he can follow the good *wu* and treat the people kindly, then his country will prosper for a long time.

若能類善物，以混厚民人者，必有章譽蕃育之祚。(Xu 2002, p. 105)

In short, the term *wu* is a key point needing attention when interpreting the *Laozi*. It contains two basic meanings in this book. First, it signifies all phenomenal things originating from Dao in cosmology. Secondly, it appears in the contexts related to ethics, signifying “others” toward whom the sages act, and sometimes, *wu* as “others” refers specifically to other people. In modern Chinese language, *wu* usually signifies natural things other than humans. Thus, we should be especially careful to avoid the influence of the modern usage when understanding Laozi’s thought.

3. Two Responsibilities for Treating Others

Now, let us examine Laozi’s ideas on the treatment of others in detail. It has been mentioned in the Introduction that “non-action” is one of his basic claims, and as Graham has discovered, there are other contexts in which his claims will be described as “doing but . . .” (Graham 1989, p. 232). Graham makes this point based on chapters 10 and 51. To be precise, chapter 51 speaks of the relationship between Dao and *wu*, while chapter 10 talks about the relationship between sages and others. Only the latter belongs to the domain of the topic we are concerned with. Of course, the situation described in chapter 51 is not totally irrelevant to this topic, and actually, it is a basis for the actions of sages described in chapter 10 (cf. Ye 2014). Since we are talking about how sages treat others, let us turn to the passage in chapter 10:

Grow them, but do not occupy them; work for them, but never control them;
develop them, but do not dominate them.

生而不有，爲而不恃(持)，⁸長而不宰。

The translation here differs from that of Graham. First, the word *shi* 恃 has been given a different interpretation. Secondly, I think the two aspects—what should do and what should not do—can be more clearly reflected in this kind of translation. We can see that

“growing” (*sheng* 生), “working” (*wei* 爲), and “developing” (*zhang* 長) are the right actions advocated by Laozi, while “occupying” (*you* 有), “controlling” (*chi* 持), and “dominating” (*zai* 宰) are the improper ones rejected by Laozi. *Sheng* 生 and *zhang* 長 refer to providing various resources for others. *Wei* 爲 is a commendatory term here, differing from the word *wei* 爲 in *wuwei* 無為. What *wei* 爲 in this passage signifies is a right action that is similar to *Sheng* 生 and *zhang* 長. As for *you* 有, *chi* 持, and *zai* 宰, they belong to the actions that the claim of *wuwei* 無為 negates. Actually, they are three forms of *wei* 爲 that contains a special meaning in *wuwei* 無為.

Chapter 64 also provides a classic example, which Graham does not pay attention to. This chapter says: “The sages . . . assist the myriad *wu* to achieve their self-so-ness but not dare to interfere” (聖人 . . . 以輔萬物之自然而不敢爲). (For a full statement of this passage, see the quotation in Section 2). The way of expression in this passage—“doing but . . .”—is similar to chapter 10. Here, Laozi affirms the actions of “remedying” (*fu* 復) and “assisting” (*fu* 輔), while rejecting that of “interfering” (*wei* 爲). In terms of value of actions, there is a consistency between *fu* 復, *fu* 輔 in this chapter and *sheng* 生, *wei* 爲, *zhang* 長 in chapter 10. Additionally, the meaning of *wei* in this chapter diverges from the one in chapter 10, as it instead refers to improper actions. Having shifted roles, *wei* now enters the company of the criticized actions such as *you* 有, *chi* 持, and *zai* 宰 in chapter 10.

If we want to provide a generalization that can clearly reflect both the actions advocated by Laozi and the ones rejected by him, then I tend to sum up the expressions that appear in these chapters as “to do V_1 , but not to do V_2 ” (V means a type of action), rather than “doing but . . .” generalized by Graham. It reminds us that Laozi advises simultaneously both “to do V_1 ” and “not to do V_2 ” when actors are oriented toward others. those actions advocated by Laozi, such as “growing” (*sheng* 生), “working” (*wei* in *wei-er-bu-chi*), “developing” (*zhang* 長) “remedying” (*fu* 復), and “assisting” (*fu* 輔), totally are concrete manifestations of V_1 , while the actions rejected by Laozi, such as “occupying” (*you* 有), “controlling” (*chi* 持), “dominating” (*zai* 宰), and “interfering” (*wei* in *bu-gan-wei*), are just the situations represented by V_2 .

Furthermore, it needs to be pointed out that both “to do V_1 ” and “not to do V_2 ” are responsibilities that actors should undertake when facing to others: the former as a positive responsibility means that actors should take some appropriate actions towards others; the latter reminds that actors must not do those intrusive actions towards others while undertaking the positive actions, and this can be called negative responsibility. A key point will be found in this generalization; that is, what “non-action” negates is exactly all actions signified by V_2 , and as a concept, “non-action” is actually an abstraction of “not to do V_2 .” This concept represents Laozi’s basic views of negative responsibility of actors. However, it is so prominent that we usually focus on the situations that “not to do V_2 ” signifies and tend to ignore those to which “to do V_1 ” refers.

In the passages quoted above, Laozi talks about both “to do V_1 ” and “not to do V_2 ,” while in other passages, he only speaks of “to do V_1 .” These cases more clearly show his advocacy of positive responsibility:

The mysterious virtue runs so deep and distant, turning back along with *wu* to reach the great concordance.

玄德深矣，遠矣，與物反(返)矣，然後乃至大順. (Chapter 65)

If the nobles and kings can follow it, then the myriad *wu* will be able to develop along their own lines. When their greed breaks out during their development, I will suppress it with plainness which is nameless.

侯王若能守之，萬物將自化。化而慾作，吾將鎮之以無名之樸. (Chapter 37)

Block up their apertures, close their doors, dissolve their sharpness, relieve their troubles, and make everyone simple and pure, so as to achieve the situation called the mysterious consonance.

塞其兌，閉其門，挫其銳，解其紛，和其光，同其塵，是謂玄同. (Chapter 56)⁹

When governing the world, the sages should let the people live a rich life with a pure mind, weaken their desires, and make their bodies strong, so that the people can live a life free of ingenuity and greed.

聖人之治，虛其心，實其腹，弱其志，強其骨，常使民無知(智)無慾。(Chapter 3)

For the convenience of discussion, the sequence of the chapters here does not follow the original one in the *Laozi*. The ways of action mentioned in the above passages are various manifestations of V_1 , such as “returning back along with *wu*” (與物返矣), “suppressing their greed” (鎮之), “blocking up their apertures” (塞其兌), “closing their doors” (閉其門), “dissolving their sharpness” (挫其銳), “relieving their troubles” (解其紛), “making everyone simple and pure” (和其光, 同其塵), “letting everyone live a rich life with a pure mind” (虛其心, 實其腹), “weakening their desires” (弱其志), and “making their bodies strong” (強其骨). By these actions, the sages will be able to lead everyone to the life called “the great concordance” (*dashun* 大順) and “the mysterious consonance” (*xuantong* 玄同).

Let us further explain the meaning of these passages. The passage in chapter 65 is programmatic among these statements. It tells us that a virtuous person will not only return to the state of “plainness” (*pu* 樸) himself, but he will also lead others to return to this way of life. The passage in chapter 37 asserts that the nobles and kings should follow the principle of Dao and allow the people to develop freely. There, it also states that the nobles and kings should suppress people’s greed during the latter development. The action of “suppressing” is a concrete manifestation of V_1 , and its purpose is to cause everyone to turn from greed toward a plain life. This passage can echo the previous passage: The ideal actors will lead others to return to the plain life by some actions including the one of “suppressing”.

The passage in chapter 65 shows the goal but does not go into detail about the path to get there. The passage in chapter 37 depicts a key method called “suppressing,” while the passage in chapter 56 describes several ways, which can be regarded as the extension of “suppressing.” These actions target not only the faults caused by greed but also the troubles resulted by ingenuity. In addition, “the mysterious consonance” mentioned here is similar to “the great concordance” in chapter 65, both of which refer to the wonderful life Laozi expects. The passage in chapter 3 also speaks of ways of action that have similar meanings to those seen in chapter 56. The statement “free of ingenuity and greed” (*wu-zhi-wu-yu* 無智無慾) in chapter 3 is a very critical point. It is the essence of “plainness,” and also the concrete meaning of “the mysterious consonance” and “the great concordance.” In general, what the sages want to achieve by the actions mentioned above is to let people (including themselves) live a plain life free from greed and ingenuity.

There are actually quite a few statements about V_1 in the *Laozi*, but they are easily overlooked because of the focus on “non-action.” There is a question here about the independence of V_1 . For example, in the sentence “develop them, but do not dominate them” (長而不宰), we may think that not to dominate others is just to let them develop freely; therefore, the action of “to develop them” (長) is not an independent one. It should be noted that “not to dominate them” can be regarded as a way of “to develop them,” but the meaning of the latter is not limited to the former. As an action, “to develop them” includes those ways providing positive conditions for others. The discussion above is for the texts where Laozi talks about both “to do V_1 ” and “not to do V_2 ,” while in those texts only talking about “to do V_1 ,” the independence of such actions is more obvious.

4. The Legitimacy of Assisting Others as an Action

There is a more important question needing discussion. That is, is there a contradiction between the V_1 actors take and the state called “self-so-ness” (*ziran* 自然), which belongs to others? From the perspective of word structure, *ziran* means to achieve this by oneself, which is a spontaneous state not affected by external forces. For “others,” the actions of “remedying” (*fu* 復) and “assisting” (*fu* 輔) taken by the sages are kinds of external forces, and so why is the state of others still called “self-so-ness” (see the sentence in chapter 64 cited above)? Perhaps we might resolve this by saying that the actions of “remedying”

and “assisting” as the external forces toward others are not very forceful. Yet, how should we understand the ones like “suppressing their greed” (chapter 37), “blocking up the apertures of their greed,” “closing the doors of their greed,” “dissolving the sharpness of their ingenuity,” and “relieving their troubles” (chapter 56)? Can the state of others still be “self-so” under the influence of these relatively forceful actions?

The concept of *ziran* has attracted lots of attention from Daoist researchers in recent years, who have put forward many enlightening insights from various perspectives. Specific to the issue concerned in this paper, we can see that scholars hold different views. For example, Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭 says that Laozi advocates using measures like suppressing knowledge to force people to return to a childlike state and that those measures are actually contrary to the people’s state of being “self-so” (Qiu 2019). However, some scholars believe that there is no such contradiction within Laozi’s thought. Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 says that the concept of “self-so-ness” describes the situation that the internal motivations drive the process of an individual’s existence and development, and this situation does not by definition prohibit all influence by external forces but only excludes those involving strong forces or direct interferences (Liu 2006, p. 211). It has been mentioned in the Introduction that Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 summarizes the activities of sages as the “soft effect” (弱作用力). In addition, Mr. Wang also points out that the “soft effect” can lead people to the state of “self-so-ness,” which means they live and act according to their own internal natures and inner drives (Wang 2013). Mr. Liu believes that the state of “self-so-ness” allows for the application of some external force, and the “soft effect” proposed by Mr. Wang can just be used to generalize the type of force that is allowed.

There is no objection to Laozi’s advocacy about “self-so-ness.” Then, whether there is a contradiction between V_1 and “self-so” is basically a question about whether the actions V_1 represents are legitimate. On the whole, I agree with Liu and Wang, but there are still two points needing to be discussed further. One is that the statements of Liu and Wang can explain why V_1 is feasible, but it is also necessary to be considered why V_1 is even needed to properly engage with others. The second is that actions such as “suppressing” and “blocking up” appear to be quite forceful and seem to be beyond the scope of the “soft effect.”

Let us examine the first point now. In general, the reason why V_1 is needed relates to the relative roles of the sages and ordinary people. Laozi’s appeals for action are mostly aimed at the sages, and he rarely says how ordinary people should act. It is very likely that he regards the sages as the persons of foresight (*xianjuezhe* 先覺者) and believes these persons should enlighten the others who, because of their greed and ingenuity, are not aware of Dao.¹⁰ In this way, the question that how ordinary people should act has been indirectly answered by Laozi: They should, with the help of the sages, transcend greed and ingenuity and return to the plain life called “the great concordance.”

Literally, *ziran* refers to a spontaneous state not affected by any external forces, but this is not its exact meaning. At a deeper level, this concept means the actualization of the authentic self, which refers to the pure and simple self that is free of ingenuity and greed. Furthermore, the actualization of this authentic self not only does not completely exclude external forces but even requires assistance of external forces in some cases. For ordinary people, they are easily driven by their vulgar self and influenced by greed and ingenuity. Thus, they need guidance and enlightenment from the sages as the persons of foresight. This role of the sages resembles that of the person who first discovered the world outside cave in Plato’s theory (Plato 1997, pp. 1132–33). To borrow Plato’s metaphor, the situation mentioned above resembles that of those people inside the cave who have not yet seen the outside and need the guidance of someone discovering the outside previously.

Next, let us review the specific types of action that V_1 includes, in order to explain the second point mentioned above. We will find that there are two levels of the sages’ behavior: in normal circumstances, the sages silently provide resources for others, allowing everyone to develop himself freely (such as the situations in chapter 10); when the others become depraved because of greed and ingenuity, the sages will help them return to the plain life

called “the great concordance” or “the mysterious consonance” (as depicted in chapters 37, 56, 64, etc.).

We can further find that those actions which seem to be strong belong to the second level. For this level, chapter 3 provides a more concrete example: “Let those things that easily stimulate people’s greed not appear, so that everyone’s mind will not be disturbed” (不見可慾，使民心不亂).¹¹ Ordinary people tend to be seduced by those things that easily arouse greed and thus to deviate from the state of being “self-so.” At this time, the sages should eliminate those things, so as to reduce the possibility of greed making people depraved. This is a way of “suppressing their greed” mentioned in chapter 37.¹² The expression of “suppressing their greed” does not mean that the sages will directly discipline or restrict other people, but that they will help others get rid of their greed by removing those things that easily stimulate their greed. Essentially, this means improving the environment in which others live, instead of directly restricting those others’ daily activities.

For others, these types of actions the sages take are the “soft effect” that is required so they can achieve “self-so” lives. Literally, expressions such as “suppressing their greed,” “blocking up the apertures of their greed,” and “closing the doors of their greed” may lead us to think that the actions the sages take are directly disrupt others. However, those actions in essence belong to a soft assistance, and its purpose is just to return along with others to a plain life without greed and ingenuity. Laozi uses these seemingly high-intensity words to emphasize the importance of assisting others, instead of expressing the intensity of actions.

Furthermore, there is no fundamental difference between the two layers included in V_1 . They are just different ways to implement the basic principle called “assisting the myriad *wu* to achieve their self-so-ness” in various scenarios. No matter at what level, what the sages need to do is not to directly discipline or transform others but to play an auxiliary role by improving the environment and providing various favorable conditions for others. In this case, the other people can exert their own inherent powers to actualize their authentic self and achieve the life called “the great concordance” or “the mysterious consonance.” In short, the sages only improve the environment and provide the conditions, so their actions are called “assisting;” The lives of the others fundamentally depend on their own inherent capacities, so this state is called “self-so-ness.”

The above discussion on the legitimacy of V_1 mainly focuses on “others.” Specifically, what I was concerned with is the reason why V_1 is allowed and even required when treating others. In addition, I will examine the legitimacy of V_1 from the perspective of “actors.” The actors’ assistance to others is not deliberately contrived, and it is not for the realization of the actors’ private desire, nor is it to show their ingenuity. The purpose of this kind of actions is just to support others in realizing their authentic self with their own inherent capacities, so that these actions are in line with the principle of Dao. On the other hand, assisting others is also how the actors need to behave if they want to fulfill their virtues and become sages. Between actors and others, an action not only affects others but also affects the actors themselves in turn. Actually, there is a mutual influence during the actions of treating others. Laozi says: “one person will become more abundant when he contributes to others, and he will get more and more when he gives to others” (既以人已愈有，既以與人己愈多) (Chapter 81). This is to say, a person who makes others successful also makes himself successful—this success is certainly not limited to material life and does not refer primarily to material life—so that actors and others are always in the process of mutual attainment. Laozi also believes that “they will not injure each other, and they will benefit from their interactions” (夫兩不相傷，故德交歸焉) (Chapter 60).¹³ It can be said that sages and other people need each other: The life of being “self-so” belonging to others needs the assistance of the sages, while the sages also need to fulfill their responsibility toward others, and only in this way can they become true sages.

5. The Nature of Interference and Educating with *Renyi*

The issue of the legitimacy of V_1 is a key point in Laozi’s thoughts on the treatment of others. In the preceding, we examined this issue from the perspective of both the others

and the actors and thus could see the boundary between the assistance V_1 represents and the interference V_2 indicates. The fundamental reason why V_2 is improper is that it is a kind of action that is driven by the selfishness of actors and destroys the state of being “self-so” of others. The concept of “non-action” is specifically designed to negate these interventional actions directed at others. Basically, this concept is an abstraction of the proposition of “not to do V_2 ,” while “assistance” can be regarded as a generalization of “to do V_1 .”

Among the various V_2 opposed by Laozi, educating the people with benevolence and righteousness (*renyi* 仁義) represents a classic case, which can help us identify the boundary between V_1 and V_2 and the differing views Laozi and Confucius hold on the role of the sages. It should be first noted that Laozi does not deny the existence of benevolence and righteousness in human nature, nor does he negate the value of actions that originate from these innate virtues. That is to say, the plain life he expects does not exclude benevolence and righteousness, and what he actually opposes is a situation where the sages use benevolence and righteousness as tools to educate the people. As he says: “When Dao is abandoned there is benevolence and righteousness” (大道廢，有仁義) (Chapter 18). The compound *renyi* 仁義 here refers to benevolence and righteousness used as tools for education, instead of benevolence and righteousness themselves. What Laozi wants to express is that the emergence of this type of education indicates a deviation from the principle of Dao.

Why would Laozi think so? I think there are two reasons for this. First, in terms of the way of education, benevolence and righteousness as political tools easily become external and superficial dogma, losing their original value as moral qualities. Secondly, education itself is very likely to destroy the life of being “self-so” belonging to the people, even if there is a possibility that such action is not driven by the selfishness of the educators. For the people, this education is a form of direct discipline or transformation, which falls within the scope of interference that surpasses the acceptable limits of assistance.

Of course, Laozi does not oppose education completely. What he advocates is “the teaching without words” (不言之教) (Chapter 2). Actions such as “remedying people when they are at fault,” “assisting the myriad *wu* to achieve their self-so-ness,” and “suppressing their greed” mentioned above are the manifestations of this kind of teaching. Laozi also says: “Abandon the education with benevolence and righteousness, and the people can return to filial piety and kindness” (絕仁棄義，民復孝慈) (Chapter 19). Actually, the process of people returning does not exclude assistance from sages, but this role of sages is not as an educator using benevolence and righteousness as tools.

In Laozi’s view, compared to the sages as persons of foresight, ordinary people are limited in their capacities for self-actualization. Thus, the latter need the help of the former. However, compared to Confucius, Laozi still holds a relatively high confidence in the ability of human self-actualization generally, which is why he advocates “assistance” or “the teaching without words” rather than direct discipline.¹⁴

6. The Relationship between “Non-Action” and “Assistance”

Based on the previous discussion, we have found that Laozi stipulates two kinds of responsibilities for engagement with others. The concept of “non-action,” as an abstraction of “not to do V_2 ,” refers to a negative responsibility whose essence is “non-interference” or “non-control,” and this responsibility is an inevitable requirement for others’ self-realization. Furthermore, as a generalization of “to do V_1 ,” “assistance” refers to a positive responsibility, which means that actors should improve the environment and provide various favorable conditions for others. In this way, they could help others achieve a plain life absent of greed and ingenuity.

It can be seen that, on a deeper level, there is a subtle cooperative relationship between “non-action” and “assistance.” For the state of “others,” what Laozi cares about mostly is letting them achieve their own “self-so-ness,” and in order to fully realize this goal, “non-action” and “assistance” from actors are both needed. The reason why actors must follow

the rule of *wuwei* is that *wei*—those interfering actions—will destroy the “self-so-ness” of others. At the same time, those actions represented by “assistance” are not only a kind of activities allowed but also a kind of conditions required by others in the process of actualizing their “self-so-ness.” Those actions are premised on not destroying the authentic self of others and do not belong to interfering activities that *wei* signifies, so they are permitted. Additionally, for others, especially ordinary people, they are limited in their capacities for self-actualization, easily driven by their vulgar self which contains greed and ingenuity, and this is the reason why the actions represented by “assistance” are needed. To sum up, the purpose of both “non-action” and “assistance” is the “self-so-ness” of others, and what Laozi expects in the end is just a responsibility to support others to actualize their authentic self on the premise of earnestly respecting the spontaneity and autonomy of those others.

As far as these two forms of the responsibility are concerned, Laozi speaks more on the negative one. While this article has highlighted the positive side that we easily forget, the negative side actually appears more often in Laozi’s statements. This situation shows that Laozi pays more attention to negative responsibility, even though he likewise regards positive responsibility as important. The classic examples are his assertions: “Act according to the rule of non-action” (為無為) (Chapters 3, 63);¹⁵ “Follow non-action and yet all the things are done” (無為而無不為) (Chapters 37, 48). These statements implicitly contain a message of positive responsibility, but in order to emphasize the negative responsibility of “non-action,” Laozi leaves it as subtext. Clearly, it is not without any rational basis that scholars nowadays focus on the concept of “non-action.” In particular, this specific vision is able to plainly reflect the characteristic of Laozi’s thought, when considered in the whole context of pre-Qin philosophy. However, this does not mean that Laozi’s advocacy of positive actions outside of “non-action” can be ignored. The subtle cooperative relationship between “non-action” and “assistance” is actually the deeper characteristic of Laozi’s thought.

It is talked about in the Introduction that some scholars have noticed Laozi’s theories of positive actions. The views of A. C. Graham and Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 have been discussed above. Here, I further offer responses to the views of other scholars. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall give a unique interpretation of *wuwei*. It means that outside of the coercive actions, actors can take some appropriate behavior as long as they are in accordance with the *de* of things. This interpretation reminds us that there are actually some ideas of positive actions in the *Laozi*. In an indirect sense, we can say that *wuwei* does contain such a meaning. However, if the direct meaning of this concept is to be strictly interpreted, then we will see that it is essentially a negative claim, as an abstraction of all the situations “not to do V_2 ” represents. That is, there is no direct indication of positive actions in this concept. In the *Laozi*, there are indeed quite a few theories of noncoercive actions, but they are not expressed by the concept of *wuwei*, but through the ideas represented by V_1 discussed earlier in this paper. In addition, interpreting *wuwei* as “noncoercive action” only describes those correct actions from the negative side. If we want to define them from the positive side, then what is the nature of those actions? Furthermore, are those actions a kind of freedom for the actors or a kind of responsibility? These important questions were not resolved by Hall’s and Ames’ interpretation. Based on the previous discussion, these questions have been given answers by this paper. It clarifies that those actions are essentially a kind of assistance to others, which is a positive responsibility cooperating with that negative responsibility represented by *wuwei*.

The two key questions mentioned above are also not answered in the views of Ding Sixin 丁四新 and Li Ruohui 李若暉. Both of them emphasize that actions are open and free as long as the rule of *wuwei* is followed. Perhaps, there is such a background in their views: It is impossible that Laozi negates all actions, either logically or in reality, and the claim of “non-action” only negates those improper actions, so that there is still a large space for actors to act freely as long as they follow the rule of *wuwei*. Compared with those studies focusing on *wuwei* only, the studies of Ding and Li can obviously expand

our understanding. However, they are still not enough to fully present Laozi's unique thinking. First, in the free space of action premised on the rule of *wuwei*, what Laozi mainly cares about is just the actions of assisting others, which has not yet been reflected in their views. Second, also crucially, in their views, only the nature of action as freedom has been presented, but the nature of action as responsibility has not yet been shown, and more specifically, the positive responsibility of assisting others is still ignored. This point is very important when understanding Laozi's thought. For if we do not pay attention to the responsibility of assisting others, then we may draw a conclusion that Laozi believes that everyone can be indifferent to others. Everyone's actions are totally free as long as the rule of *wuwei* is followed, so they can care about others and of course are allowed to not care about others, and the latter situation is precisely the manifestation of *wuwei* or non-interference. Yet, actually, this conclusion conflicts with Laozi's thinking.

The research by these scholars go beyond the way of focusing only on *wuwei*, offering very important inspirations for understanding Laozi's thought, but their insights need to be further developed. Only by grasping the nature of assisting others as a positive responsibility and the subtle cooperative relationship between it and *wuwei* can we gain fuller understanding of Laozi's rich thoughts on how to treat others.

Laozi tends to give the impression that he supports being indifferent to worldly affairs, though this view actually results from our excessive focus on the concept of "non-action." Yet, even if we have noticed the theories of positive actions, misunderstandings of Laozi's thinking may still arise, just as mentioned earlier. A more comprehensive view, which pays attention to both the aspects of "non-action" and "assistance" simultaneously, does not weaken the unique character of Laozi's thinking. In fact, this view can more fully present its deep characteristics. In short, there is a subtle cooperative relationship between "assistance" and "non-action," and these two kinds of responsibilities combine into a single system prescribing how to interact with others. Thus, what we should do is grasp these two aspects at the same time, so as to reach a fuller understanding of Laozi's thought.

7. Conclusions

This article has explored Laozi's thoughts on the topic of how to treat others. Laozi's propositions can be summarized by the dual assertion "to do V_1 , but not to do V_2 ": The various situations that "not to do V_2 " represents are the specific manifestations of "non-action," while the essence of the actions V_1 indicates is "assistance." In Laozi's view, both "non-action" and "assistance" are responsibilities in regard to how actors treat others. The former is a negative responsibility of not interfering with others; the latter is a positive responsibility, which proposes that actors should actively provide favorable conditions for others to realize a life of being "self-so." These two kinds of responsibilities combine into a unified way of behavior, and only by grasping both can we fully recognize Laozi's vision. Any analysis that lacks either one will result in misunderstanding Laozi's theory.

It can be said that what Laozi expects is just a responsibility to support others to realize their authentic self on the premise of earnestly respecting the spontaneity and autonomy of others. Laozi hopes that the sages as actors will follow the instructions of Dao to help others actualize others' authentic self while realizing their own. From this point of view, we see that the situations "assistance" refers to are actions that can promote the authenticity of oneself and others, while the behaviors negated by "non-action" are those actions that destroy the authenticity of everyone.

We hope to present Laozi's deep thinking on the issue of how to treat others by expanding our horizons. On a larger scale, we also hope to propose a possible new approach for understanding Daoist ethical thought generally. Daoist ideas might appear to suggest that inner peace is sufficient for our life and that worldly affairs can be disregarded. The characteristic of Daoist thinking and the style of its speech do often lead readers to form such an impression, and the readers' intentional or unintentional focus tends to strengthen this even more. Yet, if we expand our horizons and grasp the essence contained in the

ideas that seem to be against worldliness, the profound ethical concerns and rich practical wisdom contained in Daoist philosophy will become more and more apparent.

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Notes

- 1 The *Laozi* cited in this article is based on the Wang Bi edition (王弼本; cf. Lou 2008), and only the chapter numbers are shown for the quoted sentences later. In addition, some other editions are also mentioned when relevant, including the Chu bamboo slips edition excavated in Guodian, the Han bamboo slips edition collected in Peking University, the Han silk books A and B editions excavated in Mawangdui, and some handed down editions. For these various editions, see “The Full Text Comparison Table of the Main Editions of *Laozi*” (《老子》主要版本全文對照表) in *The Bamboo Books of the Western Han Dynasty in Peking University (II)* (北京大學藏西漢竹書(貳)). See Institute of Excavated Documents of Peking University (2012).
- 2 The word *wei* in *wuwei* has a special meaning, which does not refer to all actions. When translating *wuwei*, I adopt the word “non-action”, which is currently popular in sinology. Similar to *wei* in *wuwei*, the word “action” in “non-action” also has a special meaning, not referring to all actions. In the situation of treating others, *wei* in *wuwei*, or “action” in “non-action” refers specifically to the actions interfering with others.
- 3 The meanings of *wu* 物 in the *Laozi* are a little complicated, which will be discussed later. It is usually translated as “thing,” but this word is not enough to reflect exactly the meanings of *wu* in the *Laozi*. I do not intend to translate it in English, but express it only with *pinyin*.
- 4 The word *qi* 其 here is ambiguous. Some researchers interpret it as the actors themselves, while Gao Heng 高亨 believes that it refers to ordinary people toward whom the sages as actors are oriented (Gao 2010, p. 91). I agree with Gao’s opinion. The message here concerns how the sages treat others, instead of how they treat themselves.
- 5 On the issue of actions, what Laozi mainly cares about are the political practices of sages as rulers. However, in some of the texts, the actions of sages also contain ethical significance. Thus, a discussion completely limited to political affairs is not enough to fully reflect Laozi’s thoughts on the issue of how to act. Based on a broad sense of ethics, this paper tries to contain simultaneously both the ethical significance which has narrowed meaning and the political significance, and to a certain extent, it is also an attempt to expand the horizon of our understanding of Laozi’s philosophy.
- 6 The character *ci* 辭 is written as *shi* 始 in the Fu Yi edition (傅奕本) and the silk books B edition (帛書乙本). *Shi* 始 means to begin something, and it better suits the context. Chen Guying 陳鼓應, and Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall explain or translate the sentence with this character *shi* 始 (Chen 2009, p. 63; Ames and Hall 2003, pp. 79–80). The translated word “initiate” here is based on the translation of Ames and Hall.
- 7 For example, Chen Guying 陳鼓應 use *ren* 人 (people) to explain the word *wu* 物 in some passages of the *Laozi* (Chen 2009, pp. 158, 181); Zheng Kai 鄭開 points out the consistency among *min* 民 (the people), *baixing* 百姓 (the hundred clans), and *wanwu* 萬物 (the myriad *wu*) in his study of Laozi’s political philosophy (Zheng 2019, p. 5).
- 8 The word *shi* 恃 is often interpreted as claiming credit for oneself. Gao Heng 高亨 believes that *shi* 恃 is interchangeable with *chi* 持, which means to control something (Gao 2010, p. 28). Laozi is against the practice of claiming credit for oneself, and the usual interpretation is consistent with this idea. However, it is not very consistent with the context that mentions “not occupying them” (*buyou* 不有), and “not dominating them” (*buzai* 不宰), while Gao’s explanation is more in line with this context. In addition, the sentence *wei er bu shi* 爲而不恃 also appears in chapter 51, and the character *shi* 恃 is written as *chi* 持 in the Han bamboo slips edition collected in Peking University (this sentence does not appear in chapter 10 of the Han bamboo slips edition), which can support Gao’s explanation.
- 9 As for the meanings of the words *dui* 兌 and *men* 門, Gao Heng 高亨 believes that they refer to apertures and doors of people’s greed (*yu* 慾) and ingenuity (*zhi* 智) (Gao 2010, p. 91). I agree with this opinion. What this passage expresses is that the sages will lead people to curb their greed and ingenuity. In addition, The last word *xuantong* 玄同 in this passage is also a key point. Arthur Waley translates it as “the mysterious levelling” (Waley 1958, p. 210), while Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall translate it as “the profoundest consonance” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 164). My translation combines both of them. It needs to be further pointed out that no matter how it is translated, if we admit that *qi* 其 refers to ordinary people (see the explanation above), then *xuantong* 玄同 means a state common to all the people, not a state unique to the sages. The sages are also in this style of life, but they achieve it in a different way from ordinary people. They rely on self-consciousness, and ordinary people reach it with the help of the sages. In addition, there is a statement in the Qujie 祛僿 chapter of *Zhuangzi*: “The virtues of the people in the world

reach the mysterious consonance” (天下之德始玄同) (Guo 2004, p. 353). The word *xuantong* 玄同 mentioned here also refers to a state common to all the people, and it can be used as a reference for understanding the statement by Laozi.

- 10 The role of the sages as the persons of foresight is recognized by both Confucianism and Daoism. Mencius states this clearly: “*Tian* nurtures the people, and it allows the persons of foresight to enlighten those who are not yet self-conscious” (天之生此民也,使先知覺後知,使先覺覺後覺也) (Zhao and Sun 1999, p. 261). Confucianism and Daoism, however, have different views on how the persons of foresight enlighten others between, which will be discussed later.
- 11 The character *jian* 見 is interchangeable with *xian* 現. *Bujian* 不見 is equivalent to *buxian* 不現, which means to let something not to appear. The word *keyu* 可慾 refers to those things that easily stimulate people’s greed.
- 12 There is a detail worth discussing here. The expression *bujian keyu* 不見可慾 can be interpreted as not letting those things appear, even though it has been explained as letting those things not appear in this article. The former is a manifestation of “not to do V_2 ,” while the latter belongs to “to do V_1 .” According to the former, “to suppress their greed” as a manifestation of “to do V_1 ” needs to be completed by “not to do V_2 .” So, there is a question needing to be discussed: Is V_1 as an action still independent? It should be noted that the key to this situation does not lie in “not letting” or “letting . . . not,” which is just a difference in presentation or translation. As far as its substance, *bujian keyu* could mean not to show those things and also could mean to remove those things. The former belongs to “not to do V_2 ,” the latter points to a positive action, and it can illustrate the independence of V_1 .
- 13 The word *jiao* 交 means each other. The word *de* 德 refers to merits (*gongde* 功德) produced by something. In this chapter, Laozi says that ghosts do not injure people and next says that sages also do not injure people, and finally, he sums these situations up with the sentence quoted. This paper only pays attention to the relationship between sages and others, so the relationship between ghosts and people is not discussed here.
- 14 It is not very likely that Laozi’s criticism of the education with *renyi* is aimed specifically at Confucius’s teachings. The practice and the idea of this kind of education already existed before both Confucius and Laozi, and this older system is more likely to be the object of Laozi’s criticism. The situation discussed above is the objective difference between Laozi’s and Confucius’ thoughts.
- 15 As for the expression *wei-wuwei*, Chen Guying 陳鼓應 and Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 believe that it means to act (*wei*) according to the rule of *wuwei* (Chen 2009, pp. 70, 294; Wang 2017, pp. 47, 212). I agree with this opinion. The expression *wei-wuwei* is similar to the expression *wei-Dao* 為道, which means to act (*wei*) according to the principle of Dao. The word *wei* means to act, and the words *wuwei* and Dao refer to the norm that should be followed in actions. The meaning of Dao is abstract, while the meaning of *wuwei* is more concrete and narrower, for it reflects only one aspect of the guidance of Dao. As a principle, Dao also contains the guidance for assisting others. In both expressions, *wei* is a term with a broad sense, and its performance includes both non-interference and positive assistance in the situations involving others. What Laozi emphasizes in *wei-wuwei* is the aspect of non-interference, but there is also an implicit aspect of positive assistance. The rule of *wuwei* or non-interference does not exclude the rule of assistance, though Laozi only pays attention to the former in this expression. This is one of the reasons why I think that, between these two, Laozi places more emphasis on *wuwei*.

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Article

Wang Bi's "Confucian" *Laozi*: Commensurable Ethical Understandings in "Daoist" and "Confucian" Thinking

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Abstract: Wang Bi's work is often used as evidence for "Confucian" interpretations and translations of the *Laozi*. Those who argue that the explicit rejections of Confucian values in chapters 5, 18, 19, and 38 should actually be read as admonishing hollow imitation and the mere appearance of Confucian morality often cite Wang Bi. Additionally, this great philosopher is normally taken as a mere commentator who simply sought to synthesize Confucian and Daoist ideas. In this paper, I will argue that Wang's project is, in fact, far more complex and nuanced. He develops his own philosophical system, which appreciates some underlying commensurability between the *Laozi* and *Analects*. Describing him as promoting a "Confucian" *Laozi* is inaccurate as he ultimately leans more heavily on "Daoist" concepts, such as "self-so" and "non-action." In short, Wang Bi develops a unique philosophical system grounded heavily in various classics, and while his commentary on the *Laozi* is taken as "Confucian," it is, in fact, far more complex.

Keywords: *Laozi*; Daodejing; Daoism; Wang Bi; Confucianism; Xuanxue

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1. Introduction

The classification of pre-Qin philosophical texts into schools has long been useful in both academic and more popular settings. However, failing to appreciate nuance and/or relying too heavily on supposed opposition between these schools can easily lead to misunderstandings in interpretation and translation. Texts may be read in a more superficial manner if alignment with a particular school is overemphasized, or when the opposition between schools is overbearing, the more nuanced relationship between texts dissolves. This is especially true of the texts associated with the two most prominent schools, namely Daoism and Confucianism. Moreover, while Chinese scholarship has often entertained the idea that they can be integrated or synthesized, the overwhelming focus of contemporary discourse emphasizes difference. For example, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (*Book of Master Zhuang*)¹ is often taken as being opposed to the *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects of Confucius*). There is great evidence to support this—Confucius is often mocked, harshly criticized, and his life is even threatened in this "Daoist" classic. However, there is also excellent evidence to suggest that the *Zhuangzi* and the *Analects* share many of the same concerns and even provide similar philosophical reflections (cf. Wang 2004; Wang 2010; Nylan 2017). Strict allegiance to particular "schools" has made parsing out the complex relationship between these texts a difficult task.

The *Laozi* 老子 (*Book of Master Lao*) or *Daodejing* 道經 (*Classic of the Way and Virtuosity*) presents us with more difficulties when attempting to interpret it as promoting ideas essentially distinct from those found in the *Lunyu*. Like the *Zhuangzi*, there are passages that seemingly contain explicit and absolute rejections of Confucian values. However, given the various theories about the relationship between the persons Laozi and Confucius, as well as potential overlaps between general philosophical attitudes in the *Laozi* and *Analects*, many scholars have found avenues for dismissing the potential censure of Confucianism in the *Laozi* as actually an appeal to double-down on true Confucianism as opposed to

false appearances. There are also scholars who argue against these readings (cf. Lin 1948; Moeller 2007). Support for the Confucian interpretations and translations of the *Laozi* are often traced back, in one way or another, to the version passed down from Wang Bi 王弼 (d. 249), as well as his accompanying commentary.

In terms of ethics, virtues, and values, Wang Bi's 王弼 (d. 249) work on the *Laozi* is normally read as mainly "Confucian."² Wang himself invited this understanding when he revered Confucius as a higher sage than Laozi:

"The sage (Confucius) embodies non-being, but non-being cannot be explicated, and therefore he said nothing (about it). Laozi was one (who was fettered in) this realm of being, and thus always talked about that in which he was insufficient". (Ziporyn 2003, p. 23)

Accordingly, the Neo-Daoist or Xuanxue (xuanxue 玄學) prodigy is taken as, at worst, merely reinterpreting the *Laozi* through a Confucian lens—or at best, synthesizing the Daoist classic with Confucius. As Brook Ziporyn summarizes, "one of his central philosophical tasks: to harmonize 'Ruism' and 'Taoism,' social norms and spontaneity, indeed to unify them."³ (Ziporyn 2003, p. 18). Ronnie Littlejohn expresses a similar idea, saying Wang was "a self-identified Confucian" who "wanted to create an understanding of Daoism that was consistent with Confucianism." (Littlejohn n.d.). Eric Nelson similarly writes: "Wang Bi should be considered a Confucian who 'fashionably' incorporated Daoist elements because of their historical importance after the crisis of Confucian orthodoxy during the post-Han dynasty period." (Nelson 2020, p. 288)⁴. A host of Chinese thinkers, who will be mentioned below, agree with these general points.

Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 (d. 1964) explores the terrain through referencing "self-so" (*ziran* 自然), which is a major concept in the *Laozi*, as coming to represent an ethical orientation that resists the codifying potentiality of the "teaching of names" (*ming jiao* 名教). During the Han period, values and virtues related to Confucianism were institutionalized (thus referred to as a "school of names") (cf. Tang 1957). Gradually, they became largely hollow. "Village worthies" ran rampant. Several scholars, including Wang Fu 王符 (d. 163 CE) and Xu Gan 徐干 (d. 217 CE), warned that with the hypocrisy associated with Confucian virtues and "moral character" (*de*) would come social and political confusion (cf. Makeham 1994), and they were right. Many see Wang Bi's use of "self-so" as a way to preserve Confucian values without relying on names or doctrines, which could always be subject to potentially problematic standardizations. The repercussions of these evaluations are far-reaching. They give shape to an analysis of the long-standing tradition of *Laozi* scholarship in China, including contemporary works.

For most of its history, the *Laozi* was largely read with one of two major commentaries. Heshang Gong's 河上公 (1st century BCE) work was popular among laypeople,⁵ and Wang Bi's was hugely influential for scholars. Taking the latter as a representation of a, to whatever degree, "Confucian" reading of the *Laozi* tells us that major scholarly interpretations for thousands of years have been "Confucian" as well. This also colors our perspectives on translations into other languages as well as their accompanying philosophical and religious explanations. Methods for interpreting and translating the *Laozi* itself as well as its commentaries must deal, in some way or another, with the distinction between Confucian and Daoist schools, as well as a hugely influential "Confucian" reading.

In this paper, we will present Wang Bi as a philosopher in his own right. His thought should neither be reduced to being "Confucian" any more than "Daoist." Even the label "Xuanxue" or "Neo-Daoist" should be approached with caution—understanding what it means and the work of other Xuanxue thinkers is shaped by Wang Bi's philosophy, not the other way around. His interpretation and commentary on the *Laozi* is, in fact, an attempt to demonstrate some underlying similarities between the major concerns, theories, and concepts of Confucian and Daoist thought. The project focuses mainly on Wang Bi's supposed reinterpretation of "overtly anti-Confucian" passages in ways that make them align with Confucius, while simultaneously unequivocally upholding notions from the

Laozi as categorically superior to Confucian virtues and value-orientations. We will look specifically at chapters 5, 18, 19, and 38 of the *Laozi*. In doing so, we will discuss how Wang’s introduction and heavy reliance on “nature” or “dispositions” (*xing* 性) and “authenticity” or “genuineness” (*zhen* 真) throughout his commentary—and especially in their respective connections to “self-so” (*ziran* 自然), “non-action” (*wuwei* 無為), and thoroughgoing rejections of selfishness (*ji* 己) and desires (*yu* 慾)—makes the *Laozi* commensurable with Confucius (and some understandings of Confucianism). In other words, Wang Bi takes the promotion of “self-so” and “non-action”—which are understood largely in terms of returning to one’s own “dispositions” and “genuineness,” or else operating in accordance with the “dispositions” and “genuineness” of others, things, or the situation, and thereby rejecting selfishness and desires—as the shared (moral) goal of both Laozi and Confucius.⁶ The discussion of these concepts frames this paper; Wang’s unique understanding of them demonstrates what he sees as the underlying commensurability between the *Laozi* and Confucius.

The overall argument is that while Wang’s work has been evaluated as a “Confucianization” or “Confucian-based synthesis,” there is actually no clear evidence that this is a conscious project pursued by Wang Bi himself. It is just as likely, and perhaps even better evidenced, that Wang’s reading represents an accurate account of what he really thought the *Laozi* itself was saying. Below we will explore how Wang Bi saw the *Laozi* and *Analects* as similar in rejecting selfishness and desires while at the same time advancing self-so and non-action. Drawing on this, Wang Bi’s unique philosophy is not concerned with harmonizing, synthesizing, or unifying Confucianism and Daoism. As a philosopher in his own right, he elucidates what he saw as commensurable in the underlying projects of the *Laozi* and *Analects*. If we take this to be plausible, then our thoughts about the “Confucian” (and “Daoist”) *Laozi* and the entire tradition of *Laozi* scholarship in China, including contemporary interpretations and translations, need to be adjusted accordingly.

2. Straw and Dogs

By all accounts, Wang Bi was nothing short of a genius. He dominated “pure conversation” (*qing tan* 清談) gatherings⁷ and earned a reputation that allowed him an audience with the prominent scholar-official He Yan 何宴 (d. 249). Upon reading Wang’s work on the *Laozi*, He Yan, some thirty-one years Wang’s senior, supposedly burned his own commentary. In addition to writing and commenting on the *Laozi*—in a work that became standardized in China for nearly two thousand years—Wang wrote essays and extensive commentaries on both the *Analects* and *Book of Change* (*Yijing* 易經). These, too, are classics in themselves and have been hugely influential.⁸ Impressive for someone who died before his twenty-fourth birthday.

Despite his illustrious résumé, Wang is regularly criticized for making rather dumb-founded mistakes. His commentary on chapter 5 is almost universally agreed to as harboring a ridiculous misreading, namely taking *chugou* 芻狗 or “straw dogs” as “straw and dogs.” The *Laozi* chapter reads:

Heaven and earth are not humane (*ren* 仁), they take the ten thousand things as straw dogs (*chugou* 芻狗); the sage is not humane (*ren* 仁) they take the hundred clans as straw dogs (*chugou* 芻狗). Between heaven and earth—does it not resemble a bellows! Empty but not exhausted. The more it moves the more comes out. Much speech means numerous failures—this is not as good as holding on to center. (Chen 2020, p. 72; translation modified)

The rejection of humaneness is generally taken to be a dig against Confucianism,⁹ but the issue is complex and can be returned to after analyzing Wang’s commentary in depth. The first part of his comments is generally accepted as perfectly hitting the mark. He writes:

Heaven and earth allow things to follow their natural bent and neither engage in conscious effort nor production, leaving the myriad things to manage them-

selves. Thus they “are not humane.” The humane have to produce, establish, employ (rules, laws, policies, institutions, etc.) and transform (the beneficiaries), exemplifying kindness and achievement. But with (these activities of) producing, establishing, employing, and transforming, people lose their genuineness (*zhen* 真). If people do not preserve their genuineness (*zhen* 真), they no longer have the capacity to uphold the full weight of their existence. (天地任自然, 無為無造, 萬物自相治理, 故不仁也。仁者必造立施化, 有恩有為; 造立施化, 則物失其真有恩有為, 列物不具存, 物不具存, 則不足以備載矣。). (Lynn 1999, p. 60; translation modified)

The next lines are comically off:

Heaven and Earth do not make the grass grow for the sake of beasts, yet beasts eat grass. They do not produce dogs for the sake of people, yet people eat dogs. Heaven and Earth take no conscious effort with respect to the myriad things, yet because each of the myriad things has what is appropriate for its use, not one thing is denied support. As long as you use kindness derived from a personal perspective, it indicates a lack of capacity to leave things to themselves. (地不為獸生芻, 而獸食芻; 不為人生狗, 而人食狗。無為於萬物而萬物各適其所用, 則莫不贍矣。若慧由己樹, 未足任也。). (Lynn 1999, p. 60; translation modified)

Strangely enough, a thinker of Wang’s caliber was somehow unable to recognize that “straw dogs (*chugou* 芻狗)” is one word and not two. As the *Zhuangzi* 14.4 clearly demonstrates, “straw dogs” are the objects revered during a ritual and then cast aside afterwards. This fits perfectly with the idea of “Heaven and earth are not humane.” Sometimes people are revered, and other times they are cast aside, and the sage should learn to act in a similar manner. It is almost unthinkable that Wang, whose entire approach to language in the *Laozi* rests on his reading of the *Zhuangzi*, could make such a simple error (cf. Cai 2013).

If we first reserve judgment on what seems to be an obvious misreading of “straw dogs,” we find out what is being said is actually quite plausible. In his essay on the *Laozi*, which some take as an introduction, Wang places primacy on “actualities (*shi* 實)” over “names (*ming* 名).” “All names,” he writes, “arise from forms” (Lynn 1999, p. 39)—or “*xing* 形” which is functionally equivalent here to “actualities.” This is an obvious attack on a promotion of names that over-emphasizes their importance and ultimately leads to their being empty shells. It is the problem of hypocrisy and falsity—the village worthies Confucius warned of and the confusion identified by Wang Fu and Xu Gan. Wang Bi himself explains:

If the virtues of honesty and the uncarved block are not given prominence but the splendors of reputation and conduct are instead publicized and exalted, one will cultivate that which can exalt him in hope of the praise involved and cultivate that which can lead to it in the expectation of the material advantage involved. Because of hope for praise and expectation of material advantage, he will conduct himself with diligence, but the more splendid the praise, the more he will thrust sincerity away, and the greater his material advantage, the more contentious he will be included to be. (Lynn 1999, p. 39)

The “uncarved block” refers to one of the most famous images used by the *Laozi* to discuss Dao. In this essay, and throughout his works, Wang goes further than the famous first lines of the text, which speak of its ineffability. He either employs the term “*ci* 此,” meaning “this,” or simply refers to Dao by hints and without any signifier. Once a name is used, the “splendors” of a reputation can follow, and this, as he explains, can easily lead people further away from what is actually being spoken about. Moreover, it is the reason Wang reveres Confucius over Laozi. While Laozi wrote over five thousand characters trying to explain what Dao is, though he admits it is ineffable, Confucius never speaks of Dao and only hints at it. Unfortunately, Confucius’s way is plagued by the very problem he set out to avoid. Reputation, praise, and material advantage are heaped on those who fulfill set expectations for what normative behavior looks like. Concentration thus befalls the

name, and the actuality is lost. True virtuosity is not thereby simply ignored but actually eschewed. Wang Bi makes his point clear:

The heartfelt feelings that fathers, sons, older brothers, and younger brothers should have for one another will lose their genuineness (*zhen*). Obedience (*xiao*) will not be grounded sincerity, and kindness (*ci*) will no longer be grounded in actuality. All this is brought about by the publicizing of reputation and conduct. (Lynn 1999, p. 39; translation modified)

Looking back to his reading of “straw dogs” as “straw” and “dogs” now begins to make more sense. Read as “straw dogs,” the passage would argue, according to Wang’s line of thinking, that sometimes heaven and earth do “produce, establish, employ (rules, laws, policies, institutions, etc.)” and that sages should emulate this behavior. Similarly, “with (these activities of) producing, establishing, employing, and transforming, people lose their genuineness.” Since heaven and earth do that (i.e., establish institutions of virtue) sometimes and other times do not, then it is okay for the sage to act the same way. Sages should also sometimes establish institutions of virtue and sometimes not. Remember, straw dogs are revered for a while, then used for kindling. Therefore, if “straw dogs” refers to these ceremonial pieces, then chapter 5 makes an extremely paradoxical and potentially problematic philosophical point. As separate “straw” and “dogs,” we can understand how things are produced without being intended for certain utilitarian or instrumentalizing usages. Straw is not made *for* animals to eat any more than heartfelt feelings between family members are done *for* reputation, praise, or material gain. That these things may follow is fine, a merely accidental benefit, but to reverse our thinking and assume that this is something we can mechanically dissect and instrumentally exploit is detrimental to individuals and society.

We thereby see how this seemingly overt rejection of the Confucian value of “humane-ness” becomes a much more complex issue in the hands of Wang Bi. It is taken as a critique of establishing names and doctrines to codify otherwise genuine heartfelt behaviors. The use of these institutions is seen as marking the degradation of the values they seek to promote. The alternative is to return to or simply preserve the genuineness already within people. This is the source of the heartfelt interactions which are themselves moral in a plain “uncarved” manner. They are the actualities that names distinguish. Concentration should, however, be on the actualities and not the names. Separating “straw” and “dogs” is about promoting this type of emphasis and moving away from intentionality and towards self-so. As Wang Bi comments on the last lines of chapter 5, “The more you apply conscious effort to something, the more you will fail.” Revering straw dogs is no exception.

3. Consciousness and Fish

In his commentary on chapter 18, Wang Bi repeats his repudiation of applying conscious effort. Here, it is in the midst of a chapter that seems to reject every level of Confucian moral thinking. Alan Chan, for instance, finds substantial evidence here to suggest engagement “in a critique of some of the key ideas central to the ‘Ru’ or Confucian tradition.” (Chan 2018). Indeed, it is difficult to suggest anything but; the chapter reads:

When the great Dao is abandoned, there is humaneness and righteousness. When wisdom appears, there is great hypocrisy. When three family relations and six roles, lack harmony, there is filial piety and parental care. When the state and families are thrown into confusion, then loyal servants arise.¹⁰ (Chen 2020, p. 139; translation modified)

As we will see with chapter 38 below, this section seems to suggest that Confucian values only represent a decaying Dao. In this context, “the great Dao” stands for social harmony and well-being. The passage itself can then be taken as expressly “anti-Confucian.” Hans-Georg Moeller explains the problem from the perspective of the *Laozi*: “With the establishment of such ‘positive’ values as humanity (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), knowledge (*zhi*), and filial piety (*xiao*), the Confucians also implicitly create their opposites.”¹¹ (Moeller

2006, p. 69). The *Laozi* then thinks that Confucianism proposes virtues which “are nothing but ineffective remedies in a degenerated society.” (Moeller 2004, p. 117). The sentiment is sometimes guarded against in interpretations and translations which are strongly influenced by Wang Bi’s “Confucian” reading.

For example, Chen Guying 陳鼓應 (b. 1935) warns that the addition of the phrase “when wisdom appears, there is great hypocrisy (*zhi hui chu, you da wei* 智慧出, 有大)” should be omitted on the basis of the Guodian version. He states that “the superfluous addition of these phrases is probably the result of the influence exerted by the theories of extremist followers of Zhuangzi in the late Warring States period, who preposterously added them to the text.” (Chen 2020, p. 139). As a result of this addition, Confucian values can be associated with hypocrisy, and we read the *Laozi* as harboring a “downright negation” of them. In other words, readings like Moeller’s and other anti-Confucian interpretations of the *Laozi* can be substantiated only with this “superfluous” and “extremist” addition.

Wang Bi’s version retains these lines, but his commentary is exactly opposed to the rejection of these values. His writing on the first two sentences focuses on establishing goodness (*shan* 善) through lacking conscious effort (*wu wei* 無為) and dispelling falsehood by not letting methods (for detecting falsity) be known. Like many of his contemporaries, Wang’s thought utilizes thinking that is now referred to as “Goodhart’s Law” and the “Cobra Effect” to turn even the phrase “when wisdom appears, there is great hypocrisy” into something related to Confucius. Wang writes: “When one employs methods and uses intelligence to uncover treachery and falsehood, his intentions become obvious, and the form they take visible, so the people will know how to evade them?” (Lynn 1999, p. 80). This is how Wang squares the anti-Confucian lines in the *Laozi* with pro-Confucian sentiments. Chen, and many others who argue that ideas in the *Laozi* and *Analects* mesh well together, rely heavily on Wang’s “Confucian” reading.

More evidence for the “Confucian” reading of this chapter is found in Wang’s reference to the *Zhuangzi* in his long explanation of the last sentences. Here this second Daoist classic is employed to demonstrate shared concerns between the *Analects* and *Laozi*, which also includes the participation of the *Zhuangzi*. Referring to the basic paradoxical logic of the *Laozi*, found most evidently in chapter 2, Wang Bi explains:

The most praiseworthy of names are generated by the greatest censure, for what we know as praise (*mei*) and censure (*e*) come from the same gate. “The six relations” are father and son, older and younger brother, and husband and wife. When the six relations exist in harmony and the state maintains good order all by itself, no one knows where the obedient (*xiao*) (child, younger brother, wife) and the kind (*ci*) (parent, older brother, husband) and loyal ministers are to be found. It is when fish forget the Dao of rivers and lakes that the virtuous act of moistening each other occurs. (Lynn 1999, p. 81)

This is a direct reference to *Zhuangzi* 6.2, which can be used to rebuke Confucian notions of reputation and role models, but equally, as in the hands of Wang Bi, strike a chord with core Confucian concerns. The relevant section of this passage reads:

When the springs dry up, the fish have to cluster together on the shore, blowing on each other to keep damp and spitting on each other to stay wet. But that is no match for forgetting all about one another in the rivers and the lakes. Rather than praising Yao and condemning Jie, we’d be better off forgetting them both, letting their courses melt away in their transformation. (Ziporyn 2020, p. 56)

That fishes collect together and help one another survive is part of their natural disposition (*xing* 性). They do not learn to do this from others, nor is it even a matter of conscious effort. It is simply what they do so of their own accord, or an instance of “self-so.” For the *Zhuangzi*, we can then use this to argue against relying on either positive or negative models and the focus on the reputation that is entailed therein. Rather than try to be like Yao, or protect oneself from being in any way similar to Jie, people are better off forgetting these models and returning to Dao. Wang Bi takes this a step further—or we

could say explicates what the *Zhaungzi* means more explicitly—by connecting this view to nearly all Confucian values. In this way, Chapter 18 is not about rejecting these virtues and values but rather states that, when they become the target of conscious intentions and actions, no longer represent genuineness (*zhen* 真). This is reminiscent of Confucius’s own contempt for those hypocritical figures who falsely assume virtues, including Guan Zhong (3.22), the Ji family (3.1), and most famously (those who Mencius refers to as) “village worthies” (17.13).

This treatment of the chapter allows Wang Bi to be read as promoting “true” Confucian values while simultaneously not only not violating what is being said but actually drawing broadly on other sections of the *Laozi* and even the *Zhuangzi*. This is notably distinct from other early readings as well. Heshang Gong takes this passage to suggest that Confucian values can be useful for rehabilitating individuals and society in an effort to eventually return back to a “great Dao” state. For Heshang, then, there is still some separation between Confucianism and Daoism, at least insofar as their spheres of efficacy, respective values, and ideal states are concerned. For Wang Bi, they are simply making the same point in different ways—i.e., with different language, logic, and emphasis.

The main argument of this paper can be summarized by comparing Heshang Gong and Wang Bi’s respective comments on chapter 18. While Heshang Gong makes space for separate Confucian values, Wang Bi does not take them as distinct. In Wang’s work, both Confucianism and Daoism become transformed—but that is only if one first thinks of them as separate. According to his own understanding, “true Confucian philosophy” is completely commensurable with the *Laozi*. Insofar as both promote self-so and non-action, they are saying something similar, but as soon as virtues become the focus, they are not only distinct, but Confucianism is actually no longer a useful resource. In chapter 19, the *Laozi* itself, but especially in the comments of Wang, further supports this approach.

4. Simplicity and Decoration

Wang Bi’s version of chapter 19 differs from some others, most significantly the Guodian text. Interestingly enough, with Wang, we have a sharper critique of Confucian values, but once again, his reading can be read as turning this to present the *Laozi* as completely in line with “true Confucian philosophy.” However, as we will see below, there is one aspect that remains somewhat amiss. Wang’s chapter 19 reads:

Sever all ties with sagacity and give up wisdom, the people will be a hundred times better off. Sever all ties with humaneness and give up righteousness, the people will return to filial piety and parental care. Sever all ties with ingenuity and give up profit, there will be no more bandits and robbers. When these three things are used for adornment/decoration (*wen* 文), it will not suffice. Therefore, ensure that there is something to belong to: observe simplicity (*su* 素) and embrace plainness (*pu* 樸), be less concerned with yourself and minimize desires. (Chen 2020, p. 142; trans modified)

The Guodian has the first line as “sever all ties with wisdom and give up disputation.” Chen Guying argues for the veracity of this line based on two points. Firstly, “sage” or “sagacity” is used as a metaphor for the highest state of personal cultivation. It is found thirty-two times in the *Laozi* and is nearly always highly praised. Already, then, one can be skeptical about this glaring exception in Wang’s version. Secondly, “Sever all ties with sagacity and give up wisdom” appears twice in the *Zhuangzi* (11.2; 12.2). In both places, the *Zhuangzi* is discussing Confucian values in ways that are difficult to interpret as anything but harsh criticisms. Chen, therefore, believes that Wang’s version is the result, once again, of later *Zhuangzi* extremists tampering with the *Laozi* (Chen 2020, pp. 142–43). In other words, when reading the first line, there is a huge discrepancy, and deciding on how to read this is pivotal for deciding on the “Confucian vs. Daoism (reading of the *Laozi*)” debate.¹² Discussion of the next line hinges on the same theoretical distinction.

Instead of “sever all ties with humaneness and give up righteousness,” which directly rebuffs Confucian virtues, the Guodian version has “sever all ties with hypocrisy and

give up pretense.” On the surface, this seems perfectly in line with Wang’s thought—for instance, it is congruent with his understanding of chapter 18. Moreover, it smooths the edges of any sharp conflict between Confucianism and Daoism.¹³ Additionally, many contemporary scholars unequivocally support the Guodian for textual and philosophical reasons, for example, Chen Guying,¹⁴ Qiu Xigui 裘圭 (b. 1935),¹⁵ Peng Hao 彭浩 (b. 1944),¹⁶ Ding Yuanzhi 丁原植 (b. 1947),¹⁷ and Yang Guorong 楊國榮 (b. 1957). Once again, however, Wang’s reading almost requires this overt rejection of Confucian virtues in order to, paradoxically enough, prove that the *Laozi* supports them.

Wang Bi’s full commentary to this chapter reads:

Sagehood (*sheng*) and intelligence (*zhi*) designate the best (*shan* 善) of human talent (*cai*); benevolence (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*) designate the best (*shan* 善) of human behavior (*xing*); and cleverness (*qiao*) and sharpness (*li*) designate the best (*shan* 善) of human resources (*yong*)! However, the text directly says that these should be repudiated. Because such “decoration” (*wen*) is utterly inadequate, one does not give people the chance to identify with these expressions and so never does anything that exemplifies what they mean. Thus the text says: Because these three pairs of terms serve as mere decoration, they are never adequate. When allowing people to identify with something, let them identify with your simplicity and minimal desires. (Lynn 1999, p. 82)

Always completely cognizant of his overall project, namely, the rejection of any possibility for constructing the means to develop institutionalized powers that eventually hollow out the true virtuosity of persons and societies, Wang calls instead for a total commitment to self-so and non-action; his comments here are best directed at Confucian values. In this way, the *Laozi* neither rejects them nor seeks to replace them with its own promotion of simplicity, plainness, and censure of selfishness and desires. There is no question that those latter ideas are promoted throughout the *Laozi*. However, when the above targets of severance and “giving up” are Confucian values, Wang can demonstrate how these values should be reinterpreted as self-so and non-action. They are thereby actually aligned with the ideas the *Laozi* constantly praises in a way that highlights an underlying congruence between the *Analects* and the *Laozi*.

Sagacity, wisdom, humaneness, and righteousness are not at all rejected. What is rejected—and Wang has already made this argument in chapter 18—is their use as mere decoration, which can also be broadly understood as criticizing them as “virtues.” Thus, Wang not only furthers his project of rejecting falsity and any basis for pretense, which we find already in Confucius, but Wang also shows how the *Laozi* can be taken as supporting a certain reading of the *Analects* where self-so and non-action are recommended by both classics.¹⁸ It does not reject these values themselves, but their mere appearance, and then reinterprets them. It rejects them in the way Confucius himself does. Of course, this was not successful, and so Wang Fu and Xu Gan had to repeat the argument. Wang Bi is now showing how this critique is shared by the *Laozi* as well. It, too, is against using sagacity, wisdom, humaneness, and righteousness as mere decoration. Instead, people should remain simple, plain, unselfish, and without desires. Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (d. ca. 690) explains this as “returning to genuineness (*zhen* 真)”¹⁹ (Lou 1980, p. 87). As was already shown in chapter 18, this means that the people will be *actually* humane and righteous. Real sages and true wisdom can emerge. Families will be harmonious, and that will have radiating effects on society. The *Laozi* does not refute this model; it opposes exactly what good Confucians should: the false appropriation of any aspect of this model, which can only harm persons and society. This eventually entails a complete censure of, as we will see in reference to chapter 38, *any* model and thus “virtues” themselves. Wang Bi himself spells out this point in his essay on the *Laozi*.

Right at the end of his essay, Wang basically provides a further explanation of his commentaries on chapters 18 and 19. He writes

Therefore a man of antiquity sighed and said: “Truly! What a difficult thing this is to understand! I knew that not being sagacious was not being sagacious, but I never knew that to be sagacious was not sagacious. I knew that not being humane was not being humane, but I never knew that being humane was not humane.” However, thus it is that only after repudiating sagehood can the efficacy of sagehood be fully realized; only after discarding humaneness can the virtue of humaneness become really deep. To hate strength does not mean that one desires not to be strong but refers to how the conscious use of strength results in the negation of strength. To repudiate humaneness does not mean that one desires not to be humane but refers to how the conscious use of humaneness turns it into something false. (Lynn 1999, p. 40; translation modified)

Sagacity and humaneness do not simply get in the way of being “truly” sagacious or humane. This is an argument many “Confucians” bring to the text—such as David Hall and Roger Ames (cf. Ames and Hall 2003), Fung Yu-Lan (Feng Youlan) (Fung 1948) 馮友蘭 (d. 1990), and Fu Peirong 傅佩榮 (b. 1950) (Fu 2012), as will be mentioned below. Wang Bi goes much further. He seeks to replace not only trying to be these things but any degree of conscious and intentional action (especially those targeting specific values). Further, Wang does not aim to help one become the “true” version of sagacity and humaneness. Through casting them aside entirely, one can become efficacious and virtuous. In other words, by being self-so and practicing non-action, one will interact very well with others. The traces or footprints of these interactions are sometimes generalized and grouped into categories such as “sagacious” or “humaneness.” Therefore, being self-so and practicing non-action does not ensure being the “true” versions of these virtues but being something else entirely. This is what others look back on and call instead “sagacious” or “humaneness,” but that misses the point. It is all about being self-so and practicing non-action. As he writes, “Once the uncarved block (*pu*) fragments and genuineness is lost, all human affairs become permeated by villainy.” (Lynn 1999, p. 38; translation modified). Comparing Wang Bi’s comments on chapter 38 of the *Laozi* to other commentators further accentuates his unique reading.

5. Simplicity and Decoration

Chapter 38 is long, and Wang Bi’s comments are rather extensive. Examining them closely rounds out our argument that Wang is not reading Confucian values into the *Laozi*, but rather exploring underlying similarities which do not significantly register as more “Confucian” than “Daoist.” Comparing Wang Bi’s reading to other interpretations makes this argument evident. Chapter 38 of the *Laozi* can be translated as:

Higher virtuosity (*de*) is not virtuosity, and by this there is virtuosity; lower virtuosity does not let go of virtuosity, and by this there is a lack of virtuosity.

Higher virtuosity is non-action (*wuwei* 無為) and thereby does not depend on action; lower virtuosity acts for it and thereby has dependence on action.

Higher humaneness acts for it and is without dependence on action; higher righteousness acts for it and has dependence on action.

Higher ritual acts for it and there is no response, so sleeves are rolled up and things are cast aside.

Therefore, when the Dao is lost, there is virtuosity; when virtuosity is lost, there is humaneness; when humaneness is lost, there is righteousness; when righteousness is lost, there is ritual.

As for ritual, it is the thinness of loyalty and trustworthiness, and the head of disorder.

Those with foresight (appreciate) flower of Dao and (mark) the beginning of stupidity/duplicity.²⁰

Therefore the great person resides in the thick, and does not reside with the thin; resides in the actual (*shi* 實), and does not reside in flowery (*hua* 華). Thereby casting off that and taking up this. (Lou 1980, p. 93)

Even the decidedly Confucian scholars Roger Ames and David Hall have trouble defending a Confucian reading of this passage. There may be ways in which some congruence can be measured; “natural feelings” offer a bridge. However, overall, one cannot reject the obvious anti-Confucian elements. Ritual, ever important for Confucians, is expressly rejected. Ames and Hall write:

This chapter joins the anti-Confucian polemic of chapters 18 and 19 in which there is real concern that the Confucian celebration of increasingly artificial moral precepts will overwhelm the unmediated expression of natural feelings. It is for this reason that the full arsenal of Confucian moral values comes under assault. (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 163)

Other readers of the *Laozi* who strongly favor similarities between it and the *Analects* often provide related explanations. There is something natural about Confucian values, and expressions of them are not a separate matter. As the *Analects* itself records, “adornment is like substance, and substance is like adornment (*wen you zhi ye, zhi you wen ye* 文猶質也，質猶文也)” (12.8). The *Laozi* is then read as a corrective on the growing focus on adornment; asking for a return to simplicity, genuineness, and innate dispositions means asking for a reemphasis on substance. Fung Yu-lan says this is how we can understand chapter 38—as a corrective against the imitation of mere decoration.

As for the kind of humaneness and righteousness acquired through learning and training, these are always partly the result of imitation. In comparison to a naturally present genuine humaneness and righteousness, they are of a slightly lower order. When we read in the *Laozi* that “Higher *de* (virtue, efficacy) is not *de* (virtue, efficacy)” (chapter 38), this is what is meant. (Fung 1948, p. 128)

Imitation of Confucian values crowds out the potential for “unmediated expression of natural feelings.” The assumption behind, and focus of, these more “Confucian” takes on the *Laozi* is that the person can be more in line with Confucianism when they do not become overly focused on decoration. People naturally tend to express virtues, which should be shaped, and the person cultivated, through learning from models and practicing virtues. However, when they fixate on appearances, true virtues suffer, and moral cultivation becomes learning to pretend. From this, trickery arises, and hypocrites emerge. On the surface, and in a truncated form, Wang Bi shares these views. In fact, his work was likely a huge influence—whether directly or indirectly—on these “Confucian” readings of *Laozi*. However, there is a critical difference. Wang Bi does not simply look for avenues of Confucian sympathy. In his long and detailed commentary on chapter 38, Wang mostly references “Daoist” ideas such as “emptiness,” “non-action,” “non-grasping,” “not being selfish,” and the like. Instead of simply overlaying Confucian ideas, he doubles down on Daoist commitments. Wang does not think that the virtues exposed by Confucians will “naturally” appear or become present in a “genuine” form. What will happen, however, is that behaviors and sentiments which are problematically labelled as such will manifest. Even appreciating them in this way, however, violates what Wang sees as the underlying argument about interacting well in Confucian and Daoist texts.

Wang Bi’s explanation of chapter 38 is too long to quote in full, so we will instead summarize it. His commentary begins by noting the connection between virtuosity and Dao. Non-action is the full expression of them. Having an empty heart-mind (i.e., being without intentions) and being without selfishness and without person (*shen* 身) is how one can encourage harmony in those around them. Having virtuosity means “not regarding it as such, not holding to it, and not using it (*bu de qi de, wu zhi wu yong* 不其，無執無用).” (Lou 1980, p. 93). “Thus, although (this person) has virtuosity (they) do not have the reputation for it” and it does not come to be part of their identity (Lou 1980, p. 93). Inferior virtue is the opposite. Additionally, reminiscent of chapter 2, Wang notes that as soon as “goodness

(*shan* 善) is differentiated, its opposite arises. Invoking chapter 5, he says, “not acting for (certain names/reputation/differentiated values) means not having bias in action (*wu yi wei zhe, wu suo pian wei ye* 無以為者, 無所偏為也).” (Lou 1980, p. 93). Those who cannot do this concentrate on humaneness, righteousness, ritual, and etiquette. Therefore, acting for nothing is far superior to acting for something—no matter how much praise surrounds that something. Acting for nothing seems like acting for something, but it is not²¹ “(*wu yi wei er you wei zhi yan* 無以為而猶為之焉).” (Lou 1980, p. 93).

Turning to the vocabulary that comprises his core thinking, Wang further explains that the “root (*ben* 本)” is non-action. If one focuses instead on action and acting for, then “although one might acquire a praiseworthy reputation, falsehood too will surely arise.” (Lynn 1999, p. 121). This is echoed politically as well. The more one tries to straighten others and make them sincere, the more problems will arise. Confucian values become superficial not so much because the decorative aspects are over-emphasized, but even in trying to promote “natural feelings” and “genuineness” do “cultural institutions and ceremonial etiquette become superficial ornamentation.” (Lynn 1999, p. 121). Holding to Dao, through non-action, is the only viable alternative. “Even if humaneness and righteousness emerge from within, acting for (for) them is still like pretense and falsity (*fu ren yi fa yu nei, wei zhi you wei* 夫仁義發於, 為之猶偽).” (Lou 1980, p. 94). Here Wang Bi differs wildly from Fung, Fu, and Ames and Hall. His “Confucian” Laozi must not be so quickly labeled as such. Virtues, even those which are entirely “genuine” or “natural and unmediated expressions of true feelings,” are equated with falsity.

Compared with the discussion of this chapter in the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 (Book of Master Hanfei), Wang’s unique contribution can be even further highlighted. The *Jie Lao* 解老 or “Explaining the Laozi” section of the *Hanfeizi* begins with an extensive reading of Chapter 38—nearly 100 characters longer than Wang’s over 1200 character commentary. Here the *Hanfeizi* makes constant references to “actualities (*shi*),” “emotions (*mao* 貌),” and “principles/patterns (*li* 理).” The overall argument is that people do not fully appreciate Confucian virtues and the role of ritual. The virtues²² are formalized expressions of “actual emotions.” The *Hanfeizi* comments: “Humaneness is to happily love others from your inner heart. It is to delight in others’ good fortune and to detest others’ misfortune.” (Queen 2013, p. 229). Rituals come from the person (*shen* 身) and are supposed to be an accurate expression of their emotions. In and of themselves, humaneness and ritual are not problematic. Rather, to the contrary, the *Hanfeizi* promotes them in a manner that has led some to call it a synchronism of Confucianism and Daoism.²³ The discussion of chapter 38 in the *Hanfeizi* ends:

The expression “rejects the one and appropriates the other” refers to disregarding the outer appearance of ritual and random guessing and abiding by the causes of things in the ordering principles and the inner substance of the emotions (*qing shi*). Thus it is said: “(He) rejects the one and appropriates in the other.” (Queen 2013, p. 231)

Wang Bi does not interpret the “actualities (*shi*),” “emotions (*mao* 貌),” “principles/patterns (*li* 理),” or the “person (*shen* 身)” in the same way at all. For him, any discussion of “virtue” already violates whatever may be valid in the abovementioned concepts. This becomes fleshed out even more clearly in the (roughly) last third of his commentary on chapter 38.

Discussing how those with foresight only appreciate the “flower (*hua* 華)”²⁴ of Dao and thereby mark the beginning of stupidity/duplicity (*yu* 愚)²⁵, Wang says that even if they get at the natural tendencies (*qing* 情) of things and situations, everything will eventually be worse off because of it. Reputation and other superficial gains will be had at the cost of sincerity (*du* 篤) and honesty/the actual (*shi*). It is best to let go of one’s self and go by things—this is how non-action leads to peace “(*she ji ren wu, ze wuwei er tai* 舍己任物, 則無為而泰).”²⁶ (Lou 1980, p. 94). Holding to the “mother”—or uncarved block/simplicity (*pu*) as Lou Yujie reads it (Lou 1980, p. 104)—one can effectuate positive change and manage

affairs well. Ultimately, Lou explains, this means acting in a self-so and non-action manner. The connection is made by Wang himself already in his essay on the *Laozi* (Lou 1980, p. 104).

The “mother” or uncarved block/simplicity (*pu*) and self-so and non-action are the focus for Wang. From them, actions and sentiments, which we may refer to as humane or righteous, and even ritual and etiquette, are manifest. However, these labels are themselves always problematic and should never be the target. They are born from the mother (as self-so and non-action), but when we focus on them, we completely lose sight of how they came to be in the first place. Therefore, while we may use language to discuss them and make distinctions, we should never rely on these things, lest we undermine the importance of the mother in favor of the children. Wang writes: “It is because one functions not by using forms and rules and not by using names that it becomes possible for humaneness and righteousness, propriety and etiquette to manifest and display themselves.” (Lynn 1999, p. 123; translation modified).

Wang’s argument is not simply that the appearance of virtues has taken the place of their true, natural, or genuine versions. This is characteristic of a Confucian reading: displaying a clear commitment to values associated with the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi*. These readings take the *Laozi* to be complaining merely about the misappropriation of these values. Central concepts such as self-so and non-action are the more “unhewn,” plain, and simple or “stripped down” versions of humaneness, righteousness, propriety, and etiquette. Wang’s philosophical interpretation is significantly different. Major notions in the *Laozi*, including self-so, non-action, not being selfish, and being without desire, are themselves the best version of human sentiment and behavior. Confucian labeling and distinctions are problematic because they redirect attention away from these ideals. There is still overlap with Confucius, and he himself demonstrated some of the ideas found in the *Laozi* even better than the *Laozi* discusses them, but the ideals themselves remain Daoist.²⁷

6. Conclusions

Despite his own reverence of Confucius as a higher sage than Laozi, Wang Bi would likely gawk at any classification of his reading of the *Laozi* as “Confucian.” Insofar as the *Laozi* and *Analects* promote self-so and non-action, while simultaneously rejecting selfishness and desires, they are saying something similar. Their underlying projects are meaningfully commensurable. However, as soon as we introduce “Confucianism” as a school of thought, which almost invariably means transforming it into a “teaching of names” and with this the all but necessary requests of imitation and a general neglect of the “root” or “mother,” Wang Bi must be taken as vehemently arguing against this school. What he does agree with is Confucius as an exemplar of praising non-being—and in terms of practice, this means self-so and non-action. If, however, Confucius’ teachings, which are completely person- and situation-specific, become theorized as more abstract virtues, then the underlying message (what Wang calls “that by which” or *suo yi* 所以) is ignored. Taking Wang Bi as a mere commentator overlooks his deeper philosophical understanding.

The nuance and complexity of his unique philosophical appreciation of the *Laozi* are often oversimplified and understood as merely harmonizing, synthesizing, or unifying Confucianism and Daoism. However, Wang Bi is better appreciated as a philosopher in his own right, one who draws heavily from a variety of texts and sees similarities in the general trajectory of Confucian and Daoist philosophies. Like many Confucians (and nearly all systems of thought, ethical theories and the like), Wang Bi is opposed to pretenders and hypocrites. Those who merely take on the names, are after reputation, or only get at the “flower of Dao”, are criticized. However, this does not make Wang Bi Confucian. To be sure, he rejects the mere appearance of virtuosity because it gets in the way of “true” virtuosity, but this virtuosity is not Confucian virtue, and must be understood as ultimately self-so and non-action. The ways we talk about self-so and non-action often refers to convenient labels such as humaneness and righteousness; however, Wang Bi is not interested in them as such. This is clear in Wang’s summary of the *Laozi*: “The *Laozi* can be almost completely covered with a single phrase: Ah! It does nothing more than encourage the growth at the

branch tips through enhancing the roots.” (Lynn 1999, p. 37; translation modified). As Lou argues, the roots are the mother, or Dao, or self-so and non-action (Lou 1980, p. 104).

The implications of how we understand Wang Bi’s work are far-reaching. Not only has his version of the *Laozi* been dominant for most of Chinese history, but his commentary, too, has been inestimably influential. Countless interpretations and hundreds of translations have relied heavily on Wang Bi. This paper contributes to the “Global Laozegetics” project in two at least major ways: firstly, by reinterpreting Wang Bi’s own reading of the *Laozi*, and second, through addressing how other translations and interpretations are affected.

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Notes

- ¹ Given Wang Bi’s approach, which is the dominant theme of this paper, I will use this type of translation for all “masters texts.”
- ² Wang Bi has long been classified as a *Xuanxue* thinker—*Xuanxue* was translated by Fung Yu-lan as “Neo-Daoism” into English, which resulted in Wang’s being labeled as a “Neo-Daoist.” Reading Wang Bi as heavily invested in “Confucian” values is the result of exploring exactly what *Xuanxue* or “Neo-Daoism” means in a more nuanced sense. In other words, scholars who provided more nuanced accounts of Wang Bi describe his *Xuanxue* as “Confucian.”
- ³ Here Ziporyn is actually speaking about Wang Bi’s great philosophical successor Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312), but he attributes this same project to Wang Bi. The quote ends “even more thoroughly than any of his predecessors had.”
- ⁴ Nelson provides an excellent account of the various positions on Wang Bi and Confucianism (Nelson 2020, pp. 288–90). For a fuller discussion see Yang (2010); Ziporyn (2020); and Wang (1987).
- ⁵ Misha Tadd provides a philosophical investigation of the Heshang Gong commentary see Tadd (2020).
- ⁶ For more on these terms see Chen (2020) and Moeller (2006). Further detail on Wang Bi’s own interpretation of these terms are developed in the body of this paper, see also Chan (2018) and D’Ambrosio (2019). This entire essay is a specific elaboration on much of D’Ambrosio’s argument in D’Ambrosio (2019).
- ⁷ For further discussion of these meetings see Chan (2010), they are also widely discussed in all the Chinese language references to Wang Bi or *Xuanxue* in this paper.
- ⁸ Much of Wang’s commentary to the *Analects* is lost. His commentary to the *Book of Changes* was the official and standard reference until the Song dynasty, when Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (d. 1200) work became dominant.
- ⁹ The “anti-Confucian” element is plain enough, however, for some examples of this reading see Moeller (2004, 2006).
- ¹⁰ There are slight discrepancies in some of the characters in The *Guodian jian* 郭店簡 [*Guodian Bamboo Slips*] version, the *Boshu* 帛書 [*Mawangdui Silk Manuscript*] versions, and the *Fu Yi* 傅奕 (d. 639) version (cf. Chen 2020). Here we are mainly concerned with Wang Bi’s version, and his reading of the text. In any case, the differences in these versions is minimal and does not greatly affect a philosophical reading. See (Chan 2018). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/> (accessed on 13 February 2022). An exception will be address below.
- ¹¹ Moeller is implicitly referencing the paradoxical logic or thinking of the *Laozi*, expressed most poignantly in chapter 2 of the *Laozi*.
- ¹² These chapters (5, 18, 19, 38) are among the most contested in the entire *Laozi*. Those who find affinity between the *Laozi* and the *Analects* (e.g., Ames and Hall, Chen Guying) promote a certain reading, while those who emphasize a difference between them read these chapters as criticizing values associated with Confucianism (e.g., Fu Peirong, Moeller). For a detailed discussion of this debate see D’Ambrosio (2022).
- ¹³ As mentioned in the previous footnote, there are various ways to interpret this chapter. Moeller, as opposed to Wang Bi, emphasizes conflict between “Confucianism” and “Daoism”: “the chapter continues and even amplifies the anti-Confucian polemics of the two preceding chapters. The first three sentences [. . .] denounce the Confucian virtues and ask for their elimination. The Confucian virtues are seen as obstacles to the creation of a good society. Rather than bettering the world, they contribute to the evils they are supposed to remedy.” (Moeller 2007, p. 71).
- ¹⁴ See Chen (2020).
- ¹⁵ ‘*Guodian Chumu zhujian’ zhushi* 郭店楚墓竹簡·註釋 [*Annotated Edition of the Bamboo Slips in the Chu Tomb at Guodian*] (cf. Chen 2020).

- 16 Guodian Chujuan Laozi jiaodu 郭店楚簡老子校讀 [Collation and Reading of the Guodian Chu Bamboo Slips of the Laozi] (cf. Chen 2020).
- 17 Guodian zhujian Laozi shixi yu yanjiu 郭店竹簡老子釋析與研究 [An Analysis and Investigation into the Guodian Bamboo Slips of the Laozi] (cf. Chen 2020).
- 18 Wang’s philosophy does not assume a dating for the *Analects* or the *Laozi*. Both are referenced as resources for reflecting on philosophical topics. In short, he is not engaged with what we today could call “academic philosophy.”
- 19 Translations not otherwise indicated are my own.
- 20 The character being translated is “*yu* 愚” most read this as “stupidity.” There is also reason to read it as duplicity (cf. Lynn 1999, p. 119).
- 21 This is not a translation of the quote that follows, but a rough reading of its general gist.
- 22 In this context it is more accurate to speak of them as “virtues.” For Wang Bi “values” is a more appropriate designation.
- 23 Sarah Queen, for example, writes: “Perhaps one of the most striking characteristics of “Jie Lao” that set it apart from “Yu Lao” is its syncretic quality. “Jie Lao” seeks to harmonize practices and ideas that later became associated with the “Daoist” and “Confucian” traditions, a quality not present in “Yu Lao.” Moreover, the syncretism of “Jie Lao” appears to be devoid of influence from what later became identified as “Legalism.” The commentary does not discuss typical “Legalist” notions of governance such as rewards and punishments, names and actualities, the importance of political purchase or impartial laws.” (Queen 2013, p. 212). This reading of the “Jie Lao” chapter is well supported. The text waxing on about the positive role of the Confucian virtues and practices explicitly rejected in chapter 38. Wang Bi does not, making the classification of his commentary as “pro-Confucian” or even syncretist a gross over simplification. His project is far more complex than what we find in “Jie Lao” or in Fung, Fu, or Ames and Hall.
- 24 The “flower” refers to decorative aspects, or those ornamental qualities that are not directly related to the “substance” of Dao.
- 25 See note 18 above.
- 26 This sentiment is echoed and rephrased throughout Wang’s commentary. In the conclusion we will revisit his work on chapter 5 to see one particular reiteration.
- 27 Again, this does not assume Confucius did or did not read the *Laozi*, or any dating of either.

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Article

Rethinking Guo Xiang's Concept of "Nothing" in the Perspective of His Reception of Laozi and Zhuangzi

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Abstract: Since Feng Youlan and Tang Yongtong, scholars have mostly understood Guo Xiang's "supreme nothing" (至無, *zhi wu*) as "non-existence", arguing that by denying Dao as the origin of the universe, the philosophical tradition of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Wang Bi, he strives to prove "self-generation" (自生, *zi sheng*) of all things. This way of interpretation not only leads to various dilemmas from the perspective of intellectual history, but also diverges from Guo Xiang's own account of Dao. The purpose of this paper is to argue that Guo Xiang, instead of dismissing it, solidifies the opinion of Laozi and Zhuangzi on the transcendence of Dao through the concept of "supreme nothing", and that the self-generation of all things is the logical endpoint of this reinforcement. The seemingly opposite viewpoints of transcendence and immanence, "Dao generates all things" and "All things are self-generated", merge with each other in the context of the proposition "Dao follows nature" (道法自然, *dao fa zi ran*) in Laozi.

Keywords: Guo Xiang; Laozi; Zhuangzi; nothing; Dao; self-generation

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of modern studies of Wei-Jin Neo-Daoism in the early twentieth century, there has been a pervasive dichotomous paradigm in the field of study considering Wang Bi's exegesis of Laozi and Guo Xiang's exegesis of Zhuangzi as representative achievements in Neo-Daoism during the Zheng Shi (正始, 240–249) period and the Yuan Kang (元康, 291–299) period, respectively, and regarding the dispute between their fundamental metaphysical positions, this is much more significant than the succession. On the one hand, Wang Bi's commentaries on Laozi were considered to be an inheritance of the metaphysics of Dao being the origin of the universe by Laozi, and as a means to abstract the above metaphysics further through the concept of "Nothing" (無, *wu*), giving it a stronger ontological dimension. On the other hand, Guo Xiang's commentaries on Zhuangzi are considered to have been developed through some elaborate semantic transformations and interpretive strategies, distorting Zhuangzi's account of Dao being the primal cause of all things, ultimately eliminating the origin, and describing the birth and death of all things as "self-generated" (自生, *zi sheng*) without any ultimate cause (one of the most typical examples can be found in Li 2013). Starting from this, Guo Xiang's metaphysics is considered to be partially independent of the Wei-Jin tradition of Laozegetics that preceded him.

It is the intention of this paper to show that if we examine the remnants of Guo Xiang's commentaries on Laozi in conjunction with his discourses on Dao in his commentaries to Zhuangzi, we may discover that his deviation from the tradition is not as great as previous scholars claim it to be: by portraying Dao in terms of concepts such as "supreme nothing" (至無, *zhi wu*), Guo Xiang follows Wang Bi's way and further strengthens the transcendence of the origin of the universe. The relationship between Dao and the nature of all things is dealt with in a similar manner to Wang Bi's interpretation of Laozi's proposition "Dao follows nature" (道法自然, *dao fa zi ran*). According to the context of Wei-Jin Laozegetics, the verb "fa" is translated as "follow" according to Wang Bi's commentary, i.e. Dao is not

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contrary to the natural and actual statues of all things (道不違自然, Wang 1980, p. 65). In this way, we can reconsider the continuity between Guo Xiang's position and the Wei-Jin tradition of Laozegetics.

It is widely acknowledged that by organizing and reconstructing ancient Chinese intellectual resources from a certain "philosophical" perspective, it is inevitable to draw on the categories and theoretical approaches of Western philosophy, and that the pre-selection of different interpretative orientations will directly affect the conclusions. The issue above indicates the necessity to explain the presumptions of this paper. The interpretations by pre-Qin and Wei-Jin Daoists in this paper are conducted within the framework of "Daoist metaphysics". According to Zheng Kai's representative formulation of this research orientation, the starting point of Daoist philosophical thinking is to inquire into the empirical-physical world made up of "tangible and named" (有形有名, *you xing you ming*) things, and to account for the ground of existence and change of things by means of the "formless and nameless" (無形無名, *wu xing wu ming*) abstract Dao, from which the relationship between Dao and things constitutes the major concern of Daoism. The two poles can be portrayed in multiple ways: the ground and the grounded, the absolute (free of interrelationships and quantitative determinations such as size) and the relative (comparable in interrelationships to each other), the invisible and the visible, the ungraspable and the describable, etc. (Zheng 2003). Daoist metaphysics thus shares with Western metaphysics a surpassing of physics, a concern with the origin of the universe, and a reflection on the general existence of all things. In this sense, it would be legitimate to translate the concepts of *you* (有) and *wu* (無) in the text as "being" and "nothing (non-being)" in accordance with the prevailing translation: the former derives from the meaning of "tangible and named" and refers to concrete and determinate existing things, either here or there; the latter constitutes a negation of the former by its essential characteristic of "formless and nameless".

Given this basic set of relational categories, we can also use the concepts of "transcendence" and "immanence" in a broader sense without sticking strictly to the monotheistic description of God. At the ontological level, when we claim that Dao "transcends" all things, this means that: 1. Dao, which is formless and unbounded, has some way of "being" different from concrete things, and 2. the existence and transformation of concrete things depend on Dao as the origin. This leads to the epistemological consequence that what exists in different ways is known in different ways: concrete things known through senses, languages, and concepts; Dao known through a certain intuitive, undifferentiated, and direct inner experience. Zheng Kai considers *ming* (明, in a cruder sense it can be translated into enlightenment) in *Laozi* to be the most representative of a series of terms used by Daoists to describe this transcendent way of knowing (Zheng 2003). When the author speaks of "absolute transcendence", he is therefore referring to: 1. a strong negation that there is no commonality between Dao and things in terms of their ways of being and being known, and 2. the unconditional dependence of things on Dao in causality¹. In contrast, the concept of "immanence" refers to the omnipresence and comprehensibility of Dao in concrete things to some extent. If this sense of "transcendence" and "immanence" has any resemblance to its equivalent in Western theo-philosophy, it may simply lie in the fact that both assume some form of first cause of the universe and attempt to carve out a relationship between the two—which naturally does not logically imply any commitment to achieving consistency between the two in any specific thesis.

2. The "Nothing" as "Non-Existence": The Traditional Interpretation of Guo Xiang's Theory of Dao and Its Consequences

Since Feng Youlan and Tang Yongtong opened up the field of study of Wei-Jin Neo-Daoism, Guo Xiang's so-called metaphysics, which emphasizes the "self-generation" of all things, has often been understood as a rejection or reaction to the theory of Dao of He Yan (何晏) and Wang Bi (王弼) and even to the entire tradition of Lao-Zhuang Daoism: the latter regards Dao as the ultimate basis for the existence and change of all things as the

starting point of their speculative systems, while the former is based on the dismantling of the original status of this ultimate principle. Feng Youlan created the phrase “the theory of no-nothing” (無無論, *wu wu lun*) to summarize the basic position of Guo Xiang. The so-called “no-nothing”, that is, “without the nothing being the origin of the universe”, refuses to acknowledge the Dao of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Wang Bi in the sense of the transcendent Being, which brings all things into their own beings and was given the name of “nothing” because of its “formlessness and namelessness”: “Dao is the true nothing. Laozi and Zhuangzi also said Dao is nothing, but they said that nothing is namelessness. That is, Laozi and Zhuangzi thought that Dao is not a thing, so it cannot be named. But Xiang Xiu and Guo Xiang thought that Dao is the true nothing, which is everywhere, but where it is, there is nothing (無所不在, 而所在皆無)” (Feng 2017). (The original texts and second-hand Chinese literature cited in this paper are all translated by the author.) Feng’s so-called “true nothing” is in fact pure “nothing” in the sense of “non-existence”. It is different from the transcendent cause of the empirical world of forms and names, which is highlighted in the terminology of the Lao-Zhuang tradition, and points to the lack or absence of beingness.

Tang goes even further by explicitly bringing out the dichotomous conceptual framework of “valuing nothing (貴無, *gui wu*)—exalting being (崇有, *chong you*)”: “In terms of their theoretical systems, Wang and He value nothing, while Xiang and Guo respect being” (Tang 2001), locating the differences between what He Yan and Wang Bi understood and what Xiang Xiu (向秀) and Guo Xiang understood in their metaphysical thoughts on Dao, and thus increasingly decisively distinguishing between the latter’s seeming deconstruction of Dao with his theory of self-generation and the former’s statement of “nothing as the basis”, which was apparently introduced by Daoism since Laozi: “The prevailing philosophy of the time said that there is a ‘nothing’ behind this world of existence which depends on this ‘nothing’...Xiang and Guo opposed this theory, arguing there being no ‘nothing’ outside of ‘being’: there is only ‘being’, and nothing is not-existence” (Tang 2001). Let us try to summarize this way of interpretation: Guo Xiang completely dissolves the Dao as the “creator” by replacing the “original nothing”, which is beyond being, with “nothing” that is lacking in existence, and replacing it with a simple recognition of the phenomenal world; only then, Guo Xiang’s proposition “above he knows that the creator is nothing, and below he knows that things that do exist are self-generated” 上知造物無物, 下知有物之自造 (Guo Xiang’s *Preface to Zhuangzi*. Zhuangzi 1998, p. 1) can be interpreted logically, and the political environment in which all things are not controlled by a higher being and are self-generated according to their nature can unfold.

We have noticed that this paradigm has had such a profound influence on later scholarship that many researchers on Guo Xiang often refuse to go beyond what the pioneers defined, and instead use it unthinkingly as a common premise for discussing Guo Xiang’s metaphysics. For example, Tang Yijie claims that Guo Xiang treats “nothing” as “the true zero point”, i.e., non-existence in which the existent cannot have any utility (Tang 2000). Similar expressions include “absolute vacuum” (Wang 2006), “absolutely nothing, emptiness, non-existence” (Bao 2013), “nothing, emptiness, zero” (Kang 2013), and so on. No matter what name scholars choose, the way of explaining Guo Xiang’s “nothing” by “non-existence” and thus making Guo Xiang the deconstructor of former Daoism has not fundamentally changed.²

It is indisputable that, given the frequent occurrence of the phrase “the creator is nothing” in Guo Xiang’s *Commentary on Zhuangzi*, interpreting Dao as the “supreme nothing” in its context as “non-existence” that has lost its original function is an easy and logically straightforward way to understand Guo Xiang’s recognition of the unique value of the individual being: Why is it self-generated? Because there is no creator. However, if we reflect a little, it is not difficult to find a series of unacceptable theoretical consequences that this argument may incur. This would lead, first of all, to an absence of the source of Guo Xiang’s theory of self-generation in the history of thought: to attribute the generation and change of all things to purely accidental spontaneous movements, without acknowledging

in any sense that they have a unified cause, is not only inconceivable in the Daoist tradition founded by Laozi, which is “founded on the Eternal, the Nothing and the Being” 建之以常無有 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 615) according to *Zhuangzi*, but also it would be difficult to find precursors or echoes in pre-Qin and Song-Ming Confucianism, which held to the metaphysical principle of “what Tian conditions is a disposition” (天命之謂性). We cannot exclude the possibility that Guo Xiang, to some extent independently of his contemporaries’ general impression of Daoism and the “on-nothing-based” interpretive context, derived such an idea from certain passages in *Zhuangzi* that have the interpretive potential to eliminate the creator (in particular, the depiction of the “piping of heaven” (天籟, *tian lai*) at the beginning of “Qi Wu Lun”). However, if we consider the holistic nature of *Zhuangzi* in the eyes of ancient commentators, as well as, for example, the numerous references to the creator in the chapter Da Zong Shi and the apparently “creationist” discourses there (see Section 4 of this paper), this assumption seems at least to be less acceptable than the assumption that there is more direct continuity between Guo Xiang and his background.

On the other hand, Wang Chong’s (王充) theory of self-generation is entirely based on the simple theory of the generation of qi (氣), stopping at the volitionless and purposeless role of qi as the substrate for the transformation of all things, which has not yet entered Guo Xiang’s context of the reflection on the absolute origin of the universe. As Ye’s examination shows, although Wang Chong’s concept of “nature” can be used to refer to a pre-self-sufficient state in which things are “self-so” and “not made by others”, however, the establishment of this state is attributed to the “spreading of qi” (施氣, *shi qi*) or “moving of qi” (行氣, *xing qi*) of heaven and earth as subjects and is the result of the purposeless movement of qi (Ye 2017). This is also an abstract reflection beyond the empirical world, but it is almost a material and dynamical account rather than a strictly ontological discussion: in terms of the aforementioned distinction between Daoist metaphysics and Daoist physics, it deals with the relationship between the “finer thing” (qi) and “coarser things” (concrete beings), rather than the relationship between the absolute “No-thing” and all things that Guo Xiang tries to clarify. In this regard, there is still causality between the movement of qi and self-generation of things, without touching on what scholars call the absolute “inability” of Dao in Guo Xiang. When Guo Xiang mentions “one qi with a myriad forms” 一氣而萬形 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 365, see (Zhuangzi 1998)), “qi naturally accumulates” 氣自委結 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 424, see (Zhuangzi 1998)), he is undoubtedly influenced by this type of thought of qi, but this is not at the same level as his reflection on the ultimate ontological origin of all things.

Another line of thought is represented by Wang Xiaoyi, who tries to trace Guo Xiang’s dissolution of Dao and his idea of the spontaneous emergence of things back to the translation and dissemination of the *prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* in Chinese scholarship during his time, in an attempt to demonstrate the affinity between this theory, which has no exact precedent in China, and the Buddhist doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda*, which also denies the origin of the universe. Strictly speaking, we do not have (and cannot have) enough evidence to completely rule out this possibility. However, even sympathizers of this argument may have to admit that we cannot find traces of the theory of *pratītya-samutpāda* directly in Guo Xiang’s work—at least as far as the use of such important categories as “Dao-thing”, *xing-qing* (性情), and *xiaoyao* (逍遙) is concerned, the commentary is still very much within a typical neo-Daoistic context, and it is almost impossible to identify the influence of Buddhist texts in it unequivocally, not to mention that the setting of the “natural allotment” (性分) of every individual, which goes hand in hand with the self-generation of things, is fundamentally incompatible with the Mahayana conception of emptiness (*śūnyatā*, 空) and its fierce criticism of self-nature (*svabhāva*, 自性).³ Based on this holistic consideration, it is still a last resort to turn to Buddhism when explaining an individual aspect of Guo Xiang’s philosophy.

Leaving aside these dilemmas outside the theory itself, the more central and by far less considered question concerns the hermeneutic: whether the reading of “nothing” as “non-existence” is fully coherent with Guo Xiang’s entire account of Dao and “nothing”.

As is mentioned earlier, Feng Youlan, in defining Guo Xiang's opinion on Dao as "true nothing", incompletely cites the following notes on the "Da Zong Shi" chapter as evidence: "Dao is omnipresent, that is to say that it has no height in the high things, no depth in the deep things, no length in the long times, no oldness in the old things, and not old in old. It is everywhere, but where it is, there is nothing" 言道之無所不在也，故在高為無高，在深為無深，在久為無久，在老為無老，無所不在，而所在皆無也 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 146, see (Zhuangzi 1998)). Here we cannot help but ask: Since Dao is nothing but "non-existence", how can we conceive of its omnipresence? It is not difficult to conceive of a transcendent Being that is "formless and nameless" and yet pervades the universe. However, for "non-existence", for the mere negation and absence of the reality of being, to assert that it is "omnipresent" lacks comprehensibility, because this is tantamount to denying the reality of all empirical things, for the reason that the absence of nothingness and the presence of a being are mutually exclusive, and to assert that there is nothingness somewhere is the same as asserting that there is no being somewhere. A common reading of the statement is to read it as "although Dao is everywhere, we do not find it anywhere (that is, it is not real anywhere, or it "exists" there, but only as the absence of a master or a ground)", which leads to a contradiction between the first half of the statement and the second half: Dao is either there or it is not there, either it exists as a being or it does not exist as an absence, and the assertion that some absence "exists" somewhere is, if not meaningless, then at least convoluted and unserious. For example, we say that "no bread exists on the table", but not that "an absence of bread exists on the table", because absence itself does not "exist". By the same token, if Dao is really nothing but the lack of existence, Guo Xiang should have directly asserted that it "is nowhere" (無所在), instead of trying to assign some kind of omnipresence to this nothingness; because such a formulation is only redundant and logically ineffective, it cannot be regarded as a serious proposition that attempts to reveal certain facts.

It seems that Feng has not paid attention to this implied tension between "non-existence" and "omnipresence", and it is interesting to note that Tang, after he has managed to elucidate Dao as "non-existence", encounters the same notes immediately. In order to describe the relationship between finite things and the all-pervading Dao as aptly as possible, Tang analogizes Dao to the texture of things: one can say that things are high but not the texture of things is high. This explanation seems to be quite sound, but it actually deviates from the previous definition of Dao as "non-existence": the texture as a being can reside in other beings, while "non-existence" itself implies the abolition of being, and it can never coexist with any being in the same way. We see that Tang is forced to revert to a certain doctrine of Dao in the style of Wang Bi's interpretation of *Laozi* in order to rationalize the pervasiveness of "nothing", which is understood as the negation of the determination of being, rather than the negation of the origin itself: "To say that Dao is nothing is to say that Dao is not an actual thing, not that there is no Dao" (Tang 2001). The boundary between Wang Bi's "valuing nothing" and Guo Xiang's "exalting being" seems to be blurred here. Tang does not give further explanation for this apparent inconsistency, which may be attributed to the manuscript and lecture nature of his book. However, it is regrettable that the tension buried here has not been able to provoke later scholars to explain "nothing" by "non-existence", and most of the commentators are still satisfied with the simple contrast between the traditions of Wang Bi's interpretation of *Laozi* and Guo Xiang's interpretation of *Zhuangzi*.

It is true that there are exceptions to everything: a number of scholars have also shown some efforts to transcend the dichotomous framework of "valuing nothing - exalting being" and to identify the inner continuity between earlier Daoism and Guo Xiang. Some of them, represented earlier by Fu Weixun and more recently by Yang Lihua, argue that Guo Xiang's deviation from earlier Daoist tradition was aimed at removing certain elements from the latter's ontology that were not conducive to the full development of the theory of nature. In contrast to Tang's approach of remedying the non-existent "nothing" with the transcendent "nothing", Fu's strategy is to discover factors transferring from the transcendent "nothing"

to the non-existent “nothing”: in Guo Xiang’s view, any attempt to construct some transcendent otherworldly substance would inevitably imply a disrespect for the phenomenal world, thus constituting a violation of the fundamental Daoism principle of the natural movement of all things, and therefore the metaphysical pursuit of Laozi and Zhuangzi must be replaced by a “radical naturalism” (Fu 2005). Yang’s treatment is to a certain extent equivalent to replacing Laozi and Zhuangzi in the context of Fu with Wang Bi: in Wang Bi’s case, the generation of Dao is completely dependent on the nature of the things, and is thus almost in a position of being hollowed out: “Dao follows the square on the scale of square, and follows the round on the scale of round. Dao is not against nature” 在方法方，在圓法圓，於自然無所違也 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 65, see (Wang 1980)). Then, this is only one step away from the so-called complete dissolution of Dao by Guo Xiang: the latter is only the removal of the superfluous warts in the system out of some “Occam’s razor” type of simplicity (Yang 2010). Although this solution has to a certain extent bridged the gap between the interpretations of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* during the Wei and Jin Dynasties, it has not only failed to eliminate a series of hidden problems caused by equating Guo Xiang’s “nothing” with non-existence, but also extended doubts to Wang Bi’s *Commentary on Laozi*: If the self-sufficiency and perfection of the nature of all things can be established without Dao, then why does Wang Bi still leave a place for the “formless and nameless” Dao as the creator of all things, and repeatedly emphasize the inevitability of the return of things to “nothing”? Is this rooted in the incompleteness of Wang Bi’s metaphysical system, as Yang suggests, or is it the other way around, that explaining “nothing” as “absence of being” still lacks consideration?

In contrast to the above-mentioned careful delineation that unfolds mainly within the ontological context, another effort to establish continuity between Wang Bi and Guo Xiang lies in understanding the transition from the former to the latter as a transformation from a certain semi-cosmogenic way of thinking to a purely ontological way of thinking. In a similar tone, scholars such as Yu Dunkang, Lu Guolong, and Wang Xiaoyi claim that Wang Bi’s thesis of “nothing generates beings” implies a position of considering Dao as the spatio-temporal starting point of all things, and he does not really have a logical understanding of the relationship between “being” and “nothing” at the level of abstract concepts. Therefore, when such an abstract reflection is actually realized in Guo Xiang, every form of “creator” or “generator” must be denied (Yu 2004; Lu 1996; Wang 2006). An implicit premise of this narrative is that “nothing” as creator or generator can be established more or less only in a cosmogenic, but not in a purely ontological sense. In the rest of the paper, we will carefully examine whether Guo Xiang has really ruled out the possibility of some kind of “ontological generator” in the construction of his metaphysics, and will return to evaluate this explanatory strategy at the end of Section 5.

In the subsequent reading of Guo’s text, we will gradually clarify that the general impression of Guo Xiang’s so-called “dissolution of the Dao” is only an illusion caused by a lack of careful analysis of the text; by criticizing names like “creator” and by proving that the supreme nothing “cannot” generate the things, Guo Xiang emphasizes the transcendent character of Dao, which is free of words and boundless with things, in an unprecedentedly extreme manner through his distinctive way of speaking. In this process of deconstructing and reconstructing past Daoism based on Wang Bi’s interpretation of *Laozi*, what is deconstructed is not Dao itself, but rather the way in which Dao is forcibly framed by various predicates that are only applicable to empirical things, thus reducing it to the level of the “one thing in the things” 在物一曲 (*zai wu yi qu*, Zhuangzi 1998, p. 517). Guo Xiang’s interpretation of *Zhuangzi* has not yet jumped out of the framework of Wei-Jin Laozegetics.

3. The Transcendent “Nothing” in the Laozi-Zhuangzi Tradition before Guo Xiang

In order to clarify the extent to which Guo Xiang’s use of the concept of “nothing” inherited and exceeded the scope of previous scholars, it is necessary to make a brief review of the use of “nothing” in the traditional metaphysics of Lao-Zhuang Daoism. In his

etymological survey, Pang Pu points out three main meanings of the concept of “nothing” in pre-Qin literature, the last of which is the abstract, absolutely empty nothingness of the metaphysical origin (Pang 1996), equivalent to what this paper calls “the transcendent nothing”. The thesis of “all things are created out of the Nothing” in the handed-down *Laozi* sets the tone for Daoist scholars’ understanding of the relationship between “nothing” and everything. As the ultimate basis of the generation of all things that logically precede them, the origin itself must be absolutely different from any of them. This is the idea intended by the basic principle of “what generates all things is not a thing” 物物者非物 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 435) established by *Zhuangzi* on the basis of *Laozi*: once the origin of all things is specified as a certain thing, we can still continue to ask where that thing comes from, and that thing thus is not the common cause of all things. In this sense, things are equal to each other on an ontological level, and nothing can be the ultimate basis of other things. As written in *Zhuangzi*, “the creation of a thing cannot precede other things” 物出不得先物也 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 435). The only one who can “precede” something is the absolute transcendent No-thing (非物, *fei wu*). From this point of view, Wang Jiansong seems to have been a bit hasty when he asserts that nothing as the origin cannot generate beings and that any inquiry into the creator is bound to fall into some kind of infinite regress (Wang 2008). The situation is that Daoist metaphysics assigns the role of creator to nothing precisely because it can circumvent this infinite extension of inquiries by virtue of its character of “no-thingness”, and therefore it is precisely nothing that can logically play the role of creator of all things.⁴

For this reason, it can be said that the absolute origin is not some “supreme” or “most real” being, but rather that it shakes off all the qualities attributed to beings and is a result of “de-reification” or “de-substantiation” of beings. In this way, it is easy to understand the character of Dao as “non-being and non-non-being” (非有非無, *fei you fei wu*), since the categories of “being” and “non-being” in everyday language stand side by side. They imply the presence and absence of beingness, respectively, and must therefore be excluded in the speech of the Absolute. Laozi considered this early on, and is always wary of direct assertions of the existence of Dao: “it seems to exist” 似或存 (*Laozi*, p. 10, see (Wang 1980)), “continuous, seeming to exist” 綿綿若存 (*Laozi*, p. 16, see (Wang 1980)), “Dao as a ‘thing’ is only vague and obscure” 道之為物，惟恍惟惚 (*Laozi*, p. 52, see (Wang 1980)), “it is called the formless form, the image of no-thing” 是謂無狀之狀，無物之象 (*Laozi*, p. 31, see (Wang 1980)), and Cheng Xuanying commented on this: “It is neither being nor non-being, it cannot be specified as being or non-being, so it is vague and obscure” (Meng 2001). In terms of the fact that Dao is not a hollow nothing, which is so-called “the leftover of being” (有之所謂遺者, according to Pei Wei 裴頠, see *Jin shu* 晉書, 35.1046 (Fang 1974)), it can be said to be almost existent; but in terms of the fact that it is not one of all things, it does not have any existence, and therefore it has to be called “nothing” and “formless”.

This seems to suggest to us that any valid statement of the Absolute must be based on the negation of the use of words in some empirical sense. In other words, the only reliable way to speak of the Absolute is to constantly exclude from it determinations belonging to the realm of beings. For this reason, Daoist philosophers obviously prefer to use a negative theological method to strip empirical properties or determinations from the Absolute in order to approach the true nature of Dao to a certain extent, rather than forcing empirical words to illegally expand into the transcendent realm, which is beyond their reach. The concept of “nothing” and the series of “no-x” structured words that it constitutes are the only ones that bear this burden (Rohstock 2014).

It is not difficult to imagine that since all nominal concepts that can be spoken and meant must be stripped away from Dao, categories such as the relation of actors and subjects and the relation of cause and effect, which describe the connection between being and being in the empirical world, must be included in this category. Since Dao is not generally “something”, it cannot naturally be an “actor” or a “cause”. Fundamentally, Dao cannot even be placed in any dualistic relation with anything, because any relation presupposes differences between relational terms, and differences exist only between determinations;

thus, there can be no conceptual distinguishability “between” the transcendent origin, which itself absolutely negates all determinations and beings. Thus, it is beyond the scale of all relational categories. In the text of *Zhuangzi*, this point is expressed as follows: “The origin has no boundary with the beings, while the beings have boundaries with each other, that is the so-called thing-boundaries” 物物者與物無際，而物有際者，所謂物際者也 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 430), that is, beings can only be in opposition to each other, while the origin is not subject to such boundaries. The corollary of this statement is that the propositions given in the Daoism context of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, such as “Dao gives birth to it” (*Laozi*, p. 136, see (Wang 1980)) and “it makes ghosts ghosts and gods gods” 神鬼神帝 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 145), cannot be understood in the sense of causality in the empirical world. It is true that Dao is regarded as the origin of all things, and even in the eyes of commentators like Wang Bi, the title “Dao” is chosen from its status as the origin: ‘Dao means that by which all things are as they are’ 道也者，取乎萬物之所由也 (*Laozi Zhi Lue*, p. 196, see (Wang 1980)). However, we must not overlook the fact that “Dao”, which is established in the sense of “cause”, is also only a false name for the absolute origin. It obviously does not mean that there is really a “supreme being” who initiates and dominates the birth and transformation of all things like a mother giving birth to a child or an artisan making a utensil, meaning that empirical causality arises from the action of one existent object on another existing object. For this reason, Wang Bi cautiously refers to the words that are meant to characterize the origin, including “Dao”, as “descriptions” (稱, *cheng*) of the origin, declaring that they “do not exhaust its ultimate” 未盡其極 (*Laozi Zhi Lue*, p. 198, *ibid.*).

In terms of this rejection of any meaningful metaphysical description, such a Dao seems to come close to what many researchers of Guo Xiang call the “nothingness” of spontaneous emergence. However, it must be noted that the reason why the categories denoting Dao-things’ causality and difference cannot be applied to Dao here is not in any way because Dao “lacks” these attributes in the sense of absence, but only because it “transcends” or “overflows” them in an uncanny way. The proposition that “the origin has no boundary with the beings” is always grounded in the proposition that “what generates all things is not a thing”; if Dao is to satisfy the absolute “non-differentiation” from all things, it must first be absolutely and unbridgeably “different” from all things, and these two dimensions are in a paradoxical way twisted together in Dao and cannot be separated. Although the true generative work of Dao in a transcendental sense cannot be characterized by human language—which by its very nature has legitimacy only in its dealings with empirical things—the term “generative work” in the empirical world means “self-so” or “self-generation”, but “self-so” or “self-generation” is here inferred and guaranteed precisely as the result of this transcendental causality, which strengthens rather than weakens the dependence of all things on their origin.

Therefore, what a researcher like Wang Bo calls “gentle or mild weak action” of Dao on all things is perhaps not the best expression (B. Wang 2018); instead of calling it “weak action”, the generative work of Dao is absolutely “no action”. The result is that, as Wang Bi’s commentary on *Laozi* says, “Heaven and earth are left to nature, without any action or creation, and everything governs itself” 天地任自然，無為無造，萬物自相治理 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 13, see (Wang 1980)), “Dao is not against nature, it thus realizes its own nature and follows the nature” 道不違自然，乃得其性，法自然也 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 65, *ibid.*). In terms of the birth and destruction of all things, there is no higher being as the “cause”, and behind the manipulation and control of all things, it can be said that generative work of Dao on all things in the empirical world can only be realized as natural generation and transformation of all things, which is the ultimate destination and true spirit of *Laozi*’s theory of Dao.

In this regard, Ziporyn, through his examination of the use of the concept of “li” (理) in Wang Bi’s *Zhou Yi Lue Li* (周易略例), has discerningly specified it as “mini-Daos of the particular hexagrams” (Ziporyn 2010), i.e. the dominant and inviolable natural tendencies of movement within the plural of individual things; he undoubtedly captures an important

aspect of Dao at work in all things, namely that the empirical basis for the generation and transformation of all things is fully internalized in the individuals themselves, without the need for some higher being to exert coercive force from outside. However, we should not overlook Wang Bi's efforts to establish Dao as "a self-subsistent metaphysical principle" in addition to these separate and immanent "Daos". The way of thinking in which the singular, primordial One unifies the Many as derivatives is still clear in his interpretation of Laozi: "Dao means that by which all things are as they are" 涉之乎無物而不由，則稱之曰道 (Laozi Zhi Lue, p. 197, see (Wang 1980)), "the many things are as they are by Dao" 衆由乎道 (ibid), and "all things and forms go into one" 萬物萬形，其歸一也 (a commentary to Laozi, p. 117, ibid.). The fundamental metaphysical relationship of the "principium" and the "pricipiatum" is consolidated around the dependence of the grounded on their ground, and the internalization of the origin and the positive emphasis on its transcendence form a certain parallel in Wang Bi's context, and there does not seem to be sufficient reason to regard one as the "true intention of the author" and the other as a mere rhetorical or ironic terminology. However, if one considers the metaphysical difference between transcendental nothing and empirical things, as mentioned above, and the distinction between transcendental causality and empirical causality, then it can be argued that those two simply state the same fact on different levels. We are thus not faced with a situation in which "it is not necessary to set up a first principle in addition to the intrinsic tendencies of things", but rather "it is not necessary to accommodate the intrinsic tendencies at the expense of the seriousness of the text's description of the first principle".

This dual construction can also be found, for example, in Wang Bi's use of the concept *ben* (本, which can be translated as "root", "foundation", etc.). On the one hand, in his commentary on Laozi, Wang Bi sometimes uses *ben* to refer to the true state of things when they are not disturbed by excessive desires, when it is closely associated with the concept of "simplicity" (樸, *pu*): "ben exists in *pu*" 本在樸也 (a commentary to Laozi, p. 192, ibid.), but, on the other hand, it is more commonly used to refer to some singular, unique and unified total ground of the many: "This is the ground by which they are as they are, the same as the Ultimate, and so is called the root of heaven and earth... All things are born of it" 本其所由。與太極同體，故謂之天地之根也... 萬物以之生 (a commentary to Laozi, p. 17, ibid.) and "if one wants to understand that by which things are as they are, then all things, though obvious, have to be discovered in their origin from the depths, and therefore to account for what is inside the form by what is outside heaven and earth" 欲明物之所由者，則雖顯而必自幽以敘其本。故取天地之外，以明形骸之內 (Laozi Zhi Lue, p. 197, ibid.). In this respect, either the one and only Dao or *li* dispersed in things have a certain grounded function, but those two belong to different levels of explanation: the former establishes the origin of all things as a premise, the latter deals with implementation of the origin in things, and the two complement each other.

In summary, it seems that the practice of dissolving Dao into some non-existent "nothing" is not a necessary prerequisite for the establishment of Guo Xiang's theory of the self-generation of things. The theory of "self-generation" had already bred some form of pre-preparation even in Guo Xiang's previous Daoism of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Wang Bi, in parallel with the development of the theory of "Dao generates all things". When his forerunner, Pei Wei, took a very radical approach to assigning all realities to the concrete beings in the empirical world, Guo Xiang actually had two paths before him: either to follow this purely immanent solution with its overtones of abolitionism, or to draw intellectual resources from the pre-Qin Daoists and He Yan and Wang Bi, so as to better integrate transcendence of the nothing and its immanence. As Yu Dunkang points out, Pei Wei replaced the relation of being-nothing, which corresponds to phenomena and the origin in the early Neo-Daoists, with the relation of existence-non-existence, and then absolutely opposed being and nothing in a "Barmenidian way", only using the former to describe the generation and transformation between beings (Yu 2004). While Guo Xiang restricts the transformation between beings to the realm of being itself, he clearly inherits the idea of Pei Wei's understanding of "nothing" as "non-existence": "Not only cannot nothing become

beings, but also beings cannot become nothing. Therefore, beings change in many ways, but never become nothing. Therefore, since the beginning of time, there has never been a time when there was no being existing; being always exists.” 非唯無不得化而為有也，有亦不得化而為無矣。是以無有之為物，雖千變萬化，而不得一為無也。不得一為無，故自古無未有之時而常存也 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 435, see (Zhuangzi 1998)). Being can only be transformed into other forms of being in the process of change, but it cannot lose its existence and become nothing, and nothing itself lacks this quality of existence and therefore cannot be transformed into any form of being. Guo Xiang agrees with Pei Wei on the point that “nothing” as “non-existence” is completely insulated from the world of being. Such a “nothing” abstracts most completely from the opposite of “being”, but thus becomes completely negative for the construction of the system. However, as we will attempt to explore below, not all of Guo Xiang’s “nothing” in his context should be understood in the sense of the absence of this reality. His discourse on “nothing”, especially “supreme nothing”, has ontological overtones in other contexts. Guo Xiang breaks away from the monotonous framework of Pei Wei, in which “being” is the only reality, by reinterpreting “nothing”, which has faded into “non-existence”, as “nothing” in the early neo-Daoist sense, which transcends phenomena. In the following two sections, we will try to understand the interaction between the concept of the “supreme nothing” and the “self-generation” of things by going deeper into Guo’s specific thesis.

4. “Existing without Things”: Guo Xiang’s “Nothing” and His Highlighting of the Transcendence of Dao

Once we concentrate our discussion on Guo Xiang’s discussion of Dao, we can first find a direct basis for distinguishing between the non-existent “nothing” and the transcendent “nothing” in the fragments of Guo Xiang’s *Commentary on Laozi*, which has received little attention from scholars. Following the sentence “it seems to have existence” in the four chapters discussed earlier, Guo Xiang writes: “Existence, also being. Dao is quiet, unchanged, the end is always the same with the beginning, so it is said to exist. Existing without things, so it is said ‘seems’ 存，在也。道湛然安靜，古今不變，終始常一，故曰存。存而無物，故曰似也 (Tang 2000)⁵. If Dao is considered to be real nothing, then there is no need to go to the trouble of explicitly asserting the existence of Dao, and then to explain that this “existence” is only “seemingly existence” by means of its character of “existing without things”. It is perfectly possible to claim that “seemingly existence” is only a false name, and that there is no Dao; to say forcibly that this “non-existence” exists, just to add to the trouble. In fact, Guo Xiang’s chosen strategy for interpreting *Laozi* is quite similar to the aforementioned Cheng Xuanying’s “double repudiation of existence and non-existence” (有無雙遣, *you wu shuang qian*): first of all, in terms of Dao as the origin of the generation of emptiness, permanence, and unity, it cannot be said that it does not exist, thus dispelling the fallacy that Dao is non-existent; however, it is also not legitimate to use the term “existence” to describe Dao, because what exists can only be something, while Dao is the “nothing” that is beyond every something and negates every something. Therefore, it can only be described by such vague words as “may exist” or “seems to exist”, and thus the delusion of Dao as existence is dispelled, and the transcendence of the absolute origin of the empirical world can be found in the gap between “being” and “non-being”. Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying’s commentary on *Laozi* has reached the same line of thought here.

On the other hand, Guo describes the “existence” of Dao with the phrase “quiet, unchanged, the end is always the same with the beginning”, which is a continuation of the tradition from *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* to highlight the transcendence of Dao. Chapter 25 of *Laozi* says: “So silent and desolate! It establishes itself without renewal”, which differs from Guo’s text only in wording. Accordingly, it is not appropriate to interpret “nothing” in this context as a “negation of scarcity” of being, but rather as an “absolute negation”; Guo Xiang, in his *Commentary on Zhuangzi*, repeatedly says that “the creator is nothing” 造物無物 and “the origin is nothing” 物物者無物 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 430, see (Zhuangzi 1998)), the meaning of which is still roughly the same as what *Zhuangzi* calls “seemingly

no existence” 若有亡 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 506) and *Laozi* calls “Existing continuously, it cannot be named and it returns to no-thingness” 繩繩不可名，復歸於無物 (*Laozi*, p. 31, see (Wang 1980)), which does not mean that “there is no origin”, but rather aims to emphasize that “the origin is not a thing that exists, not a determined being”. Only in this way can further discussions of the pervasiveness and transcendence of Dao in his commentary on “Da Zong Shi” become understandable:

“Dao is omnipresent, that is to say that it has no height in the high things, no depth in the deep things, no length in the long times, no oldness in the old things, and not old in old. It is everywhere, but where it is, there is nothing. The thing that is both above and below should not be called high and low; the thing that is both outside and inside should not be called inside and outside; that which changes with change should not be spoken of for a long time; that which is always absent from beginning to end cannot be called old.” 言道之無所不在也，故在高為無高，在深為無深，在久為無久，在老為無老，無所不在，而所在皆無也。且上下無不格者，不得以高卑稱也；外內無不至者，不得以表裏名也；與化俱移者，不得言久也；終始常無者，不可謂老也。(a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 145f. see (Zhuangzi 1998)).

If we take Dao as “non-existence”, then it can certainly satisfy the requirements of “no height”, “no depth”, and “nothing”, but at the same time it cannot reside in the high and deep determinations of things, thus realizing the “omnipresence” of “no height in the high things” and “no depth in the deep things”, because the presence of a determination and its absence are mutually exclusive. Therefore, the assertion that Dao is “everywhere, and where it is, there is nothing” is very close to the following statements of Wang Bi: “Formless and silent, so it can be in everything and go everywhere” 無狀無象，無聲無響，故能無所不通，無所不往 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 31, see (Wang 1980)), “If it is warm, it cannot be cool; if it is Gong, it cannot be Shang. Form must have a division; the sound must belong. Therefore, forms are not the Big Form, and loud sounds are not the Big Sound 若温也則不能矣，宮也則不能商矣。形必有所分，聲必有所屬，故象而形者，非大象也；音而聲者，非大音也 (*Laozi Zhi Lue*, p. 195, see (Wang 1980))”. To have a determination means to have some division, some bias, that is, to become a particular being and unable to be in all existences. Therefore, in order to realize the perfect immanence of Dao in all things, one has to resort to the perfect transcendence of it, i.e., one must exclude from it the finite determinations of all things, so that while it dwells in all things (“everywhere”), it does not become any of them (“nothing”). The passage goes on to deny the applicability of a series of prepositions used to describe empirical things to Dao: Dao is full of the universe, so it cannot be called high or low; Dao travels in all directions and remains independent and unchanging, so it cannot be called by the name of long and old. In this kind of general prescriptive layer by layer exclusion, step by step elimination, Dao is progressively pushed away from the empirical world, its transcendence gradually strengthened, becoming increasingly prominent and clear. And of course, the so-called “weakening” or even “dissolving” are thus groundless. If we take these statements on the transcendence of Dao seriously, those traditionally seen as “materialistic” claims should be reconsidered. Since they cannot be taken as a direct negation of the reality of the transcendent as denotation, it seems necessary to delineate different contexts and levels of application for these two conflicting statements, so that they can be compatible and adaptable to each other.

5. The Integration of “Dao Generates All Things” and “Self-Generation”: The Theoretical End Point of the Theory of the “Supreme Nothing”

Up to this point, it can be said that Guo Xiang’s grasp of the transcendent “nothing” as absolute negation and the specific way he chooses to articulate it are no different from He Yan and Wang Bi’s tradition of *Laozi*-interpretation. However, the path that most easily leads scholars to explain “nothing” by “non-existence” still lies in the recurrence in Guo’s *Zhuangzi Commentary* on “Dao cannot generate anything” and the self-generation of things. It is in these passages that Guo Xiang explicitly demonstrates his novel way of speaking: he

avoids talking about the generation of Dao and focuses almost exclusively on the inability of it. There are four typical commentaries of this kind in the text, and they are excerpted as follows:

a. “Is there something else called ‘piping of heaven’? Since nothing is nothing, it can’t generate something; if something doesn’t exist yet, it can’t generate others. Then who is the creator? All things are self-generated. It is self-generated, not “I generate things”. If I cannot generate things, and things cannot generate me, then I am self-so. If I am self-so, it is called natural. It is only natural, not out of action.” 夫天籟者，豈復別有一物哉？... 無無矣，則不能生有；有之未生，又不能為生。然則生者誰哉？塊然而自生耳。自生耳，非我生也。我不能生物，物亦不能生我，則我自然矣。自己而然，則謂之天然。天然耳，非為也。(a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 26, see (Zhuangzi 1998)).

b. “How can nothing generate gods? Not to make the ghosts and gods become ghosts and gods, but the ghosts and gods themselves have become ghosts and gods, this is the making without making; not to give birth to heaven and earth, but heaven and earth generate themselves, this is the generating without generating. It is impossible to let it become a god. It can only become a god by itself. So what credit is there to take? “無也，豈能生神哉？不神鬼帝而鬼帝自神，斯乃不神之神也；不生天地而天地自生，斯乃不生之生也。故夫神之果不足以神，而不神則神矣，功何足有，事何足恃哉？(a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 145, see (Zhuangzi 1998)).

c. “Dao is impotent, and to attain something is to attain it by oneself. I have not attained it yet, so I cannot attain it. Therefore, whoever attains it, externally, without the help of Dao, internally, without the help of his ego, but suddenly attains it by himself and changes alone.” 道，無能也。此言得之於道，乃所以明其自得耳。自得耳，道不能使之得也；我之未得，又不能為得也。然則凡得之者，外不資於道，內不由於己，掘然自得而獨化也。(ibid.).

d. “What precedes all things? We consider *yin* and *yang* to be prior to all things, but *yin* and *yang* are also things, who is prior to *yin* and *yang*? I take nature to be prior to all things, but nature is the self-so of the things. And I take the Supreme Dao to be prior to all things, but the Supreme Dao is the Supreme Nothing, and since it is Nothing, how can it be prior to things? In this way, who is prior to things? It seems that there is something, but in fact there is not. This shows that all things are natural, and nothing makes them so.” 誰得先物者乎哉？吾以陰陽為先物，而陰陽者即所謂物耳。誰又先陰陽者乎？吾以自然為先之，而自然即物之自爾耳。吾以至道為先之矣，而至道者乃至無也。以無矣，又奚為先？然則先物者誰乎哉？而猶有物，無已。明物之自然，非有使然也。(a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 435, see (Zhuangzi 1998)).

The four paragraphs are very similar in structure, all of them inferring the “self-generation” of things from the inability of Dao to generate them. Among them, paragraph c directly refers to Dao as incompetent, while paragraphs b and d explicitly equate Dao with “nothing” and “supreme nothing”, respectively. The reference to “nothing” in paragraph a is slightly ambiguous: the phrase “if something doesn’t exist yet, it can’t generate others” seems to mean both that non-existence cannot give rise to existence and that the absolutely transcendent cannot give rise to existence. However, one must consider the fact that the other three paragraphs, which are in the same framework as this one, are not concerned with the question of whether non-existence can generate being, excluding the creator and then affirming the “self-generation” in the counter-example of “Dao generates all things”. This is also in line with the original context of the concept of the “piping of heaven”, reflecting on the existence or not of the ultimate cause (怒者其誰, *nu zhe qi shui*), so the latter should still be the case. In giving reasons for the inferred premise that “Dao cannot generate things”, the texts in paragraphs a, b, and d coincidentally resort to the “nothingness” of Dao.

As was discussed earlier, Guo Xiang’s concept of “nothing” in the context of Dao still continues with the transcendent “nothing” of the Lao-Zhuang tradition, thus, the so-called “inability” of Dao here shall be understood in the context of the absolute non-determinate nature of the origin. Paragraph d, which is located under the sentence “what generates all

things is not a thing”, is the most logically rigorous and perhaps the most helpful way to understand the transcendent connotation of this negation. Here, Guo Xiang first sets up a clear context for asking questions about “prior thing”, i.e., the metaphysical origin of all existence, and gives *yin* and *yang* as the first possible answer to this question. However, it is obvious that, as far as *yin* and *yang* are concerned, they are indeed more primitive than the usual individual existents, but they are not yet free of the determinate nature of things as things; therefore, although *yin* and *yang* can be regarded as an empirical cause of the generation, they are not fit for being the ultimate origin of all things, and the basis of their own existence can still be inquired into. It seems that whenever we still attribute the origin of being to a certain being, the origin of this being will immediately be questioned again, and the chain of questioning will thus be extended endlessly into an endlessly regressive situation. In view of this, Guo Xiang follows the line of thought of *Zhuangzi* and pushes the origin of being to “supreme nothing” as the negation of all existents: only that which is “no-thing” can be free of the difficult question of “how did they come into being?” Thus, it stands truly in the realm of “unquestionable” 不可致詰 (*bu ke zhi jie*, *Laozi*, p. 31, see (Wang 1980)).

However, new doubts follow: the words “origin” or “basis” are merely bad names for this “supreme nothing”. The transcendent and absolute Dao has removed all determinations, and thus cannot be placed in any possible relationship with beings: it cannot be represented as an “actor” in relation to the “subjects”, as a “cause” in relation to what is “born from it”, because all these rules only apply in the realm of the intelligible, only to those existences that are distinct from each other and stand in relation to each other. Thus, the paradox arises: “Since it is Nothing, how can it be prior to things?” The transcendent status of the “supreme nothing” as the origin deprives it of the possibility of being described as the origin. The establishment of this “supreme nothing” as the ultimate ground leads to the following consequence: in the empirical world to which everyday language still applies, there is no being that can dominate the generation and change of all beings. The “generative power” of Dao over all beings on the transcendent level is in fact the result of the “making without making” and “generating without generating” in the empirical world. It is ultimately realized as the “self-generation” of all beings without any external or internal reason.

Rather than saying that such a way of thinking is beyond Wei-Jin Laozegetics, we should say that it upholds and advances the principles of Wei-Jin Laozegetics at a deeper level. It can be said that Guo Xiang’s practical intention of emphasizing that “nothing cannot generate something” is indeed to preserve the spontaneity of the self-generation of all things: however, in order to achieve this purpose, it is not Dao being the transcendent basis of the generation that he wants to dissolve. Rather, it is some “supreme being” that can influence all things as a “controller” or “enabler,” that is, to prevent any being from moving toward the ultimate “nothing”. The latter is the threat to the spontaneity of all things, while the former can only serve the function of “not blocking their origins” (不塞其源, *bu sei qi yuan*) and “not forbidding their nature” (不禁其性, *bu jin qi xing*). In this regard, we see that Guo Xiang returns to the theme of “non-action” in the *Laozi* tradition: “only natural, not out of action”—the so-called natural generation of things, what is opposed is precisely the so-called “action”, that is, the interference and manipulation of some alien being, some external enabler, in the generative process of things.

From this point of view, Guo Xiang rejects all the ways of speaking in *Zhuangzi* that are more substantive and may lead scholars to mistake “nothing” of transcendence for “something” of reality: “We start to search for the trace of the true master, but we cannot get it. This shows that all things are natural, and nothing makes them so” 起索宰之朕，而亦終不得，則明物皆自然，無使物然也 (*Zhuangzi* 1998, p. 29), “Therefore, the creator of things is not a creator, and things are self-generated, self-generated without any dependence” (“故造物者無主，而物各自造，物各自造而無所待焉”, *ibid.*). It can be seen that in this process of constantly criticizing the way of treating something as the common master of all things, and constantly and strictly stripping existence and solidity from Dao,

the transcendent character of Dao as the “supreme nothing” is actually constantly being purified and strengthened. The use of metaphors such as “the true master” and “the creator” in *Zhuangzi* certainly does not seriously undermine its meaning of the piping of heaven of the self-so, and Wang Bi’s usual use of a series of phrases such as “the master of all things” (品物之宗主, *pin wu zhi zong zhu*) does not affect his definition of Dao as “not against nature”, but in its terminological construction itself, it is undoubtedly not entirely free of the practice of “analogizing” the transcendent to the object of experience. It still bears some traces of what Pang calls the “seemingly absent but actually present” master (Pang 1996), and is therefore not as appropriate as the extreme abstraction of the “supreme nothing”.

Nevertheless, by repeatedly portraying the generative function of Dao in an emphatic tone as “reliance” (因, *yin*) and “following” (任, *ren*) on the self-generation of things, and even as a fundamental “non-function” (無功, *wu gong*), Wang Bi has approached Guo Xiang’s position in many paragraphs. If one strips away the contexts in which he explicitly establishes Dao as master, it is difficult to distinguish the following statements of Wang Bi from those traditionally considered “materialistic” by Guo Xiang above: “By all things there is the use, and works are accomplished by them” 因物而用，功自彼成 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 7, see (Wang 1980)), “between heaven and earth, unrestrainedly following the nature of all things” 天地之間，蕩然任自然 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 14, *ibid.*), “things grow and complete themselves, and this is not accomplished under my mastery” 物自長足，不吾宰成 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 24, *ibid.*); the third sentence even has a similar tone to Guo Xiang’s, denying the dominant role of Dao. Similarly, when Wang Bi emphasizes that “nature is sufficient in itself, and action destroys it” 自然已足，為則敗之 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 6, *ibid.*), he clearly does not attribute the generative function of Dao to such an alien action imposed by the Other, but rather treats Dao as the reciprocal expression of the natural process itself at the transcendental level: in this regard, Dao has no real determinant or driving force for anything, because all “action” relations already presuppose two objects external to each other. If we conclude that such statements by Wang Bi are not contradictory to his affirmation of the transcendence of Dao, but are part of a unified conception of the relation between Dao and things, and therefore do not need to be considered “materialistic”, the same should be true for Guo Xiang, for his statements, which take into account both Dao and all things, do not actually change the structure of the system in any fundamental way, but only emphasize the “self” aspect in a somewhat stronger tone.

In a word, it is through these paradoxical words that Guo Xiang pushes the absolute transcendence of Dao to the center of consciousness in an unprecedentedly extreme way: starting from the principle of *Laozi*’s “Dao follows nature” and *Zhuangzi*’s “what generates all things is not a thing”, the relationship between the absolute origin and all things cannot be conceived as any relationship between things that move and thus depend on each other. This origin transcends the realm of all existents absolutely, i.e., it becomes a “nothing” at this level, and in this sense absolutely “different” from all things: “the Supreme is not limited by beingness” 夫至極者，非物所制 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 369, see (Zhuangzi 1998)). However, the category of “difference” itself is derived from the comparison of the determinations of things, and the non-determinate transcendent thus cannot have any boundary or distinction with all things. The extreme transcendence of the creator thus leads to its extreme immanence: “What generates all things is nothing, and where is the boundary? 物物者竟無物也，際其安在乎 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 430, *ibid.*). In the words of Cheng Xuanying, who thinks Dao and things are not one and not different, it can be said that the former topic is “Dao and things are not one”, while the latter topic is “Dao and things are not different”. Both of them make the paradoxical character of Dao as “both transcendent and immanent” clear, in the negations of the categories “sameness” and “difference”.

In this regard, Ziporyn comes very close to the conclusion we have reached here when he points out that Guo Xiang converges things on themselves through an extreme emphasis

on their individuality, thus moving towards the affirmation of all empirical facts in an “unprincipled” manner, thus eliminating the possibility of asking for any external purpose or “why” of the facts (Ziporyn 2010). The difference is that we believe that Guo Xiang’s text at the same time does not avoid constructing transcendence in a non-ironic sense: Dao is admittedly a sort of paradoxical “why without a why” or “principle without principle”, but this does not mean that there is really a lack of why or principle, but rather that it is beyond the realm of some existing principle, and this transcendence has always been an indispensable context for Guo Xiang’s inference of his theory of self-generation. In terms of its intelligible ultimate manifestation in the empirical world, which can be legitimately expressed in language, Dao certainly behaves as a kind of “non-principle” or “non-cause”, but in its own right it remains a kind of “super-principle” or “super-cause”. Rather than deriving the legitimacy of such descriptions as “self-generation” or “self-so” from the incapacity of Dao itself, it derives simply from the inability of human language to describe something beyond “objects” or beyond existing “relations”.

Accordingly, we can understand “Dao generates things” as an expression of the transcendent side of Dao and “the self-generation of things” as an expression of the immanent side of Dao in the sense that Dao is never the same as all things; the creation of all things is always based on it, and in the sense that there is no division between Dao and all things; all things do not have a mover and shaker outside of themselves: “That boundless thing, though called the creator, actually only shows the self-generation of things” 不際者，雖有物物之名，直明物之自物 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 430, see (Zhuangzi 1998)). The discussion of “relation” of Dao and things is thus tantamount to the exclusion of categories of empirical relation. When scholars reckon that Dao in Guo Xiang’s context is “incompetent” based on the denotation of the text alone, they confuse Guo Xiang’s abolition of some “supreme being” with the abolition of the absolutely transcendent Dao itself, and confuse the “causality” between Dao and things out of the bad name “causality” with the causality between things. In fact, there is a strict boundary between the relation of things and “relation” of Dao and things in the exact sense. The latter, as the origin and beginning that always defines the former, naturally cannot be described in a way that is appropriate to the representation of the things it generates. This difference is both ontological and hermeneutic: In the case of the former, transcendence and immanence constitute two mutually bounded and irreducible sides of the same coin. In the case of the latter, this two-faced way of describing them exists not because they are trying to explain different facts or processes but because such a dichotomy is necessitated by the limitations of the concept and language from the point of view of human beings as observer and describer. From the point of view of fact itself, the assertion “Dao generates things” and the assertion “things generate themselves” are undoubtedly the same thing, and neither the transcendent nor the immanent side has a special status here. They are in fact equivalent to each other, but they are not alternative to each other in terms of formulation, for only by virtue of their complementarity can the essence of the relation between Dao and things be revealed conceptually without bias, so that we neither diminish Dao to the notion of some actual external dominator nor arbitrarily identify individual things in the empirical world as the only reality.

We can thus review the intellectual historical narrative mentioned in Section 2, according to which Guo Xiang replaced Wang Bi’s transcendental and generative Dao with the abstract and empty “supreme nothing”, thus eliminating some residual cosmogenic tendencies in the latter’s thought, i.e., denying that the universe has a temporal or external beginning, thus obtaining a more purified ontology. We may admit that, due to the ambiguity of his formulation, it is not impossible that there are some so-called cosmogenic residues in Wang Bi, even if the propositions on which Yu and Lu rely to identify these residues, most typically “being is born of nothing” 有生於無 (Lu 1996; Yu 2004), are also open to ontological interpretation.⁶ The question now, however, is as follows: can we conceive of Dao as a beginning only in the cosmogenic sense? According to the previous discussion, Guo Xiang’s expressions such as “no height in the high things” and “no oldness in the

old things” should be interpreted as an explanation of a kind of transcendence that is not limited by space and time. Such an origin has only the purest sense of logical dependence, its “generation” is not in space and time, nor is it “external” to anything in a relative sense, so that even the empirical word “generation” can no longer be applied to it. In light of this, the risk that Yu asserts, that recognizing a transcendent “nothing” as the ultimate ground could easily slip into some kind of “theological teleology”, does not exist because such a Dao likewise does not act as “another” being and would impose any constraints and regulations on other beings, and thus would not have any nameable, intelligible purpose—other than the unrestrained movement of all things that we can observe in the empirical world (Yu 2004). Consequently, such risk only exists in terms: the mere mention of the names “origin”, “creator”, “foundation”, etc. inevitably suggests a theological possibility. However, isolated terms do not have definite meanings themselves. Their actual meanings can only be clarified in a complete theoretical system. The repeated emphasis by Wang Bi and especially Guo Xiang on the aspect of the spontaneous movement of things has sufficiently eliminated the possibility of misinterpreting Dao as some kind of teleological God (including, but not limited to, a personal God in the Christian sense, who instituted the works of salvation and will judge man at the end of the world). It is hard to imagine that anyone who has truly understood their doctrine would still be obsessed with limiting this unrestrained, lively freedom of things by some predetermined pattern and path.

In short, it seems that the transition from cosmogenesis to ontology need not require the abolition of the absolute origin in the logical sense, and we can maintain that Guo Xiang purified Wang Bi’s ontology while claiming that he did not pay the price of abolishing the origin, but continued Wang Bi’s approach and stripped the origin of its substantiality and spatio-temporal determinations in a more explicit tone (i.e., the quotations at the beginning of this section show a literal denial of the creator), thus making Dao a “true” origin in a purely ontological sense—and where the text itself allows for the latter interpretation, claiming the former would obviously attach more unnecessary presuppositions to our inference of a possible continuity between Wang Bi and Guo Xiang. In line with this attempt to preserve coherence to a greater extent, if Liu Xiaogan and Wang Zhongjiang’s so-called all-encompassing “reverse interpretation” (逆向詮釋) or “reversal” of the original *Zhuangzi* text by Guo Xiang’s commentary, in contrast to the positive interpretation and development made by Wang Bi, who follows the logic of the line of *Laozi*, constitutes a “strong assertion” of the difference between *Zhuangzi* and Guo Xiang (Liu 2009; Wang 1993), then what we advocate here is a somewhat weaker—at least only in terms of ontology, leaving aside other dimensions such as epistemology, political philosophy, and so on—interpretation, i. e., there is no fundamental divergence between the positions of Guo Xiang and earlier Daoist metaphysics, but rather a difference in formulation and emphasis, and the consequent as an explicit exclusion of an underlying substantivist interpretation: by literally deconstructing the discourse of the creator in *Zhuangzi* through a bold and radical interpretive strategy, Guo Xiang perhaps reveals more clearly the essence of the metaphysical system that earlier Daoists tried to build up from the front and the opposite side.

6. Conclusions

At the end of this paper, let us review the traditional understanding of Guo Xiang’s “nothing”: the reason why scholars so overwhelmingly agree with the interpretation of “nothing” as “non-existence” is due to the fact that Guo Xiang’s theory of self-generation is unthinkingly tied to the absence of Dao. Since the establishment of the origin necessarily implies that there is something to generate and dominate all things, then the rejection of the origin is a necessary condition for the establishment of self-generation. It is not difficult to find that this way of thinking is also present in the heated debates in recent years around the meaning of “Dao follows nature” in *Laozi*: either to insist on the original status of Dao and to weaken the nature of things (or to directly follow the way of He Shang Gong’s interpretation: “the nature of Dao is natural and it follows nothing”, treating Dao as the

subject of the word *zi ran*, 自然), or the nature of things is strongly spoken of and the generative function of Dao as the origin is downplayed (Luo 2020; Wang 2018; Wang 2020; Yin 2019). In this regard, Guo Xiang's effort to bridge "Dao generates things" and "self-generation" by means of the "nothingness" of Dao leads to a new way of thinking: in the Laozegetics of the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the two may not be opposites. Is it indisputable that Dao's work of nurturing all things and the natural generation of all things without any cause and control constitute two opposite ends of the same axis, so that the prominence of one side must be "sacrificed" to the other side as the "price"? At least in the mode of the Dao–things relation reconstructed by Guo Xiang through the concept of "supreme nothing", we find that this way of thought, which seems to be the logical one in intellectual discourse, suffers a fundamental reversal. We cannot talk about immanence here apart from transcendence, and vice versa, because the one that is omnipresent can only be transcendent (otherwise it would be limited as a special something), and the transcendent is necessarily immanent (otherwise it would be in some kind of differential relationship with beings, and therefore not really transcendent). The establishment of "nature" or "self-generation" of all things would not be detrimental to the ultimate original status of Dao, but it is precisely when "nature" and "self-generation" are not guaranteed that this original status is not achieved, because in this case Dao is already reduced to the status of a "creator", "master of things", and so on, i.e., as an agent against all things. This will undoubtedly make its transcendent character as the origin disappear. In other words, it is not the absolutely transcendent Dao that damages the self-sufficiency of things, but the "supreme being" that is misconceived as the "creator" and the "true master" and therefore not transcendent enough.

That being said, we need to respond to the possible challenge that Guo Xiang never uses the terms "creator" or "master" in a transcendental sense, and is content to deny their legitimacy in the empirical use of language. If that is the case, is it possible to imagine that Guo Xiang merely retains some formal reality of the transcendent and at the same time completely deprives it of its function as the origin? In short, is the transcendent nature of Dao separable from its generative function? This separation does not correspond to Guo Xiang's thought. When he tries to define the connotation of the concept of Dao directly, he asserts: "All things go by it. Therefore, we tentatively name it by the term 'Dao' 物所由而行，故假名之曰道 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, 517, see (Zhuangzi 1998)). As discussed in Section 3 of this paper, although Wang Bi argues that the indeterminate transcendent cannot be grasped by determinate language in its essence, he nevertheless approves of our describing it as "Dao" through its foundational role for all things as a matter of expediency. In this sense, "Dao" can be regarded as a name created for expediency, or a "false name" (假名, *jiā míng*). Guo Xiang's practice of prescribing Dao "by which (or what)" is obviously a direct continuation of the practice of Wang Bi and other earlier Daoists, in which the name "Dao" is given only because it is a representation of a certain groundness, indicating the metaphysical dependence of all things on Dao. In this regard, the transcendence of Dao is not independent of its generative function, but rather derives only from further reflection and inference based on its generator status, and is thus dependent on this basic function, and Guo Xiang's definition continues this line of thought.

Thus, although Guo Xiang strictly confines the names "creator" and "master" to the empirical world and excludes them—as mentioned earlier, his motive should be understood as a caution against the overly substantialized, object-oriented connotations implied by these terms—he does not fundamentally dismantle the original role of the transcendent in the Daoist tradition. Accordingly, when Guo Xiang declares that "Dao does not block that by which they are as they are, so that all things go by themselves" 道不塞其所由，則萬物自得其行矣 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 233, see (Zhuangzi 1998)), he is almost literally repeating the expression in Wang Bi's commentary on *Laozi*: "Dao does not block their origins, so that all things are self-generated, and what merit has Dao?" 不塞其源，則物自生，何功之有? (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 24, see (Wang 1980)). While the transcendent causality of Dao is evidenced by and implemented through the negation of all empirical

causality, it does not mean that the former is superfluous and useless, because in the idea of constructing Dao-thing structure, the establishment of the latter always depends on the former: if Dao is not established as the absolute transcendent from its original status, thus depriving all concrete beings of the right to be the ultimate master of all things, the self-generation of all things as a result of this theory becomes impossible. That is, the empirical spontaneity of beings cannot be established by itself, but only paradoxically through a transcendent “generator”. When Wang Jiansong claims that Guo Xiang regards the world itself as the Absolute through the multiplicity of beings and transformations (Wang 2008), he seems to ignore the first half of the complete reasoning scattered in Guo Xiang’s commentaries, which are unstressed yet indispensable, and directly concludes that the self-generation thesis is self-sufficient.

Such a transcendence, established through the concept of “nothing”, based on a fundamental distinction between the metaphysical and the empirical levels, does not constitute any contradiction with the “small Daos” of Wang Bi in the sense of Ziporyn, which function specifically in individual things, or with the “li” of Guo Xiang as a total recognition of the actual, given state of the Self of beings (Ziporyn 2010), but only gives the premise from which the ontological commitments behind this immanence can be deduced, and thus completes it. As mentioned earlier, especially for Guo Xiang, each thing is absolutely unique at each moment; it is just so, without any possibility of being asked “why”, and this is where li lies, but the fact that the Self is recognized to such a radical extent depends precisely on the “existing without things” of Dao, which refuses to be reduced to some objective external cause or purpose, and thus does not constitute any destruction of the self-sufficiency and completeness of things as they are. From this point of view, if Ziporyn’s claimed further polarization of the emphasis on the particularity of things from Wang Bi to Guo Xiang (for whom the so-called “principle” is so specific that it ceases to be a principle at all and is nothing more than the whole fact of the existence and transformation of things) is valid, if this is true, then the basis for the possibility of such a transformation may lie precisely in the fact that the tendency to understand the “generating without generating” of Dao as the role of some actual “principle” is further weakened by the increased transcendence of the concept of Dao as “supreme nothing”.

Thus, it can be said that the “real meaning” of the theme “Dao generates things” can only be revealed with the complement of “the self-generation of things”, without being reduced to a controller as an entity. Conversely, “the self-generation of things” can only be accepted as the logical conclusion and theoretical interest of “Dao generates things”, so that it does not fall for limiting the gaze within the empirical world and denying the ultimate cause. In Guo Xiang’s theory—even in the preparatory form of this doctrine by Wang Bi and *Laoshi*—as two conclusions derived from the absolute transcendence of Dao, there is no absolute distinction between Dao and the nature of things. “On the contrary, the two seemingly contradictory ends form an inseparable twist in the mutual fulfillment and realization of each other, which can be said to “have the same origin with different names” (同出而異名): it is when the absolute transcendence of Dao is pushed to its extreme that the absolute spontaneity of all things can be released to its extreme, and vice versa.

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Notes

- ¹ When speaking of “causality” here, it is certainly not necessary to limit its use to a specific Aristotelian taxonomic context, but rather it is a general expression of the dependence of all things on their ground, Dao, which is the logical condition for the existence and transformation of the former, as laid down in Daoist metaphysics.
- ² Other scholars have not failed to reflect on the earlier paradigm. Ziporyn, for example, has criticized the interpretation by Tang Yijie and others that attributes the existence of things to some ground of being within things, arguing that this essence-existence distinction does not apply in Guo Xiang’s case (Ziporyn 2010). However, when he analyzes Guo Xiang’s theory of causality and the reflection on the creator based on it in another work, his distinction between the different meanings of “Nothing” in the

context of Wang Bi and Guo Xiang still seems to follow the usual practice of the predecessors: “As for anything other than such being, the completely indeterminate Non-Being of Wang Bi, this is for Guo truly nothing, a cipher that can do nothing.” (Ziporyn 2003). It is still possible to identify the transformation of the meaning of “nothing” here: the term “nothing” in Wang Bi’s sense is withdrawn from its status as the ultimate cause as the creator in Guo Xiang. In a world constituted by the self-generation and self-transformation of finite entities, the formless origin is inevitably dissolved into a purely impotent nothing. This also influences his comments on the relationship of succession between Guo Xiang and Xiang Xiu, where a certain remnant of the creator that still remains in the latter is made clear in the former (Ziporyn 2003).

- 3 As the author has illustrated, the distinction between Buddhism and Daoism on the basis of their basic positions, *nidāna* (因緣) and “nature”, originated in Zhen Luan’s (甄鸞) *Laughing at Daoism* (笑道論). The Mahayana view of emptiness asserts that all false “existences” arise from the aggregation and separation of *nidāna*, denying on the one hand the existence of beings that are not dependent on any conditions, and on the other hand denying any nature that is innate and abiding. In this regard, Guo Xiang and his successor Cheng Xuanying (成玄英) are still indisputably subordinate to the traditional Daoist model of nature and natural self-generation, and there is a great irreconcilable tension with the Buddhist model of *nidāna* (Gao 2020).
- 4 It is worth noting that such an approach to the determination of the origin of all things, although it seems to have a certain apparent homogeneity with the “cosmological proof” of the existence of God in scholastic philosophy, i.e., both are based on a continuous tracing of the first cause, has fundamental differences in its purpose, thinking, and conclusions. In the classic formulation of Thomas Aquinas, for example, he aims to “prove” the existence of the origin in a way that is accessible to natural human reason, so that he: 1. has to resort to the Aristotelian assumption that “the chain of cause and effect has an end”, and 2. the object of proof is God as “the most perfect Being”, which, although eternal and infinite, is still grasped by human reason in the form of understanding and inference of beingness, and thus remains substantive, which also leaves room for God’s specific domination and arrangement of the world (for an overview of Aquinas’s doctrine, see (Boeder 1970). In contrast, Daoism does not, in the first place, presuppose an object to be “proved”; its reflections are based on an open inquiry into the origin of empirical things. More importantly, Daoism is not satisfied with the introduction of some self-caused being because it presupposes a real end to the chain of cause and effect, but rather denies the possibility of any being as an end, starting from the infinity of the chain. From this, the critique of the proof of God’s existence based on the possibility of “infinite regress” does not apply equally to Daoism, because the derivation of “nothing” as the origin does not assume some original being that is not open to questioning. “Nothing” is absolutely different from being, and therefore is not open to questioning in its own right, as being is. The consequence that becomes the end can only be some “non-ending end”, that is, “nothing” or “non-being”. The consequence inferred by Daoism is not the “most perfect being” at all, but something fundamentally different from all beings, which has no similarity with anything in what Aquinas calls the analogia entis and therefore cannot be grasped by human reason in the way that human reason is accustomed to grasping real objects. As we shall see in what follows, this distinction between “being” and “nothing” is not merely a conceptual game, but leads, in the further development of each, to a very different understanding of how all things go: for Daoism, the universe cannot be dominated and orchestrated by any willed subject (such a subject is determinate and thus can only be a being), and is not closed to some teleological end. It is the “nothingness” of Dao that guarantees the possibility of spontaneous generation and transformation of all things in a completely free and open manner.
- 5 This lost text was originally recorded in Li Lin’s (李霖) *Collection of Good Commentaries to Laozi* (道德真經取善集) of the Jin Dynasty, and is quoted here in accordance with the compilation by Tang Yijie in the appendix of his *Guo Xiang yu Wei Jin xuanxue* 郭象與魏晉玄學 (*Guo Xiang and the Wei-Jin Neo-Daoism*).
- 6 On this verse of *Laozi*, Wang Bi made the following commentary: “All things in the world come into being by virtue of being, and being has nothing as its root, so if one wants to make being complete, one must return to nothing”. This formulation of the origin or the ground is so vague in its wording that we cannot determine whether it states a temporal or logical relationship, or both. When scholars such as Wang Jiansong claim that the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi are “typically ontological” and Guo Xiang does not recognize “the ontological nothingness of Laozi, Zhuangzi, He, and Wang” (Wang 2008), he undoubtedly takes Wang Bi’s “nothing” as a logical rather than a spatio-temporal starting point.

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Article

Structure and Meaning in the Interpretation of the *Laozi*: Cheng Xuanying's Hermeneutic Toolkit and His Interpretation of Dao as a Compassionate Savior

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Abstract: Cheng Xuanying's *Expository Commentary to the Daode jing* presents the *Laozi* as the origin of Daoism—a Daoism which, by his time in the seventh century, included many beliefs and concepts coopted from Buddhism. The commentary is representative of *chongxuan xue* (Twofold Mystery philosophy), which is characterized by the integration of Buddhist concepts and methods into the interpretation of the *Laozi*. Taking the integration of the Buddhist concept of the bodhisattva as universal savior of limitless compassion, this paper investigates the “why” and “how” of this cooption. The question of why Cheng Xuanying wanted to read the *Daode jing* as a testimony to Laozi and Dao being a compassionate, universal savior is addressed with a contextualization of the commentary in its time and location: early Tang Chang'an. Next, the paper discusses, in detail, the hermeneutic tools Cheng Xuanying used to achieve his reading. Cheng Xuanying integrated his commentary and the original text of the *Laozi* in a complex structure, combining the *kepan* technique, interlinear interpretation, and added structuring comments, in addition to what might be termed “strategic citations”. This paper analyzes how he worked with these means to construct arguments and specific readings of the *Laozi*.

Keywords: Twofold Mystery; *chongxuan xue*; Cheng Xuanying; *kepan*; *Daode jing*; *Laozi*; Tang dynasty Daoism; universal salvation

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1. Introduction: A New Reading of the *Laozi*

The Daoist Cheng Xuanying 成玄英, who was invited in 631 by emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 627–49) to come to live in the capital of the Tang, presented an Expository Commentary to the *Daode jing* (*Daode jing yishu* 道德經義疏) to emperor Taizong in 637 CE.¹

This commentary presents the *Laozi* 老子 as the origin of Daoism—of the ancient philosophy as much as of the contemporary Daoism of the seventh century, with all its comparatively recently integrated beliefs and concepts, many of which were coopted from Buddhism. The commentary is a prime example of *chongxuan xue* 重玄學 (Twofold Mystery philosophy), typical for early Tang dynasty Daoist texts. Twofold Mystery philosophy's most salient feature is the integration of Buddhist concepts and methods into the interpretation of the *Laozi*. This paper takes the cooption of the bodhisattva concept, the conception of a universal, compassionate savior, as an example to analyze the “why” and “how” of this cooption.

Cheng Xuanying integrated his commentary and the original text of the *Laozi* in a complex structure, combining the *kepan* 科判 technique, known primarily from Buddhist exegesis, with detailed, word-by-word interpretation, and added structural comments, in addition to what might be termed “strategic citations”. He, thus, operated a very sophisticated hermeneutical toolkit, and this paper endeavors to show how he worked with these means to construct arguments and specific readings of the *Laozi*.

To begin, a juxtaposition of Cheng Xuanying's interpretation of the term “mother” in the first chapter of the *Daode jing* with that of two prominent precursors, Heshang

gong 河上公 (second century CE) and Wang Bi 王弼 (226–49), illustrates the novelty of his interpretation of the *Daode jing*:

The second verse of the first chapter of the *Daode jing* says:

無名天地之始 without name, the beginning of heaven and earth,
有名萬物之母 having a name, the mother of the myriad things/beings.

The Heshang gong commentary reads the sentence in the light of cosmogenesis, interpreting the term “mother” as a metaphor for the generating aspect of *qi*, which mediates between the formlessness of Dao (the Way) and the materiality of the things or beings.

“The nameless” refers to ‘the Way.’ The Way is formless and therefore unnamable. “The beginning of Heaven and Earth” means that the Way emits *qi* and unfolds transformations from its empty void. It is the root beginning of Heaven and Earth. “The named” refers to ‘Heaven and Earth.’ Heaven and Earth have form and position, yin and yang, soft and hard. Thus, they are named. “The mother of the myriad beings” means that the *qi* contained within Heaven and Earth generates the myriad beings and helps them grow to maturity like a mother raising her young”. (Tadd 2013, pp. 448–49, Wang 1993, p. 2)

The celebrated Xuanxue scholar Wang Bi read the sentence as an epistemological explanation of the ontological nature of Dao as the ineffable origin and as that which generates all being. Explaining the necessity for Dao to be ‘no-thing’ as a precondition to be able to generate all things, he interpreted the term “mother” as a description of the generative aspect of Dao:

Generally speaking, Entity all begins in negativity [*wu*]. That is why it [the Way] will be at a time when there are neither shapes nor names, the beginning of the ten thousand kinds of entities.² [And]³ when it comes to a time when there are shapes and names, that which [according to *Laozi* 51.3] ‘lets the ten thousand kinds of entities grow, and nurtures them, specifies them, and completes them’; [in short], it will be their mother. This means the Way begins and completes the ten thousand kinds of entities by means of its featurelessness and namelessness. That the ten thousand entities are begun by it [the Way] and completed by it [the Way] but that they do not know that through which these [two, their beginning and completion] come to be as they are [its aspect of being] Dark and Dark again. (Wagner 2003, p. 121)

Cheng Xuanying (seventh century) did not dwell on the generative aspects implied in the term “mother” in the light of the cosmogonic function or ontological nature of Dao. Instead, he read the sentence in the light of soteriological concerns, as an explanation of how the sage (Laozi) explains the nameless origin in order to save the beings by helping them to return to this origin. The term “mother” becomes, here the epitome of compassion.

“The Dao of Twofold Mystery has its origin in the nameless. From the origin, it descends to the [manifest] traces. This is how the names arise. Therefore, when the sage establishes ‘that which has a name’ on the basis of ‘that which is without name,’ and when he relies on ‘that which has a name’ to demonstrate ‘that which is without name,’ he just wishes to raise the sentient beings like [his own] children, and see to it that they return to the origin. Compassionate and nourishing—it is like motherhood”. (Assandri 2021a, p. 41; cf. Meng 2001, p. 376; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 287c)

This reading of the first chapter of the *Daode jing* sets the tone for an interpretation, where compassion for all beings becomes one of the major characteristics of the Dao and the sage. Rather than generating the beings—although this theme is not lost to Cheng Xuanying either—they want to save them.

This constitutes a noteworthy shift of meaning in the interpretation of the *Daode jing*, and this paper will inquire into the “why” and “how” of this shift with a discussion of

context and an analysis of literary and rhetorical devices and their effects on the formation of arguments.

2. Context: Emperors, Gods, and Religious Teachings in Seventh-Century Chang'an

2.1. Laozi and the Tang Rulers

The first emperor of the Tang dynasty, Gaozu 高祖 (r. 618–26), claimed Laozi, whose family name was said to be Li 李, like that of the ruling family of the Tang, was the imperial ancestor.⁴ Having Laozi as ancestor-cum-protection-deity “had the effect of merging the imperial ancestral cult with popular Laozi worship” (Verellen 2019, p. 219), and, thus, Daoism gained much importance in the standing of the three teachings at court. Gaozu’s son and successor, emperor Taizong, confirmed the promotion of Daoism as the first teaching of the Tang and the myth of his family’s descent from Laozi in an edict in 637.⁵

Buddhists in the capital attacked this edict immediately, arguing that Laozi had actually not founded any schools or raised disciples, and contemporary Tang Daoism had nothing to do with Laozi but adhered to teachings developed much later, after the Han and during the Jin dynasty.⁶ While the protests were of no avail, the episode underscores the lively competition between Buddhists and Daoists in the Tang capital, which centered on Laozi, author of the *Daode jing*, deity of Daoism, and claimed ancestor of the Tang emperors.

2.2. Yuanshi Tianzun and Early Medieval Daoism in Chang'an

The Buddhists claiming contemporary Daoism had little to do with Laozi because it promoted teachings that arose much later had reasons for their claim. Even the secular scholars who authored the bibliographic treatise of the official history of the Sui dynasty⁷ introduced their treatise on Daoism with the statement that Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊, the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Commencement, is the main deity of Daoism. Taishang Laojun 太上老君, the deified Laozi, appears only among a group of secondary deities. The *Daode jing* is not mentioned as a sacred scripture of Daoism but is listed in chapter 33 as one of the texts of the philosophical Masters (*zi* 子).⁸

The Daoist scriptures say that there is the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Commencement (Yuanshi Tianzun), who was born before the Great Beginning (*Taiyuan* 太元), endowed with the *qi* of the self-so, indifferent to fame and gain, silent and still, dignified and profoundly remote,⁹ nobody knows his limits. What [the scriptures] say about the destruction of Heaven and Earth when numerous kalpa cycles finish is overall the same as what the Buddhist scriptures say. They assume that the substance/body of the Heavenly Worthy [of Primordial Commencement] exists forever and does not perish. Every time when Heaven and Earth begin anew, either above Jade Capitol, or in the fields of Qionsang 窮桑 [the son of the Yellow emperor, also called Shaohao 少昊], [the Heavenly Worthy] transmits the secret Dao and this is called the saving of humanity at the beginning of a kalpa. Since the beginnings of kalpas were more than one, there are the year designations of Yankang, Chiming, Longhan and Kaihuang. Between these kalpas pass 41 billion (*yi* 億) years.

Those who are saved are all the highest ranks of the transcendents (immortals) of all heavens, there is Taishang Laojun (太上老君), Taishang Zhangren (太上丈人), Tianzhen Huangren (天真皇人), the emperors of the five Heavens (五方天帝) and all the immortal officials (仙官), in turns they all receive [the secret Dao]. People from this world have no part in this.

The Scriptures which [Yuanshi Tianzun] preaches are also endowed with the *qi* of the Original One, they exist naturally so, they are not created, and like the Heavenly Worthy [of Primordial Commencement] they exist eternally and do not perish. [...] When heaven and earth are not [in danger of] destruction, [these scriptures] are concealed and not transmitted. When a kalpa cycle begins, these scripts become by themselves visible. All together there are eight characters, they

all fully contain the profundity of the substance of Dao; these are called Heavenly Writ. Each character is one *zhang* (ca. 3 m.) square, shimmering in all directions, brilliant and radiating, stunning the mind and dazzling the eyes [. . .].¹⁰

The emphasis on Yuanshi Tianzun as the highest deity of Daoism and sacred scriptures appearing in the sky points to the southern Sandong 三洞¹¹ Daoism, specifically, to the Lingbao 靈寶 scriptures. This secular text from early Tang Chang'an underscores that Daoism in the capital Chang'an proposed a version of "integrated Daoism" that strongly relied on texts and practices from the southern Sandong tradition rather than on texts and practices related to Laozi.

The southern Jiangnan area was a hotbed of formation, interaction, and complex developments of Daoism and Buddhism during the time of the divided empire.¹² As of the early fourth century, different traditions of Daoism, including local southern Daoist traditions and Heavenly Masters who had arrived there only recently, and Buddhism became popular with the elites active at the courts at Nanjing. The co-existence of these religious groups in the region was characterized by complex social, political, and religious competition, which eventually led to the appearance of two important Daoist scriptural corpora, the Shangqing 上清 scriptures (364–70 CE) and the Lingbao 靈寶 scriptures (ca. 400 CE).¹³

Both the Shangqing and Lingbao scriptures appeared as "newly revealed" scriptures and, as such, needed a position in the complex field of existing religious scriptures and traditions. It seems that the main legitimation of the new texts rested on their claims of having originated from higher heavens and correspondingly higher deities than those previously known to the world.¹⁴ These new higher deities, most conspicuously the highest deity of the Lingbao scriptures, Yuanshi Tianzun, soon outranked Laozi.

As of the fifth century, Daoist masters began to integrate the different practices and scriptures of the Jiangnan area into what came to be called Sandong Daoism. The Lingbao scriptures and rituals remained of utmost importance in this integration; "the Great Liturgy of Lingbao codified by Lu Xiujing became the Daoist ritual standard for the Tang and beyond" (Verellen 2019, p. 223).

2.3. Laozi and Daoist Teachings of Compassion and Universal Salvation

The development of Daoism in the early medieval period went hand in hand with intensifying competition with Buddhism; the interaction comprised of both polemics and coptions.¹⁵ Mahayana Buddhist concepts of universal salvation and the bodhisattva as a compassionate savior seem to have been among the most attractive concepts; in fact, the Daoist Lingbao scriptures incorporate the ideal of the compassionate bodhisattva and the concept of universal salvation.¹⁶ The results were so successful that the importance of the Lingbao scriptures soon eclipsed that of other Daoist traditions and scriptures (Bokenkamp 1983, p. 448).

The bodhisattva concept and the ideal of universal salvation and limitless compassion were not limited to Buddhist and Daoist soteriological discourses; they also entered political discourse. Thus, emperor Wu of the Liang 梁武帝 (r. 502–49) used the bodhisattva concept very successfully to boost his own legitimacy and prestige (Janousch 1999, 2016).

The first chapter of the popular Daoist *Benji jing* 本際經, written in the early seventh century in Chang'an, sees the deity Yuanshi Tianzun preaching universal salvation and compassion as a means for the emperor to rule and bring peace and prosperity to the state.¹⁷

Thus, we have many indications that Daoism in Chang'an in the early seventh century proposed teachings, ritual practices, and even a main deity, which originated in the southern Sandong tradition, and was, as the secular and Buddhist contemporaries of Cheng Xuanying rightly observed, not really associated with Laozi. Laozi was celebrated as the author of the *Daode jing* but not as the revealing deity of the Lingbao scriptures or rituals which were so prominent in Daoist practice in the capital.

Cheng Xuanying wrote his *Expository Commentary to the Daode jing*, together with a long introductory essay (*kaiti* 開題)¹⁸, just in this period, and it seems that one of his aims was to align the Daoism of his times with the persona of Laozi and the booklet *Daode jing*.

In the following, I will look at the various hermeneutic tools and methods Cheng Xuanying employed to integrate Daoism as practiced in Chang'an at his time into the reading of the *Laozi*.

3. A Hermeneutic Toolkit

Integrating the complex mix of ideas that presented the teachings of Daoism in early-seventh-century Chang'an into the reading of the *Daode jing* was not a simple feat. The meanings that he needed to "extract" from the *Laozi* were rather new; *Laozi* interpretation in early Chang'an was hot and under scrutiny because of the presumed relation of Laozi to the emperor. Furthermore, Cheng had to reckon with well-established readings of the text such as the Heshang gong commentary or that of Wang Bi.¹⁹

To construct meaning in his *Expository Commentary*, Cheng Xuanying used not only the well-tested strategies of parsing the text and explaining words or sections, but he found new ways to add structure and coherence to the text and even, I argue, to superimpose arguments. After a concise description of each of these techniques, the last section will illustrate the functioning of the ensemble of the techniques with a close reading of chapter 40.

3.1. Structure: *Kepan* 科判 on the Level of the Scrolls

Cheng proposed to read the relatively loose collection of 81 short chapters of the *Daode jing* as a coherent text. In order to achieve this, he added structures to the text.

The *Daode jing* was traditionally divided into two scrolls with 81 short chapters called *zhang* 章.²⁰ The first scroll, comprising chapters 1–37, was called *Dao jing* 道經, the second scroll, with chapters 38–81, was called *De jing* 德經.²¹ Overall, the 81 chapters resemble a collection of wise sayings rather than a systematic exposition of philosophy.

Cheng added an extra level of subdivisions: He divided the two scrolls into three units each, with one chapter as an introduction (chapter 1 and 38, respectively), the bulk of the chapters in between (chapters 2–36 and chapters 39–80) as the middle parts, and the last chapters (chapter 37 and 81, respectively) as a conclusion. He explained this as follows:

Now I take up the first scroll with 37 chapters. It can be divided into three large sections. The first consists of one chapter; it presents the fundamental meaning of Dao. The second comprises [the following] 35 chapters; it elaborates further on the teaching of Dao. The third comprises one chapter; it summarizes the gist [of the first part of the *Daode jing*]. (Assandri 2021a, p. 36; cf. Meng 2001, p. 375; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 287a)

This [second] scripture consists of one scroll, with 44 chapters altogether. [Looking at] the larger structure of this scripture [on Virtue], the meaning is developed in three parts: The first, consisting of one chapter, correctly introduces the argument on Virtue. The second [part] consists of 42 chapters, which expand the explanation on the meaning of Virtue. The third [part] consists of one chapter, which summarizes the meaning explained before. (Assandri 2021a, p. 192; cf. Meng 2001, p. 451; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 315a)

This technique of creating divisions and subdivisions was introduced for Buddhist texts, where it is commonly called *kepan* 科判.²² It seems that the Buddhist monk Dao'an 道安 (321–85) was the first to propose a basic division of scriptures into three parts, namely, introduction (*xufen* 序分), main thesis (*zhengzongfen* 正宗分), and conclusion (*liutongfen* 流通分; literally, "dissemination") (Tang 1991, p. 550). This corresponds to the three divisions which Cheng applied to the two scrolls of the *Daode jing*.

As commentarial practice, this is substantially different from the *zhangju* 章句 method we find in the Heshang gong commentary, where the original base text is parsed in chapters and then lines and then, line by line, is commented upon.²³ With *kepan*, the parsing functions

somewhat differently: the base text is divided into paragraphs, and the paragraphs are summarized, in addition to a line-by-line explanation. We find *kepan*-style commenting practices especially often in *yishu* 義疏 commentaries by authors from the sixth to the early seventh centuries, such as the Buddhist authors Huiyuan 慧遠 (523–92), Zhiyi 智顓 (538–97), or Jizang 吉藏 (549–623).²⁴ Also, Confucian authors used this commenting style, such as, for example, Huang Kan 皇侃 (488–545) in his *Lunyu jijie yishu* 論語集解義疏,²⁵ and the great scholar and Chancellor of the Directorate of Education (*guozi jijiu* 國子祭酒) Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648) used this style in the *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 and the *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Zhang 2007, pp. 90–91).

Kepan was presumably intended as a device to facilitate understanding and explanations, and it would make sense to assume that it was intended for use in oral lectures. The form of the expository commentary (*yishu*) has its origin in oral debates and lectures, where a master explains a scripture to an audience.²⁶ It seems, therefore, plausible that *kepan* came to prominence together with lectures and the *yishu*-style commentary (Mou 1984, p. 55).

3.2. Coherence: Adding a Structuring Comment to the Chapters

Having parsed the single chapters, Cheng Xuanying named each chapter with the first two characters of the text. These seem to serve as a title, as is also visible in the Tang dynasty Dunhuang manuscript P 2517, which contains the last 20 chapters of the commentary.²⁷ Right beneath this short title, we find an added structuring comment, which explains the reason for the particular position in the sequence of chapters, relating the content to the respective preceding chapter. This technique seems to be new; I was unable to document precursors.²⁸

The added structuring commentary creates coherence between the single chapters and an explanation for their specific order. It, furthermore, allows Cheng Xuanying to pursue arguments from one chapter into the next. Lastly, these structuring comments reiterate the tripartite division of each scroll, thus, reaffirming the structure of the scrolls as introduction, main thesis, and conclusion.

Chapter 1 begins with the structuring comment:

The chapter “The Dao that Can Be Spoken of as Dao” is the first large section, it presents the fundamental meaning of *Dao*. (Assandri 2021a, p. 36; cf. Meng 2001, p. 375; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 287a)

Chapter 2 then continues:

The chapter “All Under Heaven Know” is the first chapter of the second large section, it elaborates further on the teaching of *Dao*.

The reason why this chapter follows the preceding chapter is that the preceding chapter has explained that the two contemplations of being and nonbeing are not the same with regard to coarseness and subtlety. Therefore, this chapter follows, explaining the potential of non-action, and the harm of action. (Assandri 2021a, p. 45; Meng 2001, p. 378; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 288a-b)²⁹

Chapter 37, the last chapter of the first scroll, has:

The chapter “Dao is Forever Without Intentional Action” is the third part [of the *Daojing*, the Classic of Dao], it correctly explains the conclusion. (Assandri 2021a, p. 189; cf. Meng 2001, p. 449; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 314b)

Chapter 38, the first chapter of the second scroll, begins again with the structuring comment:

The chapter on “Superior Virtue” is the first large section; it correctly presents the argument on Virtue. (Assandri 2021a, p. 193; cf. Meng 2001, p. 451; Xiong and Chen 2011, 315a)

Chapter 39 continues to introduce the main section of scroll two:

The chapter “Formerly” is the first chapter of the second large section; it correctly explains the meaning of Virtue. (Assandri 2021a, p. 200; cf. Meng 2001, p. 454; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 316b)

Chapter 40, the second chapter of the main section of the second scroll, follows up:

The chapter “Returning” follows the preceding one because the preceding chapter correctly explained that the person who has obtained the One uses Dao modestly and unassumingly. This is why this chapter follows, because it explains how this person comes from the origin and descends to the [manifest] traces, in order to sympathetically respond to the needs of the beings. (Assandri 2021a, p. 206; cfl. Meng 2001, p. 458; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 317b)

Chapter 81, as the last chapter, then closes:

The chapter “Trustworthy Words” is the third major section [of the second part of the *Daode jing*]; it concludes the preceding teaching. (Assandri 2021a, p. 363; cf. Meng 2001, p. 534; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 345c)

The structuring comments underscore the tripartite division Cheng established for the two scrolls, making a text that proposes a coherent discussion on a “formal level”, with an introduction, a main part containing the bulk of the arguments, and a conclusion out of two scrolls with a seemingly random collection of 38 and 44 short chapters. However, superimposing such a formal structure remains an empty technicality if it does not find a comprehensible and plausible correspondence in the actual arguments of the text thus structured. Cheng Xuanying achieved this correspondence by applying the *kepan* technique on the level of the single, short chapters.

3.3. Argument: *Kepan* on the Level of the Single Chapters

On the level of the single chapters, Cheng Xuanying applied the technique of *kepan* to divide the chapters into separate sub-sections he called *duan* 段.³⁰ He explicitly declared, in every chapter, right after the structuring comment, the number of sub-sections into which he divided the text and what the main arguments of the sub-sections are. Before each sub-section, he added a synopsis of the argument of the individual sub-section.³¹ Only after this synopsis does the base text and Cheng Xuanying’s interpretative, interlinear comments follow, line by line.

Thus, before the reader gets to see the first line of the base text, he has already read a structuring comment which relates the chapter to the previous one and, thus, explains the reason for the particular position of the chapter in the overall structure of the book. He also has read an outline of the arguments the chapter will propose in form of the synopses of the short sub-sections. In the Dunhuang manuscript P 2517 (Figure 1), these parts are in regular-sized characters, just like the cited base text. Only the interlinear commentary to the single lines is in smaller-sized characters.

The parsing of the inherently very short chapters of the *Daode jing* into yet smaller sub-units might seem an unusual strategy; *kepan*, as used by Buddhist commentators, rather seems to serve to create subdivisions in texts that were too long and, therefore, hard to grasp. The chapters of the *Daode jing*, instead, are extremely short and succinct and, thus, do not naturally invite further subdivisions. However, dividing the chapters into shorter sub-sections allowed Cheng Xuanying to isolate different arguments in the text. He presents these arguments in his synopsis, then cites the base text of the original *Daode jing* lines and explains in his interlinear commentary how to read the *Daode jing* base text in line with the argument outlined in the synopsis. Repeating the synopses twice in each chapter, first in the beginning and then in the apposite position before the sub-section, adds much strength to the arguments formulated in the synopses.

Wang Bi read this chapter as an instruction for the sage on how to govern (cf. Lynn 1999, p. 130; Wagner 2003, p. 257). Heshang gong read it as a discussion of the life-giving powers of Dao (cf. Tadd 2013, pp. 513–14; Wang 1993, 161–62). Cheng Xuanying read it as a discussion of the soteriological activities of the sage who has obtained Dao (see Meng 2001, p. 458; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 317b-c; Yan 1983, pp. 461–62).

Cheng begins, like in all other chapters, with the structuring commentary:

Chapter 40: “Returning”

40.0 The chapter “Returning” follows the preceding one, because the previous chapter correctly explained that the person who has obtained the One uses Dao modestly and unassumingly. This is why this chapter follows, because it explains how this person comes from the origin and descends to the [manifest] traces, in order to sympathetically respond to the needs of the beings. (Assandri 2021a, p. 206)

This structuring commentary relates the chapter explicitly to the foregoing chapter, offering a reason why the two chapters need to follow upon another. Furthermore, there is a short summary of the content of the chapter: The person (*ren* 人 might here refer to the adept or the sage) has reached Dao (the origin) and now descends to become a manifest trace³⁴ (as Lord Lao or a sage). This person, who has obtained Dao, returns to live in the world in response to the needs of the beings. In short, the chapter is about a bodhisattva-like savior.

Next, Cheng Xuanying introduces the number of subdivisions and presents the synopses of the arguments of the subdivisions:

Getting into this chapter, we can divide the meaning into three parts: The first explains that the sage who returns becomes the same as a common person [because] he compassionately wants to save the beings. The second part explains that even if the traces of the teaching have many different doctrines, nothing is superior to being soft and weak. The third part explains how the two primal forces and the ten thousand images are generated by Dao. (Assandri 2021a, p. 206)

The synopsis of the first sub-section states again, clearly, that the sage wants to compassionately save the beings, while that of the second sub-section speaks about the sage’s teachings. Only the last sub-section relates to the theme of generation of the beings, which seems so prominent in the base text of the *Daode jing*.

After this long preamble, the commentary of the base text begins: Cheng introduces each sub-section, which, in this case, consists of a few words of the original text, with the synopsis. The synopsis, thus, serves here as a header presenting the main argument. Then follows the line from the base text with Cheng Xuanying’s interlinear commentary defining key terms and explaining the meaning of the line.

40.1. The first part explains that the sage who returns becomes the same as a common person [because] he compassionately wants to save the beings.

Laozi Base Text: 40.1. A. Returning is the movement of Dao. 反者道之動。

*Interlinear commentary: ‘Returning’ (fan 反) means coming back. ‘Movement’ (dong 動) means compassion.³⁵ The sage who has attained Dao goes even beyond the three highest heavenly spheres.³⁶ But because he is moved by compassion and wants to save the beings, he returns to enter the Three [Clarities and the Grand] Veil-[Heaven],³⁷ and [then] mixes his [manifest] traces into [the world of] being. He preaches according to the opportunities and manifests [his traces] in response [to the needs of the beings.] This is why the first part of the *Daode jing* says: “[Going] far means returning”³⁸. (Assandri 2021a, p. 206)*

The repetition of the synopsis with the theme of the compassionate savior is set before the short sentence of the *Daode jing* base text. The commentary then explains how to read the base text in order to reach the meaning proposed in the synopses in concrete detail; the subject of the sentence is the sage. He has compassion and wants to save the beings.

The sage is related, furthermore, to the highest heavens described in the Lingbao scriptures. The final citation ties this—that is, Cheng Xuanying’s—interpretation back to another passage from the *Daode jing*.

If we compare this to the Heshang gong and Wang Bi readings of the passage, it is certainly an innovative interpretation. If we consider the background of the challenges of integrating the Sandong Daoism with Laozi, we can admit that Cheng successfully tied the ideal of a bodhisattva-like, compassionate savior and the highest heavens of the Sandong Daoist cosmology in with the text of the *Daode jing*.

40.2. The second part explains that even if the traces of the teaching have many different doctrines, nothing is superior to the soft and weak.

Laozi base text: 40.2.A. Weakness is the function of Dao. 弱者道之用。

Interlinear commentary: Responding to the capabilities [of the beings], he sets up the teaching. Looking up [to what he sets up], there are many doctrines. If we wish to discuss them appropriately, then there is nothing better than being soft and weak. This is why he takes this being soft and weak as the beginning of his transformative work. (Assandri 2021a, p. 207)

Again, the synopsis at the head of the sub-section sets the tone for a specific reading, here, the interpretation of the term *yong* (to use, function) as the teaching and beginning of the transformative work of the sage. It remains unclear here if Dao refers to the manifest divinity (“weakness is the function which Dao [manifest as Lord Lao employs as teaching]”) or to the “way” in the sense of a course of training (“weakness is what is the function of the way [of studying Daoism]”). Both versions are grammatically plausible.

40.3. The third part explains how the two primal forces and the ten thousand images are generated by Dao.

Laozi base text: 40.3.A. All things in the world are generated from being; being is generated from non-being. 天下之物生於有，有生於無。

Interlinear commentary: ‘Being’ (*you* 有) is the responding Dao. It is that which is called the *qi* of the original One. The marvelous origin of the original One is what is called the place of dark stillness. It means that Heaven, Earth, and the ten thousand things are all generated from the responding Dao as a thing that exists. It is precisely so that this responding Dao arises from the marvelous origin. Having its beginning in the marvelous origin, it is precisely ultimate non-being. (Assandri 2021a, p. 207)

The last section elaborates on the theme of generating the beings in terms that are much closer to the Heshang gong or Wang Bi commentaries. Thus, it seems that, while Cheng Xuanying introduced, in the first two sub-sections, novel arguments regarding compassion and the ideal of the bodhisattva-like sage, he returns here, in the last part, to the more traditional reading of the sentence in as much as he discusses the relation of Dao, being, and non-being.

He continues the argument of the last sub-section of chapter 40 in the structuring comment of the following chapter, creating, thus, a concrete link between the two successive chapters:

Chapter 41: “The Person of Highest Capacities”

41.0 The chapter “The Person of Highest Capacities” follows the previous chapter, because the preceding chapter explained that the responding Dao is empty and dark, its origin and traces are both marvelous. Therefore this chapter now follows and explains that the man of higher capacities can realize [the Dao], but it is not something that the men of inferior capacities can hear [and understand]. (Assandri 2021a, p. 208)

In this way, the structuring commentary links the separate chapters by connecting the respectively last argument of each chapter to the short summary of the main argument

of the following chapter. The effect of this is an impression of “chained or connected arguments” and, with that, a coherent text.

Of course, the connections are, at times, tenuous and seem forced; however, the attempt to turn the 81 short chapters into a coherent and cohesive exposition is noteworthy.

5. Conclusions: How the Dao Got Compassion

What does Cheng Xuanying actually achieve with his complex structuring of the commentary? Cheng’s technique was certainly inspired by the Buddhist *kepan* system, which helped Buddhist preachers or translators to structure large texts into smaller units. However, a close reading of the commentary reveals that Cheng, far from just blindly copying a formal technique, used the subdivisions and their synopses to construct new arguments which he superimposed on the text.

The original text of chapter 40 of the *Daode jing* reads:

Returning is the movement of Dao. Weakness is the function of the Dao. All the things in the world are generated from being, being is generated from nonbeing.

The argument developed in the subdivisions and their synopses reads:

The sage, who has obtained Dao, returns to descend into the world, manifesting himself³⁹ in order to save the beings.

Cheng Xuanying’s interlinear commentary then explains how to read the line of the original text in order to arrive at the argument established by the synopsis of the subdivision. This argument (the synopsis) is repeated twice, once in the chapter introduction and once directly before the commented passage, setting, thus, a kind of “talking point”. In our case of chapter 40, this interpretative strategy also involves new definitions of key terms, such as, here, the explanation that “return” refers to the “return of the sage from the Heavens”, and “movement” refers to “compassion”.

The structural commentary picks up the (redefined) key terms from the subdivision summaries to carry the arguments into the next chapter.

With this technique, Cheng Xuanying constructed coherent lines of arguments within chapters and from one chapter to the next, arguments which obviously were of interest to him—such as the sage and his compassionate saving activities. At the same time, he tied these arguments, which, in many cases, introduce novel notions and concepts, into the text of the *Daode jing*. Thus, he connected Laozi, divine manifestation of Dao, ancestor of the Tang ruling family, and author of the *Daode jing*, firmly to concepts which were previously promoted in Daoism mainly on the base of the Sandong scriptures, such as that of the ideal of a compassionate, universal savior.

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Abbreviations

DZ	Zhengtong Daozang 正統道藏.
T	Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō 大正新修大藏經.
ZD	Zhonghua daozaang 中華道藏.

Notes

- ¹ For the dating of Cheng Xuanying's commentary see Qiang (2002, p. 322).
- ² See Wagner (2003, p. 119) for the critical reconstruction of the text. Note that our commonly received version reads heaven and earth instead of ten thousand kinds of entities here.
- ³ Modified, FA. Wagner presents his translation in the parallel style format, which adds visual clarity, but is hard to reproduce.
- ⁴ It seems that Tang Gaozu, when campaigning against the Sui dynasty, found support with Daoists from the Louguan 樓觀 temple, where Laozi was revered because, according to tradition, he had written the *Daode jing* there. Cf. Benn (1977, pp. 24–32) about Louguan and the rise to power of Gaozu. Furthermore, there was a report of an epiphany of God Laojun 老君, the deified Laozi. He was said to have appeared to a commoner on Mount Yangjiao 羊角, where he declared that the Li 李 family, rulers of the Tang dynasty, were his descendants. Cf. Assandri (2009, p. 24) for details on this report.
- ⁵ See his “Ling Daoshi zai Seng qian zhao” 令道士在僧前詔, *Quan Tang Wen*, 6, 26a, which was promulgated in 637. Cf. also Lewis (2009, p. 208).
- ⁶ A report of the Buddhist protests is contained in Daoxuan's *Ji gu jin Fo Dao lunheng*, T 2104, 3, 382c–383a: The Buddhist Zhishi 智實 presented a memorial to the throne which said, among other things: “Today's Daoists do not revere [Laozi's] teachings, the clothes and headdresses they wear, furthermore, are leftovers from the Yellow Turban [rebels of Han dynasty], they are really not Laozi's descendants. They practice the filthy methods of the three Zhangs [i.e., the early leaders of the Heavenly Master sect], and reject the wondrous gate of the 5000 words [i.e., the *Daode jing*]” 今之道士不遵其法。所著冠服並是黃巾之餘。本非老君之裔。行三張之穢術。棄五千之妙門 (T 2104, 3, 382c27–383a01).
- ⁷ The authors of the treatise worked 641–656 under the supervision of Zhangsun Wuji 長孫無忌 (594–659) in Chang'an.
- ⁸ *Suishu* 33, Ershiwushi vol. 5, 3372/124a-b.
- ⁹ The Chinese expression *chongxu ningyuan* 沖虛凝遠 is concise; I have expanded the translation to include more of the possible associations the two compound terms *chongxu* and *ningyuan* contain.
- ¹⁰ *Sui shu* 35, Ershiwu shi, vol. 5, 3379/131c. See Reiter (1996, p. 291ff) for a paraphrase of the complete text and Wu (2019, p. 296) and Bumbacher (1995, pp. 139–40) for translations of excerpts of the treatise.
- ¹¹ This designation derives from the early attempts of systematizing the scriptural heritage of the south into three caverns (*dong* 洞), the Dongshen 洞神, which contained the Writ of the Three Sovereigns and related texts, the Dongxuan 洞玄, which contained the Lingbao texts, and the Dongzhen 洞真, which contained mainly Shangqing texts. See Ōfuchi (1979, pp. 253–68), Steavu (2019, p. 121ff).
- ¹² The early medieval development of Daoism from diverse, oftentimes rather unrelated groups based on practices or on specific, usually secret, texts is under study, and we do not have a “conclusive” narrative. See Strickmann (1977); Robinet (1984); Bokenkamp (1983); Kobayashi (1990); Sunayama (1990); Pregadio (2006); Assandri (2008, 2009); Raz (2012); Kleemann (2016); Steavu (2019); Verellen (2019) for diverse accounts.
- ¹³ See Strickmann (1977); Bokenkamp (1983); Steavu (2019) for discussions of the complex developments in Jiangnan Daoism and the role of these scriptural corpora therein.
- ¹⁴ See Bokenkamp (1997, p. 382). Changes in the cosmologies, such as the addition of layers of heavens, might have been influenced by Buddhist conceptions of the cosmos (cf. Zürcher 1980, p. 121f).
- ¹⁵ See Kohn (1995); Mollier (2008); Raz (2017).
- ¹⁶ See Robinet (1991, p. 155) and Verellen (2019, pp. 124 and 167).
- ¹⁷ We can gauge the popularity of this text from the fact that almost a quarter of all Daoist manuscripts found in the Dunhuang cache were part of this text (Assandri 2009, p. 57). In most of the scripture, Yuanshi Tianzun is the main deity; for a discussion of the appearance of Laozi in this text, see Assandri (2008).
- ¹⁸ *Daode jing xujue kaiti yishu*. See Assandri (2021a, 2021b) for translations.
- ¹⁹ The second emperor of the Tang, Taizong, included Wang Bi among the 21 ‘sages and teachers of ancient times’, who were honored in the imperial university (*Jiu Tang shu*, 189, pp. 595/4071a); thus, scholars in Chang'an paid renewed attention to Wang Bi's reading of the *Daode jing* (Wagner 2003, pp. 41–43).
- ²⁰ For a discussion of how and when the 81 chapters were established, see Ding (2017).
- ²¹ This order exists at least in the Wang Bi and Heshang gong versions of the text, as well as in the Tang dynasty 5000-word manuscript (*Zhonghua Daozang*, vol. 9, no. 3). In the earlier Mawangdui manuscripts, we do not find the division in *zhang* but only a division in two scrolls, with the order of the scrolls reversed. Inside the scrolls, even though we do not find the *zhang* divisions, the chapters' order is only slightly different from the received versions. Cf. Csikszentmihalyi and Ivanhoe (1999, p. 6). The Beida Manuscript of the Laozi has only 77 *zhang* instead of the 81 *zhang* of the received Wang Bi and Heshang gong editions, cf. Ding (2017, p. 171f).
- ²² The terminology for the procedure varies in Buddhist texts, see Jin (2008, p. 7) and Zhang (2007, p. 82) for a list of the various terms.

- 23 Cf. Tadd (2013, p. 6) for a description of the Heshang gong commentary's *zhangju* method. Tadd *ibid.* notes that some scholars—he cites Robinet (1977) here—maintain that Heshang gong might have created the divisions in 81 chapters.
- 24 See Jin (2008, p. 61) for concrete examples.
- 25 About this commentary, see Makeham (2003, pp. 79–85, 391–94) and Führer (2013). Makeham (2003, p. 391) points out that Huang Kan opens passages with 'summary commentaries'.
- 26 See Zhang (2007, p. 85), Tang (1991, p. 549f), Mou (1984, pp. 2–5, 12f); cf. Makeham (2003, p. 87f), Führer (2013).
- 27 This use of the first two characters of each chapter as a title is different from the headers we find in the Heshang gong commentary in the Daozang (DZ 682) or Wang (1993) edition.
- 28 There is a vague semblance with the Xugua 序卦 commentary of the *Book of Changes*; however, the resemblance is not strong, and there do not seem to be shared technical terms.
- 29 Such a passage, which explicitly constructs the reason for the specific position of the chapter in the sequence, is offered in almost all of the chapters belonging to the "middle parts" or main part of the two scrolls.
- 30 *Duan* appears in the same function in many commentaries from the Six Dynasties and Tang period, Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian. Compare Huang Kan's commentary to the *Lunyü*, which shows a vaguely comparable technique; cf. Führer (2013, pp. 311–12).
- 31 After all, Cheng Xuanying is also author of a sub-commentary to Guo Xiang's *Zhuangzi* commentary; see *Nanhua zhenjing zhushu*. Cheng (2006, p. 154) points out that Cheng Xuanying read the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* as mutually supporting each other, citing the texts respectively very frequently in his commentaries to both texts. Cheng interprets this as the texts verifying (*zheng* 證) each other. Such a verification by citations of course also entails the construction of a close relation of the two texts.
- 34 Note that Cheng Xuanying's conception of the term "traces" differs notably from that of Guo Xiang, as discussed in Ziporyn (2003, p. 31f). Cheng interprets trace as the manifestation of Dao embodied as a sage (cf. Assandri 2021a, p. 26f).
- 35 Compassion might be understood here as a movement of the mind, as a state that differs from the absolute stillness of the mind when it is in the state of unity with Dao.
- 36 The term *sanjing* 三境 refers, in Daoism, to the *sanqing* 三清, the Three Clarities, the highest heavens.
- 37 *Sanluo* 三羅: This term appears in the *Taishang xuanyi zhenren shuo santu wuku qinjie jing* (DZ 455, p. 10b). Following Miller (1995, p. 127), I read *sanluo* as a short form of *sanqing daluo*, the Three Clarities and the Grand Veil Heaven.
- 38 This refers to chapter 25 of the *Daode jing*.
- 39 Cheng uses the term "trace" or "manifesting a trace" (*xianji* 顯迹) in the sense of incarnating in a manifest body.

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Article

Notes on the Laozi and Yan Fu's Theory of Dao

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Abstract: In his *Notes on the Laozi*, Yan Fu constructs a new and unique theory of *Dao* that incorporates ideas from both Chinese and Western philosophies. Yan's *Dao* is a unity of the physical and the metaphysical. It not only inherits the characteristics of *Dao* in the *Laozi*, as the origin and destination of all things, but also adds materiality by being equated to Aether. Yan further draws on the principles of calculus to bridge the physical and metaphysical sides of *Dao*. However, his infusion of evolution into his *Dao* conception is incompatible with the cycles of reversion that are the characteristic motion of Laozi's *Dao* and this leads to internal contradictions in Yan Fu's vision. When applied to realpolitik, the principles of void and non-being expounded in Yan's theory of *Dao* become embodied in democracy. It can be said that democracy is the ultimate result of applying this new theory of *Dao* to politics.

Keywords: *Notes on the Laozi*; *Dao*; ximing; zhong; democracy

1. Introduction: A Shift in Perspective

In 1905, Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921) published his *Notes on the Laozi* (*Pingdian Laozi* 評點老子).¹ This work, while completed by adding thousands of notes to Yan's student Xiong Jilian's 季廉 analysis of the *Laozi*,² reveals Yan's attempt to combine Chinese and Western philosophy. Yan Fu was especially suited for this effort, for in the years preceding his composition of *Notes on the Laozi*, he had translated *Evolution and Ethics* by Thomas Huxley, *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith, *The Study of Sociology* by Herbert Spencer, *On Liberty* by John Mill, *A History of Politics* by Edward Jenks, and the first half of *A System of Logic* by John Mill. He had also begun to translate *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu.

Scholars call Yan Fu, who introduced Western thought into China, "the first person of Western learning in modern China." This not only reflects Yan Fu's profound attainments in Western learning, but also shows that Yan Fu was a pioneer who introduced much Western thought to China. Other intellectuals at the time could not directly read European or American works, and only knew the Western world through the propaganda of missionaries or popular books on science, technology, and law translated by the Jiangnan Manufacturing Bureau (江南製造局) and Beijing Tongwen Museum (北京同文館). Even such famous intellectuals as Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) had very limited access to original Western works, and Yan Fu's translations undoubtedly broadened their understanding of the Western world.

It is precisely because Yan Fu's identity as a translator is so dazzling that scholars have paid more attention to the Western aspects of Yan Fu's thought, while neglecting the traditional Chinese ideas at its foundation.³ Thus, much of the research on Yan Fu's *Notes on the Laozi* has similarly been influenced by such a prejudice. Researchers generally believe that Yan Fu's contribution lies in using the *Laozi's Dao* to promote Western learning.⁴ In contrast, we affirm that instead of Westernization, Yan's actual goal was expanding Chinese thought in a universalist way. He thus used Western learning as a tool to complement and improve the *Laozi's Dao*, situating the core Chinese concept *Dao* as one that could apply to both the East and the West.

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This is not a unique claim, as a small number of scholars have begun to identify that Yan Fu's ultimate purpose as using modern Western thought to develop but not subsume Chinese learning, and they have noticed the conscious connection between Yan Fu's *Notes on the Laozi* and traditional Chinese Laozegetics (*Laoxue* 老學). For example, Liu Sihe 劉思禾 observes: "We can see that [the] theories [of this group, including Yan Fu,] aim to return to the tradition of Laozegetics from the classical era."⁵ Kuan-yen Liu holds a similar view: "Yan Fu redefines the natural way of the *Dao* in the light of Darwinism, Spencerism, and progressivism" (Kuan-yen Liu 2020). Of course, this conclusion requires further investigation.

If we look to Yan Fu himself, he makes this goal very clear in his preface to *Notes on the Laozi*:

I often think that only with a deep understanding of Western theories can we accurately interpret the classical literature of our forefathers because Western theories can give us certain inspirations and make us understand the theories of our forefathers more thoroughly. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, preface, p. 12)

We see here that engagement with Western learning is to assist in more fully comprehending the unique theories of Chinese classics such as the *Laozi*. In Yan Fu's view, the sage's words are so obscure and subtle that vulgar scholars have continually struggled to understand them.⁶ Therefore, Yan Fu tried to free himself from the limitations of his historical context to seek the ultimate truth of *Dao* (the traditional Chinese term for the order of the universe and the ideal way of human life) that he believed must integrate both Chinese and Western ideas.⁷

Yan further says:

The sage's words are concise and profound. Therefore, it is necessary to understand Western learning before rethinking the sage's words to perceive the subtlety and depth of the words and to understand the immutability of the sage's words. (Wang 1977, p. 24)

He also makes this explicit in the preface to *Notes on the Laozi*:

If one cannot understand both Chinese and Western learning, ancient and modern learning, how can one understand the wholeness, subtlety, and profoundness of *Dao*? (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, preface, p. 12)

Thus, Western learning serves as a tool for Yan Fu to understand the sage's words, with universal truth based in Chinese learning as his ultimate destination. This explains why Yan advocated Western learning when he was young but returned to Chinese learning during the last phase of his life. It should be noted that Yan Fu's return to Chinese learning does not indicate a rejection of Western learning, but his establishing a "new Chinese learning" that integrates ancient and modern Chinese learning with Western learning.

This "new" learning is reflected not only in *Notes on the Laozi* but also in *Evolution and Ethics* (*Tianyanlun* 天演論), a connection previously noted by Wu Zhanliang. He believes—in contrast to scholars who overemphasize Yan's focus on Western learning and consider his core motivation to be saving the nation—that it is unreasonable to simply depict Yan Fu's work in this way. Wu explains that Yan's translation of *Evolution and Ethics* does not address contemporary problems but is an abstract study of the theory of evolution. While it does mention salvation, Yan is more interested in its content as a way to *ming Dao* 明道 (clarify the *Dao*). Wu concludes that the concept of *ming Dao* functions as Yan Fu's "ultimate attempt to put forward an ideological system that could not only guide the long-term development of politics and culture but also integrate various Western and Chinese academic ideas with the core theory of evolution to deeply reflect on traditional culture and the current situation in China so as to help save the nation" (Wu 1999, p. 109).

To summarize, Yan Fu thought Western learning could enhance previous scholars' limited understanding of the truths of Chinese learning, and so he established a new syncretic Chinese learning that included Chinese, Western, ancient, and modern ideas. If we

approach the *Notes on the Laozi* by taking Yan Fu's intent not as the imposition of Western learning on the *Laozi* but instead the enrichment of Chinese learning as a form of universal knowledge, we find that his new Chinese learning can be summarized as a rich and systematic theory of *Dao* (universal truth based on a Chinese foundation).

The following article uses the methodology of Global Laozegetics⁸ to consider Yan Fu's theory of *Dao* in his *Notes on the Laozi*. This approach stresses that his work both can be understood as connecting to an ancient tradition of Chinese learning and commentary while also drawing on knowledge from around the globe. I thus will not tell a story about the Chinese versus the Western, but one about the *Laozi* exegesis as it entered a new phase within the flow of history. Based on said view, this paper will systematically engage three aspects of Yan Fu's theory of *Dao*: *Dao* itself, things, and politics. It will analyze how this theory of *Dao* includes important internal tensions and reflect on how it leads to Yan's assertion that the *Laozi*'s political philosophy is ultimately democratic.

2. *Dao*: Unity of the Physical and Metaphysical

Since Yan Fu's academic aim in engaging Western learning was to demonstrate the truth, completeness, and subtleness of the omnipresent *Dao*, the first question that needs to be answered is whether such a *Dao* as a universal cosmic order really exists. Yan considers *Dao* as a universalizable Chinese concept that can be brought into dialogue with Western metaphysics,⁹ and he relies on Lu Jiuyuan's (陸九淵 1139–1193) theory of "same mind and principle" (*tongxin tongli* 同心同理) to support his view:¹⁰

I always believed Lu Jiuyuan when he said "there will be sages in the East Sea and the West Sea with the same mind and principle (*li* 理)." Although what he said was much more intelligent than other scholars in the Song dynasty, I think it does not yet fully explain the sage's implied meaning. Does it only include the East and West Seas? Hundreds of centuries in the past and hundreds of centuries in the future, mind and principle never vary. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, preface, p. 12)

Yan proposes that there exists a universal mind that transcends time and space. Therefore, the Eastern and Western sages have the same mind, which means that the *li* (principle, also known as *Dao*) adhered to by both Eastern and Western sages is the same. Having asserted the *Dao* indeed exists and is a cosmic order that transcends culture, Yan Fu begins to analyze and enrich the *Laozi*'s theory of *Dao* to address universal philosophical questions. Generally speaking, the *Dao* he constructs unifies the worlds of physics and metaphysics. His metaphysical ideas come from the *Laozi*, and his physics component draws more from Western thought. Therefore, the theory of *Dao* constructed by Yan Fu is a fusion rooted in Chinese thought that integrates Western thought. Specifically, he makes *Dao* not only the supreme overarching creator of all things, invisible, inaudible, imperceptible, independent, unchanging, pervading, and unailing, but also the physical substance that is the fundamental component of all worldly objects.

With its metaphysical status, Yan Fu's *Dao* has the characteristics of being "without birth or death, never increasing or decreasing; all things are interdependent, but *Dao* is independent; all things are changing but *Dao* remains the same" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 36). It directs the world: "The Great Form is *Dao* and what all things mentioned in the previous chapter obey" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 44). It is the creator: "*Dao*, namely, *Taiji*, comes down and gives birth to the One" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 51). The supremacy of this *Dao* can be seen from the word "come down." It occupies the highest position, staring down at all things. This process by which *Dao* comes down and gives birth to all things determines the nature of things.

Importantly, in the last quote about creation, Yan glosses *Dao* with *Taiji*. This is due to his view that while universal metaphysical existence might be called by different names in various traditions, it is all *Dao*:

Mystery (*xuan* 玄) metaphorically refers to the doorway whence all secret essences were derived in *Laozi*, and which is called *summmum genus* by Westerners. Mystery

equates to terms in the *Book of Changes* such as *Dao tong wei yi* 道通為一, *Taiji* 太極, and *Wuji* 無極. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 21)

Since *Dao* is the cause instead of the effect, it is said that “what it is originated from is unknown.” If a thing can be named, it originated from *Dao*. *Zhongfu* 眾甫, the father of all things, is known in Western philosophy as the First Cause. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 23)

It is called *Dao* in *Laozi*, *Taiji* in the *Book of Changes*, independence (*zizai* 自在) or the dharma-gate of non-duality (*buer famen* 不二法門) in Buddhism, and the First Cause in Western philosophy. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 36)

As can be seen from the quotations above, Yan believes that *Dao*, here glossed as “Mystery,” can also be called *summum genus* and the First Cause from Western learning, *zhongfu* (the father of all things) from the *Laozi*, *Wuji* (the Great ultimate) and *Taiji* (the Great One) from the *Book of Changes*, *Dao tong wei yi* (the one from the viewpoint of *Dao*) from *Zhuangzi*, and independence or the dharma-gate of non-duality from Buddhism.

While Yan appears to equate these concepts, he still emphasizes the *Laozi*'s key theory that language, understanding, and reason are not enough to know the complete transcendent existence which we can call *Dao*:

The unvarying *Dao* (*changdao* 常道) and unvarying Name (*changming* 常名) are independent of external things, inexpressible, and cannot be analyzed with rational thinking (*buke siyi* 不可思議). (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 20)

Yan Fu continues by elaborating on the meaning of *buke siyi*:

Buke siyi is not the same as *buke mingyan* 不可名言 (inexpressible) or *buke yanyu* 不可言喻 (indescribable), and starkly different from *buneng siyi* 不能思議 (un-thinkable). A peculiar thing that one encounters can be described as *buke mingyan*. Being trapped in extreme happiness or sadness beyond expression because of, for example, feeling comfortable to do what you desire to do, can be described as *buke yanyu*. People living in the tropics who have never seen ice suddenly hear that one can walk on water, or for example, people who do not know about gravity suddenly hear that the earth is trampled underfoot. They are confused, thinking there's no such thing and even regarding it as nonsense, and that's what *buneng siyi* means. What I mean by *buke siyi* is, for example, saying that there is a square shaped circle, death without birth, and a thing that appears in different places at the same time . . . Buddhist Nirvana is something that can be described as *buke siyi*. (Yan 2014a, vol. 1, p. 318)

Buke siyi has two meanings. One is the concept full of internal contradictions such as the rectangular circle and death as birth. The other is the ultimate state to which *Dao* belongs. *Dao* itself is beyond description beyond the logic and differentiation in language. “Chapter [4] specifically describes *Dao*. We should pay attention to the characters *huo* 或 and *si* 似, so as to have a deeper understanding of *Dao*. Fundamentally speaking, *Dao* cannot be accurately described in words” (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 22). Yan Fu notes these two terms *huo* and *si* that both mean “seems to be” to highlight the impossibility of concretely depicting *Dao*, as he believes that human perception or cognition cannot be applied to the independent and transcendent *Dao* but only interdependent worldly things.

Yan Fu's metaphysical aspect of *Dao* makes it the ineffable universal creator. Uniquely, though, Yan also endows *Dao* with a physical status. He says, “*Dao* is nature” (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 37), and “only Aether (*yitai* 以太) can enter in invisible form into the infinitesimal gaps that cannot be seen” (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 52). Here, Yan Fu professes that the essence of *Dao*, or *qi* 氣, equates with the now outdated scientific notion of Aether as the most fundamental material substance (Yan 2014a, vol. 1, p. 316). Explaining *qi* with the modern scientific language of Aether, *qi* becomes the core component of the 64 chemical elements that constitute all things in heaven and earth.

Qi means definite particles that have mass, with attractive and repulsive forces between them, and whose mass and motion can be detected. Those chemical elements can be turned into *qi* when heated to the highest temperature. (Yan 2014c, vol. 5, p. 351)

Importantly, Yan Fu redefines the traditional Chinese *qi* according to science, depicting it as a material particle that has mass, is omnipresent, and can be detected when it moves. He makes it the basis of all things, saying explicitly: “in spite of their varieties, all things between heaven and earth have the same source” (Yan 2014d, vol. 7, p. 23). “Human beings, animals, insects, plants and trees in heaven and earth all originate from *qi*, and gradually become all things through the evolution of *qi*” (Yan 2014d, vol. 7, p. 24). Ouyang Zhesheng holds the same view, arguing that “Yan Fu makes a materialist interpretation of *Dao*, the core concept of Laozi’s philosophical system” (Ouyang 2015, p. 109). The interpretation of *Dao* as *qi*/Aether undoubtedly pulls down the lofty *Dao* and gives it a material attribute, narrowing the gap between *Dao* and all things.

Yan is claiming here that *Dao* is matter, but this seems to conflict with the contrast between the two in his articulations of metaphysics, and also seems to impose Western science on the Chinese *Dao*. Yet, to resolve this tension, Yan relies on Laozi’s concept of non-being, while stating that “non-being is not nothing” (無不真無) (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 50). Given that non-being is not really nothing, what is it?

There is such a saying about calculus: numbers originate from the infinitesimal, which cannot be perceived by human senses. Therefore, it is not impossible to regard it as non-being. Infinitesimals can accumulate to form objects that can be known by humans. And the origin of all things is within the infinitesimal. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 25)

Yan Fu introduces the calculus-based concept of infinitesimals to interpret non-being; he thinks that infinitesimals can be regarded as non-being directly, and that infinitesimals accumulate to form all things that can be known. In this sense, all things originate from infinitesimals (non-being). Therefore, non-being in the *Laozi* is neither the ontological non-being in Wang Bi’s (王弼 226–249) thought, nor the *kong*¹¹ (空 emptiness) of Buddhism, but the infinitesimal which is within the range of human understanding and rational thought but beyond perceptual knowledge. For example, Aether is understood as a basic particle that, though invisible and inaudible, in reality, has weight and extension. Yan interprets *Dao* empirically and uses the infinitesimal to explain how *Dao* has given birth to things with form and mass.

Yan Fu appears to reduce *Dao* to the finest matter that equals *qi*/Aether; however, he holds to the Chinese tradition by noting the other aspect of *qi*: “what was called *qi* in ancient China is now called force (*li* 力)”¹² (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 204). This does not indicate that *qi* and force are exactly the same. It means that *qi* accumulates into all things that possess mass, the quality that naturally generates attraction and repulsion. Yan says in *Evolution and Ethics* that “all things in the universe interact with each other to produce force. If there were no objects, there would be no attraction or repulsion. If there were no attraction or repulsion, objects would not appear. Mass and force depend on each other. Force disappears without mass and vice versa” (Yan 2014a, vol. 1, p. 76). The result of this approach centers the Chinese unity of matter and energy in the physical side of the *Dao*, though also employing Western theories to refine this view.

Yan further extends his vision of *Dao* in nature as the origin of attraction and repulsion, explaining this force aspect of *qi* as also manifesting through the competition for survival between all living things and the process of natural selection. He explains:

One is “competition between living things” (*wujing* 物競) and the other is “natural selection” (*tianze* 天擇). The former refers to all things competing with each other for their own survival and the latter refers to natural selection where the stronger race survives natural competition. All things are competing for survival. In the beginning different races competed, and then groups competed against

each other. The weak are often enslaved by the strong and the foolish by the wise. The species that are stable enough to survive . . . must be the fittest for a given time and space. (Yan 2014d, vol. 7, pp. 23–24)

Yan asserts, according to Spencer's theory of evolution, that all things are competing for their own survival: there is competition between different species, there is competition within groups, and the result of competition is that the weak are enslaved by the strong, and the foolish are enslaved by the intelligent. Therefore, there is a law of the jungle in the universe and, based on natural selection, only those species that are best adapted to the environment will thrive. Yan Fu calls the secret of evolution "fitness" (*tihē* 體合), or things adapting well to their external environment.

Here, Yan connects evolutionary theory to *Dao* as the law formed by the attraction and repulsion of all things in the process of competition. This relationship is possible because of what he calls "general laws" (*gongli* 公例), which are implicit in *Dao*. He says, "As long as it can unify the principle of all things and does not stay in a particular thing, it is Mystery. In philosophy, it is called the thing's virtue that extracts a general law from numerous particularities" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 26).

Yan further describes these general laws as follows:

No matter who you are or what conditions you are under, general laws remain the same. That others can teach but I cannot, or that what I teach is different from what others teach are not general laws. Thus, [standards of] right and wrong that are not immutable are not included in general laws. It is auspicious to follow them and disastrous to violate them. So, we are talking about what Chinese thinkers and Western thinkers have agreed on separately. What are the same without prior agreement are general laws. They must be obeyed and cannot be violated. In addition, if Chinese thinkers and Western thinkers have opposite opinions on what is right or wrong, these are local customs that are formed in specific places and times, and they do not belong to general laws. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 51)

Xiong Jilian said, "All things have a certain order to follow in birth and development, which is the natural order beyond human knowledge." Zhuangzi assumed, "What was simple in the beginning may become enormously complex in the end." In Chapter 64 of the *Laozi* these ideas are expressed: the principle (*li*) of all things are the general laws of history. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 63)

As we know, Yan equates *li* and *Dao*, and so these laws that apply to both the East and the West are the general laws of *Dao*. Xiong Jilian also conveys that everything relies on laws, from the most simple to the most complex. This is the natural order, manifested in the general laws of physics and history. Since the general laws are universally applicable, we should act in accordance with these general laws of the *Dao*.

These general laws extend beyond nature; when they manifest in human society, they are called the laws of history:

If you do not know general laws, you cannot "use the ancient *Dao* to grasp what now exists" (執古道以禦今有) nor can you "know the ancient beginning" (知古始). The meaning of "use the ancient" is the same as "seeking the antique" in *Mengzi*, and all scientific and philosophical research engages in this. I once said Laozi was a historian who enjoyed a long life, and his attainment of *Dao* was completely reliant on his understanding of the laws of history. Now that I have read the above two phrases "use the ancient" and "grasp what is now," I am even more convinced of my opinion.¹³

Yan suggests human history follows the same basic laws, and we can extract these laws from ancient history to understand the present. However, that requires an accurate understanding of ancient history, a point that further explains why the *Laozi* is a source of knowledge and not just a Chinese classic needing to be colonized by Western ideas. Of

course, Yan still insists these general laws of history also follow evolutionary theory. Since Yan Fu uses *qi* to explain *Dao*, and his conception of *qi* is based on a dual nature of matter and force, the constantly changing *Dao* then represents the spontaneous evolution of all things.

However, according to the theory of evolution, the movement of objects is linear, which is not consistent with the idea of the eternal cycle in the *Laozi*. Chapter 40 of the *Laozi* says, "In *Dao* the only motion is returning" (Waley 1958, p. 192); in this, it can be seen that for *Laozi*, in contrast to the linear progression of history that Yan claims was his inspiration, the movement of *Dao* is an endless cycle.¹⁴ Yan Fu tries to use Western learning to enrich the *Dao* conception, which is the core of Chinese thought, so as to build a harmonious and universal *Dao*. However, his vision has a problem here, that is, it is difficult for the Western theory of evolution to integrate into *Laozi's* thought. The most fundamental reason is that Yan Fu interprets *Dao* through Aether, endows *Dao* with physical meaning, which is in conflict with the *Dao* in the *Laozi*.

In *Laozi's* thought, *Dao* only has a metaphysical meaning, is above all things, and is a metaphysical existence. The returning *Dao* always draws back on itself, moving in cycles (*fan* 反). As Chapter 40 says, "In *Dao* the only motion is *fan*." Here, the sense of "*fan*" is ambiguous, as the term has three different meanings used by scholars to variously explain *Laozi's* theory. The first possible meaning is "opposite."¹⁵ The second results from reading it as the similar character "*fan*" (返). This "*fan*" (返) means "return" (Xiyi Lin 2010, p. 45). Or "cycle."¹⁶ The third is "reverse."¹⁷ Actually, in the *Laozi's* philosophy, all three meanings are present; however, I consider the meaning here to be return or cycle ("*fan*" 返) because in the earliest edition of the *Laozi*, the *Guodian Laozi*, the sentence reads "In *Dao* the only motion is cycles or returning (*fan* 返)" (Jingmen Museum 1998, p. 6). The importance of *fan* to *Laozi's* theory of *Dao* leads to a contradiction between the cyclical and linear in Yan Fu's vision. Since Yan Fu physicalized *Dao*, he had to claim that *Dao* is progressively linear in accordance with the theory of evolution. This flawed combination of the cyclical *Dao* with evolution is the most glaring weakness in Yan Fu's syncretic *Dao* theory.

Though Yan Fu misses this logical contradiction, in other aspects of his *Dao* theory, logical and scientific reasoning are important to understanding *Dao* as general law. Interpreting the *Laozi* Chapter 48 passage "learning consists in adding to one's stock day by day and the practice of *Dao* consists in subtracting day by day," (Waley 1958, p. 201) Yan Fu proposes that "adding day by day is 'inductive inference' (*neizhou* 内籀) and subtracting day by day is 'deductive inference' (*waizhou* 外籀). Adding day by day is what is used for subtracting day by day" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 54). Yan believes that both learning and *Dao* are attained through scientific methods. Inductive inference, or the construction of theories based on observation, is the method to develop learning and deduction, or top-down reasoning, is the method for reaching *Dao*. Yet, he stresses that the premise used in deduction must be derived from induction, otherwise it is purely imagination. If you make inferences based on imagination, it is impossible to deduce the correct conclusion.

Clearly, Yan Fu regarded learning as foundational for reaching *Dao*:

The *qu* 曲 mentioned in this Chapter [22] refers to a part from which the whole can be seen. Therefore, there is a saying in *the Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸) that an able and virtuous personage who is inferior to a sage devotes himself to one part. Only he who knows the whole from a small part can achieve [*Dao*]. Therefore, Westerners attach importance to analysis. Zhu Xi [朱熹 1130–1200] once said: "The failure of the whole is ultimately due to the failure of some part." (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 34)

Since there is already something missing and empty, how can I know the most perfect and the greatest fullness through them? The eyes are not covered, but we cannot rely on them to enumerate infinity or verify everything. For while we can observe great straightness, great skill or great eloquence, we must also carry out logical reasoning to do what the eyes cannot. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 53)

This note comments on the *Laozi* Chapter 22's contrast between different qualities, paradoxically suggesting *qu* (literally bent) as the way to straightness. Yan takes this not as Laozi describing a paradox but as his depicting the relationship of *qu* as a part of being able to reveal the whole, or what Westerners call induction. As for other examples of the totality of complex phenomena referenced from the original passage, such as the most perfect and the greatest fullness, Yan Fu believes that although we can examine them in detail one by one with our eyes, it is too troublesome. Yan explains this is why Laozi indicates we should examine them by inference.

Induction and deduction deal primarily with the problem of the phenomenal world. Yet, Yan Fu admits the existence of the noumenal world beyond phenomena. Therefore, can inductive deduction still be applied to the incredible parts of the transcendental world? How does Yan Fu deal with this problem? He says:

Being (*you* 有) refers to something that is visible, audible and perceptible. If being becomes non-being (*wu* 無), that is, something invisible, inaudible and unperceivable, how do such three names as elusive (*yi* 夷), rarefied (*xi* 希) and infinitesimal (*wei* 微) come up? Is it true that *Dao* will ultimately not be seen, heard or felt? The answer is affirmative but only for those who can achieve the elusive, rarefied and infinitesimal. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 29)

Yan directs our attention toward the elusive, rarefied, and infinitesimal that the senses cannot grasp as what we must investigate to understand *Dao*. However, while Yan Fu does not clearly indicate the way to reach *Dao* beyond logical propositions, Huang Kewu suggests there is something else required, which he names "silent wisdom" (Huang 2012, p. 168). In fact, I think Yan Fu, though trying to take induction and deduction as the methods of understanding *Dao*, still reluctantly considers the most delicate and incomprehensible part of *Dao* to belong to "silence," as will be discussed in the next section.

To summarize, Yan Fu's theory of *Dao* not only makes it the origin and destination of all things, but also the general law concerning the attraction and repulsion among these things after their creation that runs through the whole process of their birth, growth, and death. In this way, Yan not only retains the metaphysical status of *Dao*, but also explains *Dao* with empiricism. The theory of *Dao* established by Yan embraces both Chinese and Western learning and combines both the ancient and the modern. However, there inevitably are contradictions in such a mixed theory, reflected in the tension between Yan's depiction of the endless circular movement of *Dao* and the theory of evolution that only expresses linear change. Yan Fu believed that *Dao* is shown in the movement of all things, but is the direction of *Dao*'s movement curving back or straight forward? The root of this problem lies in Yan's failure to fully deal with the relationship between *Dao* and matter. This enormous tension is irreconcilable in Yan Fu's theory of *Dao*.

3. The Principle for Coping with All Things: Defending *Zhong* with *Ximing*

Compared with the distinct dualistic relationship between *Dao* and things in the *Laozi*,¹⁸ Yan Fu endows *Dao* with materiality by interpreting *Dao* as Aether, making *Dao* into a concept that can unite the realms of metaphysics and physics. Simultaneously, Yan inherits Laozi's idea of advocating void and quietness as the source of knowledge, and extends it by quoting evolutionary theory, thus forming the principle of "hold to *zhong*"¹⁹ to follow the illumined (*ximing*)" (守中以袭明). He points out that the essence of *Dao* lies in void:

Only by defending *zhong* can we reach the endless and unlimited *Dao*. This is what Zhuangzi meant when he said "stay at the center (*zhong*) of the ring to cope with the infinite transformation of things" 得其環中，以應無窮。 What is *zhong*? The essence of *Dao*. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 24)

Only by consciously being in a state of emptiness and quietness, removing desire, expanding vision and observing the transformations of all things, will one know that all things that depend on each other can be equal, and this is where I need to make the most efforts. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 21)

Yan Fu believes that the essence of *Dao* is represented by the concept *zhong* and uses the center of the ring metaphor from *Zhuangzi* to explain his understanding of it. Furthermore, by emphasizing *zhong*, which for Yan also means holding to emptiness, removing desire, and expanding vision, he asserts that from the perspective of *Dao*, all things and opinions become equal.

In the *Laozi*, emptiness is often mentioned, and Yan regards it as the most important part among the three dimensions²⁰ of *zhong* that both enables the creation of things and allows the human mind to engage *Dao*. Yan explains this based on a passage from Chapter 5:

The pronunciation of the word *qu* 屈 (submit) is [actually] *jue* 掘, and it means *jie* 竭 (exhaust). Thus, *xu er bu qu* 虚而不屈 (empty but never submitting) [should be read as] *xu er bu jie* 虚而不竭 (empty and never exhausted).²¹ (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 24)

Here, Yan Fu interprets this passage about *xu* as a general statement which makes “emptiness” the inexhaustible foundation of all things, further elevating its importance in Laozi’s philosophy. He likewise notes that in humans, emptiness relates to mind but not body and clearly states in his analysis of a line from Chapter 3 that:

Emptying one’s mind, one is able to receive *Dao*; filling one’s belly, one’s body can get its needs; weakening one’s intelligence, all things can move following the natural law and not be disturbed by one’s will; toughening one’s sinews, one can undertake what one should do on one’s own. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 22)

This suggests that weakening one’s will as a type of “emptying” is a precondition for receiving *Dao*. Weakening one’s will, in other words, means not to show oneself, define oneself, boast of what one will do, or be proud of one’s work.

Yan, however, also believes that we should not only empty but also enlarge our minds. How is this not a contradiction? As mentioned above, emptying the mind requires the elimination of self-righteousness, but when the mind becomes empty, then what? Does it become an empty shell? What is the function of the empty mind? Laozi did not answer the question. Enlarging the mind and extending perception are two answers Yan proposes. These are explained as both rational thinking and perceptual thinking, respectively, and ideally, the two forms of knowledge become combined.

In contrast to Laozi’s serious worries about accumulating knowledge as the antithesis to an empty mind, Yan Fu advocates cultivating knowledge and believes that the development of knowledge can actually in turn promote an empty mind:

Increased knowledge leads to modesty; increased understanding leads to caution. Only after engaging in self-cultivation, do I realize that I have made so many mistakes in my life. So, [Laozi] says, [*Dao*] “seems hard to understand,” “seems to retreat,” and “seems uneven.” (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 50)

Yan suggests here that as knowledge grows, people realize how little they know. This in turn leads to them becoming humbler. Similarly, the more deeply people understand *Dao*, the more carefully they make decisions. Self-cultivation leads people to see defects in themselves that they could not see before. This requires that we always maintain an ignorant, humble, and fearless attitude, i.e., the state of an empty mind.

Based on these principles, Yan is extremely opposed to Laozi’s ideas of banishing wisdom and discarding knowledge:

Abandoning learning to not worry does not really eliminate worries. It is like an ostrich in Africa being chased and attacked that just sticks its head in the sand. It deludes itself into thinking it is not hurt by not looking at how it has been hurt. The banishing of learning in *Laozi* and the ostrich case have no difference. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 32)

Yan Fu, here, aims to show that the carefree abandonment of learning is hypocritical and a form of self-deception. In Yan’s view, this does not accord with the real *Dao*,

which contains knowledge and is the metaphysical foundation for induction and deduction. Accumulating knowledge through learning means observing the transformations of all things to realize the physical and historical laws. With this knowledge, we can then act in accordance with those laws.

Yan Fu uses Laozi's term *ximing* 襲明 (following the illumined) to describe this process. Explaining the related content from Chapter 27, he says:

Perfect activity, perfect speech, perfect calculations, perfect seals, and perfect knots all depend on *tianli* 天理 (heavenly principles). The reason why they can rely on *tianli* is that is [the order under which] human affairs occur. Guan Yiwu 管夷吾 (723–645 BCE) realized this. Thus, orders flow as though from the original source, and one can turn a disaster into a blessing, a defeat into a victory. This is what Zhuangzi called *yinming* 因明 (according with the illumined) and Laozi called *ximing*. The meaning of *yin* (accord with) is the same as *xi* (follow)²² ... When we reach *ximing*, we will surely succeed in doing things, maintaining stable relationships, and protecting things safely. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, pp. 38–39)

Yan Fu uses *yinming* from the *Zhuangzi* to explain *ximing* in the *Laozi* as following the movement of all things and the principles of nature. The key point is since *yin* means conforming to or following, it indicates following *Dao*. Therefore, Yan said, "Laozi's *Dao* advocates *yin*, not stagnation, and only the flexible and soft can achieve it" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 68). Like Laozi, he affirms the spontaneous order of the cosmos. Thus, his ideal of *ximing* respects the spontaneous movement of all things at a fundamental level and opposes human intervention based on limited human knowledge.

Ximing in the *Laozi* is rooted in an unspecified spontaneous order, and Yan Fu explains this spontaneous order as the natural selection driven by the survival of the fittest. In short, Yan transforms Laozi's emptiness and quietness into the principle of holding to *zhong* with *ximing*. In Laozi's thought, *Dao* and matter are separated, with *Dao* high above. This relationship provides the model for the monarch to be distant from and not interfere with people's natural activities. Yan combines Laozi's and Zhuangzi's metaphysical characteristics of *Dao*, while endowing *Dao* with materiality. Compared to Laozi's simple sense of emptiness, Yan's vision of emptiness as part of holding to *zhong* provided a more positive conception that allows him to affirm knowledge and encourage learning. However, the different views of Laozi and Zhuangzi on the relationship between *Dao* and things inevitably lead to different ideals for how to be in the world. The *Dao* in the *Laozi* resembles a sovereign power and "things" (*wu*) in the text mostly just refers to the collection of all things (*wanwu*) (Yubin Wang 2014). In this way, what can be deduced from Laozi's thought is the importance of the naturalness of all things belonging to one whole. Yan not only admits Laozi's view that *Dao* produces all things but also affirms Zhuangzi's view of the freedom of individuals based on the premise that "Dao is in all things." Thus, he must deal with the tension between the naturalness of the group and the freedom of the individual. In other words, Yan Fu not only confirms the existence of the natural order within the group, but also believes that each individual can still be free.

Thus, he says:

After the root is established, then the myriad phenomena can revolve around the root. The music of heaven is varied, but it is the same wind that makes different hollows produce different sounds. Each hollow produces its own sound. If they all stubbornly believe that they have the truth, then who is wrong? (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 44)

Here, the root refers to *Dao*. *Dao*, which is the foundation of all things, on the one hand, the hollows as a whole produce a harmony of different sounds, and on the other hand, ensures that the hollows are free to produce their own unique sounds without being influenced by other sounds (a metaphor taken from *Zhuangzi*). In this scenario, each voice has its own uniqueness but does not elevate its uniqueness to universality.

The *Dao* in this system can also be applied to human order, where it manifests as a political system or model of social governance. For Yan, this model not only ensures that human society follows the direction of evolution, but also guarantees the realization of each individual's unique value. Therefore, how does the lofty *Dao* in Yan Fu's thought manifest in politics? Moreover, how can we ensure the true individuality of all things? This brings us to Yan's study of the political application of the *Laozi's Dao*.

4. The Application of *Dao* in Politics: Democracy

Yan Fu plainly states the importance of politics in the text: "When Laozi talks about the function of *Dao*, he often mentions nobles and kings, so it can be seen that the *Daodejing* is a book about how to govern the world" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 46). What Yan leaves unsaid is that for Laozi, the Way of Heaven and Way of humanity should be the same and therefore asserts the movement of cosmic *Dao* as the ideal governance technique. This governance follows the *Dao* by imitating the workings of all things, and therefore for Yan, this Daoist politics must follow the theory of evolution.

In discussing types of governments, Yan accepts three kinds: despotism, monarchy, and democracy. These are the same three Montesquieu put forward in *The Spirit of the Laws*. Yan paraphrases them thusly:

There are three forms of government: democracy, monarchy and despotism. The difference between the three is . . . Democracy means that the sovereignty of a country is not held in any single person's hand but grasped by all or part of the country's people. Monarchy refers to a system where a monarch governs a country with the people acting according to long established laws. Despotism also has a monarch that governs the country, but he does so according to his will alone. (Yan 2014b, vol. 4, p. 13)

Yan Fu not only explains the meaning of the three regimes, but also further applies the theory of evolution to them, arguing that despotism evolves to monarchy and monarchy evolves to democracy.

For Yan, the democracy of Laozi is virtually equivalent to Montesquieu's "antique democracy".²³

This evolutionary model supports his conclusion that democracy is the best form of government and that Laozi's political thought most closely resembles this ideal type.

He further says:

Laozi's idea "humbleness is the trunk upon which the mighty grows, lowliness is the foundation upon which the high is laid" relates to democracy. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 49)

In *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu, [the foundation of] democratic politics is the people's morality [or noble character]. Monarchy [rests on] rituals [that express status and rank]. A despotic system is [built on] harsh punishments. China has never practiced democracy. Yet, Laozi could not produce a philosophy of something that he had never seen before. As the rule of morality [like in democracy] cannot be found in monarchy, Laozi turned his thoughts to the Yellow Emperor and Shennong to reason that it existed in high antiquity. In high antiquity, the status of the monarch was not so elevated, and the status of the people was not so lowly. There was no great disparity between them, and the people were more engaged in government affairs. Laozi mentions in Chapter 80 the "small country with few inhabitants." There "the people should be contented with their food, pleased with their clothing, satisfied with their homes, and [should] take pleasure in their rustic tasks. The neighboring land might be so near at hand that one could hear its cocks crowing and the dogs barking; but the people would grow old and die without ever having been there," and this is precisely the truth of democracy that Montesquieu mentioned in *The Spirit of the Laws*. If there is a person in the world who understands both the *Laozi* and *The Spirit of the Laws*, he will surely think what I say is very reasonable. Oh! Laozi applied the method of democracy. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 46)

From the above, it is clear Yan Fu sees the element of democracy in Laozi's thought and believes that Laozi's "small country with few inhabitants" is closer to the ideal regime of democracy. Yan even interprets the *Laozi's* Chapter 46 as indicating a democratic ideal.²⁴ He repeatedly speaks highly of democracy and states the idea that *tianxia* can only be won by democracy twice when analyzing Chapters 57 and 81 (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, pp. 59, 69).

Yan Fu suggests the *Laozi* contains democratic elements, and conversely, democratic countries also need the wisdom of Huang-Lao Daoism:

The *Dao* of a Huang-Lao Emperor is what is used by democratic countries. This is how [a democratic government] "is chief among them, but does not oppress them," "never does [anything] yet all things are done." (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 27)

Yan not only regards the democratic system as the logical conclusion of Laozi's thought, but also sees that combining and promoting the two traditions together can result in a greater achievement.

In Laozi's system, *Dao* must be that on which proper government is modeled. Yet, if, as Yan Fu interprets, the ideal government is a democracy where all or part of the people of a country hold supreme sovereignty (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, pp. 13–14), then this inevitably weakens the notion of *Dao* as a transcendent metaphysical power. This shift accords with Yan's view of *Dao* as the material Aether, an immanent conception that allows the importance of the people to be elevated and a democratic politics in which people hold sovereignty to represent the proper Way of humanity.²⁵

Laozi advocates *wuwei* 無為 (non-interference) in politics, an ideal that Yan Fu inherits. He gives it a rich connotation that links it with the democratic system. He explains both the positive and negative dimensions of *wuwei*, using ideas of natural selection and the survival of the fittest to explain its negative side. Yan believes that there is a natural competition between all things. They inevitably fight for survival, and this leads to the evolution of the whole species. The direction of evolution is to fit in with the environment, a process that on the whole forms a stable order. This is because the mutual attraction and repulsion of all things naturally leads to rewards and punishments. Therefore, Yan Fu is extremely opposed to external interference that impedes with this natural process.²⁶

Although the activity of establishing a new dynasty requires working hard, being combed by the wind and washed by the rain, and fighting intensely, just like Han emperor Liu Bang 劉邦 (256–195 BCE) and Emperor Taizong 唐太宗 (599–649) did, the fundamental reason for the successful establishment of a new dynasty is actually avoiding governmental interference, not engaging in governmental interference. Just as it was for the rulers of the Qin and Sui dynasties, people can come to power but will lose it in the end if they do not avoid governmental interference. That is so true! [So as Laozi says,] "Had they interfered, they would never have won the adherence of all under heaven." (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 54)

Here, Yan mentions both successful and unsuccessful Chinese dynasties to illustrate that good governance rests on non-interference. Xiong Jilian further explains *wei*²⁷ by saying "disrupting people's lives, draining people's energy, and encroaching on civil rights are all deliberate acts of *wei*" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 57).

In Yan Fu's view, *wuwei* means not only no interference, but also being emotionally unbiased. Yan, thus, strongly agrees with the idea in Chapter 5 of the *Laozi* that "Heaven and Earth are ruthless; to them the ten thousand things are but as straw dogs. The sage too is ruthless; to him the people are but as straw dogs" (Waley 1958). He further relies on Wang Bi's commentary on this chapter to show how this embodies the essence of evolution.²⁸ In it, Wang states:

Heaven and earth follow nature. Without action or creation, all things rule each other by themselves. Therefore, they are without kindness. Kindness creates, upholds, administers, and changes with grace and action. Being Created, upheld, administered, and changed, things will lose their true nature. With grace and

action, things cease to co-exist. If things cease to co-exist, there is not enough to support them all. The earth does not grow straw for the beasts, but the beasts eat the straw. The heaven does not produce dogs for man, but man eats the dogs. Inaction in regard to all things means to let them do as they should. Then they will be self-sufficient. If one has to use wisdom, it will not work. (Lin 1977, p. 11)

Dao's inaction and unkindness return the task of governance to all things themselves, so that all things can give full play to their functions. On the contrary, if there is a shred of *wei*, with human intelligence involved, it cannot be achieved.

Meanwhile, Yan also applies his sense of *ximing* to reveal the active aspect of *wuwei* politics, expressing that the art of *ximing* is a type of *wei* (action) but one that has access to *Dao*.

All under heaven is not impossible to gain. It likes a noble vessel, so only by *ximing* can it be obtained. If you do not follow *ximing*, you will fail. Laozi compared All under heaven to a vessel, and Spencer regarded the group of nations as an organism. They are both indeed wise. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 40)

Yan Fu takes Laozi's idea that all under heaven is like a noble vessel that is dangerous to tamper with and connects it to his interpretation of *ximing* as the spirit of democracy. As explained before, Yan equates his behavioral ideal of *ximing* to *yinming*. Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869–1936) affirms that Yan made this connection, saying, "Laozi's discussion of politics revolves around the word *yin* (follow). *Yin* refers to this sentence, 'the sage has no heart of his own; he uses the heart of the people as his heart.' Yan Fu agreed with this and thought . . . Laozi advocated democracy." (Zhang 1987, p. 161). Whether one accords with (*xi*) or follows (*yin*), in politics, the result is the same. The sage does not rule as a monarch or despot who follows his own laws or whims but accords with the needs and desires of the people. He lets the people guide him as the true sovereign.

For Yan, this more passive role involved in *ximing* governance further relates back to Laozi's *wuwei* vision where "by doing nothing, all things are done."

The six questions mentioned in Chapter 10 of *Laozi* seem to be contradictory but actually complement each other. For example, one can not only rule the land and love the people, but also remain unknown. The senses can simultaneously both engage the outside world and guard stillness. One can know everything, but you do not have to scheme. Acting this way means to love the people and rule the land through sincerity. Enacting the feminine leads to the pinnacle of masculinity; by doing nothing, then there is nothing that is not done. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, pp. 26–27)

People generally think that the only way to rule the land is to actively *wei* (control, direct, interfere with) it. Yan, instead, promotes the importance of passive stillness, of the mind as the key to knowing the world, and, thus, how to govern. This still mind follows the needs of external things and moves accordingly. Inspired by Laozi, Yan Fu believes only this stillness-based *wuwei* can achieve the goal of loving the people and ruling the land.

As mentioned above, democracy is the outcome of evolving beyond despotism or monarchy and is the ideal political system. Yan's democracy contains the political spirit of *wuwei*, so how does he view military action? He sides with Montesquieu:

Invading other countries is not what democracies should do. If you invade another country, war will also hurt yourself. Why is that? Because invading another country is incompatible with the spirit of democracy. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 40)

However, when it comes to being attacked by other countries, Yan Fu thinks that war cannot be avoided. "It is not just the use of the military that leaves us with no choice. If things reach a stage where there is no other choice, we can only respond to things as they are, and this response is rarely against *Dao*" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 41).

Yan, further reflecting on the social reality of war and violence, explains:

An unjust attack is like a knife in a common cook's hand. Even if [his hacking] does not break the knife, it will be damaged, and there is nothing [like this] that will not come to an early end. In ancient China, no one was more famous than Chiyou 蚩尤²⁹ for having a powerful army. Bai Qi 白起 (?–257 BCE) of the Qin dynasty, Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BCE) of the Chu state, Alexander, Hannibal, and Napoleon of Europe are all men who were good at fighting, but there was not a single one of them who did not die young. Laozi once said that such [violent] people soon perish. It can be seen that nothing Laozi said was unconvincing. Those who can have a good beginning and a good ending all achieve good results without violence. But the current situation in China requires the people to cultivate a martial spirit. But this is only a temporary measure, in the future we should still adhere to the principle of non-violence. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 41)

Yan Fu cites historical figures who were good at fighting and notes how none of them avoided an early death. Following Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*, Yan believes that an army should only be maintained to safeguard national security, defend itself, but never be used to invade others. That is called a just army. It is also a realistic interpretation of Laozi's principle of taking no advantage from victory.

In conclusion, democracy is the political application of Yan Fu's theory of *Dao*. However, his *Dao* is inherently contradictory, due to the irreconcilability between the linearity of evolution theory and the circular running direction of *Dao*. Yan clearly rejected Laozi's admonition to return to the pristine and redefined the *Dao*, instead suggesting *Dao* as a law of progress or a power that propels myriad things to grow, develop, and evolve,³⁰ or humans, this means the process of social development, which even Yan admits contradicts the core ideas in the *Laozi*.

We must pay attention to the difference between Laozi's philosophy and modern Western philosophy in the next three chapters. Today, from uncarved block to civilization, from simple into complex, from the hexagram *qian* 乾 and *kun* 坤 into hexagram *weiji* 未濟, this is a natural trend. Laozi's desire to return to the state of the uncarved block is like driving water from a river to a high mountain. It will not succeed. Laozi opposes the development of human society towards civilization. At present, human beings have entered the stage of civilization, but Laozi still thinks that human society should return to the state of the uncarved block. This is wrong. Why is that? Because it's against nature's tendency, against the essence of *Dao*. Freedom means that all things themselves will be at rest. The one that competes with others and survives is the one that is most adapted to nature. If this principle is followed, the era of Great Peace will soon come. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 31)

As Laozi emphasizes "return" and "reversion" to the simplicity of *Dao*, he locates his ideal society in the ancient past and calls for people to return to the "uncarved" natural state of things. Laozi is aware and critical of the failings of civilization. By contrast, for Yan Fu, there is an inevitable human evolution from simple community to complex civilization, and it is impossible to return to primitive society. Unlike Laozi, who put the ideal world in the past, Yan Fu believes that the future progress is what human beings should pursue. Therefore, Yan criticizes Laozi's idea of returning to simplicity because it is contrary to nature; it is like trying to push river water back up a mountain.

It should be noted that Yan Fu, as a scholar with a profound understanding of Chinese and Western thought, was deeply aware of the harms that civilization had caused in Europe. Therefore, he recognized the wisdom of Laozi in criticizing civilization, but concluded that the defects of civilization are the necessary price of historical progress. This view was unavoidably influenced by the fact that China had been invaded by Western countries in his time, so Yan needed a *Dao* based in evolutionism and progressivism to help his country.³¹ Still, there is no doubt that Yan has not solved the contradiction between evolu-

tion and Laozi's thought at all. He tries to give *Dao* a more positive side through evolution, but the two different understandings of the relationship between *Dao* and things dooms his effort to failure. This is the main flaw in his theory of *Dao*.

5. Conclusions

Yan Fu tries to enrich the Chinese concept *Dao* by infusing it with Western learning. This leads him to construct a new theory of *Dao* which incorporates the ancient and the modern, as well as the Chinese and the Western. On the one hand, he admits that *Dao* occupies the dominant position as the starting point, the basis, and the end point of all things. Yet, at the same time, he interprets *Dao* with the materiality of Aether, giving *Dao* a tangible quality. Moreover, he uses the infinitesimal concept from calculus to bridge the internal tension of physics and metaphysics. However, his theory encounters problems when he tries to combine the linear motion of the theory of evolution with the cyclic movement of *Dao* in the *Laozi*. This results in an irreconcilable tension in Yan's notion of *Dao*.

This cosmological confusion is carried over into Yan's political application of *Dao*. He, combining Laozi's "*Dao* produces all things" with Zhuangzi's "*Dao* in all things," deduces the principle of "defending *zhong* and *ximing*." In politics, Yan Fu takes *wuwei* as the core, on the one hand, Yan continues the traditional explanation of *wuwei* as no interference; on the other, he extends its connotation by using the theory of evolution and observes the correlation between *wuwei* and the modern political system of democracy. *Wuwei* and democracy both aim to limit or minimize the role of government control and emphasize the power of the people. In this way, it is possible to argue for some semblance of the democratic ideals present in the *Laozi*. However, his cosmology, and upholding the premise of evolution, means Yan is unable to explain Laozi's advice to return to the state of the uncarved block. This contradiction forces him to reach the conclusion that the thought of Laozi is just wrong.

Regardless of its internal inconsistencies, Yan Fu's theory of *Dao* and its democratic manifestation in politics represents a novel expression in the long history of Laozegetics, and one that specifically aims to infuse Western learning into the *Laozi's* thought to create a truly universal theory of *Dao*.

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Notes

¹ The book's title was changed several times. Its first publication was named *Hou Guan Yan's Notes on the Laozi* (侯官嚴氏評點老子), which was printed in Tokyo, Japan in August 1905 and published officially in December of the same year. It should be pointed out that Yan Fu did not write this book alone, something proven by the inclusion of the statement "Xiong Jilian said" in Chapters 25, 33, 53, 64, and 74. Later, in 1931, the Commercial Press reprinted the book on the basis of its Tokyo edition and changed the title, naming it *Yan Fu's Notes on Laozi Daodejing* (嚴復評點老子道德經). Then, in 1970, in Yan Lingfeng's 嚴靈峰 (1904–1999) collection, the *Continuation of Wujia beizhai's Complete Laozi* (無求備齋老子集成續編), the book's title was *The Laozi with Notes* (老子評點). In 1986, this part was titled *Laozi Notes* (老子評語) in a collection of books named *Yan Fu's Works* (嚴復集) published by Zhong Hua Book Company, compiled by Wang Shi 王弼. In 2014, Fujian Education Publishing House published *Notes on the Laozi* (評點老子) but the title of *Hou Guan Yan's Notes on the Laozi* (侯官嚴氏評點老子) was retained in the preface. Regardless of the title, the part written by Yan Fu is basically the same. Yan Fu's interpretations on the *Laozi* quoted in this article are all from the 2014 edition, so the author here adopts the title of *Notes on the Laozi*.

² In 1903, Yan Fu suggested that his disciple Xiong Yuan'e 熊元鏗 (1879–1906), who styled himself Jilian 季廉, write an interpretation of the *Laozi*. Yan Fu confirms Xiong Jilian's work was the foundation of *Notes on the Laozi* in an unpublished letter to Xiong that states "when I was in the capital, you were kind enough to show me the *Laozi*. It was not until I was abroad that I thought deeply [on it] and added my own notes" (Wang 1998a, p. 47).

- ³ Yan Fu entered an old-style private school at the age of seven. What he learned was traditional classical literature. He studied from Confucian scholars including Yan Changkui 嚴昌燧 (1926–1950), Huang Shaoyan 黃少岩, and Huang Mengyu 黃孟侑 and gained some exposure to Western thought after entering the Fujian Ship Administration School 福建船政學堂. See Zhesheng Ouyang (2015, pp. 3–14).
- ⁴ There are many scholars that hold this view. See Linong Ai (1982); Shaojun Liu (2001); Tiangen Wang (2004); Cheng Li (2006); and Defeng Zhou (2006).
- ⁵ The “they” in Liu Sihe’s article refer to Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857), Gao Yandi 高延第 (1823–1886), Chen Sanli 陳三立 (1853–1937), Yi Peishen 易佩紳 (1826–1906), Xu Shaozhen 徐紹楨 (1861–1936), and Yan Fu (Liu 2018). In addition, Chen Muqing, a Taiwanese scholar, expressed similar views after comprehensively investigating Yan Fu’s *Notes on the Laozi* (Chen 2017). The development of such a view also has its basis in Yan Fu’s thought. Liu Gusheng holds that *Notes on the Laozi* is a reinterpretation of the classics, that is, an innovation made on the basis of understanding the classic texts in line with the requirements of the times (Liu 2010). Yan Fu’s interpretation was extremely bold for China at that time, and the degree of innovation in the interpretation of the text was self-evident, which even made scholars think that it was divorced from the text. *Notes on the Laozi* is indeed not completely compatible with the *Laozi*. Sometimes it even criticizes the original text. For example, Yan Fu directly critiques Chapters 18, 19, and 20 of the *Laozi*, saying that they contradict nature and violate the essence of *Dao*. Such an unprecedented skeptical attitude made it easy for scholars to mistake Yan Fu’s goal to be the introduction of Western thought through traditional Chinese classical texts. Even Benjamin Schwartz said: “There can be no doubt, however, that one of the preoccupations of the marginal notes is to find in Lao-tzu, in particular, intimations of ‘democracy’ and ‘science’ as Yen Fu understands these terms” (Schwartz 1964, p. 199).
- ⁶ Yan Fu once said explicitly, “it was proposed by vulgar scholars and Confucians, confined to the times, constrained by the vapid, courted their private wisdom, and made as assumptions. *Dao* is defending but not blocking.” See (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, preface, p. 12).
- ⁷ Yan Fu’s exact words are, “If one wants to read ancient Chinese books and understand the profound meaning behind ordinary language, it is often necessary to know Western thought before one can do so” (Yan 2004, p. 73).
- ⁸ Global Laozegetics is a broader and complex network of interpretations that span the globe. It assumes both *Laozi* commentaries and translations belong within a single field of research and emphasized the value of commentators and translators. This certainly broke through the limitations of mainstream scholars in searching for the *Laozi*’s “original” text and its “original” meaning and expand scholarship on the *Laozi* text. For more on this concept, see Misha Tadd (2022).
- ⁹ For more on this, see Zhongjiang Wang (1998b).
- ¹⁰ The meaning of “the same mind and *li*” is there are thousands of things in the universe, but their minds are all the same. Since the mind is the same, so is the *li*. *Li* refers to principles or laws. Sometimes it is another name for *Dao*.
- ¹¹ *Kong* is usually rendered in English as “emptiness,” but its actual meaning is much broader than that.
- ¹² Kuan-yen Liu examined how Western science and evolutionary biology draw Yan’s attention to the latent concepts of “force” in the *Laozi*. See Kuan-yen Liu (2020).
- ¹³ See Fu Yan (2014e, vol. 9, p. 29). I employ a modified version of Mr. Waley’s translation for Yan’s quote of the *Laozi*’s original passage. See (Waley 1958, p. 159).
- ¹⁴ Chen Muqing similarly agrees that “although Laozi’s theory emphasizes the way of heaven and nature . . . it excludes any evolutionary thought.” See Muqing Chen (2017).
- ¹⁵ Anything in nature or human society, when developed to one extreme, will head toward the opposite (*fan*) extreme. That is to say, to paraphrase Hegel, everything contains its own negation. See Youlan Feng (2013, p. 19). Ren Jiyu 任繼愈 also holds a similar view. He believes that “changing in the opposite direction is the movement of *Dao*”. See Jiyu Ren (1956, p. 32).
- ¹⁶ *Fan* has the meaning of “cycle.” See Heng Gao (2004, p. 130).
- ¹⁷ D. C. Lau interpreted *fan* as “reverse”. He thinks that all we are entitled to say is that, according to the *Laozi*, when a thing develops to the higher limit, it will necessarily reverse and begin to decline, but it is not stated that when a thing is at, or reaches, the lower limit, it will necessarily develop all the way to the higher limit. See D. C. Lau (1958).
- ¹⁸ The *Laozi* highlights the mysterious, ineffable, and superior nature of *Dao*. For example, in Chapter 1 of the *Laozi*, *Dao* may be called mystery. *Dao* is the ancestor of all things in Chapter 4, the shape of nothing and the image of nothing in Chapter 14, and existed before heaven and earth in Chapter 25. We can see that Laozi’s thought presents *Dao* as the quintessence which governs the universe; anything tangible in the universe is non-fundamental, such as in the “Tianxia” chapter of *Zhuangzi*. Cao Feng makes it clear that Laozi divided the world into the metaphysical world of *Dao* and the physical world of things and believes that the two are completely different. See Feng Cao (2013).
- ¹⁹ His concept *zhong* has multiple meanings, such as center, moderation, middle, mean, etc. To include this polysemy, this paper uses the transliteration *zhong*.
- ²⁰ The three dimensions refer to emptiness, submission, and exhaustion as mentioned below.
- ²¹ The literal meaning of *qu* is loss and the literal meaning of *jie* is exhaust. *Xu er bu qu(jie)* means that “it is empty but gives a supply that never fails.”

- 22 *Yinming* refers to “observing with a tranquil mind.” The meaning of *xinming* is “resorting to the light.” It should be noted that the word *yinming* does not appear directly in *Zhuangzi*. The author thinks that the *yinming* mentioned by Yan Fu should be *yiming* 以明. *Zhuangzi* not only directly mentions this word, but also talks about *mo ruo yiming* 莫若以明 (the best thing to do is to observe with a tranquil mind) many times.
- 23 See Jesse (2017). Schwartz summarized this democratic characteristic as “an austere self-abnegating virtue.” (Schwartz 1964, p. 203).
- 24 Chapter 46 of the *Laozi* is as follows: “When there is Tao in the empire, the galloping steeds are turned back to fertilize the ground by their droppings. When there is not Tao in the empire, war horses will be reared even on the sacred mounds below the city walls. No lure is greater than to possess what others want, no disaster greater than that men should be wanting to get more. Truly: ‘He who has once known the contentment that comes simply through being content, will never again be otherwise than contented’ ” (Waley 1958, p. 199).
- 25 Yang Dayong analyzed in detail the status of people and the relationship between people and freedom in Yan Fu’s thought. (See Dayong Yang 1992).
- 26 Yan glosses “the master executioner” as “natural selection.” Interfering with the natural principles at work in the social realm, they suggest, can only result in harm. See Jesse (2017).
- 27 By *wei*, Xiong refers to all the hard work that the first monarchs of the Qin, Han, Sui, and Tang dynasties undertook to create a new dynasty, as mentioned in the above quotation.
- 28 Yan Fu said: “these four sentences given by Wang Bi summarize the new theory of Darwin at a high level” (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 23).
- 29 Chiyou is a mythological warrior who fought with the Yellow Emperor.
- 30 Kuan-yen Liu has a detailed discussion on this subject. See Kuan-yen Liu (2020).
- 31 See Zhongjiang Wang (1998b) for discussions on the different views of Yan Fu and Lao Zi on history.

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Article

The Strategy of Interpreting the *Daodejing* through Confucianism in Park Se-dang's *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*

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Abstract: This research study examines Park Se-dang's *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*, which was the first complete exegesis of the *Daodejing* (DDJ) in Korea. This study investigates the theoretical strategies that Park used to interpret the DDJ from a Neo-Confucian perspective and also examines the logical mistakes that Park took to force a unity between Neo-Confucianism and Daoism. The core method for interpreting the DDJ that Park utilized in his attempt to assert the compatibility of Neo-Confucianism and Daoism can be summarized as "interpreting Daoism through Neo-Confucian theory". This research study breaks down Park's strategy for reinterpreting the DDJ, dividing Park's argumentation into four parts: (1.) clarifying the historical hereticalization of the DDJ; (2.) identifying the ethics and treasured virtues of Confucianism and Daoism; (3.) the study of the cosmologies of Confucianism and Daoism; and (4.) interpreting Daoist moral ethics through Neo-Confucian cosmological theory. Park Se-dang's strategy for forcing unity between Neo-Confucianism and Daoism had its limits. Among other things, Park attempted but failed to narrow the gap between Confucian and Daoist ethics and cosmology by converting the concept of "heaven" in the DDJ into a humanized heaven. Eventually, even though Park's strategy failed, his work inspired other *Silhak* scholars of Joseon up to the 19th century and had a clear impact on the many subsequent reinterpretations of the DDJ.

Keywords: Park Se-dang; *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*; *Silhak*; *ti* 體; *yong* 用; *you* 有; *wu* 無

1. Introduction

This paper aims to clarify the strategy of "using Neo-Confucianism to interpret Daoism" (以儒釋道), which was the main purpose behind Park Se-dang's 朴世堂 *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*, the first complete explanatory commentary of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (below DDJ) written in Joseon Korea. The commentary serves as a treatise that focuses on the relationship between the concepts *ti* 體 and *yong* 用 and *you* 有 and *wu* 無.

Park Se-dang's commentary on the DDJ reflects the awareness of social problems and the criticism that the author, who was a scholar of *Silhak* 實學 (Practical Learning), provided during the 17th century, and the ideas of social reform that followed. To date, a total of five moral commentaries exist in complete form in Korea, all of which were written during the period from the emergence to the flourishing of *Silhak* during the middle to late Joseon dynasty. The earliest existing commentary on the DDJ by a Korean author is *Sun-eon* 醇言 by Yi I 李珥 (1536–1584), but it is not comprehensive since Yi only wrote about a few selected chapters that corresponded to his views. For Park Se-dang, Yi's attempt to interpret the DDJ not only provided the decisive impetus to begin the complete exegesis of the DDJ, but it also motivated him to write a fully annotated, first complete edition of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子—*Namhwagyeong Juhaesanbo* 南華經註解刪補, the first of its kind in Korea—by suggesting the possible ideological conformity of Confucianism and Daoism.

Not soon after Park Se-dang completed his commentaries on the DDJ and *Zhuangzi*, several other DDJ exegeses that were handed down were compiled in the 18th century, these included the following:

- *Dodeokjigwi* 道德指歸 by Seo Myeong-eung 徐命應 (1716–1787);
- *Chowondamno* 椒園談老 by Lee Chung-ik 李忠翊 (1744–1816);

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- *Jeongno* 訂老 by Hong Seokju 洪奭周 (1774–1842);
- *Nojajiryak* 老子指略 by Sin Jak 申綽 (1760–1828).

The large number of commentaries that were compiled after *Sinju Dodeokgyeong* show that the work had a clear influence on the philosophical development of Daoism in the Joseon dynasty. Of the five existing DDJ exegeses, aside from *Sun-eon*, all of the other four—listed above—were completed by *Silhak* scholars during the Joseon dynasty. This pattern suggests that the appearance of DDJ exegeses during the Joseon period is closely related to the emergence of *Silhak*.

Silhak, as the name of this school already suggests, began to take shape in the early 17th century with the intention of finding methods to solve practical problems, and became very popular between the early 18th century and the mid-19th century.¹ The fact that *Silhak* scholars established “actuality” as their academic principle must be understood as a reaction to the negative effects of Neo-Confucianism, the political ideology of the Joseon dynasty. While Neo-Confucian thought developed to its highest level over the course of the 16th century, the theory became increasingly metaphysical and lost its applicability to practical problems. Applied to real situations, Neo-Confucian theory failed to correctly assess problems or develop and provide workable solutions, which, in turn, led to more vehement criticism. In addition to the awareness of this issue among Korean scholars, external factors like the change in diplomatic relations following the dynastic transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty in China, as well as the adoption of practically oriented teachings such as *Seohak* (Western Learning)², played a crucial role.

Silhak, as pursued by Park Se-dang, aimed to strengthen the nation through practical studies, including farming and business, beyond the traditional academic methods of *Traditional Confucian exegetics* (*gyeonghak* 經學). According to a study by Yoon Sa-soon, an expert on Korean *Silhak*, the methodology pursued by the Joseon *Silhak* scholars can be largely summarized as “the spirit of broad scholarship (*bakhak* 博學)”³, “the search for empiricism and practicability”, and *Gojeunghak* 考證學 (Evidential Learning) (Yun 2008, p. 74). The term broad scholarship refers to the academic methodology pursued by scholars during the pre-Qin era, including interrogation (*simmun* 審問), contemplation (*simsa* 深思), and discernment (*myeongbyeon* 明辨). The “search for empiricism and practicability” alludes to the spirit in which the original Confucian scholars analyzed real-world problems and attempted to find workable solutions. Evidential Learning refers to the method of finding proof in older texts, which was popular in the Qing dynasty.⁴ What all three approaches mentioned above have in common is that they searched for their own methods in ancient ways of thinking, including the original Confucianism of the pre-Qin era, and in this way attempted to evade the theoretical limitations of the Neo-Confucianism prevalent in the Joseon period, although they did not attack it directly (Seo-Reich 2022, pp. 3–4).

While pursuing broad scholarship, which was neglected by Neo-Confucian scholars, *Silhak* scholars in the 16th century had the possibility to establish the DDJ as an object of research, which had been hitherto impossible since it was deemed a non-Confucian theory and thus classified as a heretical book⁵. However, in the second half of the 18th century, attempts to unify Neo-Confucianism and Daoism decreased significantly, while attempts to reinterpret the DDJ from other viewpoints, such as the original Confucianism or *Sang-suhak* 象數學 (numerology), increased. To explain this dynamic, most research thus far has focused on external factors like the acceptance and dissemination of foreign knowledge and theories, such as the Yangming school, Evidential Learning, or Western Learning, which were mostly introduced in Joseon during the 19th century (Saemio Kim 2011, pp. 11–27). This study hypothesizes that in addition to the external determinants, internal factors, namely the theoretical shortcomings of Park Se-dang’s approach to force a fusion of Neo-Confucianism and Daoism in the 17th century, also played an equally important—if not the decisive—role. Since Park’s method of interpreting Daoism through Confucian thought had reached its theoretical limit, it was inevitable that new attempts such as in-

interpreting the DDJ based on numerology⁶, criticizing Neo-Confucianism⁷, or returning to original Confucian thought⁸ would be made.

To substantiate this hypothesis, we must first expose the logical deficiencies of the theoretical attempt to unify Confucianism and Daoism employed in Park's DDJ commentaries. Therefore, this study will expose the theoretical contradictions in the annotations of the *Sinju Dodeokgyeong* and discuss them by analyzing the relationship of the concepts of *ti* 體 and *yong* 用 as well as *you* 有 and *wu* 無, which are the four core concepts of Park's DDJ interpretation. Park's understanding of the relationship between them clarifies the way in which he, as a *Silhak* scholar, tried to complete Yi I's endeavor of interpreting Daoism through Confucianism.⁹ At the same time, the problems he posed to the *Silhak* scholars of his time might help to explain why several interpretations of the heretical DDJ could suddenly appear in the following 18th and 19th centuries.

2. Hereticalization of the *Daodejing* in the 16th and 17th Centuries

Since the DDJ was first introduced to Goguryeo in the 7th century¹⁰, it has maintained its vitality in Korean thought. The *Bojangbongrojo* 寶藏奉老條 chapter of the *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事, volume 3, states that people from Goguryeo were competing to study and adhere to the teachings of the *Wudoumi* 五斗米 sect—also known as Celestial Masters Sect (*Tianshi Dao* 天師道)—suggesting a high probability that the DDJ scriptures were circulated by this movement. As one of the three major sects of Daoism, the Celestial Masters Sect was concerned with ways to maintain health and extend lifespan (S.-b. Park 2019, p. 73), and there is a high probability that the DDJ at that time was read as a religious text rather than as a text for academic or political purposes. Afterward, the DDJ was only briefly mentioned in the 8th volume of the *Goryeosa Jeoryo* 高麗史節要 when the author discusses the *bogwongwan* 福源觀, i.e., the institution for training Daoists during the Goryeo dynasty. Therefore, it should be understood that it was not until the Joseon dynasty that the DDJ actually became an object of discussion in Korea.

Then how could it happen that the DDJ began to attract the attention of Yi I and other Neo-Confucian scholars through the mid-to-late Joseon dynasty? To answer this question, it must first be clarified why the DDJ could not be academically discussed prior to the middle of the Joseon dynasty. After Goryeo adopted the Song dynasty's Neo-Confucian thought, the latter steadily evolved into the dominant political ideology, turning Joseon effectively into a Neo-Confucian kingdom. For example, as the ethical items (*tiaomu* 條目) and guiding principles (*gangling* 綱領)¹¹ discussed in Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130–1200) *The Great Learning* became established as actual political norms, Neo-Confucianism was able to become the political ideology for both family centered kinship communities and state-centered social communities. The Four Books, i.e., *Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of Mean*, reflect Zhu Xi's perspective, which continues the academic lineage of Zhou Lianxi 周濂溪, Cheng Mingdao 程明道, and Cheng Yichuan 程伊川, occupied the central position in the national education system. Eventually, this led to the hereticalization of all other schools except Neo-Confucianism.

The reasons why Daoism, along with Buddhism, were branded as heretical ways of thinking and completely banned from the public discourse lie in the writings on Neo-Confucianism, which during the Joseon dynasty were read and interpreted in a dogmatic way. Zhu Xi declares, “the *jing* 精 (fineness) and *cu* 粗 (coarseness) of things are unified, there are no two origins” (Zhu 2023g, no. 95)¹². In contrast, he explains, that “Buddha referred to heaven and earth as *huanwang* 幻妄 (illusion), which means there is nothing at all (*quanwu* 全無)” (Zhu 2023d, no. 126). According to Zhu Xi, *huanwang* is a state of nothingness, in which phenomenon and noumenon (thing-in-itself) are separated. A similar view is expressed in volume 95 of *Zhuziyulei*.

Nowadays, people only see the absence of *xing* 形 (image) or *zhao* 兆 (sign), and say it is empty (空蕩蕩) [...] For example, since Buddhists only discuss *kong* 空 (emptiness), and Laozi only discusses *wu* 無 (nothingness), it is impossible to know whether there is an actual *li* 理 in the *Dao*. (Zhu 2023g, no. 95)

Here Zhu Xi criticizes the impossibility of finding *li* in the Buddhist concept of *kong* and Laozi's concept of *wu*. And he concludes that "the *Dao* of which Buddha and Laozi speak is empty (空虛) and lonesome (寂寞)" (Zhu 2023a, no. 38). This, in turn, would lead to an empty discourse that not only fails to solve real-world problems, but even risks to become an instrument of deception. Zhu Xi refers to *The Great Learning* to explicate the purpose of study that consists of "manifesting one's bright virtue" (明明德) and "loving the people" (親民)—a purpose fundamentally different from the *Dao* of Laozi and Buddha, which he considers to be kindred spirits (*laofu* 老佛), as well as Guan Zhong 管仲 and his disciple Wang Tong 王通, all of which he considered heretics (Zhu 2023e, no. 17).

For scholars in the early and middle Joseon period, when the ideas of Zhu Xi had become the central tenet of scholarship and political ideology, there was no need to bring Buddhist and Daoist thought, already considered heretical, back to the center of their studies. Since the Neo-Confucianists regarded the DDJ as heresy, its contents were hardly ever discussed in academic literature. Nonetheless, Toegye Yi Hwang 退溪李滉 (1501–1570), who established the academic foundation of Joseon Neo-Confucianism, left a brief mention of Laozi and Zhuangzi.

One human body has both *li* 理 (reason) and *qi* 氣 (energy). *Li* is highly valued, while *qi* is of little value. However, *li* is non-interference (*wuwei* 無為), while *qi* has desires. Thus, those who put *li* into practice, already foster their *qi* in the process. This is what a sage (聖賢) is. If you focus only on nourishing *qi* (*yangqi* 養氣), you will surely hurt your *xing* 性 (nature). This is what Laozi and Zhuangzi are. (H. Yi 1915, p. 90)

Yi Hwang criticized that because the Lao and Zhuang put more emphasis on *qi*, this could lead to the destruction of *li*, and cautioned against it. Although he was aware of both thinkers, he only mentioned them in order to completely dismiss them as heresy.

Regarding Buddhism, Yi Hwang only had to say, "Just like a person that wades through the water drowns in it while testing its depth and shallowness, a person who encounters heresy will drown in it before he realizes it. That's why I do not look at Buddhist scriptures" (H. Yi 1958, p. 42). This shows that he wanted to stay away from texts considered heretical. On the other hand, Yi I, who adopted Yi Hwang's theory of the duality of *li* and *qi*, did not completely reject heresy.¹³ Discussing Buddhism, he posed the question, "Mencius says that 'people are born good (性善)', and praises Yao 堯 and Shun 舜. How is this any different from 'the heart itself is Buddha (即心即佛)'?" (I. Yi 1990, pp. 20–21). This quote shows that Yi I thought it conceivable to find true statements in Buddhist scriptures as well. Furthermore, Yi I defines his position as follows: "There are many things said by Laozi in the DDJ, but 'non-interference (*wuwei* 無為)' and 'being without desires (*wuyu* 無慾)' are concepts close to *li*. Therefore, even for a gentleman (君子), there is something to be taken from it" (I. Yi 1990, p. 62).

This is quite an unconventional view considering the political situation in the 16th century.¹⁴ Yi I was the author of the *Suneon* 醇言, the first commentary on the DDJ in Korea, which was discovered only after his death. His disciples subsequently maintained a strict silence about it and even withheld it in the *Yulgokjeonseo* 栗谷全書, a collection of Yi I's collected works.¹⁵ Furthermore, Yi I's rather unbiased view of heretical topics can be understood as the main reason why he was able to write a text like the *Suneon*. Yi I quotes Sima Qian, "Those who study Laozi defeat Confucianism, and those who study Confucianism also defeat Laozi" (I. Yi 1990, p. 62), to illustrate the conflict between these two ideas. At the same time, he adds, "Initially, the study of Lao and Zhuang did not reach this point, however, the small difference that appeared in the original source must increase the more it flows down" (I. Yi 1990, p. 63).¹⁶ This can be understood as a reevaluation of Laozi, suggesting that the damage was caused by later interpretations, but not as a problem of the original thought of Laozi himself.¹⁷ This perspective is by and large shared by Park Se-dang.

The attempts to interpret the DDJ from a Confucian perspective have already begun during the Southern Song period. Lin Xiyi's 林希逸 (1193–1271) *Laozi Yanzhai Kouyi* 老子齋齋口義¹⁸ is a representative example. Lin Xiyi's commentary on the DDJ had a considerable influence in East Asian countries: Park Se-dang¹⁹ in the Korean Joseon dynasty and Hayashi Razan 林羅山 (1583–1657)²⁰ in the Japanese Edo period who were both active in the 17th century cited a large part of Lin Xiyi's commentary. In addition, Park Se-dang actively accepted Yi I's view, expressed in *Suneon*, "The purpose of this book [the DDJ] is clearly beneficial to scholars. Therefore, it should not be neglected just because it is not a scripture of a sage" (I. Yi 2011, pp. 124–25). Park further reveals his willingness to advance the unification of Confucianism and Daoism by attempting to interpret the ideas of Laozi in a Confucian manner throughout the DDJ. In the following section, I will examine the theoretical strategy Park Se-dang used to try to achieve this interpretation of the DDJ from a Confucian perspective.

3. The Purpose, Strategy, and Limitations of Park's *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*

Park Se-dang's *Sinju Dodeokgyeong* took Chen Shen's 陳深 *Laizi Pinjie* 老子品節 as its main point of reference but also referred to the following works:

- Lin Xiyi's 林希逸 *Laozi Yanzhai Kouyi* 老子齋齋口義;
- Su Zhe's 蘇轍 *Laozi Jie* 老子解;
- Dong Sijing's 董思靖 *Daodezhenjing Jijie* 道德真經集解;
- Wang Bi's 王弼 *Laozi Zhu* 老子注;
- Jiao Hong's 焦竑 *Laozi Yi* 老子翼.

Among these other works, Lin Xiyi's annotations in *Laozi Yanzhai Kouyi* are the most widely featured commentary in the *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*.²¹ This is partly because of the widespread popularity of Lin's *Laozi Yanzhai Kouyi* in 17th-century Joseon society, but at the same time also shows that Park was particularly observant of Lin's perspectives.²² This article focuses on the relationships between *ti*, *yong*, *you*, and *wu*, as applied in *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*.

3.1. The Ethical Ground: "to Cultivate Oneself and Govern Others" (修己治人)

The first and most important step that Yi I took in the 16th century to free the DDJ from accusations of heresy was to prove that Laozi's thought did not deviate from Confucian thought.²³ In the preface to *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*, Park also took this approach, assigning the purpose of his annotation of the DDJ to reveal the principles of a unified philosophical system shared between Confucianism and Daoism.

While he [Laozi] lived in seclusion, he wrote a book to define the *Dao* that he upheld and to reveal its meaning. Although Laozi's *Dao* didn't conform to the method of the [Confucian] sages (聖人). Nevertheless, Laozi's intention was still to "cultivate oneself and govern others" (修己治人). Even though Laozi's words are brief, the message is profound. For this reason, the numerous illustrations of the *Dao* [in DDJ] are valued and have been used throughout antiquity, up through the Han Dynasty. The ruling class such as kings performed 'polite and wordless edification,' while their subordinates practiced 'clean and quiet politics.' But, during the Jin dynasty, some scholars with great ambitions but who behaved recklessly, spread falsehoods and deceived an era. [...] In the case of Lin Xiyi's annotations for example, they're all wrong, not one of them is right. (S.-d. Park 2013, pp. 71–72)

In the above passage, Park noted that, although Laozi could hardly be regarded as a Confucian sage having lived in seclusion and absent from politics, Laozi did, however, embody the Confucian intention of cultivating oneself and governing others. In other words, according to Park, both Confucianism and Daoism have at their core a shared pursuit for the accomplished temperament of sages.²⁴ This argument contradicts Lin Xiyi's view that Laozi's "words are too immoderate to have an impact on the Confucian sages" (Lin 2010,

p. 5). Lin Xiyi believed that Laozi's image of the sage differed from the Confucian ideal in terms of its ethical orientation, and argued that, "because what Laozi said is too volitional, it's close to heresy" (Lin 2010, p. 4). Park criticized Lin's arguments, and even went so far as to say that "they're all wrong, not one of them is right". In essence, this is Park's refusal to participate in hereticalizing Daoism, which was pervasive in Joseon society. This purpose is clearly expressed in the preface of the *Shinju Dodeokgyeong*.

Park Se-dang also makes the case for destigmatizing the DDJ. First, Park Se-dang implies that, for both Confucius and Laozi, "cultivating oneself and governing others" was the ultimate goal of their studies, and then takes this assertion as the basis for the compatibility of Confucianism and Daoism. Park argues that the movement to hereticalize DDJ was actually more connected to the ambiguous language used in the DDJ rather than the philosophical system it established. And, in terms of that philosophical system, there was indeed, Park argued, a strong ethical code for political affairs, with concrete recommendations such as "polite and wordless edification" and "clean and quiet politics". According to Park, misinterpretation of the DDJ occurred after the Han dynasty because of the implicit and often ambiguous nature of the language used in the text. These misinterpretations eventually became so commonplace that scholars forgot the core goal of the manuscript. Park further argued that the hereticalization of the DDJ was the result of Weijin metaphysicians whom he describes as having great ambitions but reckless behavior. This is in part a criticism directed at commentaries that are based on Wang Bi's commentary of the DDJ. For context, of the DDJ commentaries that circulated widely through 17th-century Korean society, there were mainly two schools of commentaries²⁵: commentaries from the post-Song dynasty and Ming dynasty Neo-Confucian thought, represented by Su Zhe 蘇轍 and Wu Cheng 吳澄, and commentaries from the pre-Song dynasty perspective of the Weijin metaphysicians, represented by Wang Bi. Park criticized the latter.

Wang Bi interpreted the relationship between *Dao* (道, the Way) and *ming* (名, the name), which is discussed in Chapter 1 of the DDJ, as an issue of separation between "existence" and "language" (B. Wang 2011, p. 1). Lin Xiyi argued that "since the *Dao* generally doesn't tolerate language, as soon as the *Dao* is expressed in language, the *Dao* is violated" (Lin 2010, p. 1). In other words, Lin argued that *Dao* only exists as *changdao* 常道 (the constant *Dao*, eternal or persistent Way), but not as *ming*, i.e., *Dao* as a language. However, Park Se-dang understands *Dao* and *ming* as they are presented in the first chapter of DDJ, not as distinct and separate relations of reality and the various phenomena within reality, but rather in terms of the following framework: "the *Dao* refers to the ontological noumenon (*ti* 體), and *ming* refers to the function (*yong* 用)" (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 77). That is to say, "because *Dao* has *ming* as its function, and *ming* has *Dao* as its body; thus, neither the ontological noumenon nor the function can be eliminated" (S.-d. Park 2013, pp. 77–78).

However, even if it is safe to assume that the hereticalization of the DDJ was the result of problematic interpretations proposed in part by Weijin-era metaphysicians, there are some other potential problems with Park's argument. Core to Park's central argument is that both Daoists and Confucians shared the primary aim of becoming a sage, as a point of completion for their ethical development. However, one passage from chapter 18 of the DDJ appears to call into question this very argument. This passage appears to carry strong anti-Confucian sentiment.

With the disappearance of the great *Dao*, benevolence and righteousness emerged. Once wisdom emerged, there also came with it great deception.

Only when parents fail to be in harmony do filial children and loving parents emerge. And only when the country falls to chaos do officials with strong allegiance to the sovereign show their loyalties. (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 117)²⁶

The virtues of benevolence and righteousness, filial piety, love and compassion, and loyalty or allegiance to the sovereign that appear in the above passage are all virtues that are revered in Confucianism. It is likely that Laozi mentioned these virtues as a means to address the Confucian teachings of the day. According to chapter 18 of the DDJ, filial piety

was proposed as a solution for families that were divided, and allegiance to the sovereign was discussed precisely because the state was in crisis. In other words, it appears that Laozi did not propose the virtues of Confucianism as a means toward good governance, but rather as remedies to the problems that occur in the absence of the *Dao*. In other words, the virtues of Confucian thinkers and those of Laozi were not actually aligned. Aware of this issue, Park wrote the below passage:

Loyal subjects prove their loyalty to their sovereign when the nation is in chaos. Thus, the fault lies with the chaos, not with the officials. Filial piety and love are discovered when there's tension in the family. Thus, the fault lies in the tension, and not in filial piety or love. After the disappearance of the great *Dao*, people learned of benevolence and righteousness. The fault lies in the disappearance of the *Dao*, and not with benevolence or righteousness. In this regard, Laozi deserves a critical evaluation that he did not properly understand the essence [of the *Dao*]. (S.-d. Park 2013, pp. 117–18)

In short, Park argues that loyal subjects are not only loyal during times of turmoil, but rather their loyalty is revealed in such times. Similarly, filial piety and benevolence are not the result of a lack of unity in the family but are merely revealed through temporary disorder or tension within the family. Park agrees with Laozi insofar that the *Dao* is absent first before people discover the virtues of Confucianism. However, Park Se-dang explains Laozi's point of view in terms of chronology, saying that people gradually realized the virtue of Confucianism after the disappearance of the *Dao*. But Laozi misinterpreted this temporal relationship as a causal relationship and concluded that "virtue came into the world through the disappearance of the *Dao*". In Park's view, the state would be governed well if all people tried to become loyal subjects, and then those who share flesh and blood would have no choice but to seek unity and harmony with one another. Eventually, Park concludes, "if one tries to practice benevolence and righteousness, the great *Dao* is realized, and this is the reason why the sages value benevolence and righteousness".

No matter whether Laozi misunderstood the sequence of events as causal in nature or he was simply lamenting the state of the world at his time and expressing it in an ironic way, Park's initial argument has its limitations. Even though Park's explanation might help to narrow the gap between the virtues of Confucian and Daoist thought, his explanation still failed to explain the connection on a more fundamental basis. In fact, narrowing the gap between Confucian virtues and Daoist ethics was the first issue that Park Se-dang attempted to resolve in his attempt to integrate Confucian and Daoist philosophy. Park worked to overcome these limitations by supplying the justification at the cosmological level.

3.2. The Cosmological Level: "Ti and Yong Have the Same Source" (體用一源)

According to Park Se-dang, the biggest problem with Wang Bi's interpretation of chapter 1 of the DDJ is that *Dao* and *ming* are established as tangible and intangible objects. As Lin Xiyi pointed out, at the moment when *Dao* is expressed in language, *ming* 名 (the name) is established as the "second meaning" (二義), which is separated from the original substance of *Dao*. However, Park opposed Lin's interpretation by integrating *Dao* and *ming* in the following ways:

The *Dao* refers to *ti* 體 or the ontological body, and the *ming* or name refers to the *yong* 用 or functional use. *Dao* has *ming* as its function, and *ming* has *Dao* as its body, but neither the body nor the function can be eliminated. Therefore, if *Dao* becomes *Dao* by itself, it isn't the so-called "constant *Dao*" or eternal way (*changdao* 常道), because there's no function to establish itself as the body or *ti* [of *Dao*]. Further, if the name or *ming* becomes a name or *ming* by itself, it is not the so-called "constant *ming*" (*changming* 常名), because there's no *ti* to act by itself. (S.-d. Park 2013, pp. 77–78)

Park Se-dang approaches *Dao* as *ti* and *ming* as *yong*. Based on this premise, *ti* can be exposed as a phenomenon using the function of *ming*, and *ming* has its own fundamental

substance, which is *Dao*. Therefore, *Dao* and *ming* are not independent entities but rather are entities that are interdependent upon each other, specifically as “constant *Dao*” and “constant *ming*”, respectively. Park further develops his argument by linking the concepts of “constant *wu*” (*changwu* 常無) and “constant *you*” (*changyou* 常有), as well as *li* 理 and *xiang* 象.

When Laozi uses the term “constant *wu*”, he’s actually referring to the *ti* together with the concept of the “constant *Dao*” and the “nameless” (*wuming* 無名). From this angle, Laozi attempted to understand the mysterious *li* 理 (reason, principle, or natural law) that encompasses all the other phenomena (*xiang* 象). Furthermore, the “constant *you*” discussed in this text refers to the *yong* together with the “constant *ming*” and “having name” (*yuming* 有名). From this, it can be seen that all the phenomena that manifest themselves in the world “have their origin in the same one principle” (根源一理). (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 78)

In the above quote, Park Se-dang analyzes the concept of the “constant *Dao*” in the first chapter of the DDJ as things that are on the level of the *ti*. He also analyzed the concepts of the “constant *wu*” and the “nameless”, as well as the concept of the “constant *ming*” as things on the level of the *yong* along with the concepts of the “constant *you*” and the “the named”. According to Park, if the former is something that follows *li*, then the latter becomes a *xiang* (phenomenon) through which *li* is revealed. However, since the *xiang* already embraces *li*, thus, these two are eventually “rooted in one *li*” (根源一理). Park’s proposed cosmological system is a direct application of the Neo-Confucianist perspective of “*ti* and *yong* originated from one source” (體用一源), which was prevalent during the Song and Ming dynasties. For this reason, Park quoted the following passage in his commentary and used it as a basis for his argumentation.

Li means that the *yong* is inherent in *ti*, this is the so-called “one root” (一源). Additionally, *xiang* means that “subtleness” (微) has no choice but to be included in “conspicuousness” (顯). This is so-called “gaplessness” (無間). (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 79)

The concepts of “subtleness” and *li* or “conspicuousness” and *xiang* that Park discusses here correspond to Cheng Yi-chuan’s 程伊川 theory of *ti* and *yong*, which states that *ti* and *yong* originated from one source and that there is no gap between subtleness and conspicuousness (體用一源, 顯微無間) (Cheng 2019, p. 27). The term “gapless” or “gaplessness” in Cheng’s writings refers to the relationship between *li* and *xiang*, where the *li*, or the natural principle or reason for things, serves as the *ti* or ontological body that contains the *yong* or function of a thing to be revealed as *xiang* or an object or incident within reality. Zhu Xi understood that Cheng Yi-chuan’s conception of *li* existed first in time and that *xiang* originated from *li*, therefore emerging after *li*. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that *li* and *xiang* in Zhu Xi’s view are completely the same, but they also cannot be divided because they all originate from the same source. The following is Zhu Xi’s commentary on the concept that “*ti* and *yong* originated from one”.

“*Ti* and *yong* originated from one” means that, although there are no traces of *ti* (“the ontological body”), there is already *yong* (“function”) in the middle of *ti*; and “there is no gap between *wei* and *xian*” means that *wei* (“subtleness”) is in the middle of the *xian* (“appearance or conspicuousness”). That is, even when heaven and earth do not yet exist, all things on earth are already prepared for it, that is why “there is already *yong* in the middle of the *ti*”; when heaven and earth are already established, there *li* is already present, that is why “*wei* is in the middle of the *xian*”. (Zhu 2023f, no. 67)

In summary, when viewed from the perspective of the passage of time, even when *ti* or the ontological body has no shape, it already exists from before the creation of all things in nature. A similar view can also be found in Zhu Xi’s *Taiji Tujie* 太極圖解 (Taiji diagram). In it, Zhu Xi explains the relationship between *ti* and *yong* as follows: “When one discusses *li* (the natural principle or order of things), *ti* (the ontological body) always precedes *yong*

(the function). And, when one discusses *ti*, generally speaking, the *li* of *yong* already has taken place within the *ti*. This is the reason why they originated from one single origin". In other words, Zhu Xi argues that *ti* and *yong* both originate from *li*, while recognizing that *ti* and *yong* emerged sequentially.

However, since *ti* here leaves no vestige, it is impossible for it to be recognized as itself; hence, we can only recognize it when *ti* appears outside. The reason why *ti*, which originally is not exposed on the outside, can be revealed on the outside is that *yong* is already contained in *ti* and because there is an invisible subtleness (*wei*) in the phenomenon (*xian*) that is revealed on the outside. Zhu Xi also interpreted *xian*—appearance, conspicuousness, or the external phenomenon—and *wei*—subtleness, which is present inside of *xian*—as the relationship between *wu* 物 (things) and *li*. Zhu Xi explains this idea in the following quote from *Taiji Tujie*: "If I explain 'there's no gap between subtleness and conspicuousness' by means of a very prominent *xiang* 象, it can be said that there's nothing that doesn't have *li* involved in every affair and everything" (J. Li 2020, p. 2537). In other words, all phenomena whether objects or incidents can be understood as a recognizable *xiang*. However, *li* is already implied in all possible kinds of *xiang* without exception. Zhu Xi defined the meaning of what is implied in the outward phenomenon, that is, the relationship between *xian* and *wei*, through "gaplessness" (*wujian* 無間).

In contrast to this, Joseon Neo-Confucian scholars at the time applied *li* and *qi* 氣 as the absolute criteria for analyzing various phenomena when it came to understanding the relationship between *Dao* and *ming*. Considering this point, it is of notable significance that Park is applying Zhu Xi's theory of "*ti* and *yong* originated from one" for the interpretation of the DDJ. This is because, through this method, the discussions about the relationship between *Dao* and *ming* could avoid the dichotomy of *li* and *qi*. At the same time, however, they did not deviate from the theoretical norms of Neo-Confucianism and eventually provided the possibility for an inclusive interpretation of the DDJ. Zhu Xi also summarized the concepts of *ti* and *yong* in the following way: "In terms of a metaphysical object, *chongmo* (沖漠, emptiness and tranquility) is *ti*, and when *chongmo* manifests itself in material objects, that becomes *yong*. In terms of a physical object, things also become *ti*, and the *li* of *ti* that gets revealed is *yong*" (Zhu 2023b, no. 48). In short, metaphysical objects come to existence earlier than physical objects because—although they are the noumenon of things, which itself is unrecognizable—they are already embedded in every physical object and affair as a reason (*li*). In other words, a physical object is a metaphysical object that appears as a *xiang*. This is nothing more than something that the *li* of *ti* revealed through *yong*, thus both metaphysical things and physical things both originate from the same source.

Notably, the theory of *ti* and *yong*, which Park applied as the basic perspective to annotate the DDJ is different from Wang Bi's understanding (Jo 1997, p. 193). There are some lines in Wang Bi's commentary for chapter 38 of the DDJ that show how Wang Bi understood the concepts of *ti* and *yong*: "Although the myriad things are noble, it is with nothingness that they function [because one must comply with nature and do nothing in order to demonstrate one's virtues]" (萬物雖貴以無爲用). Since Wang Bi's concept of *yong* refers to the action of *wu* (nothingness), thus, when seen from Zhu Xi's perspective, Wang Bi's concept of *yong* contradicts the concept of *you* 有 as a meaning of actual generative action. Following this, Wang Bi said, "they cannot reject nothingness in order to be *ti*" (不能捨無以爲體也). However, from Zhu Xi's perspective, this understanding is also contradictory in that an invisible entity also abandons nothingness (Jo 1997, pp. 193–94). This shows that, although Wang Bi utilized the concepts of *ti* and *yong* in the process of interpreting the interaction of *Dao* and its use earlier, his understanding of *ti* and *yong* is completely different from Zhu Xi's understanding. In addition, the conception of *ti* and *yong* in Wang's commentaries on the *Book of Change* also take on a similar meaning to those present in his commentary on the DDJ. In Wang's *Book of Change Notes* (*Zhouyi Zhu* 周易注), *ti* is used to signify the physical object itself existing in reality, and *yong* means the use of the physical objects. In other words, for Wang Bi, *ti* is established as a physical object in the form of a substance, and it also can be *you* in that it actually exists. Conversely, *yong* is established

as a metaphysical object in the form of use or function, and at the same time, it also can be *wu* (nothingness).

In the preface of *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*, Park speaks about Weijin metaphysicians as Jin 晉 period scholars who have much ambition but behave frivolously, relying on empty discourse and endless colloquy. This shows that he was aware of the difference between the perspectives of Wang Bi and Zhu Xi. At the same time, this can also be understood as Park Se-dang's will to approach and understand the DDJ rather through Zhu Xi's idea of *ti* and *yong* than through Wang Bi's concepts. In the structure of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism, the concepts such as *Dao* and *de* 德 (virtue), *you* and *wu*, *ti* and *yong*, *li* and *xiang*, and *wei* and *xian* correspond to each other, and Park structurally deduced those corresponding concepts from Zhu Xi's thought to interpret the relationship between *Dao* and *ming*.

3.3. The Dilemma: Daoist Ethics Established through Neo-Confucian Cosmology

Park Se-dang not only tried to prove the compatibility of Neo-Confucianism and Daoism by suspending the dichotomy between the Neo-Confucian "theory of *li* and *qi*" (理氣論) and Wang Bi's conception of *ti* and *yong*, but Park also took Zhu Xi's theory of "*ti* and *yong* originated from one" as the underlying principle behind his commentary of the DDJ. If it were proven that Neo-Confucianism and Daoism share the same ethical orientation (more specifically, the "sage"), while both at the same time follow the same principle that "*ti* and *yong* originated from one", then the writings of Laozi and Zhuangzi would no longer be heretical books contradicting Neo-Confucian philosophy. But rather, they would be scriptures that only differed from it in terms of their language or methodology. In that case, the Neo-Confucian interpretation of the DDJ might be an ideological strategy to overcome the exclusivity of Neo-Confucianism and the resulting phenomenon of regime fragmentation.²⁷

Even if Zhu Xi's principle "*ti* and *yong* originated from one" is applied to the interpretation of the DDJ, there are difficulties that cannot be solved by the concepts of *ti* and *yong* alone because Zhu Xi understood the concept of *yong* in Buddhism from a dualistic perspective and separated it from *ti*. Thus, when Zhu Xi discussed Buddhism, he had no choice but to come to the following conclusions: "Buddhism is empty, but Confucianism is substantial; Buddhism is dualistic, but Confucianism is monistic. Buddhism doesn't value the principles of the world and doesn't understand them" (Zhu 2023d, no. 126). The *yong* that Zhu Xi is discussing here is an illusion that is separated from *ti*, and becomes a "nothingness" that does not actually exist. From that, Zhu Xi inferred, "since Buddha said that all things in heaven and earth are vain (幻妄), the four big artificial combinations (四大假合)²⁸ became nothingness (無)". In other words, Zhu Xi thought that Buddhism discusses illusionary things that are not real, which meant that the most prominent concept of "nothingness" would not have any real effect. Therefore, Buddhism cannot reach the ultimate purpose of study, as discussed in *The Great Learning*. These purposes included manifesting "one's bright virtue" and "loving the people".²⁹ In short, the concept of "nothingness" in Buddhism deviates from the principle of "*ti* and *yong* originated from one" because it suggests that "there can be *ti* (an ontology or existence) without *yong* (function)" (有體而無用).

Zhu Xi's perspectives on Buddhism apply similarly to the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Zhu Xi often named Laozi in the same breath as Buddha when discussing heresy. The following passage from *Chuanxilu* (傳習錄, Instructions for practical living) is such an example: "Since the Buddha only talks about 'emptiness' (空) and Laozi only speaks about 'nothingness' (無), it is hard to know where reason or *li* 理 exists [within their system of metaphysics]" (Zhu 2023g). According to Zhu Xi, both the Buddhist concept of "emptiness" and Laozi's concept of "nothingness" have in common that there is no place for *li* within these conceptions because they are both objectively non-existent. Here, the concept of *li* is already separated from *yong*, which can also be defined as the illusion of physical objects in reality. Zhu Xi then continues: "If something happens right in front of someone that has no shape and no sign (兆) yet still exists, it only can be called 'empty'

(空蕩蕩). Thus, even if there's no sign of movement in a state [because it has not yet manifested itself], the people don't know that everything is already prepared for movement" (Zhu 2023g). Here, the *ti* of an object already implies the possibilities of the phenomenon, so all things actually exist in an unseparated form of *ti* and *yong*, or "*shiyou*" 實有 (real existence). In short, the *ti* that Zhu Xi is referring to has the same fundamental meaning as *li*; it is unrecognizable and, therefore, recognized as "nothingness". However, because this *ti* contains the possibility of "*ti* and *yong* originated from one", it also already contains *yong* even before its point of emergence; thus, it is not separated from *yong*, and because *yong* becomes recognizable once it emerges as a phenomenon, *ti* and *yong* can be defined as *shiyou*, or real existence.

The interpretation of the concepts of *you* and *wu* in the DDJ according to Zhu Xi's theory of "*ti* and *yong* originated from one" carries the risk of ultimately considering all things and affairs just as illusions. Therefore, for the purpose of merging Confucianism and Daoism, even though Park embraced the ethical view of the sage and the cosmology of "*ti* and *yong* originated from one" from Neo-Confucianism as the two main principles of his DDJ commentary, he did not fully adopt the logical structure of Zhu Xi's thought when it came to the issue of *you* and *wu*. At the same time, Park also did not accept Wang Bi's "theory of respecting nothingness" (尊無論), which was widely accepted at the time. If Park adopted the notion that "nothingness is the fundamental base of everything" (以無爲本) as Wang Bi asserted in his commentary of chapter 40 of the DDJ, then "Although the myriad things are noble, it is with nothingness that they function, thus, they cannot reject nothingness in order to be *ti*" (B. Wang 2011, pp. 113–14). Wang Bi contradicts Zhu Xi's claim that *wu* existed before *you*. More importantly, Wang Bi thought that, even if *ti* existed, it could not be established without *wu*, which meant that *ti* and *yong* are separated. This view completely deviates from Zhu Xi's original conception that "*ti* and *yong* originated from one". For this reason, Park explicitly stated in the preface to his DDJ commentary that the heresy of the DDJ began with the theories advocating respect for "nothingness" by the many scholars of Weijin metaphysics, headed by Wang Bi.

In short, Park Se-dang aimed at building an understanding of where the concepts of *you* and *wu* in the DDJ actually both easily mapped to and directly corresponded with Zhu Xi's idea of "*ti* and *yong* originated from one". To demonstrate that Zhu Xi's understanding of *you* or *wu* was different from the perspective adopted in the DDJ, Park Se-dang provided in-depth commentary on the contents of chapter 21 of the DDJ. Below are the contents of this chapter.

DDJ chapter 21 (Figure 1) concedes that since *Dao* is ambiguous and dark, *Dao* is difficult to recognize, but there are *xiang* and actual *wu* in it. Park described the characteristics of the unrecognizable *Dao* as "mysterious" (妙), emphasizing that even though it is difficult to perceive, there clearly is *li* in all things. In DDJ chapter 14, *Dao* is also described with the term *huhuang* 惚恍, which is similar to the two aspects of the *Dao* described above: *huang* 惚 (muddled) and *hu* 恍 (blurred). Park Se-dang explained these terms in the following way: "Symptoms without symptoms and figureless figures resemble so-called metaphysical objects. The term *huhuang* means indefinite or indistinct. The *Dao* is described as such because it seems both to exist and not to exist" (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 108). In other words, although it appears that *Dao* does not exist in its form, *Dao* does exist as a metaphysical object. A similar observation can be found in Park's commentary for chapter 21 of the DDJ, where *Dao* is also defined as a metaphysical object that is both "the utmost empty and the utmost substantial" (至虛而至實). *Dao* is empty when considered from the perspective of cognitive content, but it is real when considered from the perspective of its functional action; therefore, it is not nothingness in the absolute sense.

As a thing the Way is	道之爲物，
Shadowy, indistinct.	惟恍惟惚。
Indistinct and Shadowy,	惚兮恍兮，
Yet within it is an image;	其中有象，
Shadowy and indistinct,	恍兮惚兮，
Yet within it is a substance.	其中有物。
Dim and dark,	窈兮冥兮，
Yet within it is an essence.	其中有精。
This essence is quite genuine	其精甚真，
And within it is something that can be tested.	其中有信。
From the present back to antiquity	自古及今，
Its name never deserted it.	其名不去，
It serves as a means for inspecting the fathers of the multitude.	以閱衆甫。

All phrases following the line “as a thing the Way [*Dao*] is” (道之爲物) recount that the mysteries of *Dao* are incognizable, but that its *li* seems to be everywhere and depends on the existence of things. This is metaphysical because it is at the same time both extremely empty (虛) and extremely full. It also has the meaning that Zhou Lianxi 周濂溪 described: “It is the supreme ultimate because it is no ultimate (無極而太極) [.....] The reason why the name *Dao* has not disappeared since ancient times is because it has been handed down through various sages”.

Figure 1. *Daodejing* chapter 21 (excerpt) and Park Se-dang’s commentary. (Lau 1962, p. 26; H.-s. Kim 2013, pp. 124–25).

In contrast, Zhu Xi interpreted *Dao* much differently. Based on the same passage in the *Daodejing*, Zhu Xi interpreted *wu* 物 and *jing* 精 as being in the unrecognizable state of *huhuang* 恍惚. His commentary is as follows.

The distinction between Confucianism and Buddha only lies in the dispute about *xu* 虛 (emptiness) and *shi* 實 (substance). Laozi said: “Shadowy and indistinct, yet within it is *wu* 物 (a thing or object). Dim and dark, yet within it is *jing* 精 (essence)”. Thus, the substance and essence here are *xu*. (Zhu 2023c)

In other words, according to Zhu Xi, the *Dao* discussed in chapter 21 of the DDJ is affiliated with the category of *xu* 虛 or emptiness because it is impossible to perceive the mysterious modality of *Dao*. In contrast to this, Park Se-dang interprets *jing* 精 (essence) here as being the combination of both *li* 理 (reason or order) and *wu* 物 (a thing or object), as physical things in reality. This perspective eventually leads Park to the conclusion that *li* exists in any and all objects. As for the specific sentences “Shadowy and indistinct, yet within it is *wu*. Dim and dark, yet within it is *jing*”, Park explains that *wu* 物 is bound to fall into a contradictory relationship between the unrecognizable “nothingness” (*wu* 無) and the “physical substance” (*you* 有). This contradiction he then attempts to resolve by explaining *wu* 物 through the *yi*-principle (易理).

For example, in the conclusion of Park’s commentary for chapter 21 of DDJ, he explicitly notes: “Zhou Lianxi said that the infinite ultimate (*wuji* 無極) is the supreme ultimate (太極)”, which shows that Park tried to explain both the problematic relationships between *you* and *wu* and *ti* and *yong* using the *yi*-principle (易理) from the *Essay of the Taiji Diagram* (太極圖說). In his annotation to chapter 14 of the DDJ, Park supplements the original description of *Dao* as “seeming to exist but not to exist” (若存若亡) with the description “The *ti* of *Dao* is inherently empty” (道體本虛) (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 108). Through Park Se-dang’s annotation below, we can see that he understood *xu* differently than Zhu Xi, who considered *xu* to mean that nothing existed at all.

The *ti* of *Dao* is essentially *xu* 虛 (empty). But what we see, hear, and touch, what we consider as one, and that what we think it is not light, nor dark, or endlessly

extending, everything is close to “*youwu*” 有物 (things with shape) but eventually returns to “*wuwu*” 無物 (things without shape). Signs without signs and shapeless shapes resemble so-called metaphysical objects. *Huhuang* 惚恍 means indefinite or indistinct. The *Dao* is described as such because it seems both to exist and not to exist. (H.-s. Kim 2013, p. 108)

In the paragraph above, Park Se-dang describes the state of *xu* in detail. He writes that *xu* forms the shape of objects auditorily, visually, tactilely, or by obscure senses. In addition, he mentions the “endlessly extending” (*shengsheng* 繩繩) shapes without limits, which evade a clear grasp by humans. Park insists that the objects perceived in this way eventually return to a “shapeless state” (*wuwu* 無物). A similar sentence is found in chapter 40 of DDJ: “The ‘return’ (*fan* 返) is the movement of the *Dao*, and the weakness is the ‘function’ (*yong* 用) of the *Dao*”. Based on the implications of “return” that are revealed in the sentence “returning to its root is quietude” in chapter 16 of DDJ, the content of chapter 40 can be interpreted as “The movement of *Dao* occurs in quietude, and it can become stronger after it has been weakened” (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 171). Chapter 40 of the DDJ states, “All things on the earth are born from *you*, and *you* is born from *wu*”. Unlike Wang Bi’s interpretation of *you* and *wu*, Park understands these concepts in a spatial and temporal sense: “Movement comes from quietude or inactivity (*jing* 靜), and strength comes from weakness”³⁰. Park’s idea, which is mentioned in the annotations to chapters 14 and 21, that the *ti* of *you* and *wu* is a metaphysical object, has the same meaning as “the metaphysical realm is called ‘the Way’ (*Dao*) and the physical realm is called ‘the vessel’ (*qi* 器)” (Zhu 2019, p. 242). There are “objects with shapes” and “objects without shape” that fill the universe. Park distinguishes here whether the objects are physical (connected to *qi* 氣) and thus can be recognized with the five senses, or metaphysical (connected to *Dao*) and cannot be perceived. Based on the above logic, Park’s understanding of the relationship between *you* and *wu* can be depicted in the following way.

Figure 2 shows that the way that Park Se-dang distinguishes *you* and *wu* is based on both the substance or physical status as well as the function of an object. This radically departs the way that Zhu Xi or Wang Bi distinguished *you* and *wu*. Both Zhu Xi and Wang Bi distinguished *you* and *wu* according to their cognitive status. Whereas, unlike Zhu and Wang who identified *you* and *wu* as well as *xu* and *shi* as individual separate states, Park interprets *you* and *wu* based on the premise that “*ti* and *yong* originated from one source” as a unified, singular body. Park Se-dang’s method for distinguishing “*ti* and *yong* originated from one” additionally incorporates concepts from the *yi*-principle from *The Essay of Taiji Diagram*. In particular, Park’s interpretation is ultimately in line with Zhu Xi’s perspective on the *yi*-principle that “[the metaphysical] is shapeless but with *li*” (無形而有理) (Zhu 2023g). Naturally, the interpretation of the DDJ from this perspective does not deviate significantly from the Neo-Confucian theory.

Park’s understanding of the relationship between both *you* and *wu* and *xu* and *shi*, which led him to the conclusion that *Dao* was compatible with Confucian ethics, however, involved two additional problems. First is the question of how to resolve the contradictions between the concepts of *you* and *wu* as revealed in the DDJ interpretation through the theory of “*ti* and *yong* originated from one source”. Second, is the question of how to explain the ethical justification of actions through the cosmological system discussed above. If the decisive basis for “*ti* and *yong* originated from one” has the same ethical goal as “to cultivate oneself and govern others”, then the key question is how can ethical issues be explained through a cosmological system consisting of *yi* and *yong* as well as *you* and *wu*. However, despite these questions, one thing that is clear is that Park Se-dang’s will to bridge together different systems of ethics and cosmology, as demonstrated in his DDJ commentaries, inherits the Neo-Confucian philosophical traditions of great philosophers through the Song and Ming dynasties. Park’s attempt was not only to connect the values and beliefs of Confucianism and Daoism but also to connect heaven with the people of feudal society to elevate the ethics of the day to an even more superior moral plane (Z. Li 2008, pp. 77–105).

How Wu 無 Corresponds to You 有		
Criteria for distinguishing you and wu	ti 體 (ontological body) of Dao 道	ming 名 (name) yong 用 (application)
Cognitive status	xu 虛 (emptiness)	shi 實 (substance)
Physical status	jing 靜 (inactivity) wei 微 (subtleness)	dong 動 (activity) xian 顯 (conspicuousness)
	ruo 弱 (weakness)	qiang 強 (strength)

Figure 2. Park Se-dang’s understanding of you and wu.

4. The Strategy of Integrating Daoist Ethics and Confucian Cosmology and Its Theoretical Limitations

In the first passage of chapter 42 of the DDJ, the birth of all things is described in the following way: “The Way [Dao] begets one, one begets two, two begets three, and three begets the myriad creatures. The myriad creatures carry on their backs the yin and embrace in their arms the yang and are the blending of the generative forces (chongqi 沖氣) of the two” (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 49). Below is Park’s commentary on this paragraph, which allows us to confirm both his cosmological and ethical perspectives at the same time.

“One” here refers to the supreme ultimate (taiji 太極). Laozi said that “the way begets one” because he took nothingness as the foundation (zong 宗). “Two” refers to yin and yang (liangyi 兩儀), and “three” refers to the “three powers” (sancai 三才). “Three begets the myriad creatures” means that three extreme poles are established and all things on earth emanate from them. The sentence “the myriad creatures carry on their backs the yin and embrace in their arms the yang” means that because all things have received the two qi of yin and yang, upon emerging they hold the energy of yin and yang on their back and in their heart so that they don’t separate. Chongqi (ji 沖氣) here is “empty qi”. There is nothing in all creation that is not in harmony with this “empty qi”. Therefore, everything on earth can coexist without doing harm to each other, and can maintain itself for a long time. (S.-d. Park 2013, pp. 176–77)

The first thing to note here is that Park Se-dang considers “one” to be the supreme ultimate or taiji. However, logically speaking, since “one” originated from the Dao, the Dao as Park understood it cannot be taiji or the Dao itself. Therefore, it must be the case that the Dao that Park is referring to above is actually referring to the “function (yong)” of Dao.³¹ Park Se-dang first mentions the existence of wu before the process of creating “one” from the Dao because he interpreted wu as “empty qi” — a type of medium shared by the Dao and everything that exists—and not merely as “nothingness” in a physical or spatiotemporal sense. That is, the Dao as the identity of taiji forms yin and yang, and while Dao holds li in harmony, all things are formed. Park also sought to define Dao in the commentary of the “A Great Master” chapter of Zhuangzi, stating that “the so-called Dao contains one yin and one yang” (一陰一陽所以道) (S.-d. Park 2012, pp. 446–47). In addition, Park commented on the concept of chang 常 in chapter 16 of the DDJ. Park wrote: “Chang 常 refers to a permanent reason. When yin and yang open and close, are active one time and inactive another time, this itself is the continuous reason” (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 113). The concepts of yin and yang here define the li of Dao that do not change along with the actual movements of inactivity (jing 靜) or activity (dong 動). Park’s understanding of the principle of creation of everything is not only consistent with the specific cosmology of the universe (太極陰陽論) as described in the Great Commentary (Xici 繫辭) chapter of the Book of Changes (Yijing 易經) but also generally conforms with “li of taiji” (太極之理). Park Se-dang linked human behavior to the principles depicted in the hexagrams of sun 損 and yi 益 in the Book of

Change, and added, “I will regard the ancients’ words regarding *sunyi* (損益) as the most important teaching” (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 178).

Then, where does the postulation that human behavior should follow cosmological discipline come from? From the perspective of Neo-Confucianism, the *li* of *taiji* is established not only as an ontological and cosmological discipline but also as a justification for human behavior. However, the concept of heaven presented in the DDJ has no other meaning than the manifestation of nature that originated from *Dao*, without a humanized or subjective conception of heaven. For this reason, Park, noticing the gap between ethics and cosmology in this concept of heaven (*tian* 天), tried to integrate them. For example, in chapter 61 of the DDJ, he interprets the relationship between great and small states by linking them to human character attitudes toward heaven, such as “willingness to follow Heaven” (樂天) or “fearing Heaven” (畏天). Park explains *Dao* by indirectly referring to the concept of the mandate of heaven (*tianming* 天命) in the expression “receiving one’s destiny from heaven” (受命於天) in his annotation of chapter 16 of the DDJ (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 113). However, according to Lee Jong-seong’s research, there is no place where the concept of the mandate of heaven is referred to directly in either the *Sinju Dodeokgyeong* or the *Namhwagyeong Juhaesanbo* (Lee 2017, p. 176).

There is a fundamental difference between Laozi’s and Confucius’ understanding of heaven, so even though Park interpreted heaven from the Confucian perspective, he failed to find the unifying characteristics between them. The concepts of *di* 帝 (the lord or heavenly emperor) and *Dao* appear together in chapter 4 of the DDJ: “I don’t know whose son it [the *Dao*] is. It seems to have preceded *di* 帝 [the lord]” (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 8). Park interpreted *di* here simply as a synonym for heaven (*tian* 天), lacking human characteristics. This was necessary because it is only possible to avoid the logical error that *Dao* preceded God if the humanized *tian* is reverted to *tian* in the objective sense. This also shows that Park Se-dang was clearly aware of the difference between the concepts of *tian* in Daoism and Confucianism. Furthermore, Park interpreted *wuwei* 無爲 (inaction), which refers to refraining from manipulative behavior, as an action consistent with the ethical virtues of Neo-Confucianism. Park’s notes in chapter 48 of the DDJ: “Laozian thought lets everyone reverse their mistakes to preserve the natural state of things, but doesn’t dare to press things to happen, for the *Dao* exists in *wuwei* 無爲 (inaction) and *wushi* 無事 (being free from affairs). This is why it’s precious to lose it every day” (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 189). *Wuwei* here does not mean avoiding the manipulative behavior to comply with nature that Laozi aimed for, but the learning method of negation and self-control that is discussed in chapter 15 of *Analects*: “Is not *Shun* (舜) the one who governed effectively by inaction (*wuwei* 無爲)?” (Ni 2017, p. 354).

Park Se-dang’s attempt to interpret the DDJ through Confucianism has its limitations. Park tried to define the common ethics between Confucianism and Daoism and supported this understanding through an integrated cosmology. However, Park’s interpretations sometimes deviated from the original intention of Laozian thought. Yet, at the same time, the depth of Park Se-dang’s willingness to achieve a system that showed the compatibility of Confucianism and Daoism helped take the commentary on Daoist thought throughout the Korean peninsula to new heights and inspired others to venture into other reinterpretations and integrated thought.

5. Conclusions

This research study aimed to analyze and critically examine the theoretical strategies used in, and the purpose of, Park Se-dang’s *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*, which was the first complete commentary of the DDJ in Korea. This study also appraised the implications and academic influence of Park’s thoughts in the history of Joseon philosophy.

Sinju Dodeokgyeong is one of the five extant works of DDJ commentary in Korea. This work was compiled and written after Yi I’s *Suneon*, which was a compilation of commentaries to selected chapters of the DDJ. The 17th century—the time when the *Sinju Dodeokgyeong* was written—was for Korea a period of much internal and external political turmoil.

Events like the Manchu invasion of Korea in 1636 (丙子胡亂) and intensifying factionalism within the Joseon government destabilized the livelihoods of many on the peninsula and caused many to doubt Neo-Confucian rhetoric and beliefs. During this time, Park Se-dang, the author of the *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*, had developed a critical view of Neo-Confucianism and the academic dogmatism revolving around it. This eventually led to his reorientation toward studying the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi. The *Sinju Dodeokgyeong* reflects Park's concern for solving practical problems that eventually led him to explore the DDJ, which under the ruling Neo-Confucian ideology, had long been excluded as a heretical text.

This study on Park Se-dang's *Sinju Dodeokgyeong* was motivated by the interesting turn of events in Korean history that surround the text. Soon after Park Se-dang's *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*, there was a sudden emergence of three other DDJ commentaries. Up to now, a number of research studies have found a cause for this change in regional factors, such as the influx of new knowledge from the Qing dynasty and Western Learning and from various political and social factors on the peninsula. This study attempts to shed light on the logical errors of Park's approach to coercing unity between Neo-Confucianism and Daoism and seeks to establish it as an equally fundamental but thus far neglected cause.

Park's strategy to interpret the DDJ with the objective of demonstrating compatibility between Confucianism and Daoism can be summarized as "interpreting Daoism through Confucian theory". This study examined this strategy in four steps: (1.) Park's clarification on the historical hereticalization of the DDJ, which Park then used as a starting point from where he began to interpret Daoist thought through Confucian theory; (2.) Park defined the ethics and virtues of Confucian and Daoist thought; (3.) Park examined the cosmological systems of Confucianism and Daoism; and (4.) Park interpreted Daoist moral ethics through Neo-Confucian cosmology. The first of these steps is detailed meticulously in the introduction of the *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*. Following Park's reasoning, Laozi and Confucius shared the same scholarly goal when examined within the flow of the history of thought, but the DDJ had been misunderstood. This is because Weijin metaphysicians misinterpreted Laozi's intentions in a metaphysical and extremely abstract fashion. Park's explanation that Laozi's thoughts in the DDJ have subsequently been misrepresented can be taken as Park's strategy of proving that the discussions on DDJ are legitimate.

The subsequent steps were largely carried out through argumentation on the ethical and cosmological levels. First, Park Se-dang attempted to show that Laozi's and Zhuangzi's thoughts were not heresy, but rather scriptures with a language and methodology that differed from Confucian texts. Park went about this by showing that Confucianism and Daoism not only had the same ethical orientation but at the same time also abided by the same cosmological principles. For this purpose, Park first argued that both Confucianism and Daoism aim to reach the ultimate goal of "cultivating oneself and governing others" as well as an awareness for solving practical problems. Next, in an attempt at reinterpretation on the cosmological level, Park interpreted the DDJ through the relationship between *ti* and *yong* from Zhu Xi's theory and attempted to merge the two concepts. One issue of contention was whether the relationships between the concept of *dao* and *ming* as well as *you* and *wu* could be understood as dualistic in nature similar to *xu* and *shi* in Zhu Xi's writings or *you* and *wu* in Wang Bi's writings. Park needed to overcome these issues to negate the premise of Zhu Xi's criticisms of Daoism and Buddhism. These issues became the core of Park's strategy for a cosmological reinterpretation of Daoist thought. To this end, Park interpreted the relationship between *you* and *wu* in DDJ through the principle that "the infinite ultimate is the supreme ultimate" in the *Essay on the Taiji diagram*, proving that the concepts of *you* and *wu* correspond to Zhu Xi's standpoint of "the *Dao* is shapeless but there is *li*". Finally, Park Se-dang attempted to reduce the gap between ethics and cosmology; this strategy is in accordance with the procedure of Neo-Confucian scholarship throughout both the Song and Ming dynasties. Ultimately this was an attempt to raise the position of an ethical subject up to the position of transcendental ethics by connecting heaven and people. However, unlike in Confucianism, the concept of heaven introduced

in the DDJ text has no other meaning than that of a natural manifestation of the *Dao*, as opposed to a more personified or subjective form of heaven. In other words, Park Se-dang attempted to narrow the gap between ethics and cosmology by converting the concept of “heaven” in DDJ into a humanized heaven. However, using Park Se-dang’s strategy based on Confucian cosmology to prove the legitimacy of human behavior that Laozi mentioned in DDJ had its limits. Not only is Park’s method of interpretation highly arbitrary, but it also is not convincing because it deviates from the original intent of the DDJ.

Ultimately, Park’s attempt to achieve complete integration between Confucianism and Daoism by interpreting the DDJ using the theoretical structure of Confucianism failed. However, in the 18th century, Joseon *Silhak* scholars who had also strived for viable solutions to unifying the two systems of thought were greatly influenced by the work of Park Se-dang. That is, Park’s legacy is that he considered a new frontier of philosophical thought by reducing the scourge of scholarly heterodoxy around Daoism in Korea to resolve practical issues of the time. After Park, much work in supplementing and modifying the limitations of Park Se-dang’s interpretive strategy continued into the 19th century, being the focus of many Joseon *Silhak* scholars. In other words, Park’s writings laid the foundation for a revitalization and reinterpretation of Daoist thought in Korea.

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Notes

- ¹ Sungsan Cho describes three types of approaches that nineteenth-century Korean scholars used to address ideological conflicts: (1.) achieving development through improved adaptive Neo-Confucian learning; (2.) critical and confrontational Neo-Confucianism; and (3.) overcoming Neo-Confucian thought through religious mentality (Cho 2016, pp. 119–21).
- ² Teresa Hyun defined *Silhak* as follows: “The *Silhak* movement [occurring from the seventeenth to nineteenth century] comprised a group of Korean Neo-Confucianist scholars who attempted to go beyond the abstract metaphysical approaches of neo-Confucianism in order to find practical solutions to the agricultural, economic and social problems facing Korea” (Hyun 1997, p. 283).
- ³ According to Kim Seonhee’s research, “books and knowledge imported from China spurred the rise of broad scholarship and a growing interest in branches of practical knowledge” (Seonhee Kim 2023, pp. 53–80).
- ⁴ The rise of evidential learning in eighteenth-century Qing China had a far-reaching influence in shaping intellectual development in modern China and East Asia (Q. E. Wang 2008, pp. 489–519).
- ⁵ Jong-Chun Park (J.-c. Park 2016) discusses the Confucian anti-heresy discourses in late Joseon in more detail (pp. 113–43).
- ⁶ Seo Myeong-eung organizes the notes of his DDJ commentary *Dodeokjigwi* 道德指歸 according to the same conceptual structure that he used in his numerological work *Bomanjae Chongseo* 保晚齋叢書: the four images (*sixiang* 四象), the riverside scene (*hetu* 河圖), the polar regions (*zhonggong* 中宮), *yin* and *yang* (陰陽), hexagrams (*liuyao* 六爻), as well as measurements of time such as the 12 months, 60 weeks, and a cycle of 60 years (H. Kim 2004, p. 31). Moreover, Seo Myeong-eung describes the concept of *taiji* (the supreme ultimate) in the *Daodejing* through its connection to the human body, which is distinct from earlier Joseon dynasty *Daodejing* commentaries (Y.-g. Kim 2006, pp. 156–58).
- ⁷ Lee Chung-ik’s *Chowondammo* 椒園談老 and the DDJ annotation *Dok Noja Ochik* 讀老子五則 (Reading the Five Principles of Laozi) written by his teacher Lee Gwangryeo can be regarded as the typical examples. Kim Hyeongseok explained that although in *Chowondammo* Lee considers that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism can communicate with each other in a most basic way, he gives priority to Laozi and Zhuangzi, followed by Confucianism and Buddhism (H.-s. Kim 2019, pp. 207–29). For a more

specific analysis, see H.-s. Kim (2013, pp. 200–3). The ideological correlation between Lee Chung-ik and Lee Gwangryeo is described in H. Kim (2020a, pp. 275–302).

Hong Seokju argued in *Jeongro* 訂老 that the contents of DDJ were consistent with the words of Confucius. Because the discussions on *jian* 謙 and *zheng* 爭 in the DDJ were concerned with the question of how to avoid the coming of war in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States eras, Hong argued that the DDJ was a “book of benevolence” (T.-y. Kim 2017, p. 176).

Jo Minhwan researched how Joseon scholars integrated Confucian with Daoist theory (Jo 2005, p. 139).

The process of accepting DDJ on the Korean Peninsula was discussed in more detail in Seo-Reich (2022, pp. 999–1000).

Zhu Xi defined three guiding principles and eight ethical items as the purposes and approaches of Confucian learning in *The Great Learning*. The three guiding principles mentioned in the first verse of *The Great Learning* are “displaying enlightened virtue” (*mingmingde* 明明德), “loving the people” (*qinmin* 親民), and “the utmost goodness” (*zhuiyu zhishan* 止於至善). The eight ethical items are “external cultivation of morality”, namely “to investigate things” (*gewu* 格物), “to attain knowledge” (*zhizhi* 致知), “to make intentions” (*chengyi* 誠意), “to rectify the mind” (*zhengxin* 正心), “to cultivate the self” (*xiushen* 修身), “to regulate the household” (*qijia* 齊家), “to bring good order to the state” (*zhiguo* 治國), and “to bring peace to all under Heaven” (*pingtianxia* 平天下). The above conceptual language and translations follow Johnston and Ping (2012).

The quotation from *Zhuziyulei* 朱子語類 [Sayings of Zhuzi] in this paper is based on the collection publicly registered in the “National Archives of Japan Digital Archive” (www.digital.archives.go.jp, accessed on 30 October 2023) and has been translated directly by the author referring to different annotations. Thus, this paper only made a citation note about the quoted volume of *Zhuziyulei* and refers to the public domain addresses of the original source (Zhu 2023g).

For more information about the differences in Yi Hwang’s and Yi I’s perspectives on heresy, see Jo (2009, pp. 48–49).

Kim Hakmok, the modern Korean translator of *Suneon*, insists that Yi I was able to interpret the DDJ, a heretic book in Joseon, because he was confident that he could interpret it from the perspective of Neo-Confucian logic as needed (H. Kim 2002, p. 298).

According to Geum Jangtae’s research, *Suneon* first appeared in an anthology of Yi I’s works in 1611, and some records show that *Suneon* was published in some select editions of *Inner Works*, *Outer Works*, and *Additional Works*. However, it is now difficult to find any book that actually contains *Suneon*, and even after Yi I’s death, any discussion on *Suneon* was avoided even among his successors (Geum 2005, p. 172).

Furthermore, Yi I thought that “to empty one’s mind” in the DDJ could be a methodology to correct a wrong disposition (*qizhi* 氣質) (H. Kim 2020b, pp. 106–7).

The following research provides various information on the background and writing process of *Suneon*: Yoon (2021, pp. 69–113).

Lin Xiyi’s *Laozi Yanzhai Kouyi* was completed in the 13th century and brought to Korea and Japan from the early 15th century on, and it gained huge popularity during the Edo period (H.-s. Kim 2010, pp. 257–68).

Kim Hakmok analyzed the commentaries cited or mentioned in *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*. This analysis shows that Lin Xiyi’s commentary was most often cited, namely in chapters 3, 5, 6, 19, 21, 27, 28, 46, 49, 68, 69, and 70. This shows that Park was paying special attention to Lin Xiyi’s point of view (S.-d. Park 2013, p. 37).

Hayashi Razan was a pioneer of Japanese Neo-Confucianism. He stayed at Kennin-ji Temple (建仁寺) between 1595 and 1597, where he studied Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s thought based on Lin Xiyi’s commentaries. Hayashi Razan accepted Lin Xiyi’s viewpoint, about which he said: “Even though I dwelled upon old commentaries of DDJ, nothing is as clear as *Kouyi* 口義” (Ou 2001, pp. 275–78).

Following Lin Xiyi, Park quotes Zhu Xi the second most in *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*. Considering the magnitude of Zhu Xi’s influence at the time, it is worth noting that Lin Xiyi was cited even more than him. For a detailed study concerning the source of *Sinju Dodeokgyeong* commentaries, see H. Kim (2000, pp. 102–6).

For more information about the academic background and basic standpoint of Park Se-dang, see Han (2010, pp. 268–70).

Yi I rejected the common misconception that the DDJ only discussed *qi* 氣 and suggested the possibility that it could be interpreted through the concept of *li* in relation to *qi* as well (Jo 2010, p. 282).

Shin Jinsik explains how Park tried to identify new principles in order to steer political groups away from sources other than Zhu Xi’s doctrines (Shin 2009, p. 89).

Aside from the annotations by Weijin metaphysicians or Neo-Confucians discussed in this article, there were also commentaries from a Buddhist perspective like Shi Deqing 釋德清 that also circulated among the DDJ commentaries in Joseon society during the 17th century. Because these commentaries had limited influence on related intellectual discussion during the Joseon dynasty, they are not discussed in detail in this article.

Park did not clarify the source, but concluded the comment with a stance almost the same as in the *Zhuzi Pinjie* 諸子品節: “This chapter is written by Laozi during the decline of the Zhou state when he was worried about reality, nostalgic of days gone by, and resentful of the world”. Here, Park Se-dang argues that it was an ironic expression left behind by Laozi in anger at the reality of the loss of benevolence and righteousness in an unrestrained world, not for the purpose of criticizing the virtues of Confucianism. This demonstrates that Park finds an explanation for Laozi’s standpoint that tries to minimize the ethical differences between the Confucians and Laozi.

- 27 Four aspects defined the division of the Joseon government and the construction of Korean *Silhak*: first, the relationship between the *Dao* and the Instrument in traditional Confucian scholarship; second, institution and civilization, as expressed in the phrases of “administration and practical usage” and “profitable usage benefiting the people”; third, growing interest in the historical importance of Jeong Yakyong’s scholarship; and fourth, consistent interest in the value of practicality (Noh 2023, pp. 277–310).
- 28 The big artificial combination here refers to earth, water, fire, and wind, which make up all things in heaven and Earth. According to Zhu Xi’s understanding, they mix and grow according to the karmic theory of Buddhism.
- 29 The translation of terms from *Great Learning* is based on James Legge’s translation, which was partly changed according to the author’s understanding, see Legge (1960, p. 356).
- 30 Wang Bi interpreted this as “Everything in the world is made of *you*, and the beginning of *you* is based on nothing, thus, to complete *you*, [everything] must return to nothing” (B. Wang 2011, pp. 113–14).
- 31 For arguments supporting this opinion, see the “Sinju Dodeokgyeong-e Natanan Park Se-dang-ui Sasang [Park Se-dang’s Thought in Sinju Dodeokgyeong]” chapter in S.-d. Park (2013, pp. 271–305). On the other hand, Park Se-dang interpreted *Dao* as working according to the *li* in his annotations on the *Tiandi* chapter of *Zhuangzi* in his commentary book *Namhwagyeong JuHae Sanbo* (Annotation and Edition of *Nanhuajing*).

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Article

The Translingual *Ziran* of Laozi Chapter 25: Global Laozegetics and Meaning Unbound by Language

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Abstract: Many scholars view translations of the Chinese classics as inevitably lacking fidelity to the “original,” asserting language difference as a fundamental impediment to cross-cultural understanding. The present study disputes this viewpoint by employing the perspective of Global Laozegetics. This notion affirms a fundamental continuity between the native *Laozi* or *Daodejing* commentarial tradition and its corresponding foreign translation tradition. Specifically, I will investigate a range of interpretations of the term *ziran* found in *Laozi* Chapter 25, including 16 traditional and modern Chinese readings and 67 translations in 26 languages. My broad investigation of this narrow topic will reveal a rich historical development of interpretation and translation, highlight the philosophical ramifications of different exegetical choices, deepen our understanding of the core Daoist concept *ziran*, and assist in confirming the basic premise of Global Laozegetics that language, even the original language of Chinese, is secondary to interpretive strategy when engaging with classical works.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy; *Laozi*; *Daodejing*; *ziran*; translation; commentary; multilingual; hermeneutics

1. Introduction

Scholars of Chinese philosophy both within and without China often hold a certain level of suspicion concerning translations. Many view translations of the Chinese classics as lacking fidelity to the “original,” that “European languages can only most imperfectly ‘speak’ the world being referenced” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 57). However, these views both misconstrue the nature of the “original” Chinese text and its forms in other languages. Firstly, even if one could determine a true “original meaning” of a single text, it undoubtedly would not represent how the text was read in Chinese throughout Chinese history. That is the realm of commentary and interpretation, which transforms an “original” into a classic. Secondly, translation is not simply a flawed effort at reproducing a pristine text in a target language but a manifestation of the translator’s inevitable interpretation of said text.

This view is supported by the idea of Global Laozegetics (*Quanqiu Laoxue* 全球老學), which affirms a fundamental continuity between the native *Laozi* or *Daodejing* commentarial tradition and its corresponding foreign translation tradition.¹ Said continuity relies on the premise that translation is necessarily an act of interpretation, and that this process does not categorically differ from that of traditional Chinese language commentary regardless of any specific “foreign” readings. This study of the *Laozi* is particularly suitable for investigating translingual questions of interpretation and fidelity due to the astounding quantity of the classic’s commentaries and related works in Chinese—2185 according to Ding Wei (Ding 2004)—and the equally striking volume of its 2049 translations in 97 languages.²

To focus this broad topic, I rely on Henderson and Ng’s (2014, p. 38) principle that “obscurities in the classical text . . . are probably the most common ‘triggers for exegesis.’” One such obscurity is the meaning of *ziran* 自然 in the famous passage at the end of *Laozi* chapter 25: *Dao fa ziran* 道法自然 (Dao models *ziran*/emulates *ziran*/follows the law of *ziran*). While the term *ziran* is generally challenging, this specific instance that appears to elevate it above the Dao has inspired exceptionally rich exegesis. Such interpretations are imbedded within the larger intellectual frameworks of commentaries and translations,

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but due to the expansive approach employed in this paper intertextual concerns must be set aside.

I will first discuss six types among 16 divergent ancient and modern Chinese readings of this *ziran* to demonstrate the impressive diversity of “native” conceptions. This will undergird the subsequent historical and philosophical analysis of *ziran* articulations found in 67 translations in 26 languages. Summarized in English in order of first appearance, the most important and widely shared types revealed among these translations are: 1. Being, self-existing; 2. itself; 3. its own nature, what it is in itself, self-so; 4. from itself, spontaneous; 5. natural, naturalness; 6. Nature.³ Because the relations of these six translation types to the six Chinese interpretation types involve important subtle discrepancies, I will address them separately and then explain their connections in the body of the paper.

I must stress that the basic manifestations of *ziran* are not language specific, at least setting aside issues of subtle semantic variations to highlight the translingual side of interpretation. The shared nature of these readings, sometimes belonging to multilingual “interpretive lineages,” undermines the notion that philosophical concepts necessarily require the unique characteristics of any language to be articulated. Terms and concepts are the most basic units of philosophy. If these can translate, then there are fewer potential impediments to philosophical translation generally.

Our broad investigation of this narrow topic reveals a rich historical development of interpretation and translation, highlights the philosophical ramifications of different exegetical choices, deepens our understanding of the core Daoist concept *ziran*, and assists in confirming the basic premise of Global Laozegetics that language, even the original language of Chinese, is secondary to interpretive strategy when engaging with classical works.⁴

2. Chinese Readings of the Chapter 25 *Ziran*

We must first establish a baseline for possible and diverse readings within Chinese Laozegetics. These comprise a range of pre-modern and modern Chinese conceptions of the *Laozi* chapter 25 *ziran* that come from different Daoist, Confucian, Buddhist, and secular commentarial sources. This account will clarify how the variety of translation tactics do not simply result from the challenge of conveying *ziran* in a non-Chinese language but primarily emerge from different modes of exegesis. The multiplicity of Chinese approaches to this particular use of *ziran* includes the following clusters of six especially divergent readings: 1. self-existing, non-emulating, non-contingent; 2. universal cosmic nature; 3. emptiness, suchness as the origin of all; 4. self-referential to the Dao as itself; 5. spontaneous or naturalness; 6. the individual natures of all things (Nature).⁵

The earliest and one of the most basic Chinese readings of the last line of chapter 25 comes from the Han dynasty work *Heshanggong's Commentary* (*Laozi Heshanggong zhangju* 老子河上公章句). This commentary presents a type of interpretation where *ziran* signifies the state of not relying on or existing according to anything external. As a detailed analysis of Heshanggong's conception of *ziran* exists elsewhere (Tadd 2019b), I will simply present a summary here.

Heshanggong glosses the whole line as *Dao xing ziran, wu suo fa* 道性自然，無所法 (The nature of the Dao is *ziran*. There is nothing that it emulates)⁶ (Wang 1993, p. 103). This identifies *ziran* as the most basic quality of the Dao and confirms that by emulating *ziran* the Dao emulates nothing outside itself. It is unbounded and contingent on nothing. Thus, the Dao remains in a state distinct from the other three things that precede it in this passage—humanity, Earth, and Heaven—and which emulate something beyond themselves and so do not have pure *ziran* nature. This reading of the text creates a hierarchy of levels of *ziran*, with the Dao existing in a transcendentally perfect state of non-contingent existence, and the other three emulating this self-determined state to increasingly imperfect degrees (Tadd 2019b, pp. 5–6).

Reformulations of this first reading of *ziran* as non-emulation also appear within the later Chinese Laozegetics tradition. It is often seen within the many popular commentaries

from the Song and Ming. For example, Lü Huiqing 吕惠卿 (1032–1111) as quoted by Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1540–1620) says, “The Way takes non-emulation as what it emulates, as that which does not emulate [anything] is just *ziran*. Thus it is said, ‘The Way emulates *ziran*.’”⁷ In this manner, Lü more explicitly confirms that *ziran* equals non-contingency. Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086) similarly reformulates this view when he states, “Because Dao is its own root and origin, preceding Heaven and Earth, and unceasingly existing since ancient times, there is nothing that it emulates . . . Now Dao being its own root and origin has no cause and is *ziran*.”⁸ All these three present *ziran* as core qualities of Dao: non-contingent and *causa sui*.

A second reading presents *ziran* not just as the nature or quality of the Dao, but as the cosmic universal nature itself. Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857) articulates this saying, “*Ziran* is what is called nature (*xing* 性).” Here this rich philosophical term is used to signify the cosmic sense of the Neo-Confucian universal *xing* “nature.” Thus this *ziran* is not a way to describe the basic quality of the Dao—its own nature—but is itself the shared cosmic good nature (善性 *shanxing*) that sustains the order of existence and is what we must all strive to attain (Wei 2011, p. 22).

A third reading is metaphysical in a different way. Yuan dynasty Buddhist monk Mengshan Deyi 蒙山德異 (1231–1308) asserts his own transcendent conception of *ziran* that situates it above Dao. He says, “The Dao following *ziran* means the one True *qi* is born from within vacuous brilliance, and that the miraculous function of *ziran* is unlimited and inexhaustible.”⁹ Deyi pairs *ziran* with the unlimited creative potential of emptiness, the ground of Being. This more Buddhist notion of the ultimate then becomes the source of Dao as the original substance in the world—the True *qi*.

The fourth approach collapses the conceptual distance between Dao and *ziran*, making *ziran* equal Dao itself. This sense arises from the etymological construction of the expression (*zi* “self,” *ran* “like”) reduced to signify “self” or “Dao itself.” In the context of chapter 25, this means Dao just models “itself.” One early explicit statement of this view comes from Li Zhongqing 李仲卿, who in his 625 debate with the Buddhist monk Huicheng 慧乘 says, “Dao simply is *ziran* and *ziran* is just Dao. As there is nothing else to emulate, it is able to emulate Dao [itself].”¹⁰ Similarly, the famous Song Daoist priest Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1134–1229) interprets the line as *Dao ruci eryi* 道如此而已 (Dao is simply like this) (Bai 2011, p. 531), suggesting once again Dao as *ziran* is just “so,” just “Dao.”

This sense of the Dao emulating itself becomes more explicit in the modern period when one finds Zhang Dainian 张岱年 stating that the chapter 25 conclusion means *Dao yi ziji wei fa* 道以自己为法 (The Dao takes self as the model) (Zhang 1989, p. 79), and Ren Jiyu 任继愈 who interprets it as *Dao xiaofa taziji* 道效法它自己 (The Dao models itself) (Ren 2006, p. 56). In all these ancient and modern cases, *ziran* is reduced to an alternative term for Dao or to the self-reflexive pronoun. Regardless of their specific wording, the interpreters all conclude that Dao emulates or models itself.

The fifth type incorporates two modern Chinese *ziran* interpretations—*ziran er ran* 自然而然 and *zifaxing* 自发性—that resemble the popular foreign readings of “spontaneous” and “naturalness.” For one, Xu Kangsheng 许抗生 considers the whole passage to show that as there is nothing higher than the Way, it “can only emulate its own spontaneous (*ziran er ran* 自然而然) existence” (Xu 1985, p. 114). This draws on Heshanggong’s “non-emulation” theory while emphasizing *ziran* sense of “spontaneous” to highlight the dynamic and creative side of the Way. Liu Xiaogan, a scholar who has operated in both Chinese and English, likewise uses *ziran er ran*, which he translates as “naturalness” (Liu 2006, p. 289). Lastly, Ye Shuxun 叶树勋 analyzes *zi* 自 etymologically. He notes one of its basic meanings as *zifa* 自发 (spontaneous), which can likewise apply to the compound *ziran* (Ye 2020, p. 31). This fifth reading partially encompasses the idea of the way following its own nature, just being itself, but it can also imply the spontaneous emergent activities of all the individual things in the world.

The sixth exegetical approach, first found in the commentary of Wang Bi, emphasizes this individuality and plurality of *ziran* things as exactly what the Way models. Like with

Wei Yuan, it is associated with “nature,” but here it is not the universal cosmic nature. Instead for Wang Bi, the Way following *ziran* means according with the individual natures of all things. As Rudolf G. Wagner somewhat idiosyncratically translates:

The Way not deviating from That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is and consequently achieving their [the ten thousand entities’] nature—this is what “it takes That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is as model” means. Taking That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is as model means taking squareness as a model when among the squares, and roundness when among round ones, and thus nothing deviating in nothing from That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is. “That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is” is a word for the designationless, an expression for getting to the Ultimate. (Wagner 2003, pp. 203–4)¹¹

The key point in Wang’s reading, clarified by Wagner’s amazingly long translation of the two characters *zi* and *ran* as “That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is,” is that *ziran* is the plurality of things being themselves and also the “Ultimate” state of existence.

Variations of this view also appear in other traditional and modern studies. For example, Li Rong 李榮 (c. 650–83) takes the Sage as the subject for the whole sequence of emulation that culminates with *ziran*. He says, “The Sage is desireless . . . he allows things to return to independent transformation (*duhua* 獨化), emulating *ziran*.”¹² This places the Sage in a comparable role to Dao, emulating *ziran* and thus allowing things their own independent processes. The Song Emperor Huizong comes to a similar conclusion saying, “The Dao emulates *ziran* because it responds to things. *Ziran* is not completed (alone) by Dao, as it emerges from responding to things. Thus, the Dao descends and below emulates [things].”¹³ This suggest being *ziran* means that the Dao engages with things so it can properly respond to them. Thus, as for Wang Bi, *ziran* is the dynamic quality of adapting and responding to the diversity of things, allowing them to be themselves. Lastly, the contemporary scholar Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 continues this reading by specifying the Dao in chapter 25 as following or according with the *ziran*, i.e., the *ziji ruci* 自己如此 (self-so), of the myriad things (Wang 2008, p. 42). Wang’s key move is to equate *ziran* to the totality of all individuals (perhaps identifiable with Nature) and elevate them over Dao. This makes the Dao a force that responds to but does not control things, and lets them be self-so. Put another way, Wang’s interpretation implies an anti-authoritarian vision of Dao in contrast to other more hierarchical views like that of Heshanggong.

Chinese Laozegetics proffers abundant possible solutions to this classic four-character puzzle. Notably, these conceptions often have little to do with the unique polysemy of the term *ziran* in the Chinese original, and emerge from a profusion of different Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist intellectual traditions brought to bear on the *Laozi*. As I shall show in the following sections, the non-Chinese interpretations found in the many *Laozi* translations grapple with nearly identical questions about the nature of the text’s cosmology, and their choices further support the primacy of interpretation over the specificity of language—including “native” language—when engaging with a classic text.

3. *Ziran* Translated as “Being” or “Self-Existing”

Turning to non-Chinese understandings, i.e., translations, of the key chapter 25 passage, one encounters new philosophies and religions engaging with the exegetical problem of *ziran*. Despite the dual distances of language and culture, the issues and options that emerge reveal meaningful continuities.

The earliest preserved and basically datable¹⁴ translations of the chapter 25 *ziran* are found in two Latin manuscripts housed in the British Library.¹⁵ One is partial, and one is complete, with both being composed by Figurist Jesuits in the early 18th century. Their conceptions of *ziran* reveal an undeniable exegetical, or perhaps more accurately termed eisegetical, approach. Though these monks had a mission to find hidden Catholic doctrine in the *Laozi*, they took the Chinese tradition quite seriously in this process. Both translations drew on historical commentaries to support their readings, even translating

the relevant comments into Latin. As we will see, their notion that Dao equals God also heavily informed how they interpret and translate *ziran*.

As the complete Latin translation synthesized earlier partial efforts at interpretation and translation, I shall begin with the incomplete text that most likely appeared first (Wei 2018). There the whole line *Dao fa ziran* becomes “Tao Virtutem habet Entis à se” (The Dao possesses the characteristic of self-Being) (Textus quidam ex libro n.d., p. 220). This rendering is further accompanied by the Chinese comment 道又法於自然，是自然又大於道 (Lin 2011, p. 506)¹⁶ and its Latin translation “Tao denique Virtus pervenis ad Ens seu naturam Entis a se, certe inde sequitur quod Natura Entis a se nobilior est Tao” (The character of the Dao ultimately reaches toward “Being” or the nature of self-Being, and so the Nature of self-Being is greater than the Dao) (Textus quidam ex libro n.d., p. 223).

These related translations of original text and commentary must be carefully unpacked. First, one finds the fascinating translation of *ziran* as “*Entis à se*,” which I retranslate as “self-Being” to highlight how *Entis* indicates “Being” with a capital “B.” However, a more descriptive translation might be “existing from itself” or to use technical Catholic language derived from the very expression *ens a se*—aseity. This Latin translation identifies *ziran* with Being, but more specifically the self-existing characteristic of Being. This is a classic quality of God, but the translator seeks support for this reading and translation in the Chinese tradition. This Chinese comment and its Latin translation simply present a view where *ziran* supersedes the Dao as the highest reality, never explicitly confirming the “self-existence” reading of *ziran*. Of course, within the framework of Greco-Christian cosmology, the logic of this connection emerges from the belief that “Being” remains the ultimate, as the self-existing. Such an elevation of *ziran* in this comment clarifies why *ziran* might be identified with “Being” itself, and even equated with the Catholic God or maybe abstractly in some sense God himself as supreme Being.

Turning to the complete Latin *Laozi* manuscript, one finds the exact same translation, “Tao virtutem habet Entis a se” (Liber Sinicus *Táo Tě Kīm* n.d., p. 87). This work, however, offers a more revealing explanation for its translator’s choice. The accompanying interpretation says, “Æternam in Divino *Vû* 無 naturam habens Inscrutabilem. Ipsismet est *Ens a se* Independens et Absolutissimum” (The Eternal in Divine *Wu* 無 (Void) possesses an Unknowable nature. Itself is self-Being, Independent, and Most Absolute) (Liber Sinicus *Táo Tě Kīm* n.d., p. 90). Here *Wu* is not “Non-Being,” as it is sometimes translated, but true “Being,” as understood as the ultimate reality of *ain soph* according to the Christian Cabbala perspective of the Figurists (Von Collani 2000, p. 537).

The Dao is thus identified with the true Being that is an unknowable void. It is self-existing, independent, and absolute. This firmly situates *ziran* as the key quality or nature of the divine. Reading *ziran* as Being or the self-existent nature of Being is quite unusual in the history of its translation; however, even with the radical agenda of the translators, the “self-existent” aspect is quite close to the conception found in *Heshanggong’s Commentary* mentioned above, and the connection to the divine creative void is also reminiscent of Mengshan Deyi’s Buddhist reading. One might conclude that, even given the gulf between a 1st century Daoist or a 13th century Buddhist writing in Classical Chinese and 18th century Catholics writing in Latin, a basic shared sense of *ziran* as a key quality of the absolute persists.

4. *Ziran* Translated as “Itself”

These Latin works were never published and so had limited impact on the global reception of the *Laozi*. In contrast, though not a complete translation, the 1823 work *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-Tseu* by the first modern sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat spread widely. It was read by the likes of Hegel ([1833] 1986, p. 146), and its interpretation of *ziran* has been both copied and imitated, as I shall demonstrate below. Rémusat (1823, p. 27) translates, “L’homme a son type et son modèle dans la terre, la terre dans le ciel, le ciel dans la raison, la raison en elle-même” (Man has his type and his model in Earth, Earth in Heaven, Heaven in Reason, Reason in itself). Most notable is the translation of Dao as *la*

raison. This actually continues one of the Latin translators' interpretations of Dao, as they sometimes would also render it as "Ratio" (divine reason) (Liber Sinicus *Táo Tě Kīm* n.d., p. 1). This choice positions Abel-Rémusat to interpret *ziran* as "elle-même" (itself), instead of following the Latin version focused on the quality of Being. Dao as Reason is just Reason. It needs no other quality, as Reason is its own description and is "herself," if I preserve the grammatical gender that agrees with *la raison*.

While Abel-Rémusat's interpretation of Dao as divine Reason has found few imitators, equivalents of his simple reading of *ziran* appear in numerous other translations and languages. Some of these cases belong to what can be called interpretive lineages, where a translator reads a translation in one language and imports that "interpretation" into a second language (Tadd 2022, pp. 99–108). Abel-Rémusat generates such a lineage, when his interpreting of chapter 25 *ziran* as "itself" becomes standard in a range of languages, even if the term's grammatical gender varies: herself, himself, itself, or self. *sebè*"

In 1870, two German translations of the *Laozi* appeared, with the one by Victor von Strauss (1870, p. 126) clearly following Abel-Rémusat in translating our key concept as "sein Selbst" (himself). One also finds an undated Manchu translation published in transcription in 1901 that uses "ini cisui" (himself) (Von Zach 1901, p. 161).¹⁷ Many others followed this approach, including Tolstoy's ([1884] 1937, p. 535) earliest attempts at a *Laozi* translation that has "sam" *sebè*" (himself), de Harlez's (1891, p. 44) French "lui-même" (himself), Old's (1894, p. 10) English "itself," Ular's (1903, p. 19) German "sich selbst" (itself), Evola's (1923, chp. 25) Italian "se stessa" (herself), Ervast's (1925, p. 22) Finnish "se itse" (itself), and Ágner's (1943, chp. 25) Hungarian "sajátmagában" (itself). Stephen Mitchell's (1988, chp. 25) infamous meta-translation uses "itself," as does its Persian re-translation by Farshīd Qahramānī (2009, p. 25) that has "khud" (self). There is even Sarker Amin's (2008, p. 37) Bengali that glosses *ziran* with "Tāo," i.e., itself, and Alimonak'i's (2013, p. 92) Georgian translation where Dao obeys the "daos k'anons" (the law of Dao), i.e., the law of itself.

All these readings take the passage to basically indicate that what the Dao "models," "is founded on," or "takes as standard" is his-, her-, it-self. That is to say the Dao is just what it is. In some sense, this continues the Catholic reading that makes *ziran* a noun, but in a much gentler form, as the concept of Being is less explicit. Of course, in Tolstoy's case, with the full line rendered as "Borg" *podoben* "sam" *sebè*" (God is like himself), the theological aspect is undeniable (Tolstoy [1884] 1937, p. 535).

Among this list exist both obvious and understated translation lineages. I know that Tolstoy's translation mainly followed von Strauss (Bodde 1950, p. 25), and that both Harlez and Ular most probably read Abel-Rémusat. Furthermore, Evola certainly based his entire Italian translation on Ular's 1903 German translation. Finally, there is the case of August Wesley's (1937) Estonian work based on both Old's English and Ervast's Finnish, and which preserves both their Theosophical readings rooted in mystical perennialism.

The reduction of *ziran* to simply "self" might be critiqued as the loss of nuance and depth of meaning that inevitably occurs during translation into a foreign language. However, once again I can point to the premodern Chinese notions that *ziran* equals Dao and the modern exact equivalents of "ziji" (self) and "taziji" (itself). Thus, it becomes problematic to assert this rendering of *ziran* reflects at all on the specificity of language, a fact further demonstrated by the scope of examples in this section.

5. *Ziran* Translated as "Its Own Nature," "What It Is in Itself," or "Self-So"

The Christian theology-infused readings that focus on *ziran* as self-existing, or divine Reason itself, encountered a strong alternative originating with Abel-Rémusat's student Stanislas Julien. Julien rejected the use of European concepts like Reason or Being to discuss the Dao and delved into the explanations of 30 traditional commentaries that he cites in his over 600 explanatory footnotes. His 1842 French translation was the first complete published *Laozi* in any Western language, and this status, combined with the immense

erudition of the work, made it the base translation or key reference for most other early translations in French, English, German, Czech, and Russian.

Julien translates our key passage as “le Tao imite sa nature” (The Dao imitates its nature), which shifts the sense of *ziran* from Being or itself to “its nature” (Julien 1842, p. 92). This articulation though more awkward than Abel-Rémusat’s translation, may be closer to the Chinese traditional commentaries of which Julien cites and translates four. Interestingly, none of these sources explicitly reveal why *ziran* is taken as “its nature.” Nevertheless, his citation of Heshanggong’s 無所法 as “il n’a rien à imiter en dehors de lui” (it has nothing to imitate apart from itself) may offer a clue (Julien 1842, p. 96). This citation omits the immediately preceding phrase 道性自然 (The Way’s nature is *ziran*), but that seems the most likely source that inspired him. It is known, after all, that Julien first translated the entirety of Heshanggong’s *Commentary* while preparing his final French *Laozi* and may have taken its mention of *daoxing* 道性 (Dao’s nature) as a gloss for *ziran* (Julien 1842, p. xvi).

As with Abel-Rémusat, many translations follow Julien’s equation of “nature” and *ziran*. The earliest full English translation, an 1859 manuscript housed at Yale, is almost a direct retranslation of Julien, and has the passage as “the Taou imitates his own nature” (The Book of the Way and of Virtue 1859, chp. 25). There is also Balfour’s (1884, p. 16) English “its own inherent nature,” Masot’s (1889, p. 112) Spanish “su misma naturaleza” (its very nature), Carus’ (1898, p. 110) “intrinsic,” Allawi’s (1995, p. 82) Arabic “ṭabī’yy” (innate), and Róssis’ (2014, p. 29) Greek “fýsi tou” (its nature). As one can see, this interpretation has maintained its popularity for over 150 years. In the few examples, one observes a refining of the way this interpretation is translated, but the point remains the same. *Ziran* is what is inherent or intrinsic; it is something’s “nature.”

The last translation is quite fascinating from a history of philosophy perspective. There *ziran* becomes *fýsi*—the modern form of the ancient *physis*, which means something’s core essence, its nature. This Greek concept is likely what inspired Julien’s translation, with its implied sense of a consistent essence. The modern term *fýsi* is also used as an equivalent of English “Nature,” and this polysemy relates to another interpretation of *ziran* that I shall discuss later.

The first published English *Laozi* translation appeared in 1868 by John Chalmers. He, like the anonymous Yale translator, often relies on Julien’s interpretations in his work. Yet, when translating *ziran*, he chose a different strategy: “Tau takes its law from what it is in itself” (Chalmers 1868, p. 19). Though “what it is in itself” implies Julien’s sense of “nature,” it shifts the focus back to the notion of “itself” and of Being, of what it “is.” This reading impacted the famous but admittedly lackluster translation of James Legge (1891, p. 68), who used “its being what it is.” This departs from the focus on “itself,” emphasizing the continuity of how it exists as it exists by the use of the gerund “being,” or as he clarifies in his notes, it is God being the uncaused cause (*ibid.*, p. 69).

The renowned Arthur Waley (1934, p. 174) translation introduces a new variation on this, “the Self-so.”¹⁸ This makes *ziran* a quality of “being what it is.” It is not “nature” as the basic character of a thing, but it is a quality of just existing in its own way. In line with these two similar interpretations, Heysinger (1903, p. 42) has “the Tao from what it is,” Golden and Presas’ (2000, p. 75) Catalan has “allò que és com és” (what it is as it is), Sehnal’s (2012, p. 129) Czech has “čím je sama od sebe” (what it is by itself). One also observes Jonathan Star (2008, p. 28) presenting a long list of *ziran* translations including Waley’s “self-so,” “But Tao depends on itself alone/Supremely free, self-so, it rests in its own nature.”

In all these cases, the Dao exists as itself, in its own way. *Ziran* is not just “self” but is the state of being itself, being as it is itself, being self-so; it is a quality, not a self-reflexive pronoun. The connection of *ziran* to the Dao’s nature first appears in the beginning of Heshanggong’s comment, though it might be closer to Wei Yuan’s vision of *ziran* as the universal nature being the nature of Dao. The related “self-so” notion similarly resonates with Bai Yuchan’s sense of “ruci eryi” (just being so). Regardless of language, this form

of *ziran* cleaves more closely to a description, though one that designates the cosmic self existing as itself.

6. *Ziran* Translated as “From Itself” and “Spontaneity”

Not long after Chalmers’ English was published, two German translations, as already mentioned, appeared in February and March of 1870. The later one, by von Strauss, belongs in the Abel-Rémusat lineage, while the other, by Reinhold von Plaenckner, initiated its own type of *ziran* translation. Like Abel-Rémusat and von Strauss, the professional sinologist von Plaenckner stressed the “self” aspect of the term; however, he also included a layer of directionality. He presents “Und das Tao stammt ohne Frage allein aus sich selbst” (And the Dao without question comes only from itself) (von Plaenckner 1870, p. 114). Of course, the “from itself” translation relates again to the verb choice, but this sense of manifesting from within itself offers quite a different conception of Dao than if it just models itself or is itself. There is a sense of emergence, and it plays with the polysemy of *zi* 自 as “self/*selbst*,” “from/*aus*,” and “spontaneous.”

Von Plaenckner’s German translation became the foundation of the first Czech *Laozi* by the philosopher, politician, and nationalist Františka Čupr, who hoped to establish Czech as a functional scholarly language and translated many world classics with such an aim. In 1878, he completed his *Laozi* in which he follows von Plaenckner quite closely, stating “A Tao pochází beze vši pochybnosti samo ze sebe” (And the Tao undoubtedly comes only from itself) (Čupr 1878, p. 31).¹⁹ Here *ziran* remains the emergent “from itself” even after being transferred from the Germanic *aus sich selbst* to the Slavic *ze sebe*. In both cases, this reading is heavily reliant on taking *fa* 法 as “comes” (*stammt* or *pochází*), which necessitates including “from” as part of the expression.

A similar Dutch translation by Henri Borel (1898, p. 122), however, demonstrates that this interpretation of *ziran* is not simply a reflection of verb choice. It says, “(Maar) de Wet van Tao is van-zich-zelven” ((But) the law of the Dao is from its own self). Here *Daofa* as a compound becomes the topic and *ziran* becomes the comment. Interestingly, Goddard’s (1919, p. 23) English, certainly aware of Borel’s Dutch states, “Tao is self-derived.” Reichelt’s (1948, p. 73) later Norwegian “Tao stammer fra seg selv” (Tao comes from itself) more exactly returns to von Plaenckner’s approach. Still, regardless of the differences between these few translations, the understanding of *ziran* relates to the question of the origin of the Dao; it is about self-creation.

Lastly, the renowned sinologist Richard Wilhelm (1957, p. 65) reveals a major struggle of the translator to express the richness of *ziran*, though the basic sense aligns with von Plaenckner’s notion of originating in the self, or “self-derived.” He says, “der Sinn richtet sich nach sich selber” (The Meaning models itself after itself). The term he uses for *ziran* is “sich nach sich selber,” a phrase far more complex than any other German translation previously mentioned and which could be literally translated as “itself after it itself.” In this case, the verb takes two objects that are both “self.”²⁰ It is not quite clear where this second self is found in the original Chinese, but this sense of self-modeling, self-creating, and self-emergence represents a dynamic aseity for the Dao being “from itself.”

Ziran as “from itself” supposes a notion of emergent authenticity, a state of being where something unintentionally moves in accordance with its nature. In this “spontaneous” view “nature” becomes implied, while focus shifts to the “self-emergent” mode of action and interaction. This sense of *ziran* translated as “spontaneous” or “spontaneously” can first be dated from Balfour, previously mentioned in regard to the reading of *ziran* as “nature.” Balfour (1884, p. 16) gives a double translation, “Tao regulates itself by its own inherent nature- or, spontaneously.” This translation is influenced by the reading of *fa* 法 as an active verb, as the choice of “regulates” helps shift *ziran* to become an adverb instead of a noun or adjective. It also means that the nature of the Dao is to function spontaneously.

Balfour’s interpretation comes quite early in the history of *Laozi* translations, and one even sees a similar approach in another undated Manchu translation housed in the Saint Petersburg Institute of Oriental Manuscripts and transcribed by Giovanni Stary. It has

“ini cisui banjinara” (his own self-generating) (Stary 1996, p. 1352), which makes even more explicit the emergent aspect of *ziran*. Like “self-so,” “spontaneous” and its variations have become enshrined as another standard type of translation. For example, its noun form “spontaneity” often appears in English: Maclagan’s (1898, p. 138) “Tao takes as law Spontaneity,” Lionel Giles’ (1904, p. 21) “the law of the Tao is its own spontaneity,” Medhurst’s (1905, p. 44) “The Tao’s standard is spontaneity,” Parker’s (1910, p. 107) “Man looks up to Earth for guidance . . . and Providence to Spontaneity,” and Izutsu’s (2001, p. 73) “(its own) spontaneity.” Of course, one also finds this in other European languages as well, like Parinetto’s (1995, p. 25) Italian “spontaneità” (spontaneity).

This reading of “spontaneity,” a much more dynamic term than just “nature” or “self-so,” further appears in radically different linguistic contexts like Radpour’s (2017, p. 66) Persian translation that reads chapter 25’s *ziran* as “khud-bah-khudi” (spontaneous self). Here the translator reduplicates *khud*, which means both “self” as a noun and “spontaneous” as an adjective, which becomes “self-by-selfness” and generally is equivalent to “spontaneity.” The connection between self and spontaneity is quite fascinating, especially because self-from-selfness resembles some of our previously discussed translations. Of course, the end result emphasizes dynamic self-emergence. The translator, in private correspondence, suggests that his choice was heavily etymological, in that both *khud* and *zi* share the two meanings of “self” and “spontaneity.”

This Persian etymological translation reminds us of a similar reading in modern Chinese. Scholars like Ye Shuxun, who focus on the etymology of *zi* with its meaning of “self,” “from,” and “spontaneous,” likewise articulate the importance of this multi-meaning perspective. Such polysemy does not appear to be particularly relevant in the premodern Chinese commentarial tradition. Nevertheless, it remains an important one that not only has roots in the original language but can also clearly traverse the translanguing divide.

7. *Ziran* Translated as “Natural” or “Naturalness”

Another prevalent contemporary translation of *ziran*, like the popular “spontaneity,” is “natural” or “naturalness.” This reading evolves out of the idea that *ziran* is something’s “nature,” but again, as with spontaneity, represents something much more dynamic and vital than the essentializing notion of a core “nature.” It first appeared within the 1894 Russian translation produced by D.P. Konissi (小西増太郎 Konishi Masutarō) and edited by Leo Tolstoy. It takes the line as “jeststvennost’ neset” Tao” (Naturalness bears up the Dao) (Konissi and Tolstoy [1894] 1913, p. 17). This novel reading is especially noteworthy, as Tolstoy’s own translation, based on von Strauss and produced ten years earlier, takes *ziran* as “himself” in line with the more Christian reading of the passage. Thus, the credit for this version should likely be Konissi’s alone.

This major shift in interpretation does not list its origin, just as with Julien’s notion of “its nature,” though we do know that Konissi relied on *Laozi* editions found in the Rumiantsev Library in Moscow, now the Russian State Library (Konishi 2013, p. 106). At present that library contains the old woodblock commentarial editions of Heshanggong, Wang Bi, and Bai Yuchan. None of these commentaries readily explain the shift towards “naturalness,” but the translator’s place of origin might offer a clue.

As this work was the first European language *Laozi* produced by a Japanese man, it is worth contemplating the impact modern Japanese language had on Konissi’s reading. In particular, one must note the Japanese effort to translate the Dutch *natuur* or “Nature” with the compound 自然 (jp. *shizen*, ch. *ziran*). While this use of *ziran* to represent the Western concept “Nature” later becomes standard in Modern Chinese, it was a Japanese innovation. Given this context, Konissi’s inventive translation of *Laozi*’s *ziran* appears to project the new *natuur* sense of the term back onto the ancient work. This is especially probable given that Konissi was not a classically trained Japanese scholar but instead a Russian Orthodox priest who became interested in the *Laozi* after traveling to Moscow.

Regardless of the etymological specifics of this reading, Konissi clearly made a turn toward naturalism. According to Sho Konishi, for Konissi “nature served as a focal point

in understanding Lao Tzu” and that the “*Tao te ching* as introduced by [Konissi] reconceptualized Hobbesian nature from segmentation and competition, chaos and disorder, to the unification of all beings as the original state of nature” (Konishi 2013, p. 110). This vision of a Daoist naturalism rooted in the state of *ziran* as true “naturalness” represents an important development in the history of the concept.²¹ If this is accurate, Konissi’s reading of the *Laozi* was revolutionary.²² He is the first to elevate the *ziran* state of nature in the *Laozi* to the level of divinity while removing any metaphysical signification.

The 1950 Russian translation by Yang Xingshun—even though asserting a radically different Soviet Marxist reading of the *Laozi* that completely rejects Konissi and Tolstoy’s perspective as bourgeois idealism—still follows their translation of *ziran* as “jestestvennost’” (naturalness) (Ân 1950, p. 129). Many others use a similar approach: Duyvendak’s (1953, p. 55) French “le Cours Naturel” (the Natural Course), Duyvendak’s (1954, p. 58) self-retranslation into English “the Natural,” Lau’s (1963, p. 30) “naturally so,” Feng and English’s (1972, p. 50) “natural,” Berzinski’s (2013, chp. 25) Latvian translation “Dabisks” (natural), and Roberts’ (2001, p. 82) more euphemistic “self-momentum of all becoming.”

This perspective resembles Wang Bi’s take on *ziran*, with its focus on the cosmic order following the individual natures of all things, everything being natural. However, this is an innovative reading that does not find a perfect analogy in the pre-modern Chinese context as it relies on the post-enlightenment conception of Nature. The logical conclusion of this emergence of a naturalistic *ziran* is discussed in the following section.

8. *Ziran* Translated as “Nature”

While the terms used that mean “natural” often imply a connection to the natural world or Nature, especially in the stronger capitalized translations of Duyvendak, Nature itself as a dominant cosmic aspect of Laozi’s philosophy also finds a place. The first hint comes not from a translation of *ziran*, appearing prior to Konissi’s importation of this modern Japanese sense of the term, but in the 1870 work of Thomas Watters, an American diplomat stationed in Hong Kong. He identifies *ziran* as “spontaneity,” being the primary quality of the Way that he identifies with “Nature,” “Universal Nature,” or the “Law of Nature” (Watters 1870, pp. 40, 51, 61).

However, the leap from this identification of *ziran* as the spontaneity of Nature to Nature itself occurs much later in the mid-twentieth century. First, one finds in a French anthology of Chinese literature by Sung-nien Hsu (1933, p. 394) “le *tao* imite la nature” (the Dao imitates Nature). Not long after, in an obscure translation that is the first English version produced by a native Chinese hand, Hu Tse Ling states, “Heaven follows the way of the Tao and the Tao follows that of Nature” (Hu 1936, p. 40). A much more influential translation comes from Lin Yutang, who takes the line as “Tao models itself after Nature” (Lin [1942] 1955, p. 597) but adds in a footnote that the term is literally translated as “self-so,” “self-formed,” and “that which is so by itself.” Exactly what prompted this shift to “Nature” is not revealed, though Wing-tsit Chan, who uses a translation identical to Lin’s, “Tao models itself after Nature” (Chan 1963, p. 153), is more explicit in his mission to make the Chinese traditions of thought into types of “philosophy” that might be palatable to Western audiences. He thus frames Confucianism as humanism and Laozi’s Daoism as naturalism, supporting the latter assertion with the “fact” that Nature is the highest order in the cosmos, even above the Way.²³ In Chan’s reading, Laozi’s core concept *wuwei* 無為 (non-action) tellingly becomes “take no action contrary to Nature” (Chan 1963, p. 136).

It is worth reflecting on how the reading of *ziran* as Nature originates with Chinese scholars in the 20th century. One again might posit that this results from the massive impact Japanese understandings of Western learning had on these modern Chinese intellectuals and, similarly to Konissi, they were inspired by the Japanese conflation of *natuur* and *ziran*. Of course, the shift to re-imagining this classical concept coincides with the importation of science and the values that made such a reading appealing to people like Wing-tsit Chan.

Regardless of its complex origins, this naturalistic reading of *ziran* was influential in the latter half of the 20th century and beyond. Jovanovski’s Macedonian “prirodna”

(Nature) belongs directly to this interpretive lineage as his work retranslates Wing-tsit Chan's (Jovanovski 1978, p. 22). There are other lineages of this reading as well, like the one beginning with the anarchist Yamaga [1957]'s (Yamaga [1957] 1992, chp. 25) Esperanto "la naturon" (Nature) and continuing when a Spanish anarchist revolutionary Edward Vivancos (1963, chp. 25) retranslated Yamaga into Spanish, rendering the expression as "la Naturaleza" (Nature). This interpretation has traveled far and wide, as it easily crosses linguistic boundaries. Thus, one finds Jagadish Chandra Jain's (1973, chp. 25) Hindi translation "prākrtik kram" (Nature), E. San Juan's (2012, p. 15) Filipino "likas at taal na pagsulong ng kalikasan" (the natural and eternal development of Nature), and Yufei Luo's (2017, p. 83) Khmer "thōmměə' ciət" (Nature).

With this articulation of *ziran* as Nature itself, one has moved to the extreme opposite pole from considering this concept as an articulation of transcendent Being suggested by the Figurists. Interestingly, though one might suppose these missionaries were most likely to contort the "original meaning" of the text for their clear ideological aims, it is this reading of "Nature" that especially lacks a traditional Chinese equivalent, being the result of a Western concept mistakenly connected to the Daoist *ziran*. Even so, the union of the Dao and Nature is also not completely unexpected or irrational. The Dao, as conceived by various Chinese thinkers like Guo Xiang, does include an imminent quality, and when understood in the context of modern scientific notions could reasonably be equated to Nature. Thus, to translate *ziran* as Nature does perhaps exceed the bounds of the original language; however, such an exegetical move is not fundamentally more different than the variegated readings I have discussed above.

9. Conclusions

This paper attempts to simultaneously fulfill multiple goals. First, it aims to provide a history of the translation and reception of *Laozi's* chapter 25 *ziran* in the non-Chinese world. Such a history shows the specifics of interaction between different cultural, philosophical, and religious traditions with this difficult passage that bears much of the weight of the metaphysics found in the *Laozi*.

Second, it seeks to address the question of language and translatability. By recounting six types of Chinese interpretations and six types of non-Chinese translations, a richness and expansiveness of Chapter 25 *ziran* exegesis is unearthed that transcends the idolization of the "original" text or even the source language. Furthermore, examples taken from dozens of languages have demonstrated through sheer quantity how individual interpretive approaches remain unbound to any particular language. While some glosses more easily find equivalences trans-lingually, e.g., "Nature" or "itself," major impediments, even while crossing language families, are generally absent for all the various types. It is still possible to critique this analysis due to its crude use of equivalencies, and the importance of linguistic variation is not disallowed. Yet, the reality of shared ideas and shared approaches to exegesis persists nonetheless.

Third, it intends to spur philosophical reflection concerning the coexistence of all these different interpretations and translations of the Chapter 25 *ziran*. Conceptions of this *ziran* in translation, and to a slightly lesser extent in Chinese, appear to exist along two spectrums from the metaphysical to the physical and from the universal to the particular: *ziran* as "Being/God" on one end and *ziran* as "Nature" on the other; *ziran* as universal God/Nature at one end and as individual self-so/spontaneity at the other. These continuums do not simply result from challenges or contortions of linguistic translation, as the native Chinese tradition can attest, and while this might show the inherent emptiness of this term, they ultimately direct us back to a notion of "self." Depending on how a commentator or translator understands "self" and its relation to Dao, *ziran* becomes variously reformulated as cosmic essence, personal essence, cosmic process, or personal process. Explained from the human perspective, this term is imbued with our various possible aspirations: to know our origins, to become one with God, Nature, or our true essential natures, and live authentic spontaneous lives as we are or as we ultimately should be.

Lastly, it hopes to demonstrate the value of Global Laozegetics research. While the vast frame of Global Laozegetics might suggest an abyss of infinite exegesis, its diversity of commentaries and translations not only expands our view but also simultaneously narrows and focuses our philosophical inquiries. For example, given the above analysis, it is now worth reassessing how “self” can be variously understood in the context of this Daoist classic. Thus, a global view on the *Laozi* not only teaches us much about the history of cross-cultural intellectual connection and exchange but also brings us back to the small, bounded world of the text itself.

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Notes

- 1 For more on this concept, see (Tadd 2022).
- 2 This is an expanded count based on Tadd’s (2019a) bibliography of *Laozi* translations.
- 3 This list is by no means exhaustive, being limited to such popular examples for practical reasons.
- 4 Framed more broadly, I assert classical texts like the *Laozi* function not as sources of eternal truth but loci for philosophical debate.
- 5 As with the six types of *ziran* in translation, this set merely provides a representative but not exhaustive range of Chinese approaches to the term.
- 6 All translations are my own.
- 7 道以無法為法者也，無法者，自然而已，故曰道法自然。(Jiao 2009, p. 64).
- 8 道則自本自根，未有天地，自古以固存，所法也... 夫道者，自本自根，所因而自然也。(Wang 1979, p. 29).
- 9 道法自然者，一真氣生於虛明中，自然妙用無窮無殆也。(Deyi 1287, p. 16b).
- 10 道只是自然，自然即是道。所以更無別法，能法於道者。(Ji *gujin fodao lunheng* n.d., p. 381b).
- 11 道不違自然，乃得其性，法自然者也。法自然者，在方而法方，在圓而法圓，於自然無所違也。自然者，無稱之言，窮極之辭也。(Lou 1980, p. 65).
- 12 聖人無欲... 任物義歸於獨化，法自然也。(Li 2011, pp. 362–63).
- 13 道法自然，應物故也。自然非道之全，出而應物，故道降而下法。(Huizong 2011, p. 278).
- 14 There are three undatable Manchu translations that might predate these Latin works, two of which are used as general examples of interpretive strategies below.
- 15 Earlier fragmented Tangut, Spanish, Portuguese, Latin, and French translations of the *Laozi* exist without the key passage. See (Shanghai Guiji Chubanshe Bian 1996, pp. 117–32; Cobo 1590; Longobardo 1623, 153v; Martini 1658, p. 117; Couplet 1687, p. xxvi; Comte 1696, p. 149).
- 16 The translator attributes this comment to Mr. Chen, likely Chen Jingyuan 陳景元 but it really comes from Lin Xiyi 林希逸.
- 17 This Manchu term is hard to limit to one meaning because it often functions as a gloss for *ziran*, and includes the meanings “on its own, spontaneously, or naturally.” Still, the etymology is “ini” (his) and “cisui” (self, personal, selfish), so in this case I follow Julius Grill who renders it in German as “von selbst” (itself, by itself) (Grill 1911, p. 769).
- 18 “Self-so” later becomes an overall popular translation for *ziran* in English, though it is strangely rare in this specific chapter 25 passage.
- 19 *Samo ze sebe* can also be read as “itself from itself,” as suggest by L’ubomir Dunaj in private communication, though ultimately the notion of self-emergence remains the same.
- 20 Thanks to Dennis Schilling for explaining the intricacies of this German grammar.
- 21 Léon de Rosny suggested around the same time that Daoism shared an affinity with Rousseau’s conception of nature but did not deeply explore that thought (de Rosny 1892, p. 17).
- 22 It is conceivable there were other earlier sources for this reading, though not in this passage. This possibility is suggested by Carus’ (1898, p. 301) endnotes that say, “The words *tsz’ jan* (12–13), ‘self-like,’ which are commonly translated by ‘natural,’ mean here that ‘reason follows its own nature,’ i.e., its standard is intrinsic.”
- 23 He even entitles his chapter on the *Laozi* as “The Natural Way of Lao Tzu.”

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Article

The Understanding and Translation of De 德 in the English Translation of the *Daodejing* 道德經

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Abstract: This article investigates the translation of De 德 in the English translation of the *Daodejing*, compares and analyzes several representative translations, and tries to present the complexity and richness of the meaning of De in the thought of the *Daodejing*. The article is divided into three parts. First, it briefly traces the concept of De back to the Shang 商 and Zhou 周 periods, thus laying the foundation for subsequent study. Second, taking Chapter 51 of the *Daodejing* as an example, it explores the meaning of “virtue”, which is the most important and common translation of De, in the context of the *Daodejing* and examines related terms such as “potency” and “inner power”. Finally, two representative translations of “Xuan De” 玄德 are examined and discussed.

Keywords: De 德; Xuan De 玄德; *Daodejing*

1. Introduction

In the world of early Chinese thought, De 德 is undoubtedly an extremely important and difficult concept to understand. The importance and complexity of De is of course due, on the one hand, to its own rich philosophical implications and interpretative possibilities and, on the other hand, to the fact that its connotations and interpretations have often differed among different schools of thought or philosophers, containing a wealth of “internal differences” (Zheng 2009, p. 7). Therefore, how to interpret and translate De in early Chinese philosophical classics has always been a thorny issue. Due to the diverse meaning of De, many translators choose to keep the Chinese phonetic transcription (拼音 *pin yin*) and leave it untranslated. Such an approach, of course, would suggest to readers that De is a complex concept that is extremely difficult to understand and to translate accurately. Alternatively, some might interpret it instead as, when trying to translate it, we are bound to miss the whole picture and even form some kind of misunderstanding. However, from another perspective, as we know, translation itself is an activity of understanding and interpretation, clarifying and determining the meaning of its objects.¹ Therefore, perhaps the suspicion and suspension of translation indicates that the translator has given up the in-depth investigation and precise grasp of the concept to a certain extent. Thus, many translators try to deliver a philosophical understanding and translation of De to reveal its theoretical significance.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, De is explained under the category of Daoism and Confucianism as follows: “In Taoism, the essence of Tao inherent in all beings”, and “In Confucianism and the extended use, moral virtue”. Similarly, in the studies and translations of Chinese classics published thus far, De in Confucian texts is usually translated as virtue to emphasize its moral connotation.² In contrast, in Daoist texts, the interpretation and translation of De are more complicated and diverse, with common translations such as character, power, inner power, potency, virtue, efficacy, and integrity.³ The *Daodejing* tends to pair De with Dao 道 and expound De in the context of the relationship between Dao and myriad things (*wan wu* 萬物). Consequently, to accurately grasp De in the *Daodejing*, it is necessary to place De in the theoretical context of Dao, myriad things (*wan wu* 萬物), non-action (*wu wei* 無為), and self-so (*zi ran* 自然), and examine the significance of

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
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
De therein. In fact, the various translations of De in the English versions of the *Daodejing* show such an effort of understanding and interpretation.

This article will first trace the origins of the character De, briefly reviewing and discussing the transformation and evolution of the meaning of De in the Shang 商 and Zhou 周 periods. It will then investigate some representative English translations of De in the relevant chapters of the *Daodejing* and explore the rich meanings of De through these translations. Finally, it will examine the translations of Xuan De, which is without any doubt one of the most important concepts that is related to De in early Daoism.

2. De in the Shang and Zhou Periods

The description of De in the *Daodejing*, although unique, is not created out of nowhere but has its origins. As early as the time of the *Shang* and *Zhou*, De was already an important concept in the Chinese intellectual and political world, and some scholars have thus summarized the period of Shang and Zhou as the “Age of De” (Zheng 2009, p. 21). Along with the drastic changes in the ideological and sociopolitical systems at the time of the Shang and Zhou, the connotation of De had also evolved and had become more complex and richer in the long-term cultural accumulation.

The first occurrence of De is very early, but scholars have not formed a unified view as to whether the original graph already existed in the oracle bone graphs and whether the concept of De was initially formed. However, it is worth mentioning that, according to the textual research and references of previous scholars, the Shang oracle bone graph  (jiaguwen heji 甲骨文合集 7268) and its variants are related to the character De in the Zhou bronze inscriptions and are most likely the initial graph for De⁴ (Jao 1978, pp. 77–100; Nivison 1978–1979; Xu 1989, pp. 168–69; Guo 2019; Ye 2022, pp. 51–56).

For the meaning of the oracle bone graph , the common interpretations are virtue (*de* 德)⁵, get (*de* 得) (Jao 2009, p. 233), patrol (*xun* 巡, *xing* 省)⁶, and expedition (*zheng* 征) (Nivison 1978–1979). According to Zheng Kai 鄭開, it is quite possible that the original meaning of De is related to the regular inspection of the Four Directions (*si fang* 四方) by the Son of Heaven (*tian zi* 天子) in the Shang and Zhou periods, an activity known as “*xing fang* 省方” in the Shang Dynasty and “*yu xing* 適省” in the Zhou, since De is sometimes transcribed as 省 and taken as a phonetic loan for *xing* 省. Importantly, *xing fang* and *yu xing* are not merely equivalent to forceful conquest; rather, they include patrols, hunting and expeditions and manifest the virtue of the Son of Heaven. In other words, the purpose of *xing* 省 is not to demonstrate the power of the ruler and threaten the Four Directions. Rather, it is to display the ruler’s virtue and thus to edify the Four Directions. To this extent, *xing* accommodates a more tender dimension and is permeated with political rationality (Zheng 2009, p. 140). It is precisely this humanistic kernel of *xing* that nourishes a kind of ethos (Chen 1996, pp. 296–99) and gradually nurtures the notion of De, which includes ideological content based on a high degree of humanistic rationality and an abundance of ethical principles.

In the bronze inscriptions of the Western Zhou period, the occurrence of De and its variants is very common (Liu 1986; Ye 2022, pp. 66–68). In the *Book of Changes* (*Zhou Yi* 周易), the *Book of Odes* (*Shi Jing* 詩經), the *Book of Documents* (*Shang shu* 尚書), and other early literary sources, not only is De frequently discussed, but some related customary phrases (*guan yu* 慣語), such as bright virtue (*ming de* 明德), honoring virtue (*jing de* 敬德), and corrective virtue (*zheng de* 正德), are also found. Thus, it can be inferred that De had already become a very popular ideological term at that time. Compared with De in the Shang dynasty, which was an era when the term was understood and interpreted more at the level of bureaucracy, with the rise of humanistic rationality at the time of the Western Zhou, De also went through a process of shifting from external political systems or behaviors to internal virtues. An obvious example is Zhou’s reflection and interpretation of the major historical event, King Wu conquered Shang (*wu wang ke shang* 武王克商), which encompasses great significance in the history of the Zhou dynasty and even in the political

history of China. Being a small state, the Zhou was vastly outmatched by the Shang, but it eventually won the battle against the powerful Shang. The Zhou people believed that the legitimacy of the Zhou's victory over the Shang and its mandate from heaven came from the fact that "heaven's mandate is not always constant" (*tian ming mi chang* 天命靡常) (Cheng 2004, pp. 406–8) and that Heaven (*tian* 天) has no bias but facilitates those who are virtuous (*huang tian wu qin, wei de shi fu* 皇天無親，惟德是輔) (Kong 2004, pp. 659–64).⁷ In the worldview of the Zhou people, De and the Mandate of Heaven form a two-way internal and external interaction, enabling people to gain the favor of Heaven through their own virtuous cultivation and their esteem of De. De, on the one hand, symbolizes the human inheritance of the Mandate of Heaven⁸ and, on the other hand, signifies that this inheritance in fact originates from humanity's intrinsic virtue and that there exists a sort of "religious-cum-ethical connection" between virtue and the Mandate of Heaven (Hou 1980, p. 26).

In addition, as Ye Shuxun 葉樹勳 has keenly observed, compared with that on the Shang oracle bones, the graph for De in Western Zhou inscriptions has added the "*xin* 心" (heart/mind) element and is transcribed as 愬. Such a visual change is not accidental but is meant to emphasize the meaning of inner virtue that De implies (Ye 2022, p. 73). Roger Ames has also pointed out that, since 愬 encompasses both the elements of *zhi* 直 and *xin* 心, it may also be best understood from the meaning of the *zhi* element, and the fundamental meaning of *zhi* is to grow straight without deviation in the context of organic occurrence. The organic dimension of *zhi* is underscored by its cognates, *zhi* 植, to sow and *zhi* 植, to plant (Callicott and Ames 1989, p. 125). According to Ames, it is very reasonable to infer that De in the form of 愬 might imply the growth of one's inner virtue. Interestingly, Constance Cook has observed that, in Zhou bronze inscriptions, De sometimes also has a *bei* 貝 element, which represents a cowry shell. In the Zhou period, cowry shells had a particular role as sacred objects in gift-giving and were closely associated with the virtue (*de* 德) of those who gave them or used them in sacrifice (Cook 1997).

The internalization and spiritualization of De at the time of the Yin and Zhou dynasties are, without any doubt, accompanied by the philosophizing process of De as an ideological concept and the further refinement of its meaning. By the time of the rise of the Hundred Schools (*bai jia* 百家), De no longer merely denoted moral virtues, nor did it just pervade through various virtues (e.g., filial piety, parenthood, beneficence, respect, and tenderness); it was increasingly converging on benevolence (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 義) under the dominance of Confucianism while, at the same time, retaining and developing the complex meanings of nature, character, and spiritual experience in the traditions of the Taoists and the Yin–Yangists (Zheng 2009, pp. 13–14).

In short, in the Shang and Zhou, along with the changes in politics and thought, De accumulated different levels of meaning over a long process of conceptual evolution and consolidated an important foundation for the occurrence and development of the philosophical concept of virtue in the period of the Warring States (*zhan guo* 戰國). In addition, the denotation of De in the *Daodejing* is undoubtedly complex, and the complexity is of course due to the multiple meanings that it carries and the various interpretations that it contains; however, this complexity is also due to the profound theoretical relationship between De, Dao, and thinghood, and that between De, heart/mind, and nature (*xing* 性). The complexity of De in the *Daodejing* also manifests in the differences in meaning and understanding between the different terms used in translating De in the various translations of the *Daodejing*.

3. De as Virtue in the Translation of the *Daodejing*: An Example from Chapter 51

3.1. De as Virtue

In the translation of Confucian texts such as the *Analects* and *Mencius*, the translation of De as virtue is extremely common and hardly debatable. Indeed, in Confucian texts, the meaning of De is relatively clear. Although Confucianism distinguishes between different morals, such as benevolence and righteousness, in general, De refers to various moral norms and their presence in one's inner consciousness. In this sense, the translation

of De as virtue is also very straightforward and will hardly cause misunderstanding among readers in the English-speaking world. Obviously, the word De in Confucian texts signifies virtue and virtuous behavior; as the *Collins Dictionary* explains, “A virtue is a good quality or way of behaving”⁹.

Interestingly, when examining the translations of the *Daodejing*, the translation of De as virtue is in fact also quite common. In the early days of classical translation, it was not uncommon to see matching meanings (*ge yi* 格義) based on the need for understanding and dissemination, with Dao and De being translated as God and virtue, respectively. In addition to matching meanings, the lack of or deviation from understanding caused by the initial exposure to a heterogeneous textual tradition is also one of the major reasons for the translation of De as mere virtue. For example, the translation published by D.T. Suzuki and Paul Carus in 1913 translates the title of the *Daodejing* as “The Canon of Reason and Virtue” (Suzuki and Carus 1913), a title that was mentioned earlier in the writings of the American missionary Samuel W. Williams (Williams 1848). Examining the relevant parts of these two translations, it is easy to see that, in the translators’ understanding, the meaning of De in the *Daodejing* is virtue or morality.

After this stage, both the earlier James Legge (Legge 1891) and the later Arthur Waley (Waley 1958), D.C. Lau (Lau 1963), and Wing-tsit Chan (Chan 1969), as well as the more recent Roger T. Ames (Ames and Hall 2003) and Hans-Georg Moeller (Moeller 2007), translate the notion of De as virtue in some chapters of the *Daodejing* as well. It must be noted, however, that with the advancement of Sinological studies, these scholars have a deeper and richer understanding of the *Daodejing* and the philosophical notions therein than nineteenth-century translators such as D.T. Suzuki.¹⁰ Therefore, even though these translators also translated De as virtue in some chapters, in their translations and understandings, the meaning of virtue is not as uniform as that in the translations of Confucian texts. It does mean morality in some chapters¹¹, but in many chapters, it is closer to the Latin root *virtus* or the Ancient Greek *Aretē*¹², which refers to nature (*xing* 性), essence, potentiality, potency, etc. The article will focus on this sense of virtue first.

Examining the early classical texts, such as the *Analects*, *Daodejing*, and *Zhuangzi*, *xing* 性 (nature, essence, and concepts alike) are not yet philosophical concepts that are explicitly thematized. The *Analects* says, “The Master’s cultural brilliance is something that is readily heard about, whereas one does not get to hear the Master expounding upon the subjects of *xing* ‘human nature’ or *tian dao* 天道 ‘the Way of Heaven’” (*Analects* 5.13).¹³ The *Daodejing* and the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi* never mentioned the notion of *xing* either. However, this does not necessarily mean that these texts lack insight and reflection on *xing* or the nature of things, especially the *Daodejing*. It can be said that *Daodejing*’s reflection on *xing* or nature is precisely embodied in De, and scholars of the previous generation, such as Gao Heng 高亨, Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, and Zhang Dainian 張岱年, have pointed out the theoretical correlation between De and *xing*, arguing that De refers to the nature or attributes of all things (Gao 2011, p. 27; Xu 2005, p. 253; Zhang 1982, pp. 23–24) or “the inner foundation for the growth of all things” (Zhang 1989, p. 154).

3.2. An Example: De in Chapter 51 of the *Daodejing*

The meaning of De as *xing* or nature is fully embodied in Chapter 51 of the *Daodejing*, which says:

The Dao generates them, and the De nourishes them; Material embodies them, and the propensity of every circumstance completes them.

For this reason, among the myriad things there is none that does not honor the Dao and appreciate the De.

The honor paid to the Dao and the appreciation owed to the De is not like the bestowal of honors but is ever according to what is so of itself.

So is that the Dao in generating them, and the De in rearing them, and what grow them, nurture them, shelter them, protect them, nourish them, cover them.¹⁴

道生之，德畜之，物形之，勢成之。
 是以萬物莫不尊道而貴德。
 道之尊，德之貴，夫莫之命常自然。
 故道生之，德畜之；長之育之；亭之毒之；養之覆之。

This chapter is key in understanding the philosophical meaning of De in the *Daodejing*. However, due to the complexity of its meaning, some translators simply place De in this chapter under the category of Dao instead of translating it and collectively refer to the two as “the Tao”, for example:

The Tao gives birth to all beings,
 nourishes them, maintains them,
 cares for them, comforts them, protects them, takes them back to itself,
 creating without possessing,
 acting without expecting,
 guiding without interfering.
 That is why love of the Tao
 is in the very nature of things. (Mitchell 1995, p. 79)

In fact, such an understanding and translation have their origins in the history of the interpretation of the *Daodejing*. Cheng Xuanying 成玄英, in his Tang 唐 period commentary on the *Daodejing*, writes the first line in Chapter 51, “the Dao generates them, and the De nourishes them” (*dao sheng zhi, de xu zhi* 道生之，德蓄之), as “the Dao generates and nourishes them” (*dao sheng zhi xu zhi* 道生之蓄之), and explains that “the reason I mentioned only the Dao without saying anything about the De is because the De does not deviate from the Dao; therefore, I omitted the De. As the *Xishengjing* 西升經 said, ‘the Dao and the De are not separate, they are mysterious and similar’.” Although Cheng’s understanding or interpretation suggests the theoretical affinity between Dao and De, it completely erases the importance of De as an independent concept in the *Daodejing* and even in Chinese intellectual history; the “systematic thinking” (Wagner 2003, pp. 78–80; Zheng 2016) that may be implied by placing Dao and De in parallel expressions in the *Daodejing* has also been overlooked. It can even be said that the reader can hardly find De in such an interpretation the text.

Nevertheless, most scholars and translators still consider De in Chapter 51 as a separate philosophical notion from Dao and try to translate and gloss it. For example, D.C. Lau, Wing-tsit Chan, and Philip J. Ivanhoe translate De here as virtue, but they do not clarify the meaning of virtue in their translations¹⁵ (Lau 1963, p. 58; Chan 1969, p. 163; Ivanhoe and Norden 2000, p. 183). Other translators try to juxtapose De and Dao and examine and translate virtue in the context of the relationship between Dao and things, following the ancient explanation that De 德 means what is obtained (*de* 得) (德者，得也). Thus, these translators identify De as the universal property or individual nature of all things obtained from Dao and translate De as “the power of the Dao” (Arthur Waley 1958, p. 21), “the latent power” (Schwartz 1985, p. 202), “efficacy” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 156; Moeller 2007, pp. 120–21), “the life force” (Ryden 2008, p. 107), and “the potency” (Graham 1989, p. 218). In general, these translations can be regarded as variations of De in the sense of nature and potency, each with its own emphasis.

First, these translations come specifically from the translator’s overall grasp of the *Daodejing*, reflecting a deep understanding of the theoretical connection between De, Dao and thinghood. Second, they have their basis and origin in Chinese intellectual history. Reading De as “what is obtained from Dao” is often seen in many Daoist texts; for example, Chapter 12 of the *Zhuangzi* contains the following passage: “Things got hold of it and it came to life, and it was called De” (Watson 2013, p. 88)¹⁶. Similarly, Chapter 9 of the *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子 contains the passage, “The way of the Sage is mutually obtained and completed with *Shen Ming* 神明, so it is called Dao and De” (Huang 2014, p. 94). In his

commentary on Chapter 51 of the *Daodejing*, Wang Bi 王弼 writes, “Dao is the origin of things. De is what things obtained (from Dao)”¹⁷. It is evident that De denotes, on the one hand, the universal nature that all things obtained from Dao and, on the other hand, the essence of the existence of all things.

More importantly, these translations are also influenced by ancient Greek philosophy. In the *Metaphysics Z*, Aristotle takes up the promised study of substance. In Book Θ, he introduces the distinction between matter and form synchronically, applying it to an individual substance at a particular time. When describing the matter and form of substances, he uses the categories potentiality (*dunamis*) and actuality (*entelecheia*) or activity (*energeia*). The term *dunamis* refers to “the origin of movement and change in substance” (Nie 2017). Aristotle distinguishes two different senses of *dunamis*. In the strictest sense, a *dunamis* is the power that a thing has to produce a change. A thing has a *dunamis* in this sense when it has within it “a starting point of change in another thing or in itself insofar as it is other”. The exercise of such a power is a *kinēsis*—a movement or process. (Θ.1, 1046a12; cf. Δ.12). There is also a second sense of *dunamis* which might be better translated as potentiality. According to Aristotle, a *dunamis* in this sense is not a thing’s power to produce a change but rather its capacity to be in a different and more completed state. (Anagnostopoulos 2011, pp. 388–452). According to the explanations of Chen Kang 陳康 and Nie Minli 聶敏理, Aristotle’s use of *dunamis* to describe substance in fact includes a threefold meaning: “capacity, possibility, potentiality” (Chen 2017), or “capacity, possibility, multiplication” (Nie 2017). Here, capacity signifies the ability of something to cause movement or change, as well as the ability to receive movement or change. When this ability is not yet utilized and is in a potential state, it is called potential. It is not difficult to discern similar traces of this idea in the Western academic interpretation of De in the *Daodejing*. For example, A.C. Graham translates De as potency, on which Sarah Allan comments:

A.C. Graham, who translated de as “potency” in the *Zhuangzi*, noted that it means virtue in the sense that “the virtue of cyanide is to poison,” that is, like the Latin root *virtus*, it refers to something intrinsic. (Allan 1997, p. 101)

It is in the sense of nature and potential that Graham and Allan interpret De—cyanide has a very poisonous nature, and, therefore, has the possibility or potentiality of becoming a poison. Similarly, whether De is translated as virtue, the power of Dao, the latent power, efficacy, the life force, or potency, the underlying ideas are identical, and their intention is to show that De, as the nature or potential given to all things by Dao, contains the ability to nurture and develop all things. Moreover, there is no doubt that the connotation of De as potentiality or possibility is indeed reflected in the formulation of De in the *Daodejing* (Ye 2013).

Finally, Chad Hansen’s understanding and translation of De is noteworthy as well. Based on the relationship between Dao and De, Hansen translates De as virtuosity. According to his explanation, everything has physical structures that can relate to the internal and external worlds, and it is this physical structure that constitutes De. At the same time, De guides all things to follow the Dao and unfold themselves in their interaction with the world and can appropriately reflect the operation of the Dao in all things and in the world. From this perspective, De is the embodiment of the virtuosity of the Dao (Hansen 2020, p. 282). Chad Hansen’s understanding and translation focuses on showing the relationship between the Dao and De and describing how De manifests the Dao. However, it must be mentioned that the individual dimension or personalized principle of De embodied in all things should not be neglected. The notion of self-so (*zi ran* 自然) and the construction of Daoist political philosophy and ethics are based on the significance and role of De in the existence and development of individuals. As Yang Guorong 楊國榮 mentioned in his discussion of the relationship between the Dao and De, De demonstrates more of the principle of individuality, which is manifested both in all things and in the *Daodejing*’s understanding of the relationship between the Dao and human beings (Yang 2021, p. 20). The *Daodejing* affirms the process by which all things obtain the Dao from De but also demands that all things constantly return to the Dao, which is indeed an expression

of the intention to bridge the principle of unity and the principle of individuality. Only by fully recognizing the affirmation of De for the individuality of all things can we truly connect the ontology of Daoist philosophy with political philosophy and ethics.

4. *Xuan De* 玄德: Dark Efficacy or Dark Virtue?

In addition to appearing as an independent concept in the form of a single word in the *Daodejing*, De is also often combined with other single words to form philosophical terms, such as *Xuan De* 玄德, *Chang De* 常德, *Guang De* 廣德, *Jian De* 建德, and the most important of which is *Xuan De* 玄德. Just as De as a philosophical concept has its origins, the proposal of *Xuan De* also has a far-reaching and precise background in the history of thought. This background can be regarded as a microcosm of the transformation of the old moral and ritual (*de li* 德-禮) ideology of the Western Zhou period to the new Dao-Law (*Dao-fa* 道法) ideology of the Warring States Period and an innovation on top of the old institutional structure dominated by ethics, morality, rites and music. As Zheng Kai 鄭開 has keenly observed, “the *Daodejing*’s proposal of ‘*Xuan De*’ is intended to show that it is a more far-reaching, fundamental, and philosophical ‘virtue’ than the ‘*Ming De*’ 明德 (bright virtue) of the Western Zhou Dynasty, which is obviously a creative interpretation and transformation” (Zheng 2019, pp. 13–14). Regarding *Xuan De*, the *Daodejing* Chapter 10 contains the following passage:

To give birth to it, to rear it,
to give birth to it without possessing it,
to let it grow without commanding it,
this is called: *Xuan De*. (Moeller 2007, p. 25. Slightly modified)

生而不有，長而不恃，為而不宰，是謂玄德。

The philosophical thought in the *Daodejing* is characterized by a tendency to think about the affairs of the human world through the movement of nature and the Way of Heaven (*tian dao* 天道), and this is also revealing in the *Daodejing*’s understanding of *Xuan De*. In the *Daodejing*, *Xuan De* is first used to describe how the Dao treats all things. The Dao ensures the realization of the self-so (*zi ran* 自然) of all things through self-restraint (Wang 2010) and nonaction (*wu wei* 無為). These principles extend to political governance, as *Daodejing* Chapter 81 describes, “The way of Heaven is to benefit and not to harm. The way of the sages is to do good but not to strive for it” (*Tian zhi dao, wei er bu zheng. Sheng ren zhi dao, li er bu hai. 天之道，為而不爭；聖人之道，利而不害。*), in which the sage kings or rulers ensure the realization of the self-so of the people by emulating the nonaction of the Dao.

The English translation of *Xuan De* can be roughly divided into two types of representative ideas in translation and interpretation. First, the De in *Xuan De* is translated as efficacy, while *Xuan De* is translated as profound efficacy or dark efficacy, for example, in the translations by Roger Ames, Hans G. Moeller, and Edmund Ryden. Secondly, the De in *Xuan De* is translated as virtue, while *Xuan De* is translated as dark virtue, for example, in the translation by D.C. Lau.

Roger Ames translates *Xuan De* as profound efficacy and explains that the world is created in the collaboration of focus and field, event and situation, Dao and De, and that the field in which things are situated is itself made up of a variety of perspectives. From this point of view, the field itself is not objectified or universalized but has its own profound particularity, which is called *Xuan De* (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 157). When discussing the differences between Chinese and Western thought, he mentions that Western thinking and language are more transcendental, and Chinese culture is more characterized by associative thinking and associative language (Ames 2002, pp. 1–22). It can be said that this view is also reflected in Ames’ understanding and translation of the concepts of Dao and De. In his understanding, *Xuan De* is a characteristic that embodies universal relevance, which implies the manifestation of Dao in different fields and perspectives.

Hans G. Moeller translates Xuan De as dark efficacy, and he mentions that “it is obvious that Dao and De are not creators in the strict sense of the word, but are rather, like the root of a plant, the ‘force’ within the cosmos that sustains all there is” and that “the cosmos is conceived of in terms of biological reproduction and fertility; it is understood as an ‘organic’ process of life. Dao and De are integral elements within that process and not an external origin” (Moeller 2007, p. 120). This is also the case with his understanding of Xuan De, which he sees as an affirmation of the inner power of growth that lies within all things themselves. Edmund Ryden’s understanding is quite similar to Moeller’s, as he translates Xuan De as an abstruse life force (Ryden 2008, p. 107).

The highly philosophical and insightful readings of Ames, Moeller, and Ryden have skillfully captured and presented the complex and profound connotations of De and Xuan De in the thought of the *Daodejing*. However, as stated at the beginning of this section, beyond the highly philosophical discussion, the proposal of Xuan De has a specific historical and theoretical background; that is, the Daoists attempted to construct a new ideology on ethics, self-cultivation, and political governance out of the tradition of bright virtue (*Ming De* 明德) that existed in the Western Zhou Dynasty and was inherited by Confucianism. In addition to Xuan De, the *Daodejing* contains similar concepts such as Shang De 上德 (the highest virtue), Guang De 廣德 (the broad-minded virtue), and Jian De 建德 (the most steadfast virtue), which are also used to highlight the differences and tensions between Daoism and the past ritual traditions, as well as Confucianism, and to reflect a new direction in Daoism’s search for the question of De. If this is the case, it is obviously more appropriate to translate the De of Xuan De as virtue and Xuan De as dark virtue, just as D. C. Lau does (Lau 1963, p. 58), since such a translation is more capable of highlighting the different views of Confucianism and Daoism on the same concept of virtue.

If the above explanation is somewhat ambiguous in discussing and determining the translation of Xuan De, then we can discuss it further by looking for evidence and support in the *Daodejing* Chapter 38. An important concept mentioned in Chapter 38 is Shang De 上德. In the *Daodejing*, the meaning of Shang De is close to that of Xuan De; both refer to De that is different from ordinary ethics and morality. Chapter 38 contains the following passage:

The highest virtue is not virtuous; therefore, it has efficacy.

The lowest virtue does not let go of virtue; therefore, it has no efficacy.

The highest virtue does not act and has no purpose.

The highest humanity acts and has no purpose.

The highest righteousness acts and has a purpose.

The highest ritual propriety acts and nothing resonates with it, so that the sleeves are rolled up and coercion is exerted.

Thus,

After the Dao is lost, there is virtue.

After virtue is lost, there is humanity.

After humanity is lost, there is righteousness.

After righteousness is lost, there is ritual propriety.

(Moeller 2007, p. 93. Slightly modified.)

上德不德，是以有德；

下德不失德，是以無德。

上德無為而無以為；

下德為之而有以為。

上仁為之而無以為；

上義為之而有以為。

上禮為之而莫之應，則攘臂而扔之。

故失道而後德，失德而後仁，失仁而後義，失義而後禮。

Obviously, the highest virtue here is compared to the lowest virtue or even the virtues under the lowest virtue, such as benevolence, righteousness, and propriety. In this case, the meaning of De as potency, efficacy, nature, or power is far less obvious than that of a special kind of virtue. Therefore, the translation of Shang De as highest virtue is more appropriate than highest potency or highest efficacy. Based on the similarity of meaning between Xuan De and Shang De, the same idea applies when translating Xuan De.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, De in the *Daodejing* is a very complex concept that not only carries traces of the evolution and development of Chinese philosophy but also highlights the dialogue and tension between Confucianism and Daoism. At the same time, it also contains rich philosophical implications concerning the theoretical connection between the concepts of De and Dao and thinghood. Because of the complex threads of thought contained therein, the translation of De is bound to be complicated and confusing. In addition to a contextualized and specific approach to the notion of De and to the book of *Daodejing*, some kind of coherent and synoptic understanding is also necessary. Just as the Daoists chose to reconstruct and restate the idea of De, which has a long history, perhaps the translation of De as virtue in the *Daodejing* can serve the same purpose. In other words, although the *Daodejing* also speaks of virtue, it is very different from the Confucian texts that speak of virtue in the sense of ethics and morality, and the different ways in which the same term is used precisely highlight the uniqueness and novelty of Daoist thinking. Of course, other interpretations and translations of the word De are also necessary and enlightening, as they also pinpoint the philosophical meaning of De at one level or another, enriching and deepening the reader's understanding of the concept of De.

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Notes

- ¹ As Misha Tadd pointed out in his project, *Global Laozegetics (Quanqiu Laoxue 全球老學)*, many scholars inside and outside of China view translations of the Chinese classics as lacking fidelity to the original; however, translation is a realm of commentary and interpretation and “is not simply a flawed effort at reproducing a pristine text in a target language but a manifestation of the translator’s inevitable interpretation of said text.” See (Tadd 2022b).
- ² Even if the translation of virtue in Confucian texts is relatively uniform, there are still many scholars who have paid attention to and discussed the various meanings of De in early Confucian texts. For example, see (Chan 2011).
- ³ It is worth noting, however, that even when translated as virtue, the difference between the meaning of De and virtue in Christianity is enormous. In the latter, virtue is primarily concerned with the moral or sexual dimension.
- ⁴ Nevertheless, there are scholars who are opposed to this idea, for example, see (Kryukov 1995, pp. 314–33).
- ⁵ For example, Sun Yirang 孫怡讓 identifies the graph as the initial graph of De and argues that the meaning of it should be virtue. See (Yu 1999, p. 2250).
- ⁶ For example, Yu Xingwu 于省吾 thinks that the graph should be *xun* 巡, see (Yu 1999, pp. 2251–56); Wen Yiduo 聞一多 argues that the graph is *sheng* 省, based on the rite of patrolling (*xun shou* 巡守) recorded in the *Book of Documents*. See (Wen 1993, p. 507).
- ⁷ About the detailed discussions on the historical event when King Wu conquered Shang, see, for example (Pines 2014; Dong 2021).
- ⁸ Sarah Allan suggests that De in this sense should be translated as favor or grace, which means the grace that is passed down in the form of heredity by Heaven or the lord on high. See (Allan 1997, p. 104).
- ⁹ See <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/zh/dictionary/english/virtue> (accessed on 1 January 2023).

- 10 Due to the limitations of space, this article will not introduce the overall situation of the English translation of the *Daodejing*, but only select the more representative contents related to the theme of the article for discussion. For an overall discussion and analysis of the English translation of the *Daodejing*, see (Bebell and Fera 2000, pp. 133–47; Tadd 2022a, pp. 7–12).
- 11 See, for example, De in chapters 21, 38, 41, 79. However, even if the term virtue is used in the translation of these chapters, its specific content is different from the ethics and morality emphasized by Confucianism.
- 12 For the comparison between the connotations of virtue and Aretē, see (Zheng 2020).
- 13 The English translation is by Ivanhoe and Norden. See (Ivanhoe and Norden 2000, p. 14).
- 14 The translation is from Edmund Ryden and Brook Ziporyn and revised by the author. See (Ryden 2008, p. 107; Ziporyn 2023, p. 62).
- 15 Lau, Chan, and Ivanhoe's translations of the first line of chapter 51 are "the Way gives them life, virtue rears them...Therefore, the myriad creatures all revere the Way and honor virtue", "Tao produces them (the ten thousand things). Virtue fosters them...Therefore, the ten thousand things esteem Tao and honor virtue", and "The Way produces them, virtue rears them... This is why the myriad creatures all revere the Way and honor Virtue", respectively. See (Lau 1963, p. 58; Chan 1969, p. 163; Ivanhoe and Norden 2000, p. 183).
- 16 The translation is by Waston and slightly modified by the author.
- 17 The translation is by the author. For the Chinese version, see (Lou 1980, p. 37).

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Article

Variated Cultural Imagery of the *Daodejing* in the German-Speaking World Based on “Foreignization”: The Case of *Dao* and *De*

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Abstract: “Foreignization” (*taguohua*, 他国化) is an important concept in the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature. Through the collision, fusion and heterogeneous absorption of cross- heterogeneous cultural exchanges, the culture and discourse principles of one country are adapted through localization by the receiving country, resulting in what this theory calls “foreignization”. Global Laozegetics continues its traditional interpretive-oriented stance by examining translations of the *Daodejing* from a Laozegetics perspective, demonstrating a new development in the study of Laozi’s doctrine. Thus, there is a need to explore new perspectives in the research on the German translations of the *Daodejing*. Taking the cultural imagery *Dao* and *De* as examples, this paper explores the background and causes of “foreignization” in German translations of the *Daodejing* and its impact on the dissemination of Laozi’s doctrine in the German-speaking world, summarizing its formation path and possible problems, with the goal of shedding light on the overseas dissemination of Chinese classics represented by the *Daodejing*.

Keywords: foreignization; German translations; *Daodejing*; German-speaking world; overseas dissemination

1. Introduction

The Chinese classics are an important part of Chinese culture and directly reflect the origin and construction of different cultural and discourse principles between China and the West. Because of the huge differences between Chinese and Western cultures in terms of traditions, concepts and aesthetics, Chinese scholarship has continued to explore the overseas dissemination of Chinese canonical texts, the core of which lies in the consideration of mutual transmissions and influences across heterogeneous cultures. The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature holds that the different cultural and discourse principles between China and the West require not only “seeking common ground”, but also “keeping differences” in communication, so its doctrine is based on the study of heterogeneity.

The concept of “foreignization” was first introduced as a theory of translation by Lawrence Venuti in 1995 in his book *The Translator’s Invisibility*, as opposed to “domestication”. Venuti’s theory was influenced by the German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher; he pointed out that Schleiermacher, in his lecture *On the Different Methods of Translating* in 1813, distinguishes two different ways of translation: “Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him” (Venuti 1995, pp. 19–20).

Although the translation of the concept of *taguohua* (他国化) in the the book *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*, published in 2013, is borrowed from the term “foreignization,” in this usage, there is a significant difference from the “foreignization” described by Venuti. The former, from the perspective of the target language, “is rather to develop a theory and practice of translation that resists dominant target-language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text” (Venuti 1995,

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p. 23). But the “foreignization” (*taguohua*) in the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature, as opposed to “Chinization” (*zhongguohua*, 中国化), describes the phenomenon of literary variation in heterogeneous cultural exchanges from the standpoint of the transmitting country, i.e., the “foreignization” of local literature, and its connotation is not limited to research on interlingual translation. “Both culture and literary theories can be ‘converted’ under certain historical and cultural circumstances. Such ‘conversion’ is also known as ‘foreignization’ . . . ” (Cao 2013, p. 240); in other words, this “foreignization” is based on the premise of heterogeneity in the transmitting and receiving countries, in which the cultural and discourse principles of the transmitting country are variably absorbed by the receiving country, which is the “mature form” or “ultimate form” of variation (Cao and Tang 2015, p. 38). Therefore, the exchanges between heterogeneous cultures are always accompanied by this type of “foreignization”.

Cultural imagery involves combinations of historical deposits and national wisdom in different cultures, and has relatively fixed and unique cultural connotations. The transmission of cultural imagery across heterogeneous cultures is a deep form of communication based on translation and interpretation. The great differences between cultures can lead to cultural misalignment, i.e., differences or even inversions in transmitting cultural imagery, resulting in “foreignization”. The “foreignization” of cultural imagery is inextricably linked to the receiving background. If the culture of the receiving country is in a strong position, it will lead to the “foreignization” of the cultural imagery of the transmitting country and vice versa. To cater to cultural traditions in receiving countries, Chinese classics are often culturally mismatched during overseas transmission, thus giving rise to cultural imagery that fits the background of the receiving countries.

The *Daodejing* (also known as the *Laozi*), the most important text of Daoism, is full of wisdom and demonstrates Laozi’s philosophical thought. It is one of the earliest systematic Chinese philosophical works and one of the most widely disseminated and influential Chinese classics in the German-speaking world. Since the first full translation into German was published in 1870, the *Daodejing* has been translated and published in the German-speaking world for 150 years: the latest statistics in 2022 show that there are 178 German translations of the *Daodejing* in total (Tadd 2022, p. 145). This Chinese classic is inevitably subject to “foreignization” in different ways; as a result, much of the cultural imagery in the *Daodejing* has been “Germanized” in the German-speaking world and has gradually been divorced from its original cultural connotations. Thus, it is typical and instructive to explore variations in “foreignization” in terms of the reception of Chinese classics in the German-speaking world by taking the *Daodejing* as an example. In view of the above, this paper intends to proceed from cultural imagery under the concept of “foreignization” (*taguohua*) in the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature, specifically by taking the transliterations and interpretation of *Dao* and *De* as research objects, and then to preliminarily conduct a dynamic investigation of the “foreignization” of Chinese classics in the German-speaking world, exploring the reasons for this phenomenon. At the same time, it will reflect on research by scholars in the German-speaking world within the context of Global Laozegetics to explore the implications and inspirations of “foreignization” (*taguohua*) in the study of the German translations of the *Daodejing*.

2. “Foreignization” (*taguohua*) of *Dao*

“*Dao* is the core concept of Laozi’s philosophy, and his entire philosophical system is carried out by his presupposed ‘*Dao*’” (Chen 2003, p. 23). Thus, in studying Laozi, *Dao* has always been the focus of German researchers. Because of the indescribable nature of *Dao*, their initial interpretations of the concept were not uniform, but at the beginning of the *Daodejing*’s dissemination, understandings of the book were based on a close relationship with Christianity, and the explanation of *Dao* as *Gott* (God) was a dominant interpretation. This is a continuation of the European tradition of theological interpretation of the *Daodejing*. Firstly, the reception of Daoism and Laozi’s doctrine in the West began in the late 16th century. At that time, the Jesuits entering China with the intent to learn Chinese to

understand the country in order to promote Christian doctrine believed that “Daoism had a place here at most as a popular religious ‘superstition’” (Grasmück 2004, p. 21). Reports and religious texts on China summarized and translated by the Jesuits became the only way to receive Daoist thoughts in the West, and the earliest translations of the *Daodejing* were introduced to Europe in the 17th century (Grasmück 2004, pp. 39–40). The Jesuit Figurists, such as Joachim Bouvet and Joseph de Prémare, tried to prove that Christianity was already contained in classical Chinese texts and that “the Chinese texts were to complement the Christian canon in their new interpretation” (Grasmück 2004, p. 37). Against this background, their studies of Laozi and translations of the *Daodejing* were naturally deeply influenced by theological thought, thus building a bridge between Christianity and the *Daodejing* and playing a key role in promoting its spread in Europe. Secondly, the translation by French Sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat brought the *Daodejing* to a European readership. In his article “The Life and Opinions of Lao-tzu” (*Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-Tseu*), published in 1823, Rémusat partly inherited and developed the Jesuits’ thoughts about the “Trinity” in the *Daodejing*, suggesting that the “夷” (Yi), “希” (Xi) and “微” (Wei) of chapter 14 include the Hebrew name of God (Abel-Rémusat 1823, pp. 44–45).

For example, Reinhold von Plaenckner and the theologian Victor von Strauss, who published the first and second full German translations, both identified *Dao* with “God” and based their translations on this understanding. In his foreword, Reinhold von Plaenckner identified with the dogmas of apostolic faith found in the *Daodejing* by Joseph-Marie Amiot, Joseph de Prémare and others, and with the idea of the “trinity of God” by Antonio Montucci (Plaenckner 1870, p. XIII). Victor von Strauss, however, spent a lot of time listing the main meanings of this concept in different chapters of the original text, but after summarizing, he finally concluded by suggesting that if one German word could be found to convey all of the above meanings, *Dao* is “God, and only God” (Strauss 1870, p. XXXV).

This tradition of theological interpretation took on a new dimension in the early twentieth century with the protestant theologian Julius Grill’s translation, *Lao-tsze’s Book of the Highest Being and the Highest Good* (*Lao-tszes Buch vom höchsten Wesen und vom höchsten Gut*), published in 1910, which reflected on the tradition of theological interpretation. Grill suggested that there is a “miraculous similarity” between the philosophical thought of Laozi and the religious thought of Jesus (Grill 1910, p. VI). But he did not agree with Strauss’s understanding of *Dao* as equivalent to God because *Dao* is not a religious concept or a personalized principle; rather, it is a purely philosophical concept (Grill 1910, p. 12). He believed that Strauss’s tendency toward mystical and theosophical directions continually led him astray (Grill 1910, p. 52). Grill suggested that the parallels between the *Daodejing* and the *New Testament* should be studied in the context of a general history of religion. This would result in less prejudice than a purely theological interpretation (Grill 1910, p. VI). Thus, Grill proposed that Jesus and Laozi shared the same basic moral views and principles, but that they were formed in different ways. Christ acquired them in his historically based concept of God and his belief in an absolute personality, whereas Laozi obtained them from the concept of the “World Soul,” i.e., from the concept of “the general Absolute”. Therefore, Laozi’s *Dao* is involuntarily more or less personified, and is, therefore, close to the concept of God in its spiritual effect (Grill 1910, p. VII). To confirm his idea of the parallels between Laozi’s thoughts and those of Jesus, Grill summarized the corresponding chapters of the *Daodejing* and the *New Testament* in a list in the “Biblical parallels to the Tao-tě-king” appendix of his translation. According to his summary, there are 81 parallel passages between the two. Of these, Chapter 70 of the *Daodejing* has the most connections to the *New Testament*, with a total of 17. Furthermore, in his comments on the last sentence of chapter 70, he quoted Strauss’ interpretation of this sentence, showing that it depicts the wise men as humble in appearance and rich in heart. Grill pointed out that this is obviously contradictory with the high estimation of duty and power by the wise men, and suggested that reference could be made to the sentences in the *New Testament*: “Do not give what is holy to dogs” and “Let your light shine before men” (Grill 1910, p. 192). However, Grill did not elaborate on each of the parallels in his list, as detailed in his trans-

lation, comments or appendix. He merely suggested at the end of the appendix that the list of parallels in the New Testament could still be increased without any need to be explicitly noted, and that the scope of comparison could be narrowed or expanded (Grill 1910, p. 204).

Secondly, *Dao* is interpreted from a Western philosophical perspective as reason, *logos*, sense or related Western concepts. The aforementioned French sinologist Abel-Rémusat, an important pioneer of this tradition, compared the doctrine of Laozi with ancient Greek philosophy and, in particular, found the source of the *Daodejing* in the Pythagorean school, such that he understood *Dao* as the Greek word “λόγος”. He thus proposed three meanings of *Dao*: reason (*raison*), words (*parole*) and the universal cause (*cause universelle*) (Abel-Rémusat 1823, pp. 23–24), which he translated via “raison” (reason), and this became the popular interpretation in Europe afterward. Richard Wilhelm, the most famous sinologist in the German-speaking world, published the most famous German translation of the *Daodejing* and was known as “a spiritual mediator between China and Europe” (Walravens 2008, p. 7). Although Richard Wilhelm was a missionary, he did not start from a theological perspective, instead proposing that Chinese references be used for translation and explanation because it seemed more desirable to learn from Chinese literature; while not wanting to ignore European literature, he felt it was better to take it into considerations secondarily (Wilhelm 1911, p. II). Thus, this Western philosophical interpretation method continued. Wilhelm compared the essential differences between Laozi’s metaphysics and ancient Greek philosophy from a metaphysical perspective. He suggested that the viewpoint of the ancient Greek philosophers was turned outward, in that they searched for a principle to explain the world, whereas Laozi never left the field of anthropology. In Laozi’s philosophy, human beings form a coherent unit whose activities are carried out spontaneously. *Dao* is also spontaneous in the world (Wilhelm 1911, pp. XVI–XX), and, ontologically considered, is the root of all existence (Wilhelm 1911, p. XXII).

In addition to sinologists, many important philosophers in the German-speaking world have offered their own understanding of Laozi’s doctrine. For example, Kant identified Laozi with the moral-aesthetic category of the “grotesque” (Nelson 2017, p. 112). Hegel, influenced by Abel-Rémusat, translated *Dao* as “reason” (*Vernunft*) (Elberfeld 2000, p. 146). Schelling interpreted *Dao* as “gateway” (*Pforte*), that is, “a gateway between the unknowing of finite being and the genuine knowing of actual being” (Nelson 2017, p. 113). But in the early stage, the reception of Daoism in German philosophy was much less significant than the reception of Confucianism and Buddhism (Nelson 2017, p. 112). However, since the beginning of the 20th century, German philosophy has paid more attention to Laozi’s doctrine; in particular, Martin Heidegger’s philosophical interpretation of *Dao* expanded the influence of Laozi’s doctrine on Western philosophy. Martin Heidegger translated *Dao* as the “way,” writing the following in his essay “The Nature of Language”: “The key word in Laotze’s poetic thinking is Tao, which ‘properly speaking’ means way” (Heidegger 1971, p. 92). However, the word *Dao* is often translated in German as “reason,” “mind,” “raison,” “meaning” or “logos,” and Heidegger explains that this is because “we are prone to think of ‘way’ superficially, as a stretch connecting two places, our word ‘way’ has all too rashly been considered unfit to name what Tao says” (Heidegger 1971, p. 92). It can be seen that Heidegger suggests that *Dao* is better translated as the “way” than “reason,” “sense” or other concepts because this translation no longer places the word directly under the constraints imposed by the core concepts of European metaphysical thought.

However, the enormous differences between the Chinese and German languages make the translation difficult. Thus, even though Victor von Strauss explicitly interprets *Dao* as “God,” he leaves it untranslated in his translation because “as the matter stands, we find no necessity, hardly any justification to translate the word at all where it is used in this sense” (Strauss 1870, p. XXXVI). In addition to his aforementioned rejection of the translation of *Dao* as “God,” Grill suggested that the translation as *Weg* (way), from a philosophical perspective, would “disturb the impression of the uniformity of the world view of our philosopher sensitively,” so *Dao* is untranslatable in its philosophical sense (Grill

1910, p. 12). In conclusion, it cannot be translated either theologically or philosophically, so he advocated for keeping it untranslated.

As a carrier of Chinese culture, the Chinese character itself has the duality of original meaning and cultural significance, so many German translators are aware of the need to interpret *Dao* on different levels of meaning. There are many scholars who have discussed the multiple meanings and philosophical nature of *Dao* in detail: Victor von Strauss explored the interpretation of this Chinese character from *Guangyun* (广韵), *Shuowen* (说文), “Xici” chapter of the *Yijing* (易经·系辞) and Confucianism. Richard Wilhelm points out that there was a significant amount of confusion about the translation of *Dao* at the early stage of translation: “‘God,’ ‘Way,’ ‘Reason,’ ‘Word,’ ‘λόγος’ are only a few of the suggested translations, while some of the translators simply take the ‘Dao’ untranslated into the European languages”. He proposes that *Dao* takes “way” as its basic meaning and extends it to signify “direction” (*Richtung*); “state” (*Zustand*); and, finally, “reason” (*Vernunft*) and “truth” (*Wahrheit*). *Dao* as a verb is “to speak” (*reden*) and “to say” (*sagen*), which can also be translated as “to guide” (*leiten*) (Wilhelm 1911, p. XV). With such linguistic differences, choosing a translation for the word *Dao* undoubtedly adds difficulties for translators who use “Germanization” as an important translation strategy. As Richard Wilhelm explains, the *Dao* has a very wide range of connotations and is a basic “Intuition” that is difficult to fix conceptually; there is no word that completely corresponds to it in German. However, he insisted on translating *Dao* into German for aesthetic reasons, and finally chose “sense” (*SINN*), which is closest to *Dao* at every level of meaning (Wilhelm 1911, p. XV).

Dao, as Chinese cultural imagery, basically completed its “foreignization” at the earliest stage of translation in the German-speaking world. German scholars analyzed *Dao* according to Western cultural principles by “interpreting Chinese classics in a Western way,” so it gradually became a concept with Western cultural elements. This process enabled the rapid integration of this important Chinese philosophical concept into the German-speaking world, and translations of the *Daodejing* were able to widely spread through it in the early 20th century. This development was facilitated by “the first Dao-Fever” (Grasmück 2004, p. 60). As European society was in turmoil at the time, the young generation, “which suffers from the spiritual problems of their time” (Reichwein 1923, p. 9), turned to Eastern wisdom to find inner peace. Laozi’s thought perfectly matched their “often eschatological longing for internalization” (Reichwein 1923, p. 9); thus, the *Daodejing* became “the bridge to the East” (Reichwein 1923, p. 10) for them. Against this background, German translations of the *Daodejing* began to be widely disseminated in academic circles: the German educator and economist Adolf Reichwein pointed out that “since the beginning of the century” and up to 1923, when his book *China and Europe* (*China und Europa*) was published, “it has undergone no less than eight transmissions in Germany” (Reichwein 1923, p. 10), especially during the Weimar Republic: in the period between 1918 and 1927, the book market showed clear growth in *Daodejing* translations for the first time (Grasmück 2004, p. 26).

“The significance of the comparison of heterogeneity lies in its complementarity” (Cao 2011, p. 221). The “foreignization” of *Dao* reflects the catering of cultural imagery to the culture of the receiving country in the process of dissemination. In addition to the academic background of the interpreters, the historical background also plays an important role, and the “foreignization” of cultural imagery also confirms the importance that German-speaking scholars attach to Chinese culture as represented by the doctrine of Laozi. Reinhold von Plaenckner criticized the neglect or belittling of Chinese culture in late nineteenth-century Europe in his foreword, proposing that he “wrote it also for those who criticize and ridicule China, the Chinese and everything that comes from China, to show them that even there and in the oldest, most distant times, wise men of a healthy, noble way of thinking have lived . . . ” (Plaenckner 1870, p. XV). Strauss also criticized frequent in the neglect of Chinese philosophy at the time; he pointed out, for example, the complete absence of references to ancient Chinese philosophy and culture in the *Textbook of universal history* (*Lehrbuch der Universalgeschichte*) published in 1840. Another philosophy history book also

ignored Chinese philosophy, noting that the Chinese wise men had only established rules of decency and external morality, and only the Greek heard the “γνώθεισεαυτόν” (know thyself). Strauss’s translation and interpretation of the *Daodejing* refuted this disregard and neglect (Strauss 1870, pp. VIII–IX). Forty years later, Julius Grill still endorsed this kind of critique and repeated Strauss’s examples. Against the background of these times, it is not surprising that translators of the time needed to interpret and translate the *Daodejing* using interpretive models and concepts familiar to readers in their receiving countries. However, it is notable that in this process, German scholars have gradually deviated from *Dao* as the core concept of ancient Chinese philosophy in their interpretations. The “foreignization” caused by directly interpreting Chinese cultural images through a Western mode causes Chinese classics to gradually lose some of their unique statuses in overseas dissemination.

Since the reconstruction of sinology around the 1950s, the *Daodejing* has become an important sinological research object in German-speaking countries, and its translations and studies have become more diversified and academic. The translations of the *Daodejing* in the German-speaking world came to a standstill in the later years of the Weimar Republic through to 1945, and “almost no translations of the *Daodejing* were published after 1927” (Grasmück 2004, p. 61). However, after nearly a century, 53 German translations were published by 1970, of which 17 were published after 1945. The *Daodejing* has become the most translated Chinese classic in the German-speaking world, and its dissemination has taken on a relatively considerable dimension. Against this background, the number of translators who wish to restore *Dao* to the Chinese cultural context is increasing. Ernst Schwarz, an Austrian sinologist and translator, is an important representative of this view; his translation, published in 1970, interprets *Dao* from the perspective of Chinese language, philosophy and religion.

First, Schwarz pointed out that *Dao* was an important philosophical concept in ancient China and is not only found in the *Daodejing*, and by exploring the definition of *Dao* in *The Book of Changes (Yijing 易经)*, he showed that *Dao* is the basis for the creation and development of all things in ancient Chinese philosophy. Second, Schwarz did not ignore the religious connotation of this Chinese character. However, unlike other translators who made a direct comparison between Chinese and Western religions, which are not historically related, he, based on the records in *The Book of Rites (Liji 礼记)*, explained that *Dao* is related to ancient Chinese rituals, and appears as a sacrifice to the god of ways and roads. He argued that the religious connotation of *Dao* has existed since the Shang and Zhou periods and has had a long history of influence (Schwarz 1980, pp. 8–9).

Finally, Schwarz focused on the basic meaning of *Dao* in the *Daodejing*, suggesting that many translators have elaborated on *Dao* as a noun for “road” and as a verb meaning “to walk along the road,” but few have focused on or explored the meaning of *Dao* as a verb for “to say” or “to talk about”. The main interpretations of *Dao* as “road” and “walking along the road” are in accordance with the definition of the Chinese character “*Dao*,” which is written in the *Shuowen Jiezi (说文解字)*: “the road one walks along” (所行道也) and “a road that has only one direction is called *Dao*” (一达谓之道) (Xu 2013, p. 36). The early Jesuits followed the above interpretations. According to *Shuowen Jiezi (说文解字)* and *Guangyun (广韵)*, Abel-Rémusat also proposed that *Dao* means a road, that is, a means of communication from one place to another (Abel-Rémusat 1823, p. 18). As described previously, the important translators in the early stages, such as Victor von Strauss and Richard Wilhelm, also explained the above two original meanings of *Dao*, and this became the main interpretation of German translations. Schwarz argued that 首 (*shou*) is more important in the composition of the Chinese character for *Dao* (道). According to Chapter 37 of *The Book of Rites*, the word 首 (*shou*) can be used to “give expression,” so the word *Dao* has been used for thousands of years in Chinese to mean “expression”. He speculated that the emphasis of *Dao* was originally on the character 首 (*shou*), and that the radical of “go” (*chuo*, 辵) was added only after a corresponding change in meaning (Schwarz 1980, p. 10).

Schwarz’s method of researching *Dao* in the context of ancient Chinese language, philosophy and religion is relatively rare in the German-speaking world. This interpretive

method attempts to use the mode of “interpreting Chinese classics in a Chinese way” to allow German readers to more intuitively understand *Dao*, which is the core concept and most important piece of Chinese cultural imagery in the *Daodejing*. It also provides new perspectives and possibilities for exploring other meanings of *Dao*, which can promote the mutual acknowledgment, mutual understanding and complementary interaction of Chinese and German cultures.

3. “Foreignization” (*taguohua*) of *De*

In contrast to the significant differences in the interpretations of *Dao* by scholars in the German-speaking world, the translations of *De*, another important cultural image, are relatively fixed. Most translators choose *Tugend* (virtue) as their basic translation. For example, Reinhold von Plaenckner and Victor von Strauss both translated *De* as *Tugend* (virtue). Reinhold von Plaenckner directly suggests in his “Introduction” that “the meaning of *tě* is virtue,” and he did not list other meanings of *De* there “because without doubt they cannot be considered” (Plaenckner 1870, p. IX).

Other translations of *De* are sometimes used, although the number of translation types is significantly fewer than for *Dao*. This is because, firstly, the German word *Tugend* is closer to the basic meaning of the Chinese character “*De*”. *Tugend*, in the tenth century AD, meant “proficiency, strength, usefulness”. It developed under the influence of Ecclesiastical Latin’s *virtūs* (*mōrālis*), meaning “moral (religious) perfection,” whereas now it is externalized to “abstinence, moral conduct, moral purity, chastity” (Pfeifer 1993). And secondly, influenced by the way *De* was translated in Confucian texts, the Confucian canon gained attention in the European academic community, including the German-speaking world, earlier and more extensively than Daoist classics. Thus, *De* was translated as *Tugend*, following its meaning in Confucianism, and was widely disseminated and accepted in the German-speaking world.

Despite these two factors, there are also some important alternative translations. This is because, from the early twentieth century with the wide dissemination of the *Daodejing*, scholars began to reflect on the reception of Laozi’s doctrine in the West. For example, Alexander Ular questioned the Europeans’ “scientific analysis” of it, which led to Laozi “being dissected incorrectly by philologists” and “reassembled by so-called philosophers”, even though they did not understand anything about the philologists’ work (Ular 1903, p. 61). Ular, therefore, advocated for a return to the cultural context of ancient China to understand Laozi. His translation, *The Path and the Right Way of Lao-Tse* (*Die Bahn und der rechte Weg des Lao-Tse*), like that of Richard Wilhelm’s, had a great impact at the beginning of the classic’s German translation history. He translated *De* as “the right way” (*der rechte Weg*). Against this historical background, the translators have adopted other terms in order to translate *De* to conform to the overall thought of their translations and to reflect their understanding of Laozi’s doctrine, such as Richard Wilhelm’s translation of *De* as *LEBEN*. This word means “life” in German, but the translator here uses the capitalized form in a proprietary way to distinguish it from the German word *das Leben*. Some other translators chose “Power” (*Kraft*) or “Primordial Power” (*Urkraft*) as the translation. The sinologist Erwin Rousselle was Richard Wilhelm’s successor, who took over the directorship of the China Institute at the University of Frankfurt. In his translation, published in 1941, he considered *De* to be spiritual ability, pointing out that *De* originally means “the radiating magical power, then mystical elemental power, further in general: power, fitness, finally: virtue” (Rousselle 1985, p. 107). Hans-Georg Möller, who published the first full German translation of the excavated edition of Mawangdui in 1995, also translated *De* as “Power” (*Kraft*) (Möller 1995, p. 31).

However, the relative consistency of these translations does not mean that the cultural image of *De* has not been “foreignized” in the German-speaking world. In fact, its variation is more complex than that of *Dao*. This is because many translators, under the influence of Logos-centrism, treat *Dao* as the core term, valuing it at the expense of *De*. This unbalanced relationship between *Dao* and *De* diminishes the uniqueness of the cultural image of *De* in

the *Daodejing*. This is reflected in the view that *De* is not an independent concept, but, rather, dependent on *Dao*.

We see this view held by three major early translators. Reinhold von Plaenckner suggests in his introduction that although “grammatically *táo* and *tě* can be placed next to each other and independently,” “this is untenable,” because both parts of the *Daodejing* “speak of the *Táo*,” and “the *Táo-tě*” (Plaenckner 1870, pp. IX–X). It can be observed that Plaenckner equated the word “*Táo*” with “*Táo-tě*,” and *De* naturally did not have independence in his translation. Victor von Strauss even translated the phrase “*Dao sheng zhi, De xu zhi*” (道生之，德畜之) as “*Tào erzeugt sie, seine Macht erhält sie*” (*Dao* creates them, his power maintains them) (Strauss 1870, p. 226). Thus, the cultural image of *De* completely loses its independence and is described as the power of the *Dao*. Strauss described *De* as the good beneficent power of *Dao*, “from which the preservation or nourishment of all beings is derived here,” which is why he directly translates that the *Dao* “maintains them”. He argues that, because of the non-designation of the possessive, there is, therefore, no reason at all, like the Chinese interpreters, to hypostatize this *De* as “power” or “virtue” and to put it next to *Dao* (Strauss 1870, p. 227). Lastly, Julius Grill suggests in his translation that *Dao* is repeatedly implied in *De*, in the sense that the power of *De* is attached to *Dao* (Grill 1910, p. 14).

The three translators listed above are all important representatives of early German translations of the *Daodejing*. Their translations are influenced by their theological backgrounds, equating or analogizing the *Dao* with the supreme being of Christianity, so it is not surprising that they understood the *De* as a subsidiary of the *Dao*. For example, Reinhold von Plaenckner proposes that *De* comes from the *Dao*, the heavenly virtue received through faith in God. Thus, the *Daodejing* leads people to acquire virtue through faith in God (Plaenckner 1870, p. X). Victor von Strauss believes that, according to Laozi, “the basis for the knowledge and behavior of people is *Tào*, and the ethical and ethico-political behavior determined by this principle is virtue, *tě*” (Strauss 1870, p. LXIX). Julius Grill also suggested that “the *Tao* is the highest good as the cause, as the maintaining and perfecting principle of that moral rightness and of the corresponding moral achievement” (Grill 1910, p. 14).

In the context of dichotomy, *De* is placed in a secondary position. Compared with the previous case, these translators did not explicitly define *De* as simply subordinate to *Dao*, but instead attached much less importance to *De* than to *Dao*. It can be said that they place the relationship between *Dao* and *De* under a dichotomous model, with *Dao* as primary and *De* as secondary. For one, there are differences in the translations of *Dao* and *De*, with many translators choosing not to translate *Dao* in order to reflect its uniqueness and exclusivity. This method has existed since the first German translation of the *Daodejing*: for example, the aforementioned Reinhold von Plaenckner, Victor von Strauss and Julius Grill translations kept only *Dao* untranslated. This method of translation has had a lasting impact, as the sinologist Wolfgang Kubin, who published the first German translation of the excavated bamboo edition of *Guodian* in 2011, also keeps the word *Dao* untranslated. He translates the *Daodejing* as *The classic of the Tao and the effective power (Der Klassiker vom Tao und von der Wirkkraft)* (Kubin 2011, p. 14), leaving *Dao* untranslated and *De* translated as “effective power” (*Wirkkraft*).

In addition, many translators provide only a brief explanation of *De*. Some, such as Erwin Rousselle, leave the explanation of *De* only as a footnote. Ernst Schwarz, in his account of *Dao* and *De* in his introduction, suggests that “the term *De*, as used by the Daoists and other schools, is relatively easy to explain, but can only be properly understood if we have already gained some insight into the conceptual layers of the word *Dao*” (Schwarz 1980, p. 7). He then discusses *Dao* in detail and at great length, but unfortunately, he never elaborates on *De* separately or in more detail. In the annotation of chapter 51, he analogizes *Dao* to *Causa sui*, *De* to *causa formalis* and the “thing-world” to *causa materialis*, thus equating the three with European philosophical concepts. He proposes that the *Dao*, as potentiality,

becomes actuality through the *De*, around which the substance of the thing-world gathers (Schwarz 1980, p. 183).

Still, translators have not completely ignored the uniqueness of the word *De* in the *Daodejing*. On the contrary, many translators of the *Daodejing* have attached great importance to how the text employs *De* to mean something different than it does in other works, especially the aforementioned Confucian one. Reinhold von Plaenckner suggests that *De* derived from faith in *Dao* is higher than *De* in “the earthly sense” (Plaenckner 1870, p. X). Richard Wilhelm points out that *De* can also be translated as “nature” (*Natur*), “essence” (*Wesen*), “spirit” (*Geist*) or “power” (*Kraft*), which are often used in the *Confucian Analects* and are avoided here to prevent conflicts with other terms. *De* is usually translated as *Tugend*, but this translation is more applicable to some of the later moral treatises and is actually more appropriate for Confucius than for Laozi (Wilhelm 1911, p. XVI). The famous German sinologist Günther Debon, professor at the University of Heidelberg, was the representative translator of the *Daodejing* in the mid-twentieth century; his translation was praised by the contemporary sinologist Wolfgang Kubin as the “most linguistically beautiful translation of our subject matter according to the standard version” (Kubin 2011, p. 15). According to Günther Debon, the Chinese character *De* gradually became a purely moral concept because of the influence of Confucianism (Debon 1961, p. 4). Ansgar Gerstner, in his doctoral dissertation “A synopsis and commented Translation of the Laozi and an evaluation of its socially critical attitude” (Eine Synopse und kommentierte Übersetzung des Buches Laozi sowie eine Auswertung seiner gesellschaftskritischen Grundhaltung), completed in 2004, explains that although he translates *De* as *Tugend* as other translators do, the concept of *De* in the Daoist sense does not “refer to moral thoughts and actions, as in Confucianism, but refers to the ways in which nature functions, such as plant and animal life” (Gerstner 2004, p. 68).

However, as mentioned above, whether from a religious or philosophical perspective, the vast majority of German-speaking scholars understand *Dao* as the supreme being in Laozi’s philosophy, and either equate it directly with God, leave it untranslated or use a proper name to emphasize its uniqueness. Thus, the specificity of *De* has to give way to *Dao*, and its translation cannot be treated in the same way as *Dao*. Therefore, the word *De* is still translated as *Tugend* in most translations. However, the basic meaning of *Tugend* is closer to the sense of ethics and morality. As a consequence, the important concept of *De* in Laozi’s philosophy has been greatly reduced in its philosophical scope in the process of “Germanization,” and its connotation is mainly limited to the ethical, moral and socio-political aspects of the human world.

It is impossible to completely dissolve the cultural differences between original and translated texts across heterogeneous cultures. Different cultures communicate and collide with each other in the translation process, resulting in the filtering, misinterpretation and re-creation of the original text, thus producing a translation with a certain degree of “foreignization” (Cao 2016, p. 127). This “foreignization” has led to the widespread acceptance of the cultural image of *De* in the German-speaking world as *Tugend*, greatly reducing its cultural connotation. The problem that ensues from this is the confusion of transliterated words. The contradiction between the breadth of the connotation and the singularity of the translation has made it impossible for some translators to use the same word to translate *De*. For example, Reinhold von Plaenckner, Victor von Strauss and Julius Grill all used *Tugend* as their basic word, but Strauss translated the word *De* in the chapter 21 passage “The form of the Great *De*” (孔容之德) as *Vermögen* (ability) (Strauss 1870, p. 107); Reinhold von Plaenckner as “Nature and its creation and action” (Natur und ihr Schaffen und Wirken) (Plaenckner 1870, p. 91); and Grill as *Kraft* (power) (Grill 1910, p. 85). Differing translations of the same concept in the same chapter and sentence produce such a large gap that one would not know that it is the same concept without knowledge of the original text. This is also a great challenge for the translators.

Of course, there are some translators who attempt to return the *De* of the *Daodejing* to the cultural context of ancient China and study it from a different perspective. For example,

Alexander Ular explains the composition of the Chinese character *De* in order to criticize its simple translation as *Tugend* (virtue). Ular suggests that the hieroglyph *De* has never meant virtue, “as which it is translated persistently”. He further explains the structure of the Chinese character *De*: “it is composed of the image of going straight out and the image of the heart, so it means the spiritual going straight ahead, the right way of life, or in a more limited sense at most the straightness”. Thus, it has absolutely nothing to do with “all reason” (*Allvernunft*), “virtue” (*Tugend*) or even “God” (*Gott*) and “purity of morals” (*Sittenreinheit*), as it is usually understood (Ular 1903, p. 63).

Others list the different interpretations of *De* in the *Daodejing* and its connections in various chapters to demonstrate its rich connotations to the readers. For example, after tracing the composition and basic meaning of the Chinese character “*De*,” the Czech orientalist Rudolf Dvořák, writing in German, summarized and explained the meaning of *De* in different chapters. He suggested that Laozi may have used *De* in the ordinary sense as virtue (chapter 38) and discussed the virtue of non-contention (chapter 68), although Laozi usually interprets it in a higher sense, especially in the sense found in chapters 21 (Dvořák 1903, p. 54).

In addition, other translators have interpreted *De* from the perspective of comparative Chinese and Western philosophy. For example, Richard Wilhelm defined *De* as a metaphysical principle in his translation. He believed that Laozi established his metaphysical theory, and, thus, Laozi’s pursuit of cognitive issues involuntarily created a metaphysical principle in *De*. Richard Wilhelm first defined *De* as follows: “What the beings receive to emerge is called *De*” (Wilhelm 1911, p. XVI). He translated it as *LEBEN* in accordance with the Gospel of John: “in him was life, and that life was the light of men”. Although Wilhelm’s interpretation of *De* is still framed in the context of the human world, he placed *De* and *Dao* on an equal footing. By comparing the ancient Chinese and Western philosophical roots and using the Bible as the basis for translation, he highlighted the special connotation of the cultural meaning of *De* and, at the same time, provided a sense of familiarity to German readers unfamiliar with Laozi’s doctrine.

4. Rethinking the “Foreignization” (*taguohua*) of Cultural Imagery in the Context of Global Laozegetics

The process of “foreignization” is a fundamental localization of works from the transmitting country by adopting the thinking and cultural rules of the receiving country (Cao and Wang 2020, p. 2). This is a process of filtering, misinterpretation and variant absorption between heterogeneous cultures, which finally creates new cultural achievements by colliding and fusing the different sides.

“Foreignization” reveals the diversity of the Global Laozegetics. Global Laozegetics continues the interpretive stance of traditional Laozegetics, focusing on the study of the translation of the *Daodejing*; thus, it “is the continuation and development of traditional Laozegetics” (Tadd 2022, p. 18). “Interpreting while translating” is an important feature of German translations of the *Daodejing*, with many researchers acting as both translators and interpreters. The German translations are an important part of Global Laozegetics in terms of the number of translations, translation history and the dissemination dimension. Therefore, studying the “foreignization” of German translations of the *Daodejing* in the context of Global Laozegetics allows for an exploration of their interpretive paradigm, which demonstrates the interpretive pluralism of Global Laozegetics and reflects the cultural dialog between East and West, as well as the characteristics of Laozegetics in the German-speaking world.

A detailed analysis of the cases of *Dao* and *De* shows that the extent of “foreignization” in cultural imagery differs. First, there is a complete extent of “foreignization;” for example, *Dao* is interpreted as “God,” and *De* is understood as a subsidiary of *Dao*. The translations and interpretations of the *Daodejing* by scholars in the German-speaking world are based primarily on principles of Western culture, with many scholars expecting to find resonance in ancient Chinese wisdom to support their own views. This kind of “foreigniza-

tion” places the cultural imagery of *Dao* and *De* squarely under the cultural traditions and discourse principles of the German-speaking world, thus making these two fundamental concepts of classical Chinese philosophy exclusive terms that are integrated into a Western context.

Second, there is a partial degree of “foreignization,” such as interpreting *Dao* and *De* from a metaphysical perspective or returning them to the Chinese cultural context for interpretation. In the former case, by bringing German readers into the familiar rules of Western discourse to compare and interpret the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western philosophy, the universal nature of Chinese philosophy can be revealed. However, although the latter places the interpretation in the context of Chinese culture, the interpreters are themselves the “other”, and their understanding of the *Dao* and *De* cannot be completely divorced from their native culture, thus creating a new perspective in interpreting of the *Daodejing* and confirming the complementarity between Eastern and Western cultures.

On the whole, “foreignization” has a positive effect in terms of the dissemination of Chinese classics, such as the *Daodejing*, abroad. First, it constructs a bridge for cultural exchange between the East and West, and has had an important influence on Chinese culture. Scholars from German-speaking countries overcame the great linguistic and cultural differences between East and West to learn and spread Chinese culture, such that Chinese classics, represented by the *Daodejing*, could be spread to the German-speaking world, and so that cultural imagery such as *Dao* and *De* could be integrated into a German cultural context while retaining their cultural specificity to a certain extent.

Second, “foreignization” provides new perspectives and methods of studying Laozi. Whether it was the early theological studies of religious connotations in the *Daodejing* that contributed to the comparative cultural studies of China and Germany; the literary works based on the *Daodejing* created by German writers such as *Legende von der Entstehung des Buches Taoteking auf dem Weg des Lao-tse in die Emigration* (Legend of the origin of the book Tao-Te-Ching on Lao-Tzu’s road into exile) by Bertolt Brecht; or, as in the case of the philosopher Heidegger, who directly related the sentences of the *Daodejing* to his own thought, establishing a “free relationship, without claim to correctness” (Elberfeld 2000, p. 154) with Laozi from a philosophical perspective, these “foreignization” variations have opened up new perspectives on the study of Laozi in China and promoted interest in issues such as comparative religion between East and West, Daoist thoughts in German literature and Heidegger and the *Daodejing*.

Third, “foreignization” can contribute to the development of research on German translations of the *Daodejing*. Traditional German translation research has focused on semantic transmissions of the original text by analyzing the original text in comparison with its translation to explore translation strategies, to compare the different versions or to explore the possibility of identifying a “correct” translation. From the perspective of “foreignization,” the study of translations diminishes the centrality of the “original meaning” of the text; places it on an equal footing with the translated text; and analyzes variations that occur in the process of intercultural translation between heterogeneous cultures, such as China and the German-speaking world. The analysis of the preceding cases shows that, firstly, the multiplicity of Chinese characters, the simplicity of ancient Chinese expressions and the profundity of philosophies create many difficulties for translators. They may treat the same translation subject differently according to their understanding of the original text and their choice of words. Secondly, the cultural differences between the author and the translators across time and space and the academic and contemporary background of the translators—as well as their overall understanding of the original text and their expectations of the translations presented to the reader—are important factors in producing the “foreignization” of cultural imagery. Therefore, the “foreignization” in German translations cannot be simply dismissed as a “mistranslation”.

Although the “foreignization” of cultural imagery has greatly facilitated the spread of Laozi’s doctrine, making the *Daodejing* of the most important Chinese classics in the

German-speaking world, this also inevitably overemphasizes commonalities and obscures or ignores the particularities of Chinese culture to a certain extent. Thus, a certain degree of unique cultural values has been missing.

5. Conclusions

In recent years, Chinese scholars have discussed the overseas dissemination of Chinese classics. But, because Eastern thought and Western thought have their own ways of thinking, cultural exchanges across these heterogeneous cultures can present more difficulty than homogeneity. The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature focuses on the phenomenon of variation in cross-heterogeneous cultural exchanges, neither seeking commonality alone nor blindly preserving differences. Rather, from the perspective of heterogeneity and complementarity, this theory places Eastern and Western cultures on equal footing and seeks to explore a path of cultural exchange that involves “mutual clarity and understanding”. This undoubtedly provides a new perspective on the study of the overseas dissemination of Chinese classics.

This paper presents a preliminary study of the cultural imagery *Dao* and *De* in the *Daodejing* based on the concept of “foreignization” in the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature. It shows that *Dao* and *De* were converted into concepts with German cultural connotations in a certain historical and cultural context, which reflects the “Germanization” of translations and interpretations of the *Daodejing*. However, the “Germanization” of these two concepts is not identical. On the one hand, since the *Dao* is the cornerstone of Laozi’s doctrine, its interpretations and translations can better represent the translators’ overall understandings of the *Daodejing*. To achieve their interpretative and translational purposes, scholars have integrated the cultural image of *Dao* into the German cultural context and interpreted it according to concepts similar to Western religious and philosophical thought, such as “God,” “sense” and “way,” which, in a sense, increases the cultural connotation of *Dao* but, at the same time, somewhat weakens its uniqueness as an ancient Chinese philosophical concept. On the other hand, the cultural image of *De* has been relegated to a position below *Dao*, which is far less frequently interpreted and researched than *Dao* and whose translations show a kind of conventional commonality, resulting in *De* being simply accepted as the equivalent of the German *Tugend*.

“Foreignization” emphasizes the differences between Chinese and German culture while at the same time confirming their complementarity; i.e., through the collision and fusion of heterogeneous Chinese and German cultures, new cultural achievements are eventually created. For example, the core concepts of *Dao* and *De* in Laozi’s doctrine have been integrated into the German-speaking world and have become concepts with characteristics of Western cultural discourse. This is an important insight for the study of German translations of Chinese classics such as the *Daodejing*. In the context of Global Laozegetics, the study of *Daodejing* translations from the perspective of “foreignization” reflects the interpretation-oriented position of Laozegetics, and this is more conducive to grasping the characteristics of Laozegetics in different cultures around the world (Tadd 2022, p. 19). Based on the “interpretation while translating” feature of German translations of the *Daodejing*, its study can develop from the traditional perspective of “how translators translated” to “how translators interpreted;” for instance, the focus of translation studies can be changed from exploring the transmission of the original text and translation strategies to exploring the process of interpretations and causes of variations in the translations of the *Daodejing* across heterogeneous contexts. Secondly, by studying the “foreignization” of cultural imagery, it is possible to explore the path of classicization in German translations. It took more than 150 years for the *Daodejing* to become the most influential Chinese classic in the German-speaking world, with many German translations becoming classics and continuing to serve as references for translations into other languages. Scholars in the German-speaking world have never ceased to interpret the *Daodejing* in a variety of ways, whether in an interpretive mode that is entirely grounded in Western cultural principles; through a comparative perspective between China and the West; or in an attempt to re-

store a Chinese cultural context for the reader. Their research continues to enrich Global Laozegetics, which is an important source of inspiration for other scholars, especially those in China.

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Article

The Shifting Depictions of Xiàng in German Translations of the *Dao De Jing*: An Analysis from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Field Theory

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Abstract: Like the Bible, the *Dào Dé Jīng* is one of the most translated classics with worldwide influence, and its translation sets a good example in cross-cultural communication. Among the *Dào Dé Jīng*'s translations, the number of German versions is second only to the English ones. Since its introduction to the German regions, the *Dào Dé Jīng* has been popular among German-speaking scholars and readers, casting profound and far-reaching influences in various fields. Based on the theory of the conceptual metaphor field, the article explores the relationship between *Dào* 道 (way or Dao) and *Xiàng* 象 (Symbolic Imagery, images) in the *Dào Dé Jīng* and builds the mapping from *Xiàng* to *Dào*. In the *Dào Dé Jīng*, Laozi uses images (*Xiàng* 象) as collective concepts to illustrate his *Dào* and make his idea better understood. Thus, this article focuses on the translation of different key images (*Xiàng*) in six representative German translations of the *Dào Dé Jīng* and summarizes three main translation techniques used in translating *Xiàng*: shifting, conversion, and concealment. After balancing the cultural differences and translation requirements, the German translators take these techniques to translate *Xiàng* and make relevant concepts more understandable and acceptable for German readers, which facilitates the spread of the *Dào Dé Jīng* in the German regions. Inspired by the German translation of *Xiàng*, contemporary translators shall balance the cultural differences between the source language and target language, choose the appropriate translation strategies and techniques in translating ancient Chinese classics and make their translation a bridge between different civilizations.

Keywords: the *Dào Dé Jīng*; *Dào*; conceptual metaphor field; *Xiàng*; translation

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1. Introduction

As one of China's famous philosophical classics and the sacred book of Daoism, the *Dào Dé Jīng* crystallizes the ancient wisdom and civilization of China. For centuries, the translation of the *Dào Dé Jīng* has attracted the attention of scholars at home and abroad and helped the world know China better. According to Daoxuan's *Collection of Critical Evaluations of Buddhism and Daoism from the Past and Present* (*jī gǔ jīn fó dào lùn héng* 集古今佛道论衡), the *Dào Dé Jīng* was first translated into Sanskrit by Xuanzang and Taoist priests under the official organization in the twenty-first year of Zhenguan in the Tang Dynasty (AD 647) (Liu 2018, p. 234). Later the *Dào Dé Jīng* was translated into Latin, French, German, Japanese, English, and other languages. According to Prof. Misha Tadd, the number of translated versions of the *Dào Dé Jīng* has reached 2000, involving 94 languages (Tadd 2022, p. 88). Second only to the Bible, the *Dào Dé Jīng* is the most translated classic with worldwide influence.

In 1823, French sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat published his *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-Tseu* (*Memory of the Life and Opinions of Laozi*), in which he translated five chapters of *Dào Dé Jīng* and elaborated the concept of *Dào*. In 1827, based on French

sinologist Abel Rémusat's French translation, the German philosopher Carl Jos. Hieron Windischmann translated five chapters of the *Dào Dé Jīng* into German¹. Since then, the translation of the *Dào Dé Jīng* in the German-speaking regions began. The past two centuries witnessed the increase of German translations of the *Dào Dé Jīng* from none to over 150. The number of German versions of the *Dào Dé Jīng* is second only to that of the English ones. Among these German versions of the *Dào Dé Jīng*, excellent translations by Victor von Strauss, Richard Wilhelm, Günther Debon, and so on are widely recognized and quite influential. Meanwhile, the German philosophical circle always pays close attention to Laozi and his work. From Immanuel Kant's strong criticism of Laozi's thinking to the critical acceptance of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Martin Buber, and so on to Laozi's ideas, to Martin Heidegger and Karl Theodor Jaspers' appreciation and recommendation of Laozi, Laozi and his *Dào Dé Jīng* gradually came to the fore in the German philosophical circle (Elberfeld 2000). Likewise, the *Dào Dé Jīng* inspired many writers in German-speaking regions. Laozi's thinking and ideas can be seen in Alfred Döblin's 1915 *Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun* (*The Three Leaps of Wang Lun*) which sets the story in late eighteenth-century China, Bertolt Brecht's poetry 1924 *Morgendliche Rede an den Baum "Griehn"* (*Morning address to a tree named "Green"*) and 1953 *Eisen* (*Iron*) and his dramas 1941 *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (*Mother Courage and Her Children*), 1943 *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (*The Good Person of Szechwan*), Hermann Hesse's 1919 *Demian: Die Geschichte von Emil Sinclairs Jugend* (*Demian: The Story of a Youth*), 1922 *Siddharta: Eine indische Dichtung* (*Siddhartha: An Indian Tale*), and 1932 *Die Morgenlandfahrt: Eine Erzählung* (*The Journey to the East*). Since the 1990s, the promotion of the *Dào Dé Jīng* to the world accelerates with more translations, diversified media, as well as more readers and audiences. The *Dào Dé Jīng* and the philosophical thinking in the book become popular among modern readers, manifesting their vitality in the contemporary world.

Though the *Dào Dé Jīng* is only a book of almost 5000 Chinese letters, it is a book of the world. The *Dào Dé Jīng* covers many fields, such as self-cultivation, state governance, military strategy and tactics, epistemology, cosmology, world and natural outlook, and so on. Meanwhile, the *Dào Dé Jīng* is obscure and hard to read, even for native readers. Without annotations, even Chinese readers cannot interpret the book correctly. However, why did the *Dào Dé Jīng* maintain high popularity in the German world for over a century? This article aims to find the answer from the analysis of the translation of *Xiàng* (Symbolic Imagery)² in the German versions of the *Dào Dé Jīng* from the perspective of the conceptual metaphor field. Meanwhile, this article attempts to summarize the techniques used in the translation of the *Dào Dé Jīng* and lay the foundation for the translation of other Chinese classics which bridge the communication between Chinese civilization and other civilization.

2. *Xiàng* as the Source Domain and the Conceptual Metaphor Field of *Dào*

Laozi said "The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way"³ (Laozi 1963, D. C. Lau, trans., p. 5). From the perspective of semantics, *Dào* is an extremely abstract concept that cannot be explained in words. From Wang Bi's explanation that "Semantically speaking, *Xiàng* shares the closest meaning with *Dao*" (*jìn yì mò ruò xiàng* 尽意莫若象), people could find that Laozi sought to make an analogy between *Xiàng* and *Dào* and make himself better understood (Lou 2011, p. 414). Though *Dào* is an abstract concept "that could not be seen, heard, felt, smelled or sensed," still *Dào* could be "embodied by all things or found in all things", and people could feel and understand *Dao* through the changes of things and their observation and experience (Rao 2006, p. 11). Thus, *Xiàng* could serve as the medium for us to better understand *Dào*.

The original semantic meaning of *Xiàng* is the mammal elephant, but its meaning gradually evolves. In Chapter XXI of *Hán Fēi Zǐ, Illustrations of Laozi's Teaching* (*Hán Fēi Zǐ jiě lǎo* 韩非子解老), the semantic evolution of *Xiàng* is recorded as follows:

People can rarely see the living elephants, usually the bones of dead elephants, then some people try to represent the living elephants through pictures. With the help of those images, those who have not seen elephants can know what living elephants look like. Therefore, the images (Xiàng 象) are gradually referred to as people's concepts of something.⁴ (Zhang 2016, p. 220)

In the Paleolithic Era (or Old Stone Age), China's elephants mainly inhabited the northern regions such as Henan, Shanxi, and Shaanxi. Later, due to the colder climate and the elephants migrated southward. By the Period of Warring States, people in northern China could only see the dead bones of elephants instead of living elephants. Based on the bones, people imagined what living elephants look like (Wang 2013, p. 22). Since then, *Xiàng* has been referred to as what is in people's minds or people's concepts of things. For example, the Chinese letters originate from the inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty. These inscriptions symbolize the images in the external world. China's ancient calendar was set through the observation of cosmos images. In Chinese medicine, *Xiàng* means manifestation. Viscera are hidden inside the body. As manifestation reflects the condition of viscera and can be observed externally, it is called visceral manifestation (*Zàng Xiàng* 藏象). Likewise, *Xiàng* is an important concept in traditional Chinese aesthetics and painting. Images are widely used in literature and painting to reflect people's feelings. Besides, *Xiàng* is a key term in ancient Chinese philosophy. According to *Zuo Tradition* (*zuǒ zhuàn* 左传), in the third year of Lord Xuan's reign (606 BCE), "the cauldrons were cast with images of various creatures. The hundred things were therewith completely set forth, and the people thus knew the spirits and the evil things" (Zuo 2016, p. 601). Through the casting of images on the cauldrons, "the ancient Chinese developed the early understanding of the relationship between objects and images" (Zhang 2014, p. 69). Likewise, in the *Zhou Book of Change* (*zhōu yì* 周易), *Xiàng* is paraphrased as follows:

When the sages discovered the esoteric principles under heaven, they compared them to concrete states and appearances, symbolized them with appropriate objects and meaning, and thus called them images. (Ji 2008, p. 383)

With the help of images, the sages make profound and obscure knowledge easier to understand for ordinary people. During the process, *Xiàng* serves as the medium between the physical world and the metaphysical world. In the *Dào Dé Jīng*, Laozi also uses the concrete *Xiàng* to interpret the abstract *Dào*. Such interpretation is based on the common characteristics shared by *Wù* 物(thing), *Xiàng* and *Dào* and their mutual relations. As *Dào* exists in all things (*Wù* 物) and things can be referred to as *Xiàng*, *Xiàng* shares similar, if not all, characteristics with *Dào*. From various perspectives, *Xiàng* is used to interpret *Dào*, to make the intangible tangible, and to make the abstract concrete. Thus, the essence and core of *Dào* are better explained.

To some extent, the relationship between *Xiàng* and *Dào* can also be elaborated by the conceptual metaphor theory. The western conceptual metaphor theory originated from Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, in which he discussed the rhetorical functions of metaphor. In the 1970s, there occurred a cognitive turn in the conceptual metaphor theory. Developed by Lakoff, Johnson, Turner, and other writers, the theory of conceptual metaphor became more and more mature in their books and articles, including *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Lakoff 1987), *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Lakoff and Turner 1989) (Wang 2007, p. 34). The conceptual metaphor theory holds that metaphors are everywhere in daily life and they serve as conceptual norms which influence human thinking. Based on their experience of the objective world, people can understand the target concepts with relatively weak structures through those with relatively strong structures (Lan 2005, p. 122). Lakoff points out that each metaphor contains a source domain, a target domain, and a source-to-target domain mapping (Lakoff 1987, p. 68); the direction of metaphorical mapping is from concrete to abstract domains (Lakoff 1987, pp. 275–76). Lakoff and Mark Turner further define metaphoric mapping as a set of correspondences between two conceptual domains (Lakoff and Turner 1989, p. 4). However, there can be

more than one source domain or one target domain in conceptual metaphors; in other words, metaphoric mapping does not always occur between two conceptual domains. With examples like “An argument is a container” “An argument is a journey” and “An argument is a building”, Kövecses answers “why does a target domain have several origin domains” (Kövecses 2002, pp. 63–64). Kövecses argues that due to the partiality of metaphorical mappings, people tend to specify one target domain with multiple source domains instead of one. Meanwhile, the mapping from source to target domains can also be partial. In the partial metaphorical utilization, only part of the source domain is used in each metaphor. The used part of the source domain is highlighted in forming the target concept, while the part of the target domain that is not highlighted is hidden. The highlighting process is defined as metaphorical highlighting. One source domain can only play a partial role in forming the target domain, but the mystery of the target domain can be revealed with enough source domains. People can get the whole picture of the target domain with a comprehensive understanding of multiple source domains. Together, these source domains build the structure and content of the target domains, facilitating people’s understanding of abstract concepts (Kövecses 2002, pp. 84–91).

Kövecses’ model of conceptual metaphor focuses on the relationship between the source domain and target domain, while it pays little attention to the relations between different source domains. Inspired by Kövecses’ theory, this article attempts to analyze the relationship between *Dào* and *Xiàng* through the mappings from multiple source domains to one target domain. Though the many-to-one mapping model does not reveal the interrelations among different source domains, or *Xiàng* in this article, still Kövecses’ theory could bring people closer to the concept of *Dào*.

As shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, [Dào] is the core concept surrounded by the *Xiàng* concepts like *Pǔ*, *Yī*, *Gēn*, *Shuǐ*, *Mén*, *Mǔ*, *Yīng’ér*, *Gǔ* and so on⁵. In the *Dào Dé Jīng*, Laozi uses concepts like *Mǔ* to illustrate his idea of *Dào*, and concepts like *Mǔ* serve as the *Xiàng* (source domain) in building the structure and content of *Dào* (target domain). What lie between [Dào] and *Xiàng* are the semantic features shared by them. In the figure, the two-way arrows are used to reflect the mutual relations between the two ends⁶. For example, the two-way arrows are used to reflect that *Xiàng* shares the semantic features and these concepts share intertextuality. As shown in the figure, the author holds that the interrelated mappings from *Xiàng* and the semantic features to [Dào] form the semantic field of [Dào], serving as the structure and content of [Dào], and bringing people closer to the concept of [Dào].

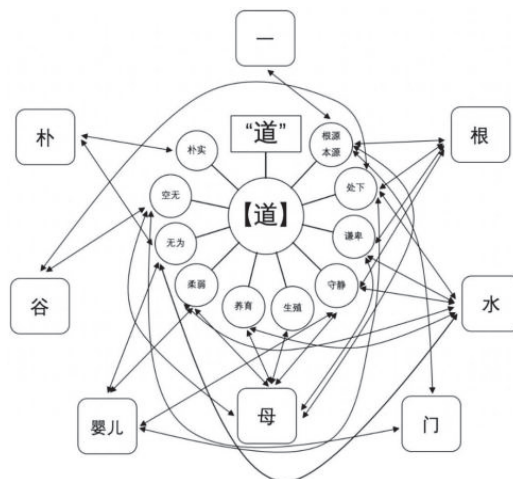


Figure 1. The conceptual metaphor field of *Dào* in the *Dào Dé Jīng*.

Table 1. Terms in Figure 1.

Chinese	Chinese Pinyin	English
道	Dào	Dao
一	Yī	One
根	Gēn	Root
水	Shuǐ	Water
门	Mén	Gate
母	Mǔ	Mother
婴儿	Yīng'ér	Babe
谷	Gǔ	Valley
朴	Pǔ	Unpretentious
根源	Gēn Yuán	Origin
处下	Chǔ Xià	Below
谦卑	Qiān Bēi	Humble
守静	Shǒu Jìng	Stillness
生殖	Shēng Zhí	Breed
养育	Yǎng Yù	Nourish
柔弱	Róu Ruò	Soft and weak
无为	Wú Wéi	Without doing anything
空无	Kōng Wú	Nothingness
朴实	Pǔ Shí	Unadorned

3. The Techniques Used in Translating *Xiàng* in German Translations

The article focuses on the German translations of the *Dào Dé Jīng* and aims to analyze them from the perspective of the conceptual metaphor field of *Dào*. It has been made clear that *Xiàng* acts as the source domain in the conceptual metaphor field of *Dào*. Meanwhile, the mapping from the source domain to the target domain diversifies the content and meaning of the target domain. The mapping process coincides with the translation process which happens from the source language to the target language. Excellent German translations of the *Dào Dé Jīng* combine the mapping process with the translating process to better illustrate the major concepts in the book. Therefore, based on the six representative German translations published in different times, including Victor von Strauss (1870), Richard Wilhelm (2010), Erwin Rousselle (1985), Günther Debon (2014), Viktor Kalinke (2000), and Annette Oelkers (2014), the article attempts to analyze the three main techniques used in translating *Xiàng* in German translations: the shifting of *Xiàng*, the conversion of *Xiàng*, and the concealment of *Xiàng*.

3.1. The Shifting of *Xiàng*

Based on the corpus-based comparative studies on the above six German translations of the *Dào Dé Jīng*, the author finds that the shifting of *Xiàng* is the most commonly used translation technique. In Chinese, *Shifting* is originally a mathematical concept that means moving all points of an object in the same direction by the same distance on the same plane. Shifting doesn't change the shape or size of an object but its position. The author borrows this mathematical term to describe the first technique used in translating *Xiàng* in the German *Dào Dé Jīng*. With such a translation technique, the translated *Xiàng* meets the following conditions: (1) The expressions in the German translation are commonly-used ones that match semantic meanings in Chinese, and the translation does not change the original *Xiàng* and its basic semantics; (2) *Xiàng* simply gets shifted from the original Chinese text to the German one with its relative function in the target text remains.

For example, the [Mǔ] concept appears in the source text in the forms of *Mǔ* 母 (mother), *Cí* 雌 (female), and *Pín* 牝 (female). The corresponding expressions of this *Xiàng* after being transferred to the German translations are shown in the following table (Table 2):

Table 2. Corresponding expressions of [Mǔ] in the German translations of the *Dào Dé Jīng*.

Translator	<i>Mǔ</i> 母 (Mother)	<i>Cí</i> 雌 (Female)	<i>Pín</i> 牝 (Female)
Strauss	Mutter (mother)	Vogelweibchen (female bird)/ Weibheit (femininity)	Weibliche/Weib (femininity)
Wilhelm	Mutter	Henne (hen)/ Weibheit (femininity)	Weib/Weibliche (femininity)
Rousselle	Mutter	Vogelmutter (mother bird)/ Weibheit (femininity)	Tiergöttin (goddess of animal)/ Weib/weibliches Wesen (female creatures)
Debon	Mutter	Weibchen/Weibheit (femininity)	Weibheit/Weib/Weiblichkeit/Weibliche (femininity)
Kalinke	Mutter	Weiblich/Weibliche (femininity)	weiblich, Weibliche (female/femininity)
Oelkers	Ursprung/Dao/Mutter	neues Leben entsteht (give birth to new life)/die Fürsorglichkeit, die dem weiblichen Prinzip zugrunde liegt (maternal love)	Weiblich (femininity)/ohne Ende wird neues Leben geboren (new life was born in endless circle)/ Weibliche (femininity)

As shown in Table 2, the *Xiàng* of [Mǔ] is translated into different German expressions in the six German translations, with those highlighted in bold basically in accord with the Chinese expressions of the *Xiàng*. For example, *Mutter* means *mother*, *Weibheit/Weibliche* and *Weib/Weibliche* both mean *female*, all of which are corresponding expressions of the *Xiàng* of [Mǔ] in German.

A similar example is the translation of [Shuǐ] 水 (water), whose expressions in the original text include *Shuǐ* 水 (water), *Jiānghǎi* 江海 (river or sea), and *Lù* 露 (dew), which when shifted to the German translations become the following ones (Table 3):

Table 3. Expressions of [Shuǐ] in the German Translations of the *Dào Dé Jīng*.

Translator	<i>Shuǐ</i> 水	<i>Jiānghǎi</i> 江海	<i>Lù</i> 露
Strauss	Wasser	Meer, Strom, Fluss, Ozean	Tau
Wilhelm	Wasser	Meer, Strom	Tau
Rousselle	Wasser	Meer, Strom, See	Tau
Debon	Wasser	Meer, Strom	Tau
Kalinke	Wasser	Meer, Strom	Nass
Oelkers	Wasser	Meer, Fluss, Ozean	Tau

As shown in Table 3, similar to the translation of [Mǔ], the expressions of [Shuǐ] in the German translations, such as *Wasser* (water), *Strom* (river), *Meer* (sea), *Fluss* (river), *Tau* (dew) and *Nass* (clear water), all fall under the category of [Shuǐ] in the original text. It is another typical example of the shifting of *Xiàng*. In addition, the translations of [Gǔ] 谷 (valley) as *Tal* (valley), and [Pǔ] 朴 (log) as *Rohholz* (log) and *unbearbeiteter Stoff* (unprocessed timber), etc., are examples of the shifting of *Xiàng*.

The shifting of *Xiàng* keeps the content and form of the original text to the greatest extent. It is a translation with an almost original taste and flavor, which not only conforms better to the translation criterion of faithfulness but also ensures the unity of form and spirit of the translated text. However, from the perspective of the target readers, the *Xiàng* in the source language may not be familiar to the target readers, or the translated *Xiàng* means opposite to its original semantic meaning. Thus, the shifting of *Xiàng* may cause two

consequences: first, the same *Xiàng* cannot be understood by the target readers without detailed annotations; second, the semantic asymmetry between the translated text and the source text could cause misunderstanding. Therefore, the shifting of *Xiàng* is the most appropriate technique to preserve both the form and spirit of *Xiàng* in the target language, as long as the *Xiàng* has slight semantic changes, or it is familiar to the target readers. Moreover, from the perspective of the conceptual metaphor field, this pattern keeps the metaphorical mapping relationship and mapping content of the original text.

3.2. The Conversion of *Xiàng*

Through data analysis, the author finds the second translation technique: the conversion of *Xiàng*. That is, the translator, when translating a *Xiàng*, uses another *Xiàng* in the place of the original one, thus introducing a conversion in translation. By further analyzing this technique, the author divides the conversion of *Xiàng* into the following two groups according to the mechanisms:

3.2.1. The Conceptual Conversion

The translators actively adopt translation strategies to avoid the disadvantages of shifting. When cultural differences pose obstacles to the readers' understanding of the original *Xiàng* while it is being transferred from the original text to the target text, the translator uses another *Xiàng* in the target language culture with the same metaphorical meaning to eliminate or reduce the obstacles to the readers. The most typical example of conversion among the six German translations is Erwin Rousselle's translation of [Mén] 门 (door). Different from the other five translations which usually use the shifting of *Xiàng* to translate *Mén* 门 (door) from the original text into *Tor* (door) and *Tür* (door) in German, Rousselle translated the two *Mén* in Chapter 1 and Chapter 6 of the *Dào Dé Jīng*, both into *Schoß*, as shown in the following table (Table 4):

Table 4. Two translations of [Mén] in Erwin Rousselle's translation.

Translator	German Translation	Chinese	English Translation
Rousselle	Das Mysterium der Mysterien, aller Geheimnisse Schoß .	玄之又玄，众妙之门。——一章	Mystery upon mystery—The gateway of the manifold secrets.
	Der dunklen Tiergöttin Schoß , ist Himmels und der Erde Wurzel.	玄牝之门，是谓天地根。——六章	The gateway of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth.

As shown in Table 4, the basic semantic meaning of [Mén] in the German cultural context is the passage of entrance and exit, while that of *Schoß* in German is the "pregnant woman's abdomen" or "woman's private parts", which is closely related to productivity. If translated into *Tor* or *Tür*, German readers would not be able to understand [Mén] without detailed annotations. Beyond the *Dào Dé Jīng*, *Schoß* is more relevant to [Mǔ] than to [Mén] both in Chinese and German. The converted *Xiàng* not only affiliates itself with another *Xiàng* ([Mǔ]) in the conceptual metaphor field of *Dào*, but also relates itself to the creativity and originality of *Dào* in the German culture. This cannot be achieved by the shifting of *Xiàng* like *Tor* or *Tür*. The conversion of *Xiàng* not only keeps the expressions about *Dào* as interpreted by *Xiàng* in the original text but also conveys the original and creative semantic features of *Dào*, making it easier for German readers to understand.

3.2.2. The Deviated Conversion

The reason for this conversion is the translator's misunderstanding of the semantics of the original text or the existence of discrepancies between the reference text and the authoritative edition. For example (Table 5):

Table 5. The Conversion of *Xiàng* in German Translations.

Translator	German Translation	Chinese	English Translation
Rousselle	Die Gottheit des Quelltals ist todlos, das ist die dunkle Tiergöttin . Der dunklen Tiergöttin Schoß ist Himmels und der Erde Wurzel.	谷神不死，是谓玄牝。玄牝之门，是谓天地根。——六章	The spirit of the valley never dies. This is called the mysterious female. The gateway of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth.
	Sie ist die tiefe Wurzel und der feste Stamm . Die Führerin zu ewigem Leben und dauernder Schau.	是谓深根固柢，长生久视之道。——五十九章	This is called the way of deep roots and firm stems by which one lives to see many days.
Strauss	Nimmt ers leicht, so verliert er die Vasallen ; ist er unruhig, so verliert er die Herrschaft.	轻则失根，躁则失君。——二十六章	If light, then the root is lost; If restless, then the lord is lost.
Debon	Dieses nennt man: Die Wurzel vertiefen und den Stamm festigen. Das ist der Weg ewigen Lebens und dauernder Schau.	是谓深根固柢，长生久视之道。——五十九章	This is called the way of deep roots and firm stems by which one lives to see many days.

As shown in Table 5, Rousselle translated the two *Pin* in Chapter 6 of the *Dào Dé Jīng* into *Tiergöttin* (Goddess of Animals). The title of Rousselle's version of the *Dào Dé Jīng* is called *Lao-tse. Führung und Kraft aus der Ewigkeit* (*Lao-tse. Guidance and Strength from Eternity* 1985); and *Dào* is translated as *Führerin* throughout his translation. Therefore, from the perspective of textual semantics, Rousselle's conversion of *Xiàng* stems from his goddess-based interpretation of [Dào], which is an adaptation in the context of goddess discourse. Strauss converted *Gēn* 根 (root) in Chapter 26 into *Chén* 臣 (minister), a character with irrelevant semantic meanings because he took a different reference from the He Shang Gong Version. (Wang 1993, p. 107) This conversion of *Xiàng* was a de facto conversion, though not a product of Strauss' subjective action. Moreover, Rousselle and Debon both translated *Dī* 柢 (root) in Chapter 59 into *Stamm* (tree trunk). Although the trunk and roots are both components of trees, they are not identical parts. More importantly, the semantic features conveyed by them are not the same. The reason for this deviation is probably that Rousselle and Debon had applied the expressions (*Wurzel* and *Stamm*) with a high level of co-occurrence.

From the perspective of conceptual metaphor, although conversion happened after *Xiàng* is translated, the metaphorical mapping relationship still exists because of the adoption of a new *Xiàng* in the translated text, whereas the translation uses a new source domain to describe the original target domain.

3.3. The Concealment of *Xiàng*

Compared with the above two techniques, the concealment of *Xiàng* makes the biggest change during the translation. This means the translator will conceal the *Xiàng* in the source text by completely not using it or only partially using it in the target text. Therefore, according to its concealment extent, the concealment of *Xiàng* in the translation can be divided into two types: the total concealment of *Xiàng* and the partial concealment of *Xiàng*.

3.3.1. The Total Concealment of *Xiàng*

This is quite typical in Annette Oelkers' translation, as shown in the following table (Table 6):

Table 6. The Total Concealment of *Xiàng* in the German Translation of the *Dào Dé Jīng*.

Translator	German Translation	Chinese	English Translation
	Das Namenlose, das Eine, was wir nicht benennen können, bildet den Anfang von Himmel und Erde. Das mit Namen benannte ist der Ursprung der zehntausend Dinge.	无，名天地之始，有，名万物之 母 。——一章	The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth; The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.
	Wenn wir uns auf den Ursprung besinnen und dies daraus entstandene Welt verstehen, dann können Schwierigkeiten und nichts mehr anhaben.	既知其子，复守其 母 ，没身不殆。——五十二章	After you have known the child, go back to holding fast to the mother, and to the end of your days you will not meet with danger.
	Hat man den Ursprung verstanden, dann kann man lange wahren.	有国之 母 ，可以长久。——五十九章	When he possesses the mother of a state, he can then endure.
	Der Ursprung des Lebens funktioniert nach dem weiblichen Prinzip; ohne Ende wird neues Leben geboren. Auch der einzelne trägt diese Energie in sich. Der Ursprung von Himmel und Erde ist unergründlich.	玄牝之门，是谓天地 根 。——六章	The gateway of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth.
Oelkers	Alles erblüht, wieder und wieder, nur aus dem Grund, um zu dem Ursprung zurückzukehren; zu dem was ewig ist und ewig sein wird. Diesen ewigen Kreislauf nicht zu erkennen, macht unglücklich.	夫物芸芸，各复归其 根 。——十六章	The teeming creatures all return to their separate roots.
	In diesem Punkt unterscheide ich mich von anderen Menschen; ich habe erkannt, dass das DAO immer für mich sorgen wird.	我独异于人，而贵食 母 。——十章	I alone am different from others and value being fed by the mother.
	Kannst du Zugang zum Tor des Lebens haben, ohne dass neues Leben entsteht ?	天门开阖，能为 雌 乎？——十章	When the gates of heaven open and shut, are you capable of keeping to the role of the female?
	Der Ursprung des Lebens funktioniert nach dem weiblichen Prinzip; ohne Ende wird neues Leben geboren. Auch der einzelne trägt diese Energie in sich. Der Ursprung von Himmel und Erde ist unergründlich.	玄牝之门，是谓天地 根 。——六章	The gateway of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth.
	Das Schwere schafft die Grundlage für Leichtigkeit. Die Ruhe ist das Oberhaupt der Unruhe. . . . Begibst du dich nicht auf die Suche, dann verlierst du die Verbindung mit dir . Unruhig zu sein bedeutet, die Herrschaft über die eigenen Gedanken zu verlieren.	重为轻 根 ，静为躁君。 . . . 轻则失 根 ，躁则失君。——二十六章	The heavy is the root of the light; The still is the lord of the restless. . . . If light, then the root is lost; If restless, then the lord is lost.

As shown in Table 6, in the *Dào Dé Jīng*, she translated *Mǔ* 母 in Chapters 1, 52, and 59 and *Gēn* 根 in Chapters 6 and 16 into *Ursprung* (a German word meaning *origin*). Yet *Mǔ* in Chapter 20 was translated into *Dào*, *Cí* 雌 in Chapter 10 into *Neues leben entsteht* (a German phrase meaning *creating new life*), *Pín* 牝 in Chapter 6 into *dem weiblichen Prinzip; ohne Ende wird neues Leben geboren* (German phrases meaning *the law of the female; endless creation of new life*), and *Gēn* 根 in Chapter 26 into *Grundlage* (a German word which means *foundation*) or *die Verbindung mit dir* (a German phrase meaning *contact with you*), etc. The reason why Oelkers largely adopted total concealment is that she intended to interpret the

Dào Dé Jīng in a chicken-soup style in her translation with more use of close-to-life wording and Free Translation. Therefore, she preferred erasing the *Xiàng* that indirectly indicates the characteristics of *Dào* and directly depicting them in her language. Such translation surely facilitated readers to understand her interpretation of *Dào*, but it also lost the literary and aesthetic value of the source text in which *Xiàng* was used to explain *Dào*.

In addition to the above examples in Annette Oelkers' translation, [Pǔ] was the most totally-concealed *Xiàng* and the only one that was concealed in all six versions of the translation. *Pǔ* 朴 appeared eight times in the source text. As listed in the following table, only the first one was translated with the technique of shifting, the other seven were translated into *Einfalt* / *Einfältigkeit* / *einfältig* (German words meaning *simplicity*), *Einfachheit* / *einfach* (German words that also represent *simplicity*), or *Lauterkeit* (a German word that means *purity*) that can directly indicate their semantic characteristics.

As shown in Table 7, the literal German translation *Pǔ* 朴 is *Rohholz*, the semantic meaning of which is *log*. In German, *Rohholz* has no symbolic meanings, let alone the metaphorical meanings similar to those contained in the source text. Simply shifting *Pǔ* into *Rohholz* would make it hard for German readers to understand the source text. To solve this problem, the translators concealed *Pǔ* and directly presented its metaphorical meanings.

Table 7. *Pǔ* 朴 in the German Translation of the *Dào Dé Jīng*.

Source Language	Target Language						
	Strauss	Wilhelm	Rousselle	Debon	Kalinke	Oelkers	
朴 ₁	Rohholz	unbearbeiteter Stoff	Rohholz	Grobholz	Holz, das noch nicht beschnitzt ist.	unbearbeitetes Holz	
朴 ₂	Einfalt	Lauterkeit	Rohholz	das Schlichte	Ursprünglichen	das eigene wahre Wesen	
朴 ₃	Einfalt	Einfalt	Rohholzsein	Groben und Schlichten	Ursprünglichkeit	—	
[Pǔ]朴	朴 ₄	Einfalt	Einfalt	Rohholz	Grobholz	Ursprüngliches	die ursprünglichen Eigenschaften
	朴 ₅	Einfältigkeit	Einfalt	Rohholzhaft	Schlichtheit	Einfachheit	Ursprung
	朴 ₆	Einfachheit	Einfalt	Rohholzsein	Schlichtheit	Ursprüngliche	Verbindung mit DAO
	朴 ₇	Einfachheit	Einfalt	Rohholzsein	Schlichtheit	Ursprüngliche	einfach
	朴 ₈	einfach	einfältig	Rohholz	schlicht	das Einfache (gleich unbeschnittenem Holz)	sind sie selbst

3.3.2. The Partial Concealment of *Xiàng*

This means that some of *Xiàng* are translated into other forms. They are not translated as individual concepts but collateral concepts. The meaning of these *Xiàng* can be seen in different expressions, as shown in the following table (Table 8):

Table 8. The Partial Concealment of *Xiàng* in the German Translation of the *Dào Dé Jīng*.

<i>Xiàng</i> (Different Forms)	German/English Translation	Source
[Mǔ] 母 (<i>Cí</i> 雌)	die Fürsorglichkeit, die dem weiblichen Prinzip zugrunde liegt (母性般的关怀)	Oelkers: Chapter 28
[Gǔ] 谷 (<i>Gǔ</i> 谷)	Thalniederung (谷之低)	Strauss: Chapter 28
[Gēn] 根 (<i>Gēn</i> 根)	Wurzelgrund (根基)	Debon: Chapter 16, 26
[Gēn] 根 (<i>Gēn</i> 根 - <i>Dī</i> 抵)	mit dem Ursprung verwurzelt (扎根)	Oelkers: Chapter 59
[Pǔ] 朴 (<i>Pǔ</i> 朴)	das Einfache (gleich unbeschnittenem Holz) (像未雕琢过的木头一样简单)	Kalinke: Chapter 57

In the above examples in Table 8, *Xiàng* concepts like [Mǔ] [Gǔ] [Gēn] and [Pǔ] are not translated as individual concepts, but their semantic features are kept in other forms. The words in bold in Table 8 like *weiblich* (female), *Tal* (valley), *Wurzel* (root), and *Holz* (log) maintain the features of the corresponding *Xiàng*. Though these words are attributives or compound words, the semantic features of the *Xiàng* are concealed in them. The partial concealment of *Xiàng* essentially takes the form of the “*Xiàng* + its metaphorical meaning.” Together such form shall be regarded as simile, instead of metaphor.

4. The Differences between the Transfer Modes of *Xiàng* in German Translations

Based on the above analysis, the author lists the features of the transfer modes of *Xiàng* in German translations in Table 9 to examine the source domain, target domain, and the mapped semantic features (common features shared by *Dào* and *Xiàng*) before and after the translation.

Table 9. Features of the Transfer Modes of *Xiàng* in German translations.

	Shifting of <i>Xiàng</i>	Conversion of <i>Xiàng</i>		Concealment of <i>Xiàng</i>	
		Conceptual Conversion	Deviated Conversion	Total Concealment	Partial Concealment
Source Domain	Unchanged	Changed	Changed	Concealed	Unchanged
Target Domain	Unchanged	Unchanged	Unchanged	Concealed	Unchanged
The Mapped Semantic Features	Unchanged	Unchanged	Changed	The metaphor disappears and the semantic features are expressed explicitly.	The semantic features remain unchanged while the metaphors are changed to simile or fixed expression in German.

According to Table 9, we can find that: (1) Through the shifting of *Xiàng*, the source domain, target domain, and mapped semantic features remain unchanged after translation. (2) Through the conceptual conversion of *Xiàng*, the target domain and mapped semantic features remain unchanged while the source domain changes. However, if the translation is based on misreading or the different versions of the original text, only the target domain remains unchanged. (3) In the total concealment of *Xiàng*, the conceptual metaphors in the original text are not translated; the source domain and target domain are concealed, while the mapped semantic features are expressed explicitly. In the partial concealment of *Xiàng*, the mapped semantic features in the source language remain unchanged while the conceptual metaphors are changed to similes or fixed expressions in German which are usually ignored.

Judging from the effects of the different translation modes, through the shifting of *Xiàng*, the three elements of conceptual metaphor remain unchanged. However, such a mode does not always mean it is the best translation technique in dealing with Chinese classics. For example, Strauss and Wilhelm take such a mode in translating the *Dào Dé Jīng* in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but their target readers are usually missionaries, sinologists, philosophers, and other professional scholars who are familiar with Chinese culture. Therefore, they use the shifting of *Xiàng* to maintain “both the form and spirit” of the original texts. Meanwhile, there are many annotations in their versions of the *Dào Dé Jīng*. Given the detailed explanation and annotation in the preface of Strauss’s translation, Strauss knows the huge differences between the two cultures and tries to bring German readers closer to the Chinese culture. Next to the shifting of *Xiàng*, the other two modes are also indispensable in translating Chinese classics like the *Dào Dé Jīng*. They all play essential roles in translation and cross-cultural communication.

5. Conclusions

In the past two centuries, excellent German translations of the *Dào Dé Jīng* kept on popping up, making the *Dào Dé Jīng* popular in the German regions and influencing people in various fields. Thanks to German translators' flexible translation techniques used in translating *Xiàng* 象 (Symbolic Imagery, image), the gist of the *Dào Dé Jīng* and Laozi's philosophical thinking becomes understandable and acceptable to readers. In the *Dào Dé Jīng*, Laozi uses concrete *Xiàng* to illustrate the abstract *Dào*, and these *Xiàng* concepts serve as the source domains of the target domain, namely *Dào*. Gradually the content and semantic features of *Dào* become diversified and enriched. Meanwhile, compared to *Dào*, *Xiàng* is easier to understand and more accessible in people's daily life. From their daily experience, people gradually have a comprehensive and holistic view of *Dào*. Thus, the translation of *Xiàng* becomes a key issue and a tough issue in the translation of the *Dào Dé Jīng*. Based on the conceptual metaphor theory developed by Lakoff, Johnson, Turner, Kövecses, and other linguists, the author focuses on the translation of *Xiàng* concepts in six representative German versions of the *Dào Dé Jīng* and summarizes three techniques used in translating the *Dào Dé Jīng*: the shifting, conversion, and concealment. These techniques make the abstract *Dào* translatable and bring Laozi's ideas closer to German-speaking readers.

Instead of focusing on the pros and cons of different German versions of the *Dào Dé Jīng*, this article focuses on analyzing the translation techniques or the transfer modes of *Xiàng* in German translations of the *Dào Dé Jīng*. The flexible translation techniques used by the German translators made *Dào Dé Jīng* popular in the German-speaking regions. Through the shifting of *Xiàng*, German translators attempted to find the replacement of the concepts of the *Dào Dé Jīng* in their native language, making small shifts between the source language and target language. Meanwhile, they use detailed annotations to illustrate the abstract concepts, maximizing the illustration of *Dào* to readers. Without these annotations, their translation will be confusing and obscure. Through the conversion of *Xiàng*, German translators narrow the cultural differences between the source and target language. Some of the Chinese *Xiàng* concepts in Chinese are conversed with new German concepts to facilitate German readers' understanding of *Dào*. With the help of the conversed German concepts, the German readers feel close to these unknown Chinese concepts and have a holistic view of the semantic features of *Dào*. Through the concealment of *Xiàng*, German translators stick to the principle that "less is more." German translators choose not to translate some of the *Xiàng* concepts to avoid making the readers confused. Though such concealment does not convey the original linguistic and aesthetic features of the texts, the semantic features and meaning are maintained. It is regrettable to make such concealment, but such concealment can facilitate people's understanding of the text.

To sum up, the flexible translation of *Xiàng* in German versions of the *Dào Dé Jīng* inspires future translations of ancient Chinese classics. The translation of Chinese classics needs more than the translators' proficient language skills in dealing with unique Chinese concepts and terms; it also requires the translators to have profound knowledge of different cultures and sharp conceptions of cultural differences. It is easy to translate the words but not the thoughts. Rigid translation of culture can only convey words not thoughts. Contemporary translators need to pay more attention to the cultural backgrounds of their target readers and choose words carefully, turning their translation into a bridge of cross-cultural communication. Though modern translators have done a great job in their work, they still have a long way to go.

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Notes

- ¹ From 1827 to 1834, Carl Jos. Hieron Windischmann published a four-volume monograph *Die Philosophie im Fortgange der Weltgeschichte (Philosophy in the Process of World History)* in Bonn, Germany. In the first volume *Die Grundlagen der Philosophie im Morgenlande (The Foundation of Eastern Philosophy)*, Windischmann translated five chapters (Chapters 1, 14, 25, 41, 42) of *Dào Dé Jīng* from Rémusat's French translation.
- ² *Xiàng* is a unique philosophical concept in Chinese classics, and it shares similar but not equivalent meanings with western philosophical terms such as symbolic imagery and image. To distinguish this Chinese philosophical concept from the western ones and explain it in the context of Chinese culture, this article uses Chinese pinyin *Xiàng* to refer to this concept.
- ³ All the English quotes from the *Dào Dé Jīng* are based on D. C. Lau's translation.
- ⁴ The English quotes from *Hán Fēi Zǐ* are translated by the author.
- ⁵ In *Dào Dé Jīng*, the same Chinese character, such as *Mǔ* 母 (mother), could mean both the symbolic imagery and the specific word. To avoid confusion, this article uses “[]” to distinguish the symbolic imagery from the words. For example, the [Mǔ] serves as the *Xiàng*, the medium, or source domain in understanding *Dào*, while *Mǔ* just means mother. As in Figure 1, the [Dào] [道] in the core means the core concept of *Dào Dé Jīng*, while the *Dào* “道” above the [Dào] refers to the Chinese letter *Dào* 道.
- ⁶ To highlight the relations between different concepts and make the picture clear, the writer only lists part of the arrows, and those not listed can be inferred from the figure.

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Article

A New Portrait of a Daoist Sage: Jean-François Foucquet's Interpretation of the *Dao*

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Abstract: In the translation history of late imperial China, the Jesuit enterprise played a significant role in translating Western scientific knowledge, a role they performed in tandem with proselytization. The Jesuit Figurists' re-interpreting and re-writing of the ancient Chinese classics pivoted on symbols, figures, and Chinese characters. The father at the helm of this journey, Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730), embarked on his own Figurist path, navigating by the symbols, figures, and Chinese characters from the *Yijing*. His followers Joseph Henri Marie de Prémare (1666–1736) and Jean François Foucquet (1665–1741) continued on this track, each further developing his own interpretation of the *Dao*. Here I will present and explore Foucquet's journey of the *Dao* and his presentation of the Christian God and Jesus Christ as Daoist sages by investigating his Chinese, French, and Latin manuscripts that discuss his reinterpretation of the *Dao* in the Chinese classics, especially the *Yijing* and *Daodejing*. In these manuscripts, Foucquet adopted typological exegesis and exhibited his inheritance of the Confucian-Christian-*Dao* synthesis from his senior Bouvet; he also identified the *Dao* as Deus and the Oneness of the *Dao* as the unity of the Holy Trinity. This micro-historical case study of Foucquet's interpretation of the *Dao* shows how his navigating the strait between the Scylla and Charybdis of the emperor and the Holy See factored into his trajectory of interpreting the *Dao*; it also demonstrates that in response to being challenged by his own brothers in the Catholic Church, he cleaved to typological exegesis and Confucian-Christian-*Dao* synthesis. The significance of this paper lies in that the early understanding of the *Dao* was manipulated, especially among the Figurists, both as a tool for proselytization and as a bridge to link the East with the West.

Keywords: *Dao*; *Daodejing*; Figurists; Foucquet; translation

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1. Introduction

In the translation history of late imperial China, the Jesuit enterprise played a significant role in translating Western scientific knowledge, a role they performed in tandem with proselytization. In the performance of such roles, and being dressed like Xi Ru 西儒 (Western Confucianists), the Jesuits justified their accommodation strategy by identifying *Tian* 天 (Heaven) and *Di* 帝 (Lord), as well as other similar appellations from the ancient Chinese classics, with their Christian God. Early Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci had objected to the use of the *Dao* and *Taiji* as equivalents for God and instead centered on relating *Tian* and *Di* from the *Four Books* 四書 with the Christian God. Later, another group of mavericks, the Jesuit Figurists of the early Qing dynasty, embarked on their own path of interpreting the *Dao* and the *Yijing* 易經 (the Book of Changes).

The Jesuit Figurists' re-interpreting and re-writing of the ancient Chinese classics pivoted on symbols, figures, and Chinese characters. The father at the helm of this journey, Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730), embarked on his own Figurist path, navigating by the symbols, figures, and Chinese characters from the *Yijing*. His followers Joseph Henri Marie de Prémare (1666–1736) and Jean François Foucquet (1665–1741) continued on this track, each further developing his own interpretation of the *Dao*.

Past scholarship has consistently treated Chinese Figurism, especially that of the Jesuit Figurists, as a misstep in the translations of the early Sinologists. It may not be fair to judge their translations solely on the metrics of faithfulness or accuracy. A more charitable approach in assessing their reinterpretation of the *Dao* is to also take into account the tradition of hermetic thinking they inherited from the West and the patronage they received from the emperor and the Holy See. Their translations of the *Yijing* connected the Judeo-Christian tradition with the antediluvian patriarchs in ancient Chinese legends and mythologies and were for that considered far-fetched assumptions. Ancient mystic figures, such as Yao 堯, became for them the pre-figuration of the coming Jesus Christ; and Fuxi was none other than the holy patriarch and prophet Enoch (Bouvet Manuscript no. NAL 1173, stored in Bibliothèque nationale de France, ff. 66 and 86). The Jesuit Figurists, especially the leading father Joachim Bouvet, inherited neo-platonic, cabalistic, and hermetic philosophy from the Western tradition of Hermeticism. Their hermetic learning manifested in their translation of Chinese classics, translations which formed the backdrop for the early development of Sinology in the 16th and 17th centuries; their exhaustive studies on the Chinese classics and their meticulous forming of links between figures from Chinese legend and history and biblical figures in their Latin and French manuscripts aimed to reduce the gap between Christianity and Chinese philosophy and history as a proselytization tool.

The manuscript translations and rewritings the Figurists made of the *Yijing* and the *Dao* were later disseminated in Europe. Their Sinological studies and translations not only reflected the Figurist theological perspective that all pagan beliefs refer to the same one God, they also ignited debates in Europe as to whether Chinese mythology and the biblical stories did indeed share the same origin; their new interpretations of the concepts in the Chinese classics, such as the *Dao* in the *Daodejing*, also opened the sluice gates for the Enlightenment¹ (Rowbotham 1932, pp. 1051–52).

Following in the footsteps of Bouvet, his protégés Joseph Henri Marie de Prémare and Jean François Foucquet inherited Bouvet's mystic Hermeticism, but each with his own theological and philosophical interpretation of the *Dao*. In "In the Light and Shadow of the *Dao*—Two Figurists, Two Intellectual Webs" (Wei 2018), Sophie Ling-chia Wei probes the networks and patronage impacting two Figurists in two different locations, Joseph Henri-Marie de Prémare in Canton and Jean François Foucquet in Peking, and their reinterpretation of the *Dao*. While Prémare received more influence from the local literati, such as Liu Ning 劉凝 (1620–1715), and was mostly interested in dissecting Chinese characters, such as *dao* 道, Foucquet obtained more imperial support, being assigned by the Kangxi Emperor to work on astronomical treatises. One genealogy of the *Dao* from Prémare to the early French Sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832) has been explored in Wei's paper "The Genesis of *Dao* Knowledge at the Beginning of Orientalism," published in *History Retold: Premodern Chinese Texts in Western Translation* (Wei 2022). Here, the other end of that genealogy of the *Dao* will be assembled, while crucial pieces will be added to the puzzle. Past scholarship has drawn only rough silhouettes of Foucquet's life and translations. From John W. Witek's biography of Foucquet (Witek 1982), readers may not be able to discern the important events of Foucquet's life, nor is it easy for readers to derive an overview of Foucquet's translations out of the book's mass of assembled facts. Claudia von Collani's catalogue-like fact sheet describes the Jesuits who had discussed the *Dao* (Collani 2015). However, Collani does not enquire further into the origins of their views or whether they had interacted with and influenced each other; nor does she investigate deeper into Foucquet's reinterpretation of the *Dao*. To paint a more detailed portrait of Foucquet's interpretation of the *Dao*, not only will I elaborate on the comparison between Prémare and Foucquet, I will further investigate Foucquet's Chinese, French, and Latin manuscripts discussing his reinterpretation of the *Dao* of the Chinese classics, especially the *Yijing* and the *Daodejing*.

After setting foot in China and being assigned by the Kangxi Emperor to assist Bouvet in 1711, Foucquet followed his passion for spreading Christianity in China, and studied the Daoist classics and commentaries exhaustively. Working with Bouvet, he reinterpreted

hexagrams from the *Yijing* and completed the manuscript of the *Yi Gao* 易稿 (the Drafts of the *Yijing*), all the while continuing to elaborate on his French and Latin manuscripts that equated the *Dao* and *Taiji* with the Christian God. In these manuscripts, he adopted typological exegesis and exhibited his inheritance of the Confucian-Christian-*Dao* synthesis from Bouvet; he also identified the *Dao* as Deus and the Oneness of the *Dao* as the unity of the Holy Trinity.

Of these Figurists, Foucquet was the only one to return to Rome and try to convince the Popes, that Chinese Figurism and the Figurists' works and translation were not far-fetched assumptions, by use of his manuscripts and theories. Facing refutation from the Roman Catholic Church about the Rites Controversy, especially concerning the terminological choices of *Tian*, *Di*, and even *Dao*, Foucquet stood fast by his interpretation of the *Dao* in his Chinese manuscripts that he submitted to the emperor and in Latin and French manuscripts he later submitted to the Pope. These rewritings and interpretations of the *Dao* are scattered across archives in the Bibliothèque nationale de France and the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana—these are the precious cache of materials through which this paper will investigate Foucquet's very first attempts at translating the *Dao* into Latin and French.

Therefore, contrary to the rather narrow past scholarship on the Figurists, I will present a more panoramic view of Foucquet's *Dao*. Regrettably, Foucquet has so far been ignored in scholarship of the Figurists' *Dao* in favor of Bouvet's and Prémare's re-interpretation of the *Yijing* and the *Dao*. Looking to add valuable scholarship to this overlooked area, I will elucidate Foucquet's footprints on his path of interpreting the *Dao*, noting also where his path diverges from that of his colleague Joseph Henri Marie de Prémare.

2. Jesuit Figurist Rewriting in Translations

According to Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, Jesuit translations are not always strictly translations (Hsia 2007, pp. 39–40). In their translations of European texts into Chinese, while they did sometimes apply exact word-for-word translation, Jesuit translators also compiled translated or paraphrased passages from European texts into a single Chinese work. Matteo Ricci's (1552–1610) *Ji Ren Shi Pian* 畸人十篇 (Ten Treatises by an Abnormal Person) in 1608 is one such example of compilation. Another form of Jesuit translation is synopsis (ibid.). One such example, the *Tianzhu Jiangsheng Yanxing Jilüe* 天主降生言行紀略 (The Birth, Life and Sayings of the Lord of Heaven) by Giulio Aleni (1582–1649), represented a synoptic presentation of the Gospels.

The Jesuit mission in the early Qing dynasty placed the Jesuit Figurists center stage. The strategy of rewriting and compilation had been adopted as a rule of thumb by the Jesuit Figurists in their translations in the early Qing dynasty. In their rewritings, the Jesuit Figurists also assumed authoritative roles as assertive commentators, employing past literati's commentaries and linking them with the biblical stories, in order to demonstrate that the Chinese classics shared the same origin as Christianity. In his Latin manuscript *Selecta quaedam Vestigia praecipuorum Christianae religionis dogmatum ex antiquis Sinarum Libris Eruta* (Certain Selected Vestiges of Principal Christian Religious Teachings Extracted from Ancient Chinese Books) and his Chinese manuscript *San Yi San* 三一三 (Three One Three [Triune God]), Prémare quoted from the commentaries of *Laozi Yi* 老子翼 (Interpretation of *Laozi*), especially from Li Rong's 李榮 (circa 650–683) "One is not One alone; it is One because of Three. Three is not Three alone; Three comes from One. (一不自一，由三故一；三不自三，由一故三。)" (Prémare, Brotier 120, p. 135). Prémare then drew on this quotation as further proof that "Therefore, we know that we have one God (Lord) existing in three persons, not three lords" (ibid.). Prémare linked the *Dao* with the Holy Trinity and his theory of Trinitarianism. While Prémare focused on the number One Three 一三 and its connection with the Holy Trinity, Foucquet, who continued the tradition of rewriting in Figurist translations, focused on the *Dao* as One and also quoted several Neo-Confucianist and Daoist scholars' commentaries to link with his astronomical expertise and his theological perspective: "*Dao* is Deus," a perspective that will be further elaborated upon in the following sections.

This paper thus reviews and investigates several works of Foucquet's Latin, French, and Chinese manuscripts and translations to flesh out the portrait of Foucquet. These works include Foucquet's re-translations of the *Yijing*, in which some concepts related to the *Dao* were reinterpreted, his translations of astronomical treatises and celestial maps that are buttressed by his deliberate picks of commentaries from Neo-Confucianist and Daoist scholars, as well as his original work, the *Problèmes théologiques*, his reinterpretation of the *Dao*, and its link with Deus.

Foucquet's manuscript translations disclose his striving for the vindication of his new interpretation of the *Dao* on both sides—the Qing emperor and the Holy See. On the Eastern side, Foucquet tried to win the patronage of the Kangxi Emperor by presenting translations of the *Yijing* and the *Dao*, which were compilations of original texts, past literati's commentaries, as well as his own intra-lingual translations and additions of especially selected passages from the Chinese classics. On the Western side, he also conducted translations into Latin and French, supplemented with his own commentary, to justify to the Holy See the cause of the Figurists' proselytization in China. Seen through the lens of André Lefevere's concept of rewriting, a translation is not simply a static text, but a cultural and even a political act exercised by players at both the individual and institutional levels of the translation process. Patronage, he says, is "any power (person, institution) that can further or hinder the reading, writing and rewriting of literature" (Lefevere 1992, p. 15; see also Wei 2018, p. 2). In the history of Jesuit translation activities, it is known that Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci and other Jesuits migrated from coastal ports to inland cities, interacting with local literati along the way; later Jesuit Figurists in the early Qing dynasty, in contrast, stayed in the imperial court, close to the emperor whom they wanted to convert. Foucquet was one of the Jesuits who had the trust of the Kangxi Emperor. These Jesuits in the imperial circle enjoyed the privilege of, and were sheltered by, the imperial power of the High Qing dynasty. Other Jesuits, such as Prémare, were confined to local areas such as Canton, their mission restricted. The ideologies of patrons such as the Holy See and the emperor and the commentaries supported by the imperial circle factored into the Jesuits' translations of the major concepts in the Chinese classics, such as the *Dao*. The change of locality and difference of patronage thus influenced which direction and commentaries the Figurists, especially Foucquet, chose for their intralingual translations and European-language translations of the *Dao* from the *Yijing* and the *Daodejing*.

3. The Ineffability of *Daoxin* 道心 in *Shengren* 聖人 (Sage)

In the context of Chinese culture and the Confucian classics, Bouvet and Foucquet re-interpreted hexagrams and numbers from the *Yijing* as prefiguring the advent of Jesus Christ. Looking to convert the Kangxi Emperor to Catholicism, Bouvet and Foucquet worked on the reinterpretations of the first twelve hexagrams and transformed Jesus Christ into a Confucian sage king, knowing that the Confucian sage king was a moral ideal for the Kangxi Emperor. In the two manuscripts *Da Yi Yuan Yi Nei Pian* 大易原義內篇 (The Inner Chapter of the Great *Yi*'s Original Meaning) and *Yi Gao* 易稿 that long went unseen in the Vatican Library, Bouvet and Foucquet re-interpreted the first twelve hexagrams, *Qian* 乾 (the Creative), *Kun* 坤 (the Receptive), *Tun* 屯 (Difficulty at the Beginning), *Meng* 蒙 (Youthful Folly), *Xu* 需 (Waiting), *Song* 訟 (Conflict), *Shi* 師 (the Army), *Bi* 比 (Holding Together), *Xiao Xu* 小畜 (The Taming Power of the Small), *Lü* 履 (Treading), *Tai* 泰 (Peace), and *Pi* 否 (Standstill)². Bouvet and Foucquet retold the stories of Christianity and depicted God and the Holy Son as having the appearance and personality of the *junzi* 君子 (the superior man) from the *Yijing*. Each hexagram that was interpreted by Bouvet and Foucquet depicts one facet of the virtuous Confucian sage; taken together, they form a gestalt image of Jesus for presentation to the emperor and Chinese readers (Wei 2020, p. 65).

While Foucquet assisted Bouvet by digging deeper into *Yi* studies, he also embarked on his own studies, linking the hexagrams with the *Dao* and building the profile of a *Shengren* 聖人 (sage) by using *Daoxin* 道心 (the heart of the nature; the heart of the Way) so as to identify *Shengren* 聖人 with the Christian God. Within his literary space interwoven

with translations, notes, and compilations of the *Daodejing* commentaries, the *Dao* or *Daoxin* 道心, *Shengren* 聖人, and Christian God usually co-existed to suggest parallels among them. With Foucquet's *Yi* studies as the foundation of building his Confucian sage, he continued to employ Bouvet's Confucian-Christian-*Dao* synthesis, drawing parallels among the *Daoxin* 道心 from the *Shangshu* 尚書 (the Book of Documents), the ineffability of the *Dao*, and the formless Christian God. For example, the 51st hexagram *Zhen* 震 was employed by Foucquet to indicate that myriads of things come from *Di* 帝 (帝出於震), referring to *Tianzhu* 天主; the 29th hexagram, *Kan* 坎 (the Abyssal), was employed to illustrate the *Daoxin* 道心 (the heart of the nature; the heart of the Way), which could be traced back to the *Shangshu's* 尚書 人心惟危, 道心惟微 (the heart of man is unstable; the heart of the Way is ineffable) (Kong 2000, p. 93);³ this just-quoted sentence in fact became a signature phrase Foucquet frequently used in his translations of the *Yijing* to link the *Dao* with Deus. In his re-interpretation of a sage, it is noticeable that Foucquet first borrowed the concept of *Daoxin* 道心 from the *Shangshu* 尚書, which was called by the later Confucianists a Confucian classic, and extended his interpretation of *Daoxin* 道心 to the *Daodejing*.

In Chinese culture, *Daoxin* 道心 indicates the way of nature, or the way of Heaven. From a Daoist perspective, the way of Heaven is natural law; it demonstrates the heart of the universe, which benefits all things without harm or preference. Eliminating social gaps while preserving order and stability, it is perceived as a force that maintains harmony and equilibrium in nature. In the sentence quoted above from the *Shangshu* 尚書, *Daoxin* 道心 is ineffable 微, of the essence 精, and of the One 一. One of these three features of *Daoxin* 道心, ineffability may also be found in the *Daodejing*. From Chapter 14 of that work,

We look for it but do not see it; we name it "invisible."

We listen for it but do not hear it; we name it "inaudible."

We grope for it but do not grasp it; we name it "ineffable."

(視之不見名曰夷，聽之不聞名曰希，搏之不得名曰微。Author's translation). (Laozi 2002, p. 5)

The existence of the *Dao* transcends all the sensory experiences and is imperceptible by the senses. What cannot be seen, heard, or grasped is the way of Heaven, the *Dao*. The invisible, inaudible, and ineffable *Dao*, in Foucquet's interpretation, corresponds with the imperceptible Christian God, and thus the ineffability of the *Dao* and *Daoxin* 道心 were linked with the heart of the Christian God in Foucquet's translations of the hexagrams. In the *Yi Gao* 易稿, Foucquet further associated *Daoxin* 道心 with the heart of Christian God, as is shown in many hexagrams, such as *Song* 訟.

The human ancestor, Adam, began with (the virtue of) primal goodness in Former Heaven, and followed the order of the Lord, the Father, the Creator, which is the right principle of *Daoxin*. However, the heart of man is unstable; the heart of the Way is ineffable, of the essence, and of the One. The human ancestor, in the very beginning, did not pay respect to or stand in awe of God. He did not exercise caution for the ineffable heart of the *Dao*; nor was he alert to the unstable human heart. Above, he deviated from the righteousness of the natural law of Former Heaven. Below, he became conceited and left lasting impact of calamities on his offspring.

(人祖先天元之始，以造物君父之命，為道心之正理。然人心惟危，道心惟微，惟精惟一。人祖厥初不敬不畏，不謹道心之微，不惕人心之危，上悖先天理自然之正，下忘己並後世子孫之害。). (Bouvet & Foucquet Borg. Cin. 317 No. 7, p. 14)

Foucquet emphasized in his translation "the order of the Lord, the Father, the Creator, which is the right principle of *Daoxin* 道心" (ibid.). Comparing the human ancestor's heart to weakness and fickleness, in the following paragraph in manuscript Borg. Cin. 317, No.7, Foucquet further elaborated on the righteousness of *Daoxin*, the heart of the Way, which was what Jesus had inherited from God (ibid). *Daoxin* 道心 was thus transformed by Foucquet into the *heart* (心) of the Christian God. The term was usually employed by Foucquet

to indicate that the ancestor of humanity Adam was created in the image of God, i.e., with the same *heart* as God. The betrayal of Adam was further drawn upon to indicate that he betrayed the heart of God and instead followed his own unstable heart. The sentence 人心惟危，道心惟微 (the heart of man is unstable; the heart of the Way is ineffable) is repeated in the translations of several hexagrams, including *Qian* 乾, *Song* 訟, *Xiaoxu* 小畜 and *Pi* 否.

In addition to the translations on the ineffability of *Daoxin* from the hexagrams, this paper also examines Foucquet's notes and the commentaries he consulted as another source of his hermeneutical method for the ineffable *Dao*. Foucquet's association of the ineffable *Dao* with *Shengren* and the Christian God may be located in his notes and translations of the commentaries of the *Daodejing*. Manuscript no. Borg. Cin. 109 stored in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (the Vatican Library) (the source of the image in Figure 1), which contain commentaries written by Chen Yidian 陳懿典 (1554–1638), is likely one of the commentaries on the *Daodejing* that Foucquet brought back to Europe. Many of the sheets have writing on both sides, with printed Chinese commentaries on one side of the sheet (either the recto or verso side) and Foucquet's French notes and translations on the other. The present study is the very first attempt, among all past scholarship on Foucquet's works and translations, to examine the source of his translations of the *Daodejing* commentaries, which is Borg. Cin. 109. It is very interesting to note that not only were Chen Yidian's commentaries quoted, but those of Su Che 蘇轍⁴ (1039–1112), Li Rong⁵, and Lü Huiqing 呂惠卿⁶ (1032–1111), all of which were compiled in Chen Yidian's work, were also commentaries that Foucquet frequently employed to link the *Dao* with the Christian God in his translations. Surprisingly, Foucquet and Prémare both employed these Daoist and Confucian scholars' commentaries on the *Daodejing* to explain each his own theological interpretation of the *Dao*, but Foucquet deliberately picked certain segments of these commentaries to fit his own hermeneutical view on how *Daoxin* 道心 reflects the heart of God as an image of *Shengren*.

One example is Li Rong's commentaries. As for *Yi* 夷 (invisibility), *Xi* 希 (inaudibility), and *Wei* 微 (ineffability), Li Rong's glossolalia and commentaries perfectly suited Prémare's inclination to link it all with the Holy Trinity (Wei 2022).

One is not One alone; it is One because of Three. Three is not Three alone; Three comes from One. From One to Three, so Three is One Three. From Three to One, so One is Three One. When One is Three One, One is not One anymore; when Three is One Three, Three is not Three any more. When Three is not Three, then there is no Three; when One is not One, then there is no One. When there are no One or Three, words may be forsaken. If one sticks to One or Three, [it] will topple this profound and coherent religion [Daoism].

(一不自一，由三故一；三不自三，由一故三。由一故三，三是一三；由三故一，一是三一。一是三一，一不成一；三是一三，三不成三。三不成三則無三，一不成一則無一。無一無三，自葉忘言之理；執三執一，翻滯玄通之教也。). (Li 2018, vol. 1, pp. 1–76)

"One Three" 一三 in Li Rong's commentaries, according to Prémare, actually refers to the Triune Unity. Leading up to his use of the quotation, Prémare equates the pronunciation of *Yi* 夷, *Xi* 希, and *Wei* 微 with the Hebrew Tetragrammaton of Yahweh (Prémare, Brotier 120, p. 134) and explains that in the antiquity of China, the emperors in the southern suburbs of the capital worshipped the *San Yi* 三一 (Three One), which he holds to refer to the Christian God (Prémare, Brotier 120, p. 135).⁷ Then, following the quotation, he further elaborates on the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three persons in one God (Prémare, Brotier 120, p. 136). In his essay *San yi san*, Prémare notes how the Holy Trinity was a required element to understanding all the Chinese classics. He further added that "*Dao* generates One, which gives rise to Two, and then Two leads to Three, which gives birth to myriads of things" supports the claim of existence for the three seats/persons, or *Sanwei* 三位, of the Holy Trinity; since the three share one single nature of God, so "Three

is not Three alone . . . When Three is not Three, then there is no Three. It is One Three [Triune Unity]". In the view of Prémare, Li Rong's commentaries prove that in the period when the *Daodejing* was written, the Chinese people believed not only in one single God (monotheism) but also in the Triune God (Wei 2022, p. 222). The above passage was quoted several times by Prémare in his Chinese and Latin manuscripts owing to the syncretism in Li Rong's commentaries fitting Prémare's own links between the *Dao* and the Holy Trinity.

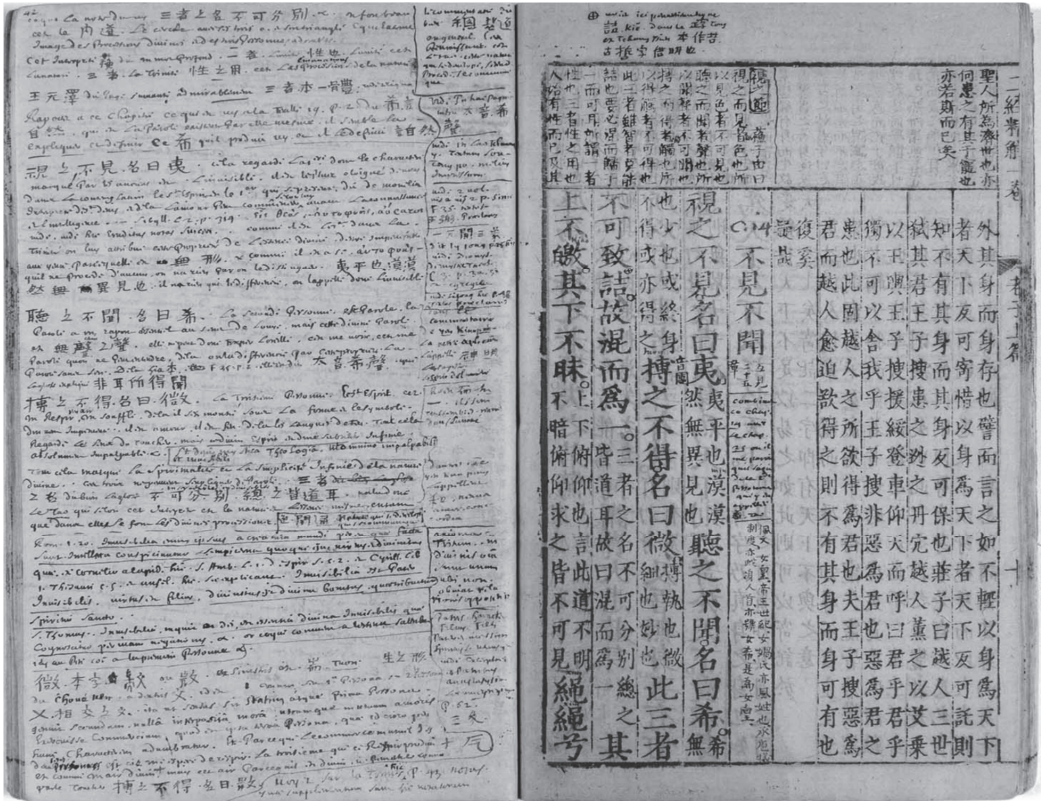


Figure 1. Foucquet's notes and translations of commentaries compiled by Chen Yidian. (Foucquet Manuscript no. Borg. Cin. 109, vol 1, stored in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, p. 42).

In Foucquet's manuscripts, on the other hand, a different section of Li Rong's commentaries was cited to focus on the similarity between the ineffability of the *Dao* and the mystic wisdom of the Christian God.

We grope for it but do not grasp it; we name it "ineffable." The great image has no form, which is hard to grasp. The sage's mystic wisdom achieved emptiness and void. Therefore, it is named "ineffable." The ineffable is the portent, the void. What is motivated to correspond to the (nature of) things is a portent. What is mysterious and unparalleled, if there is a name, is void.

(搏之不得，名曰微。大象無形，難可搏觸。聖人玄悟，了達虛無。故言微。微者，機也，無也。動而應物，機也。妙絕有名，無也。)(Foucquet Borg. Cin. 109, vol. 1, p. 40)

Foucquet departed from Prémare's analysis of Chinese characters and his equating the pronunciation of Yi 夷, Xi 希, and Wei 微 with the Hebrew Tetragrammaton of Yahweh to relate it to the *Deus*; instead, Foucquet concentrated on the sage image demonstrated by

Daoxin 道心 as well as its emptiness and void. In the above example, Foucquet stresses the features of the sage's (the Christian God's) mystic wisdom, which are paralleled with the characteristics of the *Dao*, itself emptiness and void. In addition, while explaining the concepts of *Yi* 夷, *Xi* 希, and *Wei* 微 from Chapter 14 of the *Daodejing*, Foucquet further elaborated on the *Dao*'s ineffability and equated it with the Christian God (Foucquet Manuscript no. Borg. Cin. 109, vol 1, stored in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, p. 42). Then he translated "This is called the form of the formless, the image of nonentity. This is called the amorphous." (無象之象, 謂之恍惚), and described the phrase as mythic theology and the *summus unice* (the highest one), with the form of the formless, as the simple and absolute, which he identified as the Christian God (ibid.).

In these sheets mixing Foucquet's notes and printed commentaries, it is worth noting that he frequently cited and translated *Daodejing* commentaries from Li Rong, Wang Pang 王雱⁸ (1044–1076), Li Yue 李約⁹ (circa. 778–806), and Li Xizhai 李息齋¹⁰ (1245–1320) that touched on the *Shengren*, to which he added his notes in the margins. These quotations are mostly about the images of the *Shengren* or how the ineffable *Dao* may be paralleled with the Christian God. The commentaries also corresponded with Foucquet's interpretation of the ineffable *Dao*. For example, Wang Pang's commentaries related to the *Dao*'s formlessness and Li Yue's discourse on the void of the *Dao*. These commentaries, for Foucquet, resonated with the ineffable *Dao* and the divine features of God.

The holy man in Christianity differs from the sage in Confucianism and Daoism, though both could be seen in the concept of *Shengren*. Here, in order to shorten the gap between Chinese philosophy and culture and Christianity, Foucquet applied the image of the Confucian and Daoist sage to that of God and Jesus Christ, who enjoy a supreme status due to their possessing virtues and existing without flaw. The use of *Daoxin* 道心 in Foucquet's translations and notes echoes the image of God and *Shengren* to which he attempted to draw links.

In his translations and rewritings, Foucquet not only explained the *Dao* and *Daoxin* 道心 from the standpoint of a commentator of the *Daodejing*, but he also continued to employ the Confucian-Christian-*Dao* synthesis from Bouvet to present a panoramic view of *Shengren*, encompassing the image of the Christian God as a Confucian and Daoist sage. This all-embracing approach resonates with Chinese Figurism, which holds that all pagan beliefs share the same origin. To Foucquet, *Dao* is another alias for the Christian God; and *Daoxin* 道心 is the weft of the woven image of the Christian God as a *Shengren*.

4. Prémare's Daoist Sage

In order to present a more panoramic view of Foucquet's interpretation of the *Dao* and the Daoist sage, it is imperative to compare it with the interpretation of his counterpart, Prémare. In his work *Vestiges des principaux dogmes chrétiens tirés des anciens livres chinois*, Prémare first stated that *Shengren* 聖人 (sage) is the Holy Man, who is the *Messiah*, "known in advance to the patriarchs by divine revelation, and announced by the prophets, was not only awaited and heard by the Jews to come, but was, under the law of nature itself, in almost all parts of the world, worshiped under different images, figures and puzzles" (Prémare 1878, p. 185). Following the principle of Chinese Figurism, Prémare quotes and translates passages from the Chinese classics, including the *Chunqiu* 春秋 (The Annals of Spring and Autumn), *Zhongyong* 中庸 (Doctrine of the Mean), *Mengzi* 孟子 (Book of Mencius), the *Analects*, and especially the Daoist classics, such as the *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Works of Master Zhuang), and *Liezi* 列子 (Book of Master Lie), in order to parallel the image of the sage with the Holy Son. While discussing different names for the *Shengren*, Prémare especially built the image of Daoist sage by quoting from the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. For example, while equating *Chin-gin* 神人 (Divine Man, Prémare's Romanization) with *Shengren*, Prémare indicated that the Laozi has several mentions of *Chin-gin* 神人, which refers to God, "because the divinity was hidden in the Sage; he is called *Chin-gin* 神人 or Divine Man" (Prémare 1878, p. 187). In addition, *Zhuangzi* 莊子 was also quoted to interpret *Tien-gin* 天人 (Heaven-man, Prémare's Romanization), *Tchi-gin* 至人 (Ultimate

Man, Prémare's Romanization), who is without concupiscence, and *Ki-gin* 畸人 (the Separated Man, Prémare's Romanization), who is separated from men and of the same dignity and rank as Heaven (Prémare 1878, pp. 187–93). In Prémare's translation, different appellations of the Holy Man and the Daoist sage corresponded to the overall Jesuit accommodation policy, which meant advocating the same Christian God under the different aliases. He was given in various Chinese classics. In addition, his extensive quotations from the Daoist classics also demonstrated his exhaustive studies in the Daoist classics, especially the *Daodejing* and *Zhungzi* 莊子.

Prémare was extremely well-versed in the Chinese language, Chinese grammar, and Chinese classics. His vast learning in Chinese characters was acquired especially out of his interaction with a local literatus and Catholic, Liu Ning 劉凝. Liu was quoted in Prémare's manuscripts as saying that the three characters 一 (One), 二 (Two) and 三 (Three) are employed under the principle of *zhishi* 指事 (indication), not *xiangxing* 象形 (pictograph) (Prémare Borg, Cin. 317. No. 5, p. 8).

Liu Ning said: the Chinese characters 一 [one], 二 [two], and 三 [three] are based on the principle of indication. Two and three are not simply composed of piling separate 一 [ones] all together. This is because 一 [one] works as *Dao*, and there is nothing it cannot penetrate. 二 [two] is actually 一 [one] and 三 [three] is actually 一 [one]. The *Dao* of *Tian* 天 [heaven], *Di* 地 [earth], and *Ren* 人 [mankind] is equal to 一 [one], though there are discrepancies between *Yin* and *Yang*, between the firm and the yielding, and between benevolence and righteousness. It is actually 一 [one] That is the reason why Laozi did not say that 三 [three] gives birth to 四 [four] but said that 三 [three] gives birth to myriads of things [萬物]. This is because the visible is procreated by the invisible while the numbers originate from 三一 [three one]. 一三 [One three] is not a number.

劉凝曰：一二三皆指事，非疊一而為二三，... 蓋一之為道，無所不貫，二即一也，三即一也。... 天地人之道，雖有陰陽剛柔仁義之異。其實一而已。... 是以老子不曰三生四，而曰三生萬物，蓋言形生於無形，數生於三一。一三非數也。(Prémare Borg, Cin. 317. No. 5, p. 8)

三一 (three one) and 一三 (One three) are identified by Prémare with the Holy Trinity, once again demonstrating Prémare's special interest in Chinese characters. While Prémare received more individual support and interaction from local literati for his re-interpretation of the *Dao* and grafting his analysis of Chinese characters onto his image-building of the Daoist sage and the Holy Son, Foucquet, remaining in the imperial court, received institutional support from the emperor and also inherited the hermeneutic method of typological exegesis from Bouvet.

Foucquet arrived in Amoy, China, in 1699, and began his decade-long proselytization in the province of Jiangxi. In 1711, Foucquet was summoned to the imperial court to work with Bouvet on the re-interpretation of the *Yijing*. According to Joseph Dehergne, "not only did Bouvet think of Foucquet as the only person who understands him, but also Prémare regarded Foucquet as Bouvet's favorite student" (Dehergne 1995, p. 80). After his arrival in Beijing, Foucquet embraced the theory of Chinese Figurism and found that he shared with Bouvet the same interest in locating traces of God and biblical figures in Chinese legends and classics. Their rewritings of Chinese history planted the ancient sage kings from the antiquity of China into the genealogies of biblical figures (Chan 2002, p. 518). The rulers and sages in the ancient Chinese legends were not real historical figures, they believed, though they did manifest the imminent coming of the Savior (Collani 1985, p. 118). This same approach of typological exegesis had been prevalent in Bouvet's translations of hexagrams, with which he was assisted by Foucquet, as well as in Foucquet's own astronomical treatises.

From the view of European intellectual history, the figures and symbols used in Jesuit Figurism had been considered an essential feature of European intellectual culture since early Christianity. Lackner indicates that "Figurism is mainly a hermeneutical method

of Biblical exegesis. ... The coming and significance of Christ is prefigured in the Old Testament by means of letters, words, persons and events" (Lackner 1991, p. 130).

This approach of typological exegesis was also prevalent in Foucquet's translated astronomical treatises. In addition to the study of the *Yijing*, Foucquet was assigned to instruct the Kangxi Emperor on the most up-to-date European astronomical studies, including those of Philippe de La Hire, Nicolaus Copernicus, Johannes Kepler, Christian Huygens, René Descartes, Giovanni Battista Riccioli, and Giovanni Cassini (Li 2020b, p. 206), in order to replace the old calendrical studies in the imperial astronomical bureau. While bearing the brunt of transmitting then cutting-edge astronomical knowledge, Foucquet adhered to this approach of typological exegesis in his translations of astronomical treatises and the *Dao* in Latin and in Chinese, in his attempt to convert the Kangxi Emperor and also to dispel the doubts of the Holy See.

5. *Dao* in Foucquet's Typological Interpretation

Foucquet's typological exegesis approach was ubiquitous throughout his works, not only in the translations of the hexagrams related to the *Dao* discussed above, but also in the following celestial map and in his astronomical translation the *Ju Gu Jingzhuan Kao Tianxiang Bu Jun Qi* 據古經傳攷天象不均齊 (The Examination of the Irregularities in the Sky Based on the Ancient Classics). Before discussing any further the *Dao* in his astronomical treatises and translations in Chinese, it is worth looking at one celestial map of the Northern Hemisphere with Foucquet's notes and translations of Chinese mythology in Latin to appreciate the attention of his typological exegetic approach. Around 1722, having then returned to Europe, he completed his *Hémisphère céleste boréal avec légende en chinois et annotations manuscrites en latin* (The Northern celestial hemisphere with legends in Chinese and handwritten annotations in Latin) (Li 2020a, p. 57) with translations and rewritings on the margins. This map is another manuscript I found in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Figure 2). It is tangible evidence of Foucquet's efforts to draw parallels between the Chinese constellations and the astrological signs in the West and with the Biblical stories. To do this, he used the same approach of typological exegesis to treat the figures in Chinese legends as pre-figurations or prophecies of the figures in the Bible. For example, the fall of Lucifer was compared to Gonggong 共工 from ancient Chinese mythical legends. "Cum cum (共工, Foucquet's Romanization) has tipped the axis of Heaven to become the first founder (bringer) of the disorder of arms and wars, and to bring out the first flood in the world to the universal destruction of humans" (Foucquet Manuscript no. FRBNF40704851, stored in Bibliothèque nationale de France). Lucifer and Gonggong 共工 both became symbols of Satan. Foucquet's typological exegesis could also be shown in his translation of the Koën (鯀), which was transformed into a fish (Pisces) because it had violated the mandate of God, and Xuanwu 玄武¹¹ (the Black Tortoise). In his translation of this celestial map, there is also another type¹² linking the constellation Virgo with Holy Mary; and the twins in the constellation Gemini are a type to the hypostatic nature of Jesus (i.e., twins as the soul and body of Jesus). The backbone of their steadfast beliefs was from the *prisca theologia* (ancient theology) narrative: all pagan theists are actually monotheists, and all of the world's religious traditions share one single origin, from which all esoteric and exoteric knowledge and doctrine derive. It was a powerful narrative in the Renaissance that deeply influenced the Jesuit Figurists. This method of typological exegesis derived from the *prisca theologia* was also manifested in Foucquet's rewritings and re-interpretations of the celestial map of the Northern Hemisphere.



Figure 2. Hémisphère céleste boréal avec légende en chinois et annotations manuscrites en latin (The Northern celestial hemisphere with legends in Chinese and handwritten annotations in Latin) (Foucquet Manuscript no. FRBNF40704851, stored in Bibliothèque nationale de France).

Another of Foucquet's works on astronomy, the *Ju Gu Jingzhuan Kao Tianxiang Bu Jun Qi* 據古經傳攷天象不均齊 (Foucquet Borg. Cin.317. No. 13),¹³ was completed during the period 1712–1715 (Witek 1982, p. 454). This is also another work of his that demonstrates his inheritance of the Confucian-Christian-*Dao* synthesis as well as of the typological exegesis approach from Bouvet and that he treated the *Dao* as an agent to build the image of Jesus Christ as a Confucian and Daoist sage. Making good use of his excellent astronomical knowledge and his exhaustive studies on the *Yijing* as well as other Daoist classics, including Chapter 18 of the *Daodejing* (Laozi 2002, p. 6), Chapter 3, *Tianwen xun* 天文訓 (Celestial Phenomena), of *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Master[s] from Huainan) (Liu 2009, pp. 44–62), and the Outer Chapters, Chapter 16, *Shan Xing* 繕性 (Correcting the Nature) of *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Master Zhuang) (Guo 2011), Foucquet explained that the chaos and the irregularity in the universe and the five stars 五緯 (*Chenxing* [辰星], *Taibai* [太白], *Yinghuo* [熒惑], *Suixing* [歲星] and *Zhenxing* [鎮星]) were actually the delicate arrangement of God (Foucquet Borg. Cin. 317. No. 13, p. 1). Adam, the ancestor of humanity, “offended against Heaven” 獲罪於天 (ibid., pp. 16, 24), which led to the difference between *Xian Tian* 先天 (The Former Heaven) and *Hou Tian* 後天 (The Latter Heaven) and the irregularities of the universe.

Several hexagrams, including *Bi* 賁 (Grace), *Yi* 頤 (Corners of the Mouth), and *Gu* 蠱 (Decay), were employed to illustrate the fact that the faults of Adam led to the disasters brought down on his own offspring. In the second half of this work, Foucquet especially focused on Yan Zun's 嚴遵 commentaries on the *Daodejing* and reasoned that it was the fault of *xian zu* 先祖 (the ancestor of human beings). He also indicated that such terms as *sheng* 聖 (saint), *shen* 神 (spirit), *hou* 后 (empress), *jun* 君 (lord), and *shi* 師 (master) are names referring to Jesus Christ; and in the end he quotes from Chapter 18 of the *Daodejing*¹⁴ (Laozi 2002, p. 6) to explain why the *da sheng* 大聖 (the great sage) was born (Foucquet Borg. Cin. 317. No. 13, p. 25). When the *da sheng* descended, the *Dao* saved all under Heaven (ibid., p. 28).¹⁵ In Foucquet's reinterpretation, Jesus Christ's sagely image was built from

the virtues of the *Dao*. With the inherited Confucian-Christian-*Dao* synthesis, Foucquet also planted Jesus Christ as a Daoist sage into ancient Chinese history. Shortening the gap between Chinese history and biblical stories, the use of the *Dao* and the Daoist sage helped Foucquet to build a communal space for compatibility between Catholicism and Chinese civilization.

6. *Dao* as Deus

Foucquet's *Dao* was fully illustrated in another French manuscript, *Problèmes théologiques*, in the manuscript numbered Borg. Cin. 371, stored in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. This work was completed between August and October of 1718 (Müller 2005, p. 184). In it, Foucquet states that the *Dao* is the Christian God—a blunt statement to draw the attention of converted Chinese as well as of the Catholic missionaries who were interested in the mission in China. This work may be divided into two parts. First, Foucquet focuses on his argument. The *Dao* in the Chinese classics is Deus, so he could infer that the *Shengren* would then be the Savior in the Holy Scripture. In the second part, he tries to prove it in reverse. Since the Messiah is the *Shengren* celebrated in many passages of the Chinese classics, the character *Dao* also designates the Supreme Being venerated by Christians (Witek 1982, p. 210).

In order to testify that the *Dao* is Deus, he first explains the five main articles that Christian piety teaches about the Christian God (Foucquet Borg. Cin. 371, Manuscripts stored in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, pp. 4–7):

1. In Divine Nature, being infinitely simple, spiritual, without composition and absolutely unique, there is contained an infinity of perfection. The unity, with a fertility, surpassing understanding, produces the Trinity, and the Trinity does no harm to the unity.
2. This Supreme Nature, which is one and three, full of itself and in need of nothing, has freely chosen to go out of itself through the production of the universe.
3. This Supreme Being, which has manifested itself to the outside through the production of the world, is not only the principle of all corporal being; it also has created intelligent beings.
4. This light, this wisdom, this truth, and this Supreme Nature has finally taken a body in the Incarnation and has shown itself among men in the person of the Holy of Holies.
5. This Supreme Nature which we call God has many other names in our scriptures and in the theological language. Sometimes it is the Most High, the Father of his creation, the Master of the world, the universal Lord, or the Almighty. On other occasions, it is Substantial Reason, the Word, the life-giving Spirit, Wisdom, Truth, etc.

Among these five articles, one may note that Foucquet especially emphasizes unity and lists it as the foremost principle of the Christian God, which is related to how Foucquet later interpreted the *Dao*. In addition, the last article also resonates with the Jesuits' accommodation policy—to locate certain terms, such as *Tian*, *Di*, *Shangdi* and especially the *Dao*, from the Chinese classics, and explain that they were different appellations of the same Christian God in the antiquity of China. What is more, in another of his Chinese works, namely the *Jing Yi Jing Yao* 經義精要 (The Gist of the Meaning of the Classics), Foucquet focused on 64 concepts, among which, he indicated that *Tianzhu* 天主 (Heavenly Master), *Tiandi* 天帝 (Heavenly Lord), *Tian* 天 (Heaven), *Zhuzai* 主宰 (the Ruler), *Dao* 道 (the Way), *Li* 理 (Reason), *Shen* 神 (Deity), and *Taiji* 太極 (Supreme Ultimate) are aliases of the Christian God (Chen 2017, p. 249). His use of these concepts aimed to reconcile biblical interpretation with philosophical accounts from the Chinese classics, and to graft the Christian God onto Chinese philosophical terms, including the *Dao*.

Foucquet further listed the features of the *Dao* to prove that the *Dao* is actually Deus (ibid., p. 7–8):

1. The *Tao* (Foucquet's Romanization) seen in itself and in its essence.
2. The *Tao* as creator and conservator of the universe, making shine its infinite perfections which fill it, in its creatures.

3. The *Tao* as sun of the spirits, which rules the heart of man by a ray of its ineffable light.
4. The *Tao* in its most intimate, substantial, and indissoluble union with the Chief, the King, the Master of the universe.
5. The *Tao*, celebrated in the ancient monuments under the most glorious names.
6. The weakness and invalidity of all arguments which skepticism might raise against this doctrine which is equally ancient, sublime, and solid.

In the above articles, there are undeniable similarities between the *Dao* and Christian God identified by Foucquet. Identified with the Christian God, the *Dao* is consequently the creator of the universe and celebrated under the most glorious of names. Once again Foucquet uses “the most intimate, substantial and indissoluble union” (ibid.) to lay the foundation for his argument about the compatibility between the Oneness of the *Dao* and the unity in the Holy Trinity. In addition to drawing parallels between the *Dao* and Christian God, Foucquet also dwelt on the analysis of the *Dao* and quoted from Yu Desheng’s 虞德升 *Xie Sheng Pin Zi Jian* 諧聲品字箋 (Notes on the Harmonic Sounds and the Appreciation of Characters) (Yu 1997) while, for similar purposes, Prémare cited from the *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters) (Xu 2002) for his dissection of the character *Dao* 道.

Furthermore, the French manuscript *Problèmes théologiques* also showed that Foucquet’s translation and interpretation of the *Dao* was actually mingled with the Western tradition of Hermeticism and the commentaries of Daoist and Neo-Confucian scholars. Pythagoras, Orpheus, Archimedes, Hermes, Trismegistus, the Chaldeans, Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Eudoxus, Damascius, Cyrillus, Clement of Alexandria, Dionysius, Plotinus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Fenélon were quoted to reinforce that Christian theology had always insisted on the Oneness of the Christian God. In addition, corresponding to the Oneness of the Christian God, Foucquet also consulted other past commentaries, including those of Su Che, Li Rong, Lü Huiqing and Chen Yidian. Compared to Prémare, who focused on Li Rong’s commentaries and worked on linking with the theory of trinitarianism, Foucquet extensively quoted commentaries from Neo-Confucianists who also discussed the *Dao* to explain the linkage between the Oneness of the *Dao* and the Oneness of the Christian God. For example, speaking of the *Dao* as One, Foucquet quoted and translated from the *Wei Zhai Ji* 畏齋集 (the Collection of Fear of Fasting) (Cheng 1975) of Cheng Duanli 程端禮 (1271–1345), a famous Yuan-dynasty scholar who was in the same tradition of philosophical thought of the Neo-Confucianism advocated by Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085), Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200). The following quote was titled *San Yi Tang Ji* 三一堂記 (The Record of the Three One Hall); it seemed that Foucquet deliberately picked this passage for his interpretation, which was a further link between the One and Three One (the Holy Trinity). In this article, Cheng Duanli elaborated on different meanings of the One.

One is the sublime purity of the essence of the *Dao* and the ultimate pinnacle of sacred efforts. It is pristine without impurities. It is from the beginning to the end without being interrupted. It is (one) that contains myriads of things. It is (one) that communicates with the past and the present and reaches the top and the bottom (of the universe). It is the origin and the backbone of myriads of things.

(一者，道體之純全，聖功之極致也。精粹無雜者也。始終無間者也。該括萬物者也。通古今達上下、萬物之原、萬事之幹也。) (Foucquet Borg. Cin. 371, Manuscripts stored in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, p. 49–50)

Along with this quote, Foucquet also added his own commentary in which he equated the Oneness of the *Dao* with the Christian God.

In addition, Foucquet seemed to be the advocate of the interpretations of Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1093) and Shao Kangjie 邵康節 (1012–1077), while Prémare rejected both Neo-Confucian philosophies. Foucquet also quoted the Neo-Confucianists’ commentaries to explain the *Dao*. For example,

Heaven is produced by the *Dao* or by Reason; the earth derives from this same Reason in a state of perfection. It is also by Reason that all the things of the world have received their forms and their figures, and it is by Reason that man can and does act. Heaven, earth, men, the myriads of things in the world—all the beings differ from each other, but there is no difference in whence they originate; they all depend upon it (the Oneness in the *Dao*).¹⁶

(天由道而生，地由道而成，物由道而形，人由道而行。天地人物則異也，其于由道一也。) (Foucquet Borg. Cin. 371, Manuscripts stored in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, p. 312. Authors' translation of Foucquet's French translation. Differences between the original Chinese and my English translation are from Foucquet's French translation)

His deliberate selection of commentaries from the Western tradition and from Neo-Confucian scholars exhibited his trajectory in interpreting the *Dao*: Foucquet equated the Oneness in the *Dao* with the unity in the Holy Trinity. What is more, Foucquet continued to translate sentences and passages related to 道一 Oneness in the *Dao* and related it to the unity of the Holy Trinity. For example, on page 56, he explains by quoting from Volume 5, *Dayue* 大樂 (Great Music) of the *Lü Shi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Spring and Autumn of Master Lü), translating thusly: "the *Dao* is the ultimate essence, formless and without name, so it is called the Ultimate One" (ibid).¹⁷ On page 58, he continues to quote and translate the connection between the One and *Shen* 神 (God) from Wang Pang's commentary of Chapter 39 of the *Daodejing*: "The meaning of the One is the essence under Heaven, so it is called *Shen* 神 ... The virtue of *Shen* always lies in One" (ibid).¹⁸ Another example is one sentence he quoted and translated on page 63: "One is the foundation of myriads of things, which is the invincible *Dao*" (ibid), which is from the *Huainanzi*.¹⁹ Corresponding to the above commentaries between the *Dao* and One, Foucquet assessed the *Dao* in the following five manners:

1. The *Tao* is one because it cannot be divided.
2. The *Tao* is one because of the preeminence of its being of an incomprehensible perfection and beauty.
3. The *Tao* is one because it is effectively and really the fertile fountain of the innumerable multitude of the beings existing in the universe.
4. The *Tao* is one because it is the one who puts order into the beings.
5. Finally, the *Tao* is one because it is the principle of movements which follow an invariable rule, which they [the movements] could not preserve by itself.

(Foucquet Borg. Cin. 371, Manuscripts stored in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, p. 32. Authors' translation of Foucquet's French translation.)

These features of the *Dao* are perfectly aligned with the previously mentioned attributes of the Christian God and also resonate with the sentence from the *Shangshu* 尚書 (the Book of Documents), that the *Daoxin* 道心 is ineffable 微, of the essence 精, and of the One 一, as well as with the Neo-Confucianist commentaries Foucquet quoted. Continuing the repeated theme of depicting the Christian God and Jesus Christ as Daoist sages, in *Problèmes théologiques*, Foucquet comprehensively elaborates on his advocacy on the compatibility between the Oneness of the *Dao* and the unity in the Holy Trinity, which is quite a different path from Prémare's interpretation of the *Dao* as One Three 一三.

7. Concluding Remarks

After Foucquet rejected a confrere who had been appointed to be his superior, he returned to France and became a bishop at the Propaganda Fide ([Sacred Congregation for the] Propagation of the Faith) in Rome. In Paris he became acquainted with Voltaire and the Duc de Saint-Simon, and in Rome he had several discussions with Montesquieu. His correspondences with Voltaire and Montesquieu were pivotal for later French scholars developing Sinology in France (Witek 1982, pp. 308–13).

Drawing on his astronomical and calendrical knowledge, Foucquet followed in the Figurist footsteps of Bouvet and worked on the reinterpretation of the *Yijing*; he followed Bouvet's approach of typological exegesis and the Confucian-Christian-*Dao* synthesis in his interpretation of the *Dao*. On the other hand, Prémare concentrated on the philology of the *Dao*, including the "anatomy" of the Chinese character 道 and the pronunciation of Yi 夷, Xi 希, and Wei 微; in contrast, Foucquet focused on profiling the Christian God and Jesus Christ as Daoist sages with the virtues of the *Dao*. Foucquet further interpreted that the Oneness of the *Dao* was compatible with the unity in the Holy Trinity. While his method was distinctive, his purpose was similar—to proselytize Chinese readers, and to persuade European readers that the *Dao* is equivalent to Deus. Rendering visible the traces of his search for the *Dao* in his Chinese, French, and Latin manuscripts, this paper portrays a comprehensive portrait of a Figurist, Jean-François Foucquet, at the peak of the Rites Controversy.

Prémare's interpretation of the *Dao* was followed by Abel-Rémusat's own interpretation, and Prémare made a more lasting impact on the early French Sinologists. Though Foucquet's interpretation of the *Dao* had no further impact on the earliest extant Latin manuscript translations of the *Daodejing* stored in the British Library, this micro-historical case study of Foucquet's interpretation of the *Dao* shows how his navigating the strait between the Scylla and Charybdis of the emperor and the Holy See factored into his trajectory of interpreting the *Dao*; it also demonstrates that he cleaved to typological exegesis and Confucian-Christian-*Dao* synthesis in response to being challenged by his own brothers in the Catholic Church. The significance of this paper lies in that the early understanding of the *Dao* was manipulated as a tool for proselytization and as a bridge to link the East with the West, especially among the Figurists. Ironically, for the Figurists, the *Dao* stood for another incarnation of the Christian God based on their hermetic thinking. However, during the 17th century, the *Dao*, after its dissemination to Europe, also opened the sluice gates for the Enlightenment. The *Dao* had not yet been categorized into the separate but related domains of religious Daoism and philosophical Daoism—that demarcation would have to wait until the 18th and 19th century translations of the *Daodejing*.

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Data Availability Statement: Manuscripts and images used in this research are stored in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana and the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF).

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ Voltaire, one of the key Enlightenment thinkers, was deeply inspired by the writings of Bouvet and Foucquet. "His assertion of the 'noachide' source of Chinese religion may well have come from his conversation with Foucquet" (Rowbotham 1932, p. 1052).

- 2 For the English names of hexagrams in the *Yijing*, the author follows the English translation by Richard Wilhelm, *The I Ching or Book of Changes: The Richard Wilhelm Translation* (Wilhelm 1977).
- 3 《尚書·大禹謨》云：「人心惟危，道心惟微，惟精惟一，允執厥中。」All translations herein are the author's own unless otherwise noted. See Kong Anguo 孔安國, *Shangshu Zhengyi* 尚書正義. Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000.
- 4 One of the examples Foucquet quoted from Su Che: "The sage does not forsake learning, but (his learning) is based on the *Dao*." (聖人未嘗不學，而以道為主。) (Foucquet Manuscript no. Borg. Cin. 109, vol. 1, stored in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, p. 31).
- 5 See one of the examples Foucquet quoted from Li Rong on page 8 above.
- 6 One example of what Foucquet quoted from Lü Huiqing 呂惠卿: "The sage knows that the chaos of everything under Heaven starts from that people missing their origin and thus losing their nature." (聖人知天下之亂，始於迷本而失性。) (Foucquet Manuscript no. Borg. Cin. 109, vol 1, stored in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, p. 32).
- 7 天子祭三一於南郊。
- 8 An example of what Foucquet quoted from Wang Pang: "How could the *Dao*, having no form, be named?" (道無體焉得名。) (Foucquet Manuscript no. Borg. Cin. 109, vol. 1, stored in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, p. 7).
- 9 An example of what Foucquet quoted from Li Yue: "*Dao*'s being a thing is dim and fickle, but it detests being sinuous and complicated; instead, *Dao* is entrusted in clearness and void." (道之為物，雖恍惚無常，然惡煩雜而託清虛也。) (Foucquet Manuscript no. Borg. Cin. 109, vol. 1, stored in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, p. 27).
- 10 An example of what Foucquet quoted from Li Xizhai: "We look for it but do not see it; then we cannot ask for its form. We listen for it but do not hear it; then we cannot capture its sound. We grope for it but do not grasp it; then we cannot seek its shape." (視之不見，不可以色求也。聽之不聞，不可以聲取也。搏之不得，不可以形索也。) (Foucquet Manuscript no. Borg. Cin. 109, vol. 1, stored in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, p. 41).
- 11 Xuanwu 玄武 is one of the "four symbols" or "four images" of Chinese constellations. The four refer to four Chinese mystical animals and guardian spirits symbolizing and protecting the four directions: the East by Qinglong 青龍 (the Azure Dragon), the West by Baihu 白虎 (the White Tiger); the South by Zhuque 朱雀 (the Vermilion Bird), the North by Xuanwu 玄武 (the Black Tortoise).
- 12 In Biblical studies, a type is a person, place, thing, or event that foreshadows a future person or event. A type usually indicates the similarity between something in the future and in the past in either the physical or the moral order, and is not a matter of chance resemblance. That is the typological exegesis that the Figurists mainly employed to parallel Chinese mythology and history with the stories and history of the Bible. According to the Figurists, there were more symbols and mystic creatures in the Chinese classics used as types of Jesus or used to describe the birth of Jesus (Wei 2020, pp. 50, 56).
- 13 This paper examines manuscript call no. Borg. Cin. 380, a self-translation of Foucquet's manuscript call no. Borg. Cin. 317 (13) into Latin translation for European readers.
- 14 大道廢，有仁義。
- 15 大聖降，而道濟天下焉。
- 16 The French original is as follows: Le ciel a est produit par le Tao ou par la raison, lu terre a este mise par cette mesme raison, dans l'état de perfection ou elle est, c'est encore par la raison que toutes les chose du monde ont reçu leu formes et leurs figures, enfin c'est par la raison que l'homme nit et peut agir, le ciel, la terre, les hommes, les choses du monde tous les estres diffèrent entre eux, mais il n'y a pas de différence dans la dépendance qu'ils ont tous, delà raison comme de leur origine et de leur principe il vent dire qu'ils en dépendent tous également. (Foucquet Borg. Cin. 371, Manuscripts stored in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, p. 312).
- 17 道也者，至精也，不可為形，不可為名，強為之謂之太一。
- 18 一之為義，天下之至精，故能神。... 神之為德，常在一也。
- 19 一也者萬物之本無敵之道。

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Article

Three Early Russian Documents about the *Daodejing*: An Analysis

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Abstract: It has been nearly 200 years since the *Daodejing* and Daoist thought was first introduced to Russia in the first half of the 19th century. Although the study of Daoist philosophy and Laozi in Russia started relatively late, the *Daodejing* has been the most translated classic of Chinese culture in Russia. The early dissemination of the *Daodejing* in Russia was deeply influenced by the government and religion, and there were some controversial and neglected materials that were difficult to verify due to the lack of documents and manuscripts. For example, the first translation manuscript of the *Daodejing* in Russia has almost become a rare book that is nearly impossible to find and inconvenient to read; the authorship of the first article introducing Laozi's thought in Russia remains a mystery; the first complete translation was completed by a Japanese theologian living in Russia, but it has not received enough research attention. The insufficient research on the early dissemination of Laozi studies in Russia has had a negative impact on the studies of Laozi in Russia. Therefore, this paper, on the basis of various documentary and manuscript references, aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the early dissemination of Laozi studies in Russia, paying particular attention to the three early Russian documents in the 19th century about the *Daodejing*, namely, the first translation manuscript of the *Daodejing*, the first article introducing Laozi's thought in Russia, and the first complete Russian translation of the *Daodejing*. A detailed review of these three documents can help to correct some misconceptions and misunderstandings of the early dissemination of the *Daodejing* in Russia, and, to some extent, reveal the early dissemination characteristics of Laozi studies in Russia.

Keywords: the *Daodejing*; Russia; sinology; translation manuscripts

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1. Introduction

Russia's study of China began in the 18th century, but research on Daoist philosophy and Laozi started relatively late. This was because early sinology in Russia primarily involved academic activities under official monitoring, and the main task of the Russian Orthodox Missions was to conduct a comprehensive study of the Chinese economy and culture, collect information and intelligence about China, and report major events in the Chinese political life to the Tsarist Russian Foreign Ministry in a timely manner. Therefore, Russian sinologists initially did not pay much attention to the study of Daoist philosophy and Laozi. It was not until the 19th century, with a deeper understanding of Chinese politics and cultural thought, that Russian sinology gradually matured, and the translation and study of the various schools of Chinese philosophy began to take shape.

The *Daodejing* is unique within the global transmission of ideas as the most translated philosophical work (Tadd 2022, p. 87). Although the study of the *Daodejing* started relatively late, it is the Chinese cultural classic that has been most frequently retranslated in Russia, and its circulation in Russia ranks second only to the Bible among world famous classics. The research on the *Daodejing* in Russia can be roughly divided into three stages: the first stage was the Imperial Russian Period (from the early 19th century to the early 20th century), where the research had a mystical and Eurocentric touch; the second stage

was the Soviet Period (from the early 20th century to the late 20th century), where, in the social context of academic research measured by political standards, the study and interpretation of the *Daodejing* became one of the main battlegrounds for the struggle between materialism and idealism; the third stage was the Post-Soviet Period (from the late 20th century to the present), where researchers became more objective and rational in their understanding and attitude, and began to apply scientific methods to conduct multifaceted, in-depth, and specific research on Daoism.

The early dissemination of the *Daodejing* in Russia was heavily influenced by the Russian government and religion. Some valuable translations and research findings were unable to be published and remained as manuscripts. Due to the lack of available materials and references, the academic community struggled to conduct verification and in-depth analysis. Additionally, there were controversial literature and neglected materials, which had a negative impact on the studies of Laozi in Russia.

Through visits to major libraries in Russia and through examination of precious manuscripts, we conducted a detailed analysis of three early Russian manuscripts about the *Daodejing*, namely, the first translation manuscript of the *Daodejing* in Russia, the first article introducing Laozi's thought in Russia, and the first complete Russian translation of the *Daodejing*. All three works were born in the 19th century, during which Russian sinologists obtained sinological materials indirectly from the West on the one hand, and developed their own sinological research directly through the Russian Orthodox Missions on the other hand. In the first half of the 19th century, the Russian Orthodox Missions achieved fruitful results, and the first translation manuscript of the *Daodejing* in Russia emerged at that time. By the middle of the 19th century, Russian sinology began to thrive and continued to learn from western sinology, forming its own unique research perspective. The first article introducing Laozi's thought in Russia was published during this period. By the second half of the 19th century, the Russian government had invaded Chinese territory, and Russian sinology had embarked on a mission to serve its government, becoming a product of the promotion of Far Eastern policies. During this period, the rigidity of the Russian bureaucratic system also led Russian thinkers and writers to rethink the fate and future of Russia, and to seek a way out from the cultural thought of other countries; it was during this period that the first complete translation of the *Daodejing* was produced in Russia.

These three documents became the three "firsts" in the Russian studies of Laozi. A detailed review of these three documents reveals different research characteristics and styles of the three periods of the 19th century. By connecting the three dots, we can also draw a picture of Russian studies of Laozi in the 19th century.

2. The First Translation Manuscript of the *Daodejing* in Russia: A Textual Analysis

Sivillov Dmitrij Petrovich (1798–1871) was a representative figure of Russian sinology in the first half of the 19th century. He was the first person to translate the *Daodejing* in the history of Russian sinology. From 1821 to 1830, he served as the monk priest for the 10th Orthodox Mission in Beijing. In the instructions issued by the Russian government to the Mission in 1818, it was clearly stated that, once the priest had sufficient knowledge of the Chinese language, he should start studying Buddhism and Daoism, translating books that explain the doctrines of these two religions, and preparing materials and arguments to rebut these two religions (Skachkov 1977, p. 128).

In this context, Sivillov completed the first Russian translation of the *Daodejing*. During the translation process, Sivillov did not find the so-called "rebuttal evidence", but was deeply impressed by the philosophical wisdom contained in Laozi's thought. Unfortunately, Sivillov's translation could not be published due to lack of official approval. Regarding the completion time of the manuscript, he once wrote, "I translated the *Daodejing* in 1826, but it has been preserved as a manuscript" (Zhang and Luo 2022, p. 3). Sivillov never gave up the opportunity to publish his translation. In 1844, he wrote a letter to Musin-Pushkin Mikhail Nikolaevich (1795–1862), the inspector of the Kazan educational district, emphasizing the significant importance and value of Chinese classical literature

such as the *Daodejing*, stating that “this classic has long been translated into major European languages, but there is still no Russian translation. Therefore, I have made up my mind to translate it, and I am honored to send the translation to Your Excellency for review, and sincerely request your assistance in applying for official funding for publication. I even have the idea of submitting a report to His Majesty the Tsar; perhaps it will be beneficial” (Khokhlov 2014a, p. 501). Then, 14 years later, Sivillov made another effort and sent his manuscript to Lyubimov Nikolaj Ivanovich (1811–1875), the Director of the Asian Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, but all his efforts were in vain and there was no response.

During the process of examining his manuscript materials, it was discovered that Sivillov had two translation manuscripts of the *Daodejing*, the first manuscript was kept in the Manuscript Department of the Lenin State Library (ОР ГБА, ф. 273, No. 2894) at that time, consisting of two volumes, titled *Laozi’s Moral Philosophy* (Nravstvennaya filosofiya Lao-tszy). The first volume contains a large number of revision traces, and the second volume is a revised version of the first volume, containing the translation of the *Daodejing*. The second manuscript was preserved in the Library of Kazan University¹ (Б-ка КГУ, рукопись 15322, II/43) at that time, and was titled *Moral Guidelines Derived from Original Natural Reason or Laozi’s Moral Philosophy* (Rukovodstvo k dobrodetelyam, pocherpnutoe iz samykh nachal estestvennogo razuma, ili nravstvennaya filosofiya Dao-tszyya). The manuscript was finished in 1828, and it was finally published in 1915–1916 with the help of Zamotajlo Ivan.²

Although eventually published and distributed, these versions were not reprinted and became almost untraceable, rare, and difficult to access in paper form. Sivillov’s translation was a groundbreaking work in the history of Russian studies on Laozi, but its value was not fully recognized, and its content has not been studied in detail due to its initial manuscript form and small circulation. We found Sivillov’s early translation of the *Daodejing* in the Russian Foreign Policy Archive and Odessa University Library among other institutions, and we conducted a detailed analysis and study of his translation.

Sivillov held a high regard for Daoist philosophy and the *Daodejing*. In his 1831 manuscript “A Brief Overview of Three Existing Religions in China—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism” (Kratkoe obozrenie tryokh sushhestvuyushhikh v Kitae veroispovedanij, izvestnykh pod imenem konfutsianskogo, daoskogo, i fovevskogo), Sivillov wrote, “A study of Laozi’s moral theory reveals many contradictions and seemingly unreasonable statements. However, if one explores the book from the perspective of the mysterious implications hidden within the author’s conception, rather than just the literal meaning, one will discover many places that reveal his profound wisdom, a kind of wisdom that cannot be found in other Chinese philosophers, not even in Confucius” (Sivillov 1817–1840, p. 37).

During the Qing Dynasty, Daoist organizations fell out of favor among the upper classes and experienced a decline. Nevertheless, Sivillov remained a steadfast defender of the *Daodejing*: “The Chinese erudite gave an extremely negative connotation to Laozi’s most wonderful aphorisms, portraying him as a person with evil intentions, an enemy of good deeds, and that he was hostile to science, which can increase wisdom and facilitate the use of knowledge. While criticizing Laozi, they ignored the quotes in other chapters of the scripture that show Laozi’s endorsement of science and his encouragement for people to accumulate virtues and do good deeds . . . ” (Sivillov 1817–1840, p. 39).

As a clergyman, Sivillov’s translation of the *Daodejing* contained many words and expressions in the style of Russian Orthodox religious texts, and his interpretation was influenced by traditional Christian theology. For example, in his translation of Chapter 4 of the *Daodejing*, the phrase “萬物之宗” (the source of all things) was translated as “Виножник всех тварей” (the originator of all creatures) (Zamotajlo 1915, p. 213), where “Виножник” was a term commonly used in Christian scriptures to refer to the creator or originator, such as in *The Wisdom of Solomon*, where “Lord of all things” and “O Lord” were both translated as “Виножник” in Russian. In other words, Sivillov’s translation included archaic words that were introduced into Russian from Church Slavonic. Church Slavonic

often influenced linguistic style and created an elegant style. For example, the translation of the phrase “富貴而驕” (if a person is proud with wealth and honor) in Chapter 8 of the *Daodejing* was “если богатый или благородный надмевается гордостью” (if a rich or noble person shows pride, arrogance, or haughtiness) (Zamotajlo 1915, p. 215). The use of the verb form “надмеваться” (to be haughty, proud, or arrogant) derived from the adjective “надменный” (haughty, proud, or arrogant) or the noun “надменность” (haughtiness, pride, or arrogance) was a unique feature of Church Slavonic, which still persisted in written language in the 19th century. Through the stylistic overtones of Church Slavonic, Sivillov gave the Russian translation of the *Daodejing* a touch of a religious scripture in the eyes of Russian readers.

From the above, it can be seen that Sivillov’s priesthood affiliation and his identity as a priest deeply influenced his perception and reception of the *Daodejing*. As an Eastern Orthodox Christian, he was influenced by the traditional Christian worldview, which was bound to be reflected in his translation. Here is an example in Chapter 5 of the *Daodejing*:

Source text: “天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗，聖人不仁，以百姓為芻狗”.

Sivillov’s translation: “Как небо и земля нечувствительны — для них все вещи значат не больше, чем брошенный пучок травы, так и мудрый ко всем хладнокровен: для него люди, как и пучок травы, не производят никакого приятного впечатления”. (Zamotajlo 1915, p. 213)

(Just as heaven and earth are not sentimental—for them, all things are no more than a discarded bundle of grass, so the wise remain indifferent to all—for them, the common people are like a bundle of straw, which leaves no pleasant impression.)

Sivillov compared all things and the people to a bundle of discarded grass, which did not leave any pleasant impression on the sage, and this interpretation was negative and pejorative. The concept of “Original Sin” in Christianity influenced Sivillov’s interpretation of the source text and word choice in translation. From the perspective of an Eastern Orthodox Christian, life was difficult, and everyone was trapped in sin, so he tended to explain the saints’ “straw dogs” (芻狗) attitude toward people with the sinfulness of their nature. However, from the perspective of traditional Chinese thought, at the beginning of human beings, human nature is inherently good, and people need to retain their original state and natural virtues. Daoist philosophy even advocates a return to the original simplicity of childhood. Such a deviation in understanding was a result of the conflict between the two cultures and worldviews of China and Russia.

Sivillov emphasized the similarities and shared values between the philosophical system of Daoism and Eastern Orthodoxy, particularly highlighting humility and gentleness. In many chapters translated by Sivillov, readers can observe how the Christian worldview and cultural background influenced the translator’s perspective and interpretation of the source text. Here is another example in Chapter 25 of the *Daodejing*:

Source text: “知其白，守其黑，為天下式”.

Sivillov’s translation: “Хотя он имеет ясное понятие о красоте белого цвета, но он больше любит чёрный цвет, чем белый, и этою-то скромностью подаёт образец вселенной”. (Zamotajlo 1915, p. 228)

(Although he has a clear idea of the beauty of white, he loves black more than white, and with this humble attitude, he sets an example for the entire universe.)

Sivillov translated “black and white” literally as colors. This emphasis on humility may have been inspired by the fact that all Orthodox priests and monks, especially those living in seclusion (monasticism), must wear black robes as a symbol of humility and detachment from the world. Priests who regularly wear colored liturgical vestments are referred to as “white clergy”, while those who have taken monastic vows and wear black robes constantly are called “black clergy”. The image of a secluded monk is similar to that of a Daoist practitioner, which may have triggered Sivillov’s association.

When it came to Sivillov's translation strategy, he adopted a highly flexible method of free translation. Firstly, the structure of the translation was significantly altered, with the original 81 chapters being condensed into 70, but without deleting any original text. Instead, he merged neighboring chapters dealing with the same topic into a new chapter and personally wrote a subtitle for each chapter. At the end of the translation, Sivillov evaluated his own work by stating that "my translation, although not fluent and elegant and not entirely literal, is close to the spirit of this ancient Chinese philosopher" (Zamotajlo 1916, p. 21). Thus, it can be seen that Sivillov was more interested in the communication of the overall ideological system of the *Daodejing* than in the accuracy of the literal meaning. His aim was to help readers understand the essence of the work. He provided a detailed explanation and supplemented the vocabulary extensively in the translated text. Sivillov chose to use metaphors or omissions to deal with places that he was not sure about, he found difficult to understand, or were inherently ambiguous. Here is an example in the third chapter of the *Daodejing*:

Source text: "是以聖人之治，虛其心，實其腹，弱其誌，強其骨".

Sivillov's translation: "Посему-то мудрый опрастывает своё сердце от всех подобных страстей и старается наполнить внутренность свою чистейшими правилами любомудрия. Ослабляя свои высокопарные помыслы, он тем более укрепляет внутренние силы своего духа". (Zamotajlo 1915, p. 228)

(Therefore, the sage guards his heart against all such passions, and strives to fill his inner being with the purest wisdom. By weakening his lofty aspirations, he strengthens the inner forces of his spirit.)

For the translation of the words "腹" (stomach) and "骨" (bones) in this passage, Sivillov avoided a literal translation and instead interpreted them as metaphors. He translated "腹" (stomach) as "inner being" (внутренность), and "骨" (bones) as "inner forces of the spirit" (внутренние силы своего духа). As for the interpretation of the word "其" (his/her/its/their) in "強其骨" (strengthen his/her/its/their bones), although most translators believe that "其" refers to the common people, Sivillov, like He Shangong, interpreted "其" as referring to the sage himself.

In another chapter, Sivillov chose a different translation approach when it came to translating body parts. For example, in the interpretation of the line "為腹不為目" in Chapter 12 of the *Daodejing*, Chinese commentators suggested that it should be understood as a metaphor. Lin Yutang believed that "腹" (stomach) referred to the inner self, whereas "目" (eyes) meant the external self or the sensory world (Lin 2009, p. 130). However, Sivillov translated "腹" (stomach) and "目" (eyes) as human organs directly in Chapter 11 of the *Daodejing*:

Source text: "是以聖人為腹不為目，故去彼取此".

Sivillov's translation: "Итак, мудрый желает лучше быть желудком, который повидимому спокойно пребывает во внутренней середине человеческого тела, однако же беспрестанно работает, но никому не показывает своей работы, кажется, будто-бы ничего не делает, однако по всему телу распространяет жизнь и питательность, -нежели оком, которое на все смотрит с порочным вожделением, сообщая через впечатление наружных предметов заражение и самому сердцу, но мудрый-же, чтобы избрать первое, -всегда отвергает это последнее". (Zamotajlo 1915, p. 217)

(The sage would rather be the "stomach". The stomach stays quietly within the body, constantly working without showing its efforts to anyone. It may seem like it is doing nothing, but it spreads vitality throughout the entire body and delivers nutrients to it. The eyes, on the other hand, look at everything with immoral greed, and pass on to the "heart" what it has been contaminated with through external things. However, the sage always rejects the latter in order to choose the former.)

Sivillov endeavored to convey the charm and essence of the *Daodejing* to 19th century Russian readers through his translations. As analyzed earlier, he avoided using unfamiliar concepts and instead opted for a “domestication” translation strategy, attempting to compensate for cultural gaps by finding corresponding Russian words. He hoped to give Russian readers an experience similar to reading a sacred text such as the Bible. Sivillov’s interpretation of the *Daodejing* came from the viewpoint of a Christian clergyman. However, his position was fundamentally different from that of some Catholic and Protestant missionaries in other countries, who tended to replace others’ cultural heritage and awareness with their own worldview and cultural symbols, thus promoting their viewpoints under the influence of Eurocentrism.

Relying on his strong language knowledge, Sivillov endeavored to understand and communicate another culture and the worldview it carried. Despite the near absence of references, his translation was mostly free of errors resulting from misunderstandings of the vocabulary and grammar of the source texts. In short, his translation and interpretation reached a high standard of depth and accuracy. It is unfortunate that Sivillov’s work was not published until the beginning of the 20th century and had limited circulation. If his translation could have been published earlier, it might have accelerated the process of Russian familiarity with Daoist thought and culture during the Imperial Russian period and, to some extent, prevented misunderstandings and defamation of Daoist philosophy by some Russian thinkers and critics during that period.

3. The First Article in Russia Introducing Laozi’s Thought: A Documentary Examination

The year 1842 was a significant year for the international study of Laozi’s philosophy. In that year, the French sinologist Stanislas Julien (1797–1873) published his French translation of the *Daodejing*. Around the same time, two works were published in Russia that introduced Laozi’s *Daodejing*. The first was a two-volume work titled *Statistical Summary of the Chinese Empire* (Statisticheskoe opisaniye Kitajskoj imperii) authored by Bichurin Nikita Yakovlevich (1777–1853), one of the founders of Russian sinology, and published in St. Petersburg. In the fifth chapter of the book, “Introduction to Religion”, Bichurin pointed out that “Confucius and Laozi share the same view on interpersonal morality, both regarding the ‘Dao’ as a natural law engraved in the soul, and as a virtue or characteristic guiding one’s actions. The difference between the views of these two sages lies in the different methods they propose for retaining one’s original ‘simplicity’ and cultivating one’s character” (Bichurin 2002, p. 64). Bichurin’s concise summary of Daoism had a profound influence on the approach of Russian sinologists toward Daoism and Daoist philosophy, and many later scholars continued to conduct research on Daoist works within this paradigm. In his book *Statistical Summary of the Chinese Empire*, Bichurin did not directly quote from the *Daodejing* and omitted most of the details, using simple language to convey the essence of Daoism and Laozi’s teachings to readers.

The groundbreaking work in the history of Russian sinology that provided an in-depth introduction to the thought of Laozi was an article titled “Laozi and His Teachings” (Lao-dzy i ego uchenie), which was published anonymously in the 11th issue of *The Son of Fatherland* (Syn Otechestva) in 1842. The author of the article was exposed to the ideas of the *Daodejing* through the first French translation published by the renowned French sinologist Julien. In the form of a dozen or so pages, the author introduced Laozi in detail to Russian readers. This article is widely considered by the Russian academic community as the groundbreaking work discussing Laozi’s thought in the history of Russian sinology. Additionally, this article translated a significant amount of the *Daodejing* from Julien’s French version to Russian, making it the first publicly published excerpt of the Russian translation of the *Daodejing*.

There are two speculations in the Russian sinology community about the anonymous author of the article. The first view is that the article was written by Bichurin. Yang Xing-shun (1904–1989) wrote in his work, “The article is anonymously published, but based on its content, it was probably written by Bichurin, a famous Russian sinologist in the

19th century” (Yang 1950, p. 97). The second view is that the author of the article was the Senkovskij Osip Ivanovich (1800–1858), an Orientalist scholar who studied Arabic. At the 19th All-Russian Conference of Philosophy and Modern Civilization of the East Asian Region, Khokhlov Aleksandr Nikolaevich (1929–2015) presented a report exploring the issue of the authorship of the article in *The Son of Fatherland* (Khokhlov 2014b, pp. 87–93). After a literature check and close reading of the text, we agree with the second opinion that the author of “Laozi and His Teachings” was Senkovskij for the following reasons:

(1) *The Son of Fatherland* was founded by Grech Nikolaj Ivanovich (1787–1867) in 1812, who was also the nominal editor-in-chief of another magazine, *Reader’s Library* (Biblioteka dlya chteniya). However, the actual editor-in-chief of *Reader’s Library* was Senkovskij, who had been the actual editor of *The Son of Fatherland* since 1840. He once hosted the column “Baron Brambeus’ Miscellaneous Notes” in *The Son of Fatherland* under the pen name of Baron Brambeus. Starchevskij Al’bert Vikent’evich (1818–1901) mentioned that Senkovskij wrote as many as 100 articles a year in the 1840s, mostly anonymously or published under various pen names, in *Reader’s Library*, *Northern Bee*, and *The Son of Fatherland*. There were records showing that almost all the works in *The Son of Fatherland* edited by Senkovskij in 1841 were written by himself. His works were rarely discussed because they were all anonymously published (Starchevskij 1855, pp. 370–77). This showed that Senkovskij had a close relationship with *The Son of Fatherland*, which provided strong evidence for our speculation.

(2) In the preface of the article published in *The Son of Fatherland*, the anonymous author described the Qing Dynasty’s condescending attitude toward foreign countries with a slight sense of sarcasm, showing bias in his perception of China. The article unveils an unfamiliar nation little by little, which is different from the articles written by sinologists who have sufficient knowledge of China. On the other hand, from Bichurin’s works, it can be seen that he was always a staunch supporter of Chinese culture and philosophy, and he never tolerated any ridicule of the East and China. In 1977, Academician Tikhvinskij Sergej Leonidovich (1918–2018) wrote, “Bichurin’s obsession is reflected in his idealization of certain aspects of Chinese society, politics, international system, and Qing Dynasty law” (Tikhvinskij 1977, p. 149). Senkovskij also pointed out that Bichurin’s views were too idealistic, and he commented on Bichurin’s impression of China, saying that “it completely does not conform to the actual situation at that time, especially in the context of the Qing Empire’s disastrous defeat in the Sino-British War” (Khokhlov 2013, p. 303). “Everything is so perfect in this country, everything is strictly in accordance with legal procedures, the law is so perfectly implemented, the monarch is so benevolent, the officials are so diligent, morality is so pure, and even philosophy is so lofty that when reading Bichurin’s book, one cannot help but be amazed and jealous of China . . . What surprises us even more is that he did not say a word about the decline of China” (Senkovskij 1841, p. 4). It follows that Bichurin was unlikely to be the author of the article in *The Son of Fatherland*.

(3) At the beginning of the article, there is a description that reads, “Not long ago, the East was an unknown land to us. Going to Constantinople was considered an important task” (Anonymous 1842, p. 16). This paragraph also mentions Kabul, Afghanistan, India, and other places. According to Senkovskij’s biography, he first visited Constantinople in 1819, while Bichurin never showed an interest in Turkey and Afghanistan as subjects of research.

(4) Senkovskij had always aspired to establish a journal focused on literary commentary. To this end, he introduced a column called “Literary Review” in the magazine he edited. Upon reviewing his published articles, it is evident that, in addition to literary works, he frequently selected and analyzed exemplary works by other authors, often drawing from foreign magazines to pique readers’ curiosity. He would then excerpt the original texts for analysis and provide commentary on their merits and flaws, thus forming a distinctive style of literary criticism that bore similarities to the writing style found in “Laozi and His Teachings”.

(5) Some scholars, such as Bernshtam Aleksandr Natanovich (1910–1956), believed that the anonymous author was Bichurin. Bernshtam argued that 1840s coincided with the peak period of Bichurin’s publications, and that Bichurin had corresponded with the French sinologist Julien in 1841, with Julien’s name appearing in the preface of the article (Bernshtam 1950, p. 16). However, such a claim is untenable, as the introduction and writing style of the article *Statistical Summary of the Chinese Empire*, published in the same year, is very different from that of *The Son of Fatherland*. In the latter, the author repeatedly mentioned the similarities between the philosophies of Laozi and that of Hinduism, indicating a deep understanding of various religions and cultures in Asia. Bichurin, on the other hand, had no involvement in Hindu studies and made his academic contributions primarily in the field of Buddhist studies.

(6) In 1839, in the third part of the “Science and Art” section of the seventh issue of *The Son of Fatherland*, an article titled “The Basic Principles of Chinese Historical Compilation Established by Confucius” (Osnovnye pravila kitajskoj istorii) was published, clearly signed by Bichurin. Therefore, if the article published in 1842 was indeed written by Bichurin, there would have been no need for Bichurin to publish it anonymously.

On the basis of the above reasons, we speculate that the author of the article is likely Senkovskij. After discussing the authorship of the article, we can then focus on its core content. The article begins by praising Julien’s French translation of the *Daodejing*, stating that “the distinguished sinologist Julien has provided readers with a translation of Laozi’s work, titled *The Book of the Way and Virtue* (Lao Tseu, Tao-Te King. le livre de la Voie et de la Vertu). This book elaborates on Laozi’s incisive and unique thoughts . . . Translating the *Daodejing* is a very difficult task, and only Julien is competent to do so. His translation is so accurate that anyone with a little knowledge of Chinese can find every word in the source text” (Anonymous 1842, p. 18). In this article, the author explored Daoist thought and the *Daodejing*, providing many excerpts translated from Julien’s French version into Russian to illustrate his understanding of the *Daodejing* and interpret Laozi’s philosophical system from his own perspective. From the translation, it can be seen that the author did not refer to the original Chinese text but instead completely translated the content from the French version. For example:

Source text: “我獨泊兮，其未兆，如嬰兒之未孩”。

Julien’s translation: “Moi seul je suis calme: (mes affections) n’ont pas encore germé. Je ressemble à un nouveau-né qui n’a pas encore souri à sa mère”. (Julien 1842, p. 69)

(I feel very calm, my emotions have not yet sprouted. I look like a newborn who hasn’t smiled at his mother yet.)

Translation by the anonymous author: “Я спокоен, мои страсти не пустили ещё ростков; я похож на новорождённого, который не умеет ещё улыбнуться своей матери”. (Anonymous 1842, p. 27)

(I am very calm, my passion has not yet sprouted; I look like a newborn baby, he doesn’t know how to smile at his mother.)

In the source text, “孩” is often understood as “the smile of a baby”, while the anonymous author, like Julien, translated it in a relatively flexible manner as “baby smile to the mother”. Julien’s translation did not apply Western philosophical concepts to explain the source text, and it also removed the religious connotations of Christianity or Hinduism, taking a relatively neutral stance on Laozi’s thoughts. The anonymous author retained Julien’s ideas and translation style when translating the *Daodejing*.

However, when analyzing Laozi’s thoughts, the author employed the method of comparative philosophy to draw parallels between Laozi’s philosophy and Hindu philosophy. The author was the first to introduce in Russia the similarities between the concept of Dao and Indian religious thought. Russian translations of Indian scriptures were published earlier in Russia than Daoist scriptures, such as the Russian version of the *Bhagavad Gita* (1788) published by Russian educator Novikov Nikolaj Ivanovich (1744–1818)

(Shaumyan 2018, p. 21). By contrasting it with Indian religious thought, the author bridged the aesthetic gap between the concept of “Dao” in the *Daodejing* and Russian readers. The author pointed out that the entire *Daodejing* is imbued with the inherent spirit of “monism” and “pantheism” found in Indian philosophy. The *Daodejing* emphasizes the oneness of all things, which is deeply rooted in the concept of “Dao”. This parallels the philosophy of the *Upanishads*, particularly the “Advaita Vedanta”, where one of the main arguments is that the world is not as it seems, but rather an illusion, and that “Brahman” is the sole reality and true existence. The anonymous author mentioned, “From Laozi’s perspective, oneness is the essence of all things; therefore, there is no essential difference or separation; there is neither truth nor falsehood, beauty nor ugliness, existence nor non-existence” (Anonymous 1842, p. 27). Although it was not indicated here that it was derived from the *Daodejing*, it can be seen that it is related to Chapter 2 of the *Daodejing*, “天下皆知美之為美，斯惡已，皆知善之為善，斯不善已” (When all the world knows beauty as beauty, there is ugliness. When they know good as good, then there is evil).

The author argued that according to Laozi’s teachings, which advocate for rejecting all activities, war is naturally prohibited. In this aspect, Laozi’s and Confucius’s opinions align. Another fundamental idea borrowed from the works of Laozi and Confucius is that human nature is inherently good, and, in order to achieve moral perfection, people should return to the simplicity of nature. This is clearly contradictory to the Christian concept of sin, but similar to Rousseau’s philosophical thoughts. The author’s insight into the role of tradition in China is also remarkable, as evident from the following statement: “China is a country where tradition serves as the foundation for everything. New ideas here are merely an expansion of ancient thoughts. All Chinese philosophers, whether they are negative mystics or simple materialists, express themselves using the same expressions and wording from the same traditional stories. The only difference among them lies in their interpretations of the same legend” (Anonymous 1842, p. 32).

The author drew a comparison between the concept of wuwei (nonaction) in the *Daodejing* and the mystical Quietism movement in Christianity from the 16th to 18th centuries.³ Quietism advocates a “passive” attitude of silence and self-cultivation, emphasizing the importance of inner prayer techniques. It promotes entrusting oneself to God and denies the necessity of formal church praying. The author referred to Laozi’s philosophy as “Eastern Quietism”. Therefore, the author selected sentences that are more aligned with the principles of Quietism for excerpted translation:

Source text: “塞其兌，閉其門，終身不勤；開其兌，濟其事，終身不救”.

Julien’s translation: “S’il clôt sa bouche, s’il ferme ses oreilles et ses yeux, jusqu’au terme de ses jours, il n’éprouvera aucune fatigue. Mais s’il ouvre sa bouche et augmente ses désirs, jusqu’à la fin de sa vie, il ne pourra être sauvé”. (Julien 1842, p. 189)

(If he closes his mouth and shuts his ears and eyes, he will not be tired until the end of his days. But if he opens his mouth and increases his desires, until the end of his life, he cannot be saved.)

Translation by the anonymous author: “человек должен закрыть уста, зажать уши и глаза, если он раскроет уста и увеличит свои желания, он не сыщит спасения”. (Anonymous 1842, p. 29)

(A person must close their mouth, ears, and eyes. If they open their mouth and increase their desire, they will not seek redemption.)

Compared with Julien’s translation, the author made some deletions in the content, but, in general, he expressed his Quietism views. The author emphasized the incompatibility of selfish desires with the Way, and that man should restrain his desires and observe the virtues of the Way. At the same time, the author believed that Laozi is the only philosopher who praises weakness; therefore, he excerpted Julien’s relevant translation to prove this point, such as “人之生也柔弱，其死也堅強” (Man is soft and weak at birth; at death,

he is hard and rigid.) and “弱之勝強，柔之勝剛” (The weak overcomes the strong; the soft conquers the hard).

The author was highly interested in Laozi’s concept of wuwei (nonaction), which he saw as the supreme principle of the Laozi’s doctrine—abandoning all desires and achieving perfect calmness and peace. The author contrasted Westerners and Easterners, viewing Europeans as insatiable in their desires, adventures, and ideas, constantly disturbed by the need for new activities. In order to feel alive and present, they indulge in life and seek enjoyment. On the other hand, Easterners avoid action and are even willing to escape from themselves. They suppress desires, give up actions, and repress thoughts. Europeans have difficulty understanding Asians, who seek to escape the whirlwind of life and find satisfaction in perfect tranquility (Anonymous 1842, p. 29). As a result, the author inappropriately translated the principle of wuwei as “бездействие” in Russian, which connotes “no action or inaction” and carries a negative connotation of passivity, easily interpreted by readers as shirking responsibility or laziness.

During this period, three magazines—Reader’s Library, The Northern Bee, and The Son of Fatherland—were the main channels of information dissemination in Russia, which met the basic needs of the public for various genres and information. These magazines dominated the dissemination of information, guided public opinion, and shaped reading preferences. The article published in The Son of Fatherland was the first in Russia to introduce Laozi and the *Daodejing*, leaving the initial impression of the *Daodejing* on Russian readers, and influencing the development of social thought and the literary opinions about the *Daodejing* at that time. The anonymous author’s interpretation of wuwei became one of the factors that contributed to a certain degree of aversion to Daoist thought among Russian readers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴ For example, in his book *China and Europe* (Kitaj i Evropa) published in 1890, the Russian philosopher and poet Solov’ov Vladimir Sergeevich (1853–1900) regarded the *Daodejing* as a “preaching of obscurantism” and “the opposition to life, knowledge, and progress” (Solov’ov 1966, p. 122). In the context of revolutionary sentiment, the Russian literary writer Maxim Gorky (1868–1936) mentioned Laozi in his 1915 article “Two Souls” (Dve dushi), where he criticized the social and political life of the East and Laozi’s philosophy from the perspective of Eurocentric bias and stereotypes. Gorky’s viewed Laozi as advocating retrogression and considered his ideas as one of the reasons for the stagnation of China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Gorky 1918, pp. 174–75).

4. The First Complete Translation of the *Daodejing* in Russia: Characteristic Analysis

As mentioned earlier, Sivillov completed the translation of the *Daodejing* as early as 1826, but it remained unpublished for a long time. There were several abridged translations of the *Daodejing* that were published since that. For example, Tolstoy Lev Nikolaeovich (1828–1910) started his own research and translation of the *Daodejing* in 1884. He selected the chapters to be translated, but his translation work was not smooth until 1893 when he began translating and proofreading with his follower Popov Evgenij Ivanovich (1864–1938). The translation work lasted until May 1894, and it was published in 1910 by the “Medium” publishing house under the title *Quotes of the Chinese Sage Laozi* (Izrecheniya Kitajskogo mudretsa Lao-Tze), which included a preface titled “On the Essence of Laozi’s Teaching” (O sushhnosti ucheniya Lao-Tze) and 64 selected chapters of the *Daodejing*. In addition, the famous poet of the Silver Age, Bal’mont Konstantin Dmitrievich (1867–1942), began translating the *Daodejing* at the end of the 19th century. In 1909, he published a collection of writings titled *The Calls of Antiquity* (Zovy drevnosti), in which he selected and translated 14 chapters of the *Daodejing* in poetic form, paving the way for the first Russian translation of the *Daodejing* in poetic form.

It was not until the end of the 19th century that the first complete Russian translation of the *Daodejing* was published. It was translated by a Japanese named Konishi Masutaro (小西増太郎 1862–1940), who, in May 1893, published the first three chapters of a review article titled “The Philosophy of Laozi” (Filosofiya Laosi) in the Issues of Philosophy and

Psychology (Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii). In May 1894, the fourth chapter of the article “The Philosophy of Laozi” was published in the same journal, together with the full translation of the *Daodejing*. In 1913, the offprint *Laozi, Daodejing or the Book of Morality* (Lao Si. Tao-te-king ili pisanie o npravstvennosti) was published, which was proofread by Tolstoy and annotated by the Russian literary critic Durylin Sergej Nikolaevich (1886–1954). Konishi’s translation of the *Daodejing* remained the most influential full Russian translation until 1950, and, under the influence of Tolstoy, this translation was reprinted at least 13 times and was considered a valuable asset in the Russian studies on Laozi. However, it did not receive much attention in the academic circle. There was relatively little or no critical discussion on this translation, and it was often ignored when reviewing the Russian studies on Laozi. For example, Yang Xingshun (1904–1989), a representative figure in the study of Daoism during the Soviet period, dedicated a chapter to the study of the *Daodejing* in his monograph *Ancient Chinese Philosopher Laozi and his Doctrine* (Drevnekitskij filosof Lao-tszy i ego uchenie), where he reviewed in a comprehensive and objective manner various research on the *Daodejing* in Russia before the revolution, yet he did not mention Konishi’s translation.

Konishi was a unique figure in the history of Russian sinology. He was born in Japan in 1862 during the Meiji Restoration Era. Influenced by this trend, he began to explore new spiritual realms. In 1877, Konishi entered the saltworks of the famous Japanese salt merchant Takeyoshiro Nozaki in Okayama, where he met the priest of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Japan and was baptized in Japan in 1879 as Daniel Petrovich (also known to some Russian scholars as Daniel Pavlovich). He was schooled for 6 years at the Orthodox Seminary and the Orthodox School of Russian language in Tokyo between 1880 and 1886.⁵ He received extensive training in Orthodox Christian theology and the Russian language, and he was a student of everything that made Nikolay’s mission unique (Konishi 2013, p. 104). In 1887, Nikolay (Ivan Dmitrievich Kasatki) (1836–1912), then the bishop of the Japanese Orthodox Church, sent Konishi to study the history of theology at the Kiev Theological Academy. In 1892, Konishi graduated from the Kiev Theological Academy and entered the Department of History and Philosophy at Moscow University. From 1887 to 1893, Konishi studied in Russia for 6 years, where he received dual education in theology and secular philosophy.

Translating and studying Chinese classics was an important academic activity during his time in Russia, and it was during this period that he completed the translation of the *Daodejing* with the help of two key figures. The first was philosopher and psychologist Grot Nikolaj Yakovlevich (1852–1899), who was Konishi’s academic mentor in Russia. He was a professor at Moscow University, the Chairman of the Moscow Psychological Society, and one of the founders of the largest philosophical journal in Russia—*Issues of Philosophy and Psychology*. It was in this journal that Konishi published his translation of the *Daodejing*, *the Great Learning*, *the Doctrine of the Mean*, and other works. It was also through Grot’s introduction that he met Tolstoy.

The second key figure was Tolstoy, who admired the philosophy of Laozi and believed that it was a great loss that there was no excellent translation of the *Daodejing* in Russia. Therefore, Tolstoy actively promoted the study and translation of Laozi’s philosophy in Russia. In addition to helping Konishi proofread his translation of the *Daodejing*, Tolstoy also assisted his follower and fellow translator Popov in proofreading his translation. Regarding Tolstoy’s proofreading of the Russian translation of the *Daodejing*, Konishi wrote in the preface of his offprint translation in 1913, “In November 1895, Tolstoy heard that I was translating the famous classic the *Daodejing* from Chinese to Russian, so he asked Grot to invite me to his house. He said, ‘In order to have the best translation in Russia, I am willing to help you proofread the text’. I gladly accepted the kindness of Lev Nikolayevich (Tolstoy). I brought my translation of the *Daodejing* to him for his guidance several times, and we worked together for 4 months. Lev Nikolayevich (Tolstoy) compared my translation with English, German, and French translations, and decided on the text of

each chapter. My translation was, thus, completed and initially published in the journal *Issues of Philosophy and Psychology*” (Konishi 1913, p. 3).

However, according to historical records, Konishi’s translation was published in *Issues of Philosophy and Psychology* in 1893–1894. Tolstoy’s daughter Tolstaya Aleksandra L’vovna (1884–1979) wrote in her memoirs the details of her father’s discussions with Konishi about the translation of the *Daodejing*, and the time was recorded as 1893. Tolstaya pointed out in her annotations that the time “1895” mentioned by Konishi in the preface of his 1913 Russian translation of the *Daodejing* was incorrect (Tolstaya 1981, p. 126). In the book *Konishi Masutaro–Tolstoy–Nozaki Takejiro—The Trajectory of Friendship* by Ota Kenichi, the author clearly stated that Professor Grot introduced Konishi to Tolstoy on 23 November 1892, and began to collaborate on the translation of the *Daodejing* (Ota 2007, p. 262). All these sources prove that Tolstoy actively participated in the translation and publication of Konishi’s work on Laozi’s philosophy in 1892–1893. They were drawn to each other because of their common interest in the nonchurch, nonhierarchical, universal, “rational” religious perspective expressed by the common people in the *Daodejing*. Their collaboration to translate the *Daodejing* reflected their shared beliefs and ideas (Konishi 2013, p. 112).

The influence of Tolstoy on Konishi was undoubtedly significant. Konishi later became a supporter of Tolstoyism. Under Tolstoy’s influence, Konishi abandoned his Orthodox faith shortly after returning to Japan in 1893 and immersed himself in the study of Tolstoy’s philosophy. He actively engaged in translating and studying Tolstoy’s works, becoming the first person in Japan to directly translate Tolstoy’s works from Russian. As an illustration, he initially rendered *The Kreutzer Sonata*, a story by Tolstoy, with the intention of indirectly criticizing the Confucian ethical system. His primary aim in introducing Tolstoy to Japan was not to present him as a literary writer, but rather to showcase his consistent set of religious thought, which were eventually labeled as the “anarchist religion” in Japan. With Tolstoy’s help, he completed the translation of the *Daodejing*, which not only reflected Konishi’s understanding of Laozi’s philosophy, but also embodied Tolstoy’s interpretation of Chinese culture. Konishi found Tolstoy’s ideas particularly meaningful because they were similar to those in the *Daodejing*. He believed that Tolstoy’s emphasis on universal virtue was at the heart of his philosophy, echoing fundamental concepts from the ancient Daoist thought.

However, Tolstoy expressed dissatisfaction with Konishi’s translation in a letter he wrote in 1907, stating that “it is strange that he (Laozi) is not known to this day. He is so deep in thought and wears Chinese clothes (language and writing). Konishi’s translation is very poor. The translation should have philosophical wisdom and not be subject to arbitrary interpretations” (Makovitskij 1979, p. 348). It is, thus, clear that Konishi’s translation, although influenced by Tolstoy, and was expressive of Russian–Japanese transnational intellectual practices beyond the East–West divide; however, his translation also maintained its independence and originality, as can be seen from the comparison of the two translations:

Source text: “有物混成，先天地生”.

Tolstoy’s translation: “оно и есть существо непостижимое, Оно было прежде неба и земли”. (Tolstoy 1992, p. 534)

(It is an incomprehensible existence, before heaven and earth.)

Konishi’s translation: “Вещество произошло из хаоса. Есть бытие, которое существует раньше, нежели небо и земля”. (Konishi 1913, p. 17)

(Matter came from chaos. There is a being that exists before heaven and earth.)

The Chinese word “混” in the original text refers to concepts such as “chaos” and “fusion”, with a vague meaning. Konishi’s translation selected the religiously suggestive “chaos” to retain this ambiguous meaning. Tolstoy translated it as “incomprehensible existence”, retaining the sense of “profound and unfathomable”, but not reflecting the meaning of chaos and fusion. In other words, Tolstoy claimed Dao as an incomprehensible, but not a chaotic deity.

Konishi's translation was based on the *Daodejing*, which was collected as the 40th issue of "Chinese Collection" in the Rumyantsev Museum. He also consulted Japanese publications on Laozi's works available in Russia at that time, as well as the French translation of the *Daodejing* published by the French sinologist Stanislas Julien in 1842. We speculate that Konishi also referred to Japanese publications on Laozi's works that were available in Russia at the time, because, when he publicly debated Vasil'ev's views on Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Han Feizi in his book *Religions of the East: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism*, Konishi pointed out that Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Han Feizi were not contemporaries, and that the time of appearance of Laozi's works pointed out by Professor Vasil'ev was unfounded. The appearance of the *Daodejing* was at least three or four centuries earlier than what Professor Vasil'ev believed. Konishi presented a large amount of evidence and proof, in which he used Japanese characters to spell out Chinese place names and personal names related to Laozi's life in Japanese, rather than in Chinese pronunciation; for example, Han Feizi was translated into Japanese as "Kanpishi", Zhuangzi was translated into Japanese as "Soshi", and so on (Konishi 1893, pp. 25–28).

The translation of the *Daodejing* published in 1913 was basically the same as the one published in *Issues of Philosophy and Psychology* in 1894, but with slight differences. In the 1894 version, Konishi presented the translation notes as footnotes, while the 1913 version removed Konishi's footnotes and replaced them with Durelin's annotations at the end of the translation. Durelin, in some cases, added the translations of French sinologist Julien, Russian sinologist Vasil'ev, or Russian poet Bal'mont, and conducted a simple evaluation and analysis in his annotations on the basis of Konishi's original footnotes. For example, in the annotation for the term "straw dogs" (芻狗), Durelin added Vasil'ev's translation for comparison while retaining Konishi's footnotes. He also made a brief comment, "The use of straw dogs instead of any living sacrificial objects shows that, in Laozi's time, natural sacrificial objects had been replaced by symbolic ones" (Konishi 1913, pp. 64–65).

Unlike Sivillov's translation, Konishi preserved the form and structure of the original chapters and attempted to translate them as accurately as possible, and he succeeded to a large extent, but there were also translations that did not match to the original meaning of the source text, showing his difficulty in understanding the text. For example:

Source text: "持而盈之，不如其已；揣而銳之，不可長保".

Konishi's translation: "Чтобы посуда была наполнена чем-нибудь, нужно держать ее твердо (без малейшего движения) и ровно. Чтобы лезвие наострилось, нужно долго продолжать натачивание". (Konishi 1913, p. 8)

(To fill a vessel, one must hold it firmly and evenly, without the slightest movement. To sharpen a blade, one must continue sharpening it for a long time.)

The original meaning of the passage is "You hold to fullness, and it is better to stop in time. You keep on beating and sharpening a sword, and the edge cannot be preserved for long." From the translation, it can be seen that Konishi's understanding and translation of this sentence almost contradicted the original meaning. Although there were some errors related to literal translation in Konishi's translation, it did not deviate from the meaning of the original text and the integrity of its internal logic on the whole. Moreover, Konishi's study of Laozi was not limited to translation, but he also provided a profound analysis and historical examination of Laozi's ideas.

The article "The Philosophy of Laozi" published in 1893–1894 was an epitome of Konishi's research on Laozi's philosophy. The article was divided into four parts. In the first part, Konishi engaged in an open debate against Vasil'ev's views in his book *Religions of the East: Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism*. Vasil'ev, with a strong spirit of skepticism, denied the authenticity of the author of the *Daodejing* and argued that it was written at a time when Confucianism held an important position. Konishi refuted this viewpoint in the article and vigorously defended the authenticity of Laozi, as recorded in Sima Qian's *The Records of the Grand Historian*. In the second part, Konishi examined the time period and life of Laozi, challenging Julien's assertion that Laozi was born in 604 BC. In the third part,

the author argued that individual wisdom and turbulent times played a role in the emergence of Laozi's philosophy. Konishi held a higher opinion of Laozi compared to Confucius, seeing Confucius as proud and self-conceited, while Laozi as humble and benevolent (Konishi 1893, pp. 25–45). In the fourth part, Konishi introduced his position and views on the ethics and metaphysics of the *Daodejing*. He believed that Laozi's "metaphysics" included the doctrines of the Dao and cosmology, and that the two were closely related, with the former serving as the foundation of the latter. Laozi's ethics encompassed individual ethics and social ethics. The root of ethical corruption, according to Konishi, was personal desires, and moral perfection could only be achieved by overcoming selfish desires. When discussing Laozi's social ethics, Konishi believed that the core idea was to recognize the legitimacy of monarchy, advocate governance by nonaction, promote policies of keeping the people ignorant, advocate legal nihilism, reject wealth, and oppose war. This interpretation shared similarities with Tolstoy's ideas (Konishi 1894, pp. 363–79).

Konishi's study of Laozi was even more persuasive when viewed from the perspective of the world civilization. He received a Western-style education, initially following the Eastern Orthodox Church, before later embracing Tolstoyism. Therefore, his study of Daoist philosophy was conducted within the framework of Western philosophy, rather than Chinese classical philosophy. He drew parallels between Laozi's thought and that of Western philosophers such as Heraclitus (about 544–483 BC), Plato (427–347 BC), and the Eleatic School, arguing that the concept in Western philosophy that is closest to the "Dao" is "nous" proposed by Anaxagoras (500–428 BC). Konishi pointed out that, "similar to Greek philosophy, Laozi's metaphysical system is also a systematic and comprehensive exposition on the highest existence. The difference lies in the fact that Laozi's thought is the product of individual wisdom, whereas Greek philosophy is the product of the collective efforts of many scholars" (Konishi 1894, pp. 386–88). Thus, it is evident that he was skilled at drawing on and analogizing classical Western philosophy. In most cases, these were valuable insights, but sometimes the supposed similarities he pointed out did not actually exist, such as the so-called correspondence between some of Laozi's propositions and the philosophy of Heraclitus, or the similarity between the cosmology of the *Daodejing* and the thought of the Greek philosopher Anaxagoras. Although his views were still open to debate, and his translation had some shortcomings, it is undeniable that he had a strong spirit of scientific inquiry and dared to challenge the works of Russian sinologist Vasiliev and French sinologist Julien. In the process of interpreting Laozi's thought, he compared it with the doctrines of ancient Greek philosophers, building on the foundation of Western philosophical perspectives, and he made unique contributions to the translation and cross-cultural exploration of Chinese philosophical classics.

5. Summary and Conclusions

The Imperial Russian Period was an important stage for Russia's expansion abroad, with a strong emphasis on studying the culture and economy of neighboring countries. The study of Chinese culture in Russia at that time was carried out under official instructions and monitoring, with the aim of seeking some kind of "homogeneous discourse support" to achieve spiritual colonization of China. Although the development of Russian sinology began with the establishment of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing in the early 18th century, it was not until a century later that research on the *Daodejing* started to appear in the works of the Russian Orthodox missionaries stationed to Beijing. The research on Daoism and Laozi in Russia started relatively late, but the *Daodejing* is now the most frequently translated Chinese classic in Russia and an important component of international studies on Laozi. The characteristics of the early dissemination of Laozi's teachings in Russia can be summarized as follows:

Strong Historical and Religious Limitations: Translators during this period in Russia inevitably approached the translation and interpretation of the *Daodejing* with a comparison to religious theology, resulting in strong historical and religious limitations. In the early stages of dissemination, Russian studies of the Eastern countries were always inter-

twined with Russian interests, and sinological studies, including the study of Laozi, were characterized by practicality and utilitarianism. The research on Laozi conducted by members of the Orthodox Mission, who had strong religious zeal and academic spirit under official instruction, played a significant role in the early dissemination of the *Daodejing*.

Drawing on Outstanding Achievements from European Sinology: Russian sinology research has been greatly influenced by the West, particularly French sinology. The translation and interpretation of Western versions have indirectly contributed to the development of Russian studies on Laozi. In particular, Julien's French translation of the *Daodejing* in 1842 had a tremendous impact on Russian sinologists and facilitated the dissemination of the *Daodejing* in Russia.

Comparisons and Contrasts Between East and West: The translation and study of the *Daodejing* during the Imperial Russian Period were predominantly based on the methodology of comparative philosophy. In Tsarist Russia, the main reference points for interpreting the *Daodejing* were Christian Quietism, Hinduism, and Neoplatonism. In the later period of Tsarist Russia, there were also translations and summaries of the *Daodejing* from the perspective of religious syncretism, such as Tolstoyism and theosophical thought. Direct comparison of Laozi's philosophy with similar ideas in other religious and philosophical systems was a consistent research method and tradition in Russian studies on Laozi in the early stages, and it continues to be so today.

The Fusion of Tolstoyism and Laozi's Teachings: Tolstoy played an indispensable role in the spread of the *Daodejing* in Russia. He used the authority of the *Daodejing* and some of its ideas to reinforce his own concept of nonresistance to evil and nonviolence within the framework of Tolstoyism, which was gradually emerging at that time. In Tolstoy's translations and reviews of the *Daodejing*, the integration of Laozi's philosophy with the Tolstoy's own thinking was clearly visible, profoundly influencing the development of Russian studies on Laozi. Even Russian scholars such as Lisevich Igor' Samojlovich (1932–2000) and Maslov Aleksej Aleksandrovich (1964–) hypothesized that Konishi's translation and Yang Xingshun's translation during the Soviet Period tended to replace Chinese Daoist philosophy with Tolstoyism⁶ (Myshinskij 2016, p. 123).

Widespread Misinterpretations and Misunderstandings: The early dissemination of the *Daodejing* in Russia, compared to the West, was closer to the source text and showed greater respect for the original work. However, due to issues such as language comprehension and Eurocentrism, translations often retained a touch of mystical or utopian color, resulting in various mistranslations and misinterpretations. In particular, there was a negative understanding of wuwei (nonaction) that directly influenced the evaluations of Russian thinkers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries regarding Laozi's teachings, labeling the *Daodejing* with characteristics of nihilism, laziness, pessimism, individualism, etc.

High Academic Value, but Limited Dissemination: During the early stage of dissemination, translations and research articles on Laozi's teachings were produced by Russian sinologists such as Sivillov, the anonymous author, and Bichurin. These works were profound and objective in their research. However, due to various reasons, they were unable to be published or had very limited circulation, resulting in the lack of a significant impact on society. As a result, subsequent scholars' studies on the scholars and works of this period were relatively scarce, leading to some erroneous historical accounts and literature. It is imperative for the academic community to engage in discussions and corrections on these issues.

In summary, early Russian studies on Laozi exhibit distinct historical and regional characteristics. Russian sinologists generally approach the studies on Laozi with a positive and respectful attitude. However, there are inherent limitations in research due to the perspective of the "other", resulting in difficulties in transcending religious and Eurocentric biases in translation and research. Conducting a comprehensive analysis of historical documents and the unique characteristics of early Russian studies on Laozi, as well as investigating the understanding and cultural impact of these studies in Russia, can enrich

our research and correct inaccuracies in existing literature, and provide a detailed and supplementary portrayal to the global landscape of Laozi studies.

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Notes

- ¹ The manuscript materials of the Kazan University library are now preserved in the Russian Foreign Policy Archive and the National Central Archive of History.
- ² In 1915, Zamotaylo published the first half of Sivillov's translation on pages 209–245 of the fifth and sixth issues of the fourth volume of the Odessa Library Association Magazine affiliated with Novorossisk University. The second half of Sivillov's translation was published by Zamotaylo on pages 3–21 of the first and second issues of the fifth volume of the same magazine in 1916, as well as in 1916 in an offprint with the following information: И. Замотайло. 1916. «Перевод Дао-дэ-цзина Архимандрита Даниила Сивиллова 1828г. Со вступительной статьей о даосизме и конфуцианства.» Одесса: Н.Л. Ламберга. (Zamotajlo 1916 «*Perevod Dao-deh-tszina Arkhimandrita Daniila Sivillova 1828 g. So vstupitel'noj stat'ej o daosizme i konfutsianstva.*» Odessa: N.L. Lamberg.)
- ³ The most important work about Quietism *Spiritual Guide* (Guía spiritual) was written by Spanish theologian and Catholic mystic Miguel de Molinos, and then translated into Russian by Lopukhin Ivan Vladimirovich (1756–1816), one of the leading representatives of Russian Freemasonry, published in Moscow in 1784.
- ⁴ Another important factor that contributed to the negative interpretation of Daoist philosophy in Russian society was *Religions of the East: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism (Religii Vostoka: konfutsianstvo, buddizm i daosizm)* published in 1873, written by Vasil'ev Vasilij Pavlovich (1818–1900), in which Vasil'ev mistakenly depicted the concept of wuwei as laziness and opposed it to active living. He commented on Laozi's philosophy from the perspective of Eurocentrism, which played a negative role in Russia's understanding of Daoist philosophy (Vasil'ev 1873, pp. 72–104). He even speculated that Laozi had been to the West, and that the *Daodejing* was completed on the way to the West. He compared the *Daodejing* to the Bible, believing that the ideas reflected by the three Chinese characters of Dao道, de, and jing经 were very close to the concept of God (Zhang and Luo 2022, p. 3).
- ⁵ The Russian Orthodox Mission in Japan was founded in 1870 by Nikolay, who came to Japan in 1861 as a priest accompanying the Russian Consulate in Hakodate. The Russian Orthodox Mission opened this Orthodox Christian school in order to expand the influence of Orthodox Church in Japan, train Japanese priests, and absorb Japanese believers. In addition to theology and Japanese, the curriculum of the school included courses in Russian, Chinese, algebra, geometry, geography, history, psychology, and the history of philosophy.
- ⁶ In the text, we mentioned that Yang Xingshun did not mention at all in his monograph the complete translation published by Konishi at the end of the 19th century, which was reprinted many times, and that he could not have been unaware of this Japanese scholar's translation of the *Daodejing*. It is speculated that this is because Yang Xingshun hoped to completely eliminate the religious elements in Daoist philosophy; thus, he did not recognize Konishi's translation. However, it is interesting to note that the Russian scholar Myshinskij Aleksej Leonidovich (1966–) carefully compared Yang Xingshun's translation with Konishi's translation and found a high degree of similarity between the two translations (Myshinskij 2015, pp. 666–69). One possibility is that Yang Xingshun referred to this translation and, therefore, did not want to acknowledge its historical status, claiming that his translation of the *Daodejing* was the first complete translation in Russia. Another possibility is that his thinking is actually consistent with Konishi, who included the ideas of Tolstoy; hence, his translation coincidentally or miraculously matches Konishi's translation. This view has been discussed by Russian scholars such as Lisevich, Maslov, and Myshinskij.

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Article

Interpretive Trends and the Conceptual Construction of the Daodejing's Dao in Russian Sinology: A Historical Overview

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Abstract: “Dao” is not only a core concept in the *Daodejing*, but is also an important keyword in Chinese classical philosophy. It encompasses the origin of all things in the universe, the laws of nature, and the laws of dealing with the world. A historical review of Russian sinologists’ interpretation and conceptualization of “Dao” reveals the differences in philosophical understanding and translation strategies of those sinologists, and reflects the translation loss and compensation of Chinese classical philosophical keywords in the process of foreign dissemination. During the Imperial Russian Period, researchers regarded “Dao” as the revitalization of religious theology. During the Soviet Period, the aim of the Soviet researchers was to find the struggle between materialism and idealism in “Dao”. In the Post-Soviet Period, researchers gradually threw off the shackles of ideology, and began to conduct more diversified and multi-level research on “Dao” and the *Daodejing*. This article aims to discuss the research and translation of the *Daodejing* in Russia, paying particular attention to the dissemination and reception of “Dao” in Russia. It also endeavors to explore the interpretive trends of “Dao” in Russia and highlight the dissemination and understanding of Laozi thought in Russia.

Keywords: Dao; the *Daodejing*; Russia; sinology; materialism

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1. Introduction

The *Daodejing* is the core philosophical classic of Daoism and is an important part of world civilization. The *Daodejing* and Daoist thought first came to Russia in the first half of the 19th century, in which the Russian Orthodox Mission played a very important role. From 1715 to 1956, Russia sent 20 Orthodox Missions to China, which became the cradle of Russian sinology¹. Among them, a large number of sinologists emerged, making outstanding contributions to the dissemination of Chinese culture and the promotion of Confucianism and Daoism. The *Daodejing* is a worldwide phenomenon, and it has been translated into most of the global languages that are in use today. The research on Daoism and Laozi in Russia started relatively late, but the *Daodejing* is the most frequently translated Chinese classic in Russia, second only to the *Bible* among the world's famous classics. According to Dr. Misha Tadd, there are 42 Russian translations of the *Daodejing* (Tadd 2019, p. 105). These translations have outstanding academic value, and they represent a microcosm of Russian translation and research on Chinese Daoist philosophy.

With “Dao” at its core, the *Daodejing* constructs a rich philosophical system involving figures ranging from emperors who reign the world to hermits who value self-cultivation. The entire Daoist philosophical system develops with the “Dao”, a concept formed by Laozi. The understanding and reception of “Dao” in Russia have been deeply influenced by social ideology, and are closely related to the historical development of Russian sinology. With the changes in time and space, the interpretation and conceptualization of “Dao” in Russia can be divided into three stages. The first stage was the Imperial Russia Period (from early 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century). Scholars in this stage compared the interpretation of “Dao” with Christianity, and their research was illusive and had a touch of Eurocentrism. The second stage was the Soviet Period (from the beginning of the

20th century to the end of the 20th century), during which academic research was usually measured by political standards. The study and understanding of “Dao” also became one of the main positions of the struggle between materialism and idealism. During this period, materialists regarded “Dao” as a powerful weapon against religious thought, whereas idealists mystified “Dao” to disarm materialism. The third stage was the Post-Soviet Period (from the end of the 20th century to the present), and the researchers in this period tended to be more objective and reasonable in their understanding and attitude toward “Dao” and began to adopt scientific methods to conduct multifaceted, in-depth, and specific research on Daoism.

This article adopted the keyword research method proposed by R. Williams, which opened up a new way of using historical semantics for social and cultural research. According to Williams, when conducting an in-depth interpretation of a keyword in a certain field, not only do we need to emphasize the historical origins and developments of the semantics, but more importantly, we need to pay attention to the radical change, discontinuity, and conflict in different interpretations of the keyword. In this article, we took “Dao”, a keyword and core concept in the *Daodejing*, as the research object, and endeavored to investigate the understanding and interpretation of “Dao” in Russia, and explore the interpretive trends and reception of the *Daodejing* in Russia.

2. The Imperial Russia Period—The Revitalization of Religious Theology

The Imperial Russia Period was an important time for Russia to realize foreign expansion, and great importance was attached to the study of the culture and economy of neighboring countries. At that time, Russian sinologists were mainly members of the Russian Orthodox Missions, and their academic research was conducted under official instructions and monitoring. Under the guise of religious propaganda, they were essentially studying China’s economy, politics, and culture while collecting information and intelligence about China for the Russian government. Back then, Western missionaries generally believed that the *Daodejing* implied the teachings of the *Bible*, and the image of “Dao” was basically manifested through the metaphors of “God” or “Creator”, which was also because early translators adopted a target-culture-oriented translation strategy². Restricted by the social environment, Russian sinologists in this period had strong historical and religious limitations when studying and approaching the concept of “Dao”, which was always associated with keywords such as “divine”, “God”, “mysticism”, “prophet”, etc.

In 1818, the Russian government explicitly instructed the Tenth Orthodox Mission to study the Chinese religion. Count Speranskij Mikhail Mikhajlovich (1772–1839) wrote the “Summary of Instructions and Questions Offered by the Academy of Sciences for Young Travelers on Mission to China” (*Nachertanie instruktsij i voprosov, predlagaemykh Akademiej nauk v pol’zu i upotreblenie molodym puteshestvennikam, naznachennym i otpravlyaemym pri dukhovnoj missii v Kitaj*), which stipulated that once the priest had enough knowledge of the Chinese language, they should start to study Buddhism and Daoism, translate books that help explain the teachings of these two religions, and prepare materials and arguments needed to rebut the two religions (Skachkov 1977, p. 128). It was under this circumstance that the monk priest of the Tenth Orthodox Mission, Archimandrite Daniil (Sivillov Dmitrij Petrovich) (1798–1871), started the translation of the *Daodejing*. During the translation process, Sivillov failed to find the so-called “rebuttal evidence”, instead, he was amazed and overwhelmed by the philosophical wisdom in Laozi’s thoughts and believed that the *Daodejing* contained wisdom that the *Analects* did not possess. Sivillov associated “Dao” with immortality of the soul, the immortality of life and karma, giving “Dao” a mystic touch. He wrote: “The ‘Dao’ is the creator of the universe, the wisdom, the rules, the judge of the law, the spirit that rules everything like God” (Khokhlov 2014, p. 493). In 1826, he completed the first manuscript³ of the Russian translation of the *Daodejing*, which could be regarded as the beginning of Russian research on the *Daodejing*. Regrettably, Sivillov’s translation was not approved for publication until 1915 when “The Unpublished *Daodejing* in the Daniil (Sivillov) Archives” (Neopublikovannyj per. Dao-

deh-tszina arkhimandrita. Daniila (Sivillova)) was published in the Proceedings of the Odessa Bibliographic Society (Izvestiya Odesskogo bibliograficheskogo obshhestva) [only includes Chapter 1–Chapter 46].

During this period of time, a lot of research was conducted on Laozi by Western scholars. For example, Jean-Pierre Guillaume Pauthier (1801–1873), a French Orientalist, published *Le Tao-Te-King* in 1838. In 1842, the famous French sinologist Stanislas Julien produced the first complete translation of the *Daodejing*, followed by Victor Von Strauss, who translated it into German in 1870. Later, an English version of the *Daodejing*, undertaken by a Scottish sinologist James Legge (1815–1897), came out in 1891. Then, in 1898 and 1903, Paul Carus (1852–1919) and Isaac Heysinger published another two versions of English translation, respectively. In 1842, the 11th issue of *Son of the Motherland* (*Syn Otechestva*) published an anonymous article introducing Laozi, which was regarded as the first published translation and research work on the *Daodejing* in Russia. The author quoted and translated the French translation of the *Daodejing* by Stanislas Julien (1797–1873). The research on the anonymous authorship of this article was quite controversial. Russian bibliography experts generally believed that the author of the article was Bichurin Nikita Yakovlevich (1777–1853), whereas Khokhlov Aleksandr Nikolaevich (1929–2015) thought the author was Senkovskij Osip Ivanovich (1800–1858), as pointed out in the report “Who is the Author of the Article ‘Laozi and His Teachings’ in the Journal *Son of the Motherland* in 1842” (Kto avtor stat’i “Lao-tszy i ego uchenie” v zhurnale *Syn otechestva* 1842 g.) collected in the 19th All-Russian Conference of Philosophy and Modern Civilization of the East Asian Region. Be it Bichurin or Senkovskij, the publication of this article had groundbreaking significance for the spread of Daoism in Russia, and it proved, to some extent, that the early formation and development of Russian sinology was deeply influenced by European sinology, as most of the early translations of Chinese classics were translated from English and French translations.

In the history of Russian sinology, the representative figure of the second half of the 19th century was Vasil’ev Vasilij Pavlovich (1818–1900). Back then, the fortress of Russian sinology research gradually shifted from the Russian Orthodox Mission to universities and research institutes, which was marked by the book *Religions of the East: Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism* (*Religii Vostoka: Konfutsianstvo, buddizm i daosizm*) by Vasil’ev. In this book, Vasil’ev praised, analyzed, and translated the *Daodejing*. He spoke highly of it, believing that “Laozi’s language is very unique, and the ideas expounded in the book are more profound compared with that of the *Analects*, the grammar more accurate compared with that of *Zhuangzi* and *Mengzi*, it is thus simpler and easier to understand” (Vasil’ev 1873, p. 76). However, Vasil’ev did not remove the utopian mysticism in his understanding of the ideological connotation of the *Daodejing*; he even speculated that Laozi had been to the West and that the *Daodejing* was completed on the way to the West. He compared the *Daodejing* to the *Bible*, believing that the ideas reflected by the three Chinese characters of Dao道, de, and jing经 were very close to the concept of God. He also divided Daoism into “Daoist philosophy” and “Daoist religion” from the perspective of positivism. It was his belief that Russia and Europe had the mission to enlighten the East, as Daoist thought was conservative and backward. It is not hard to find evidence of Eurocentric tendency in his viewpoint. During Vasil’ev’s time, the research on Daoism in Russia was not sufficient. From Vasiliev’s two books, *Religions of the East: Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism* (*Religii Vostoka: Konfutsianstvo, buddizm i daosizm*) and *Outline of the History of Chinese Literature* (*Ocherk istorii kitajskoj literatury*), we can see that the research on Confucianism accounted for more than half of the works and the research on Buddhism was more profound, but less attention was paid to Daoism. This is also supported by the arguments in the book *On the Science of the East* (*Nauka o Vostoke*), in which Alekseev Vasilij Mikhajlovich (1881–1951) divided the Russian sinology education of the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century into two periods, with the Chinese Revolution of 1911 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 as the watershed. Alekseev wrote in the book: “In the second period, one of the biggest breakthroughs in Sinology education was that, the *Daodejing*

was incorporated into the Russian syllabus, becoming part of the Chinese classics. Whereas in the first stage (i.e., before the revolution), students only studied Confucian literature, which was not enough, we have to recognize the importance of Laozi's teaching and read intensively about it. "(Alekseev 1982, p. 174)".

Although having studied under Vasil'ev, the famous sinologist Georgievskij Sergej Mikhajlovich (1851–1893) had a different view from his teacher on the value of traditional Chinese culture. He opposed the Eurocentric tendency in Chinese philosophical research and extensively used atypical positivism expressions such as "world material" (mirovaya materiya) and "world spirit" (mirovoy dukh) to analyze the traditional Chinese philosophical thought including the interpretation of "Dao". He pointed out that "As the material and concept that came into existence at the very beginning, Dao is the only eternal and unchanging matter in the myriad things in nature...Dao is both the world's material, the world's power, and the world's spirit" (Georgievskij 1885, pp. 299–300). With the deepening of his research, Georgievskij tried to explain Daoism from the perspective of absolute materialism and claimed that material develops according to its internal rules, rather than the interference of some concepts. He interpreted "Dao" as the law of nature, "Virtue appears when human beings follow the law of nature (i.e., 'Dao')" (Georgievskij 1892, p. 112).

The encounter between the famous writer Tolstoj Lev Nikolaevich (1828–1910) and Laozi took place at the right time. In 1877, Tolstoj completed the work *Anna Karenina*, and then found himself in a spiritual and existential crisis, so resorted to traditional Chinese thoughts to find a way out of his predicament. Through Strakhov Nikolaj Nikolaevich (1828–1896), Tolstoj obtained the *Daodejing* translated by French sinologist Stanislas Julien. Based on this translation, he selected and translated the chapters that he thought were worth translating. From Tolstoj's translation and interpretation of "Dao", we can see the continuous evolution of his understanding of Daoism. When he came into contact with the French version of the *Daodejing*, he used the word "God" (bog) to interpret "Dao". In his view, "Dao" was the symbol of God as well as the way to God. He believed that Laozi's theory was, in essence, similar to Christianity. In his book *A Book about Path and Truth Written by the Chinese Sage Laozi* (Kniga Puti i Istiny, napisannaya itajskim mudretsom Laotsy) (1884), Tolstoj wrote: "Dao is obtained through the temperance of all personal and carnal things...The essence of both is the spirit and divinity that form the basis of human life, manifested in ascetic ways. Therefore, for human beings to become a blessing instead of a trouble, one should learn to live not for material desires but for the spirit, which is exactly what Laozi taught" (Tolstoj 1956, pp. 350–51). The "God" he meant was not the "God" in the sense of the church, but the beginning of the human soul, and the subjective love and objective happiness. This is also the cornerstone of Tolstoyism⁴. Later, Tolstoj further developed his own interpretation of "Dao". In his article "Non-action 無爲" (Nedelanie) (1893), he translated "Dao" as "path, virtue, truth" (put', dobrodetel', istina). He believed that the acquisition of "Dao" must be achieved through doing nothing that goes against nature, and based on this, he proposed "non-resistance to evil by violence" and "moral self-improvement". Later, in the process of proofreading the Russian translation of the *Daodejing* by Konissi Masutarō 小西増太郎 or Konissi Daniil Petrovich (1862–1940), Tolstoj developed a new understanding of Laozi's thought. In the *Anthology of Daily Thoughts of the Wise* (Mysli mudrykh lyudej na kazhdyj den') (1903), "Dao" was translated into reason (razum). In 1906, Tolstoj made further changes and reflections on "Dao" in his open letter "A Letter to a Chinese" (Pis'mo k kitajtsu) to Gu Hongming 辜鸿铭, in which he perceived "Dao" as "freedom" (svoboda). This freedom did not mean freedom from shackles, but rather what one acquired after knowing the law of nature. In his subsequent research, he synthesized his previous understanding and interpretation, believing that "the law of 'Dao' means rational life is the only way to be cherished, and 'Dao' is the necessary and supreme law of heaven or God" (Tolstoj 1935, pp. 295–98). It can be seen that Tolstoj's understanding of "Dao" expanded and changed over the years, because he translated indirectly through the English, French, and German versions to Russian, in the process of which, he added

his own understanding. Laozi's thinking, Western philosophical research on Laozi, and Tolstoj's own world view were all reflected in Tolstoj's works.

In 1893, Tolstoj's follower Konissi published "The Philosophy of Laozi" (*Filosofiya Laosi*) in the *Issues of Philosophy and Psychology* (*Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii*), and later published the first complete translation of the Russian version of the *Daodejing* in 1894 with the support of Tolstoj. He argued that Laozi's philosophy was an idealist philosophy and wrote: "For Laozi, all concrete substances belong to the category of existence and are constantly changing; Laozi proved that there is an eternal, unchanging category that includes all existence, namely 'Dao.' 'Dao' is the purest spirit, with internal unity and inseparability" (Konissi 1893, p. 42).

Konissi received a European-style education, initially following the Orthodox Church, and then Tolstoyism. Therefore, his research on Daoism was carried out under the framework of Western philosophy rather than Chinese philosophy. He compared Laozi's thought with that of Western philosophers such as Heraclitus (about 544–483 BC), Plato (427–347 BC) and the Eleatic School, believing that the concept closest to "Dao" in Western philosophy was "nous" proposed by Anaxagoras (500–428 BC). Konissi was convinced that "Similar to Greek philosophy, Laozi's metaphysical system is also a systematic and complete exposition on the highest existence. The difference lies in the fact that Laozi's thought is the product of individual wisdom, whereas Greek philosophy is the product of joint effort of many scholars" (Konissi 1894, pp. 386–88). It is worth mentioning that Konissi's version of the *Daodejing* was the only complete Russian translation until 1950, thus is a valuable asset in the Russian study of Laozi with strong research significance.

Contrary to Tolstoj and Konissi, who commended and respected Daoism, Solov'yov Vladimir Sergeevich (1853–1900), who played a significant role in the development of Russian philosophy and Orthodox theology, believed that both Confucianism and Daoism refuse to create, with the former holding the ancestors in high esteem and the latter advocating non-action, therefore laying the foundation of Chinese conservatism. Influenced by Christian-centralism and Eurocentrism, Solov'yov regarded China as an alien and dangerous force. He argued that the essence of Chinese thought was that the past had unconditional dominance over the present, and Laozi's theory was a full testimony of that. "The theory of Laozi is a ridiculous philosophy, just like other Chinese people, Laozi intends to seek the absolute origin of the world from the past, a past that is unconditional and exists above all matter, this negative force is the so-called 'Dao.' All things in the world originate from it and eventually return to it, that is to say, 'Dao' is the path that all things follow in common, yet there is no clear definition for this absolute origin of all things, because it is simply indescribable and unspeakable" (Solov'yov 1996, p. 119). In his view, the essence of "Dao" is "non-action", which is the embodiment of obscurantism and denial of life, knowledge, and progress. It is exactly with the analysis of Laozi's "Dao" that he explained the philosophical origins of "conservatism" and "traditionalism" in Chinese culture. As a philosopher trained in the Western philosophical system, Solov'yov approached and examined a mysterious culture of the other, that is different from the West, from a Western point of view. Notwithstanding differences, his interpretation of "Dao" rested on the patterns of 19th century European Orientalism⁵, emphasizing East–West distinction and Western superiority.

During this period, Russia not only obtained information on sinology indirectly from Western Europe, but also focused on developing its own sinology. Russian sinologists tried to make comparisons and interpretations of "Dao" by incorporating it into the research field of comparative philosophy. Granovskij Timofej Nikolaevich (1813–1855), a Professor at Moscow University, believed that Laozi was obviously familiar with the speculative philosophy of Hinduism, since he preached benevolence and opposed excessive material enjoyment. Laozi also deemed that everyone should lead a life that is different from a worldly life, and he was a believer that the eternal and absolute reason (the "Dao") was the origin of all existence (Granovskij 1990, p. 609). According to Granovskij's world view, the mechanical view of nature coexists with the organic view of nature. He believed that

“the eternal and absolute reason” was the “Dao”, which was very consistent with Hegel’s system of absolute idealism, but it did not contradict Kant’s positivist theory, and this was the first attempt by a Russian researcher to use the idealism to interpret Daoism. In his book *Religion in China* (Religiya Kitaya), Glagolev Sergej Sergeevich (1865–1937), a Professor at the Moscow Orthodox Theological Seminary, compared and analyzed “Dao”, a main concept in the quest of cultural generation, operation mechanism and law, with “Logos”, he believed that “‘Dao’ is the path, the follower of this path as well as the path followed by all things. ‘Dao’ is not created, because ‘Dao’ itself is eternal. ‘Dao’ is everything and nothing, a cause and an effect” (Glagolev 1901, p. 33). Before the October Revolution, Russian sinologists compared the Daodejing with religion when translating and interpreting the Daodejing. Their interpretation of “Dao” was mysterious, conservative, and religious, with strong historical and religious limitations as well as Eurocentrism and Slavism⁶ tendencies.

3. The Soviet Period—Materialist Understanding Due to Ideology

After the October Revolution in Russia, the establishment of Soviet Marxism–Leninism and the Chinese Revolution had a significant impact on the research objects and methods of Soviet sinology. Unlike the previous Imperial Russian sinology, the sinology research during the Soviet Period became inextricably intertwined with political reality. The research and understanding of “Dao” were freed from the religious vision of divinity and prophets, and a unique academic research school was formed with new perspectives and research methods. Three stages can be identified during this period. The first stage was from after the October Revolution in 1917 to 1935, which was a period of “pure academic” research with few political involvements; the second stage spanned roughly from 1935 to 1966, in which the politically motivated “New Daoism” prevailed. During this period, the Lao-Zhuang doctrine was interpreted as materialistic and progressive. In the third stage between 1966 to 1983, the materialistic interpretation of “Dao” was questioned and challenged, and there was a dispute between the materialist and idealist perspectives, with the former still taking the upper hand.

In the early days when the Soviet Union was founded, purely academic discussions on Daoism were the mainstream. Sinologists who conducted traditional academic research without the influence of social and political realities could be categorized as “old-school” Daoist researchers, as represented by Alekseev, whose understanding of Daoism had traces of idealism and mysticism. He believed that “‘Dao’ is a rule, an absolute truth beyond human understanding, and it is eternal. Human is the third element after Heaven and Earth, and the ‘Dao’ lies in the heart of Human” (Alekseev 1978, p. 49).

Alekseev’s disciple Petrov Apollon Aleksandrovich (1907–1949) can be regarded as a trailblazer of the “new-school” of Daoism research. In the early stage of his research, Petrov was influenced by his teacher and asserted that Daoist philosophy followed the system of objective idealism. When refuting the views of Solov’ov, a pre-revolutionary scholar, Petrov wrote: “Instead of being a negative force, as the author (i.e., Solov’ov) thinks, ‘Dao’ represents an absolutely positive force. Under the framework of idealism, ‘Dao’ is interpreted as a kind of uncertain potential in existence, and at the same time, it is also the absolute and only actual existence” (Petrov 1935, p. 10). With the publication of Stalin’s “Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism” (*O dialekticheskom i istoricheskome materializme*) in 1938 and the in-depth research of Petrov, Petrov gradually became a pioneer who drew on Marxism to explore the history of Chinese philosophy. Previously, Petrov broke away from the specific historical context and conducted logical analysis to discuss the abstract reality of Daoist theory. In the book *Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* (*Ocherk filosofii Kitaya*) published in 1940, scholars began to turn to the method of historical comparison, seeing early Daoism as a stage of philosophical development, explaining the logic and trend of its development, and successfully finding evidence of materialism (even rationalism) in Daoism. Petrov pointed out:

Accurately speaking, there is no widely accepted Russian translation and interpretation for the concept of “Dao”. Existing translations and interpretations (logos, world-way,

god, world-cause, spiritual power, pure transcendental being, etc.) fail to express the true essence of “Dao”, making it a principle that exists only in ideas, without taking into account its basic definition. Based on this account, two points must be noted: Dao operates in accordance with the natural conditions of all things. Dao comes into existence before Heaven and Earth. It suggests that “Dao” may have a materialistic connotation in its ancient understanding, and “Dao” may be a material existence that follows the law of natural development, and it also covers the law of evolution of such existence. (Petrov 1940, pp. 251–52).

Building on Petrov’s research, the overseas Chinese scholar Yang Xingshun 楊興順 (1904–1987) became the most influential representative of “new-school” Daoism researchers in the study of Laozi and Zhuangzi in Russia. If Petrov was trying to find a materialist motive in Laozi, Yang Xingshun made Laozi a staunch materialist. In 1947, Zhdanov Andrej Aleksandrovich (1896–1948), a member of the Political Bureau of the CPSU Central Committee in charge of ideological and political work in the Soviet Union at that time, personally chaired a seminar on the *History of Western European Philosophy (Istoriya zapadnoevropejskoj filosofii)* written by Aleksandrov Georgij Fedorovich (1908–1961). He wrote: “The history of philosophy is mainly the history of materialism development, and idealism philosophy is only allowed to appear in the history of philosophy as the object of criticism for materialists” (Zhdanov 1947, p. 257). This assertion laid the foundation for the following official academic research, due to which, many scholars gradually changed their academic positions. For instance, in the first edition of *Ancient Oriental History (Istoriya Drevnego Vostoka)* written by the Orientalist Avdiev Vsevolod Igorevich (1898–1978), Laozi was an enemy and a mystic (Myshinskij 2015, p. 345). However, in the 2nd and 3rd edition of *Ancient Oriental History* revised in 1953 and 1970, Laozi was thought to be a progressive thinker whose doctrine had elements of naive materialism and dialectics of nature, “Dao” is everywhere, and it is thanks to the existence of “Dao”, that everything in the world could survive and thrive (Avdiev 1953, p. 670). Yang Xingshun’s monograph *Ancient Chinese Philosopher Laozi and His Doctrine*⁷ (*Drevnekitajskij filosof Lao-tszy i ego uchenie*) published in 1950 was also a positive response to Zhdanov’s viewpoint. Yang wrote this book to expose the distortion of Laozi’s theory by Kuomintang scholars and Western bourgeois scholars, and to prove that Laozi’s philosophical theory was the embryo of Chinese materialism.

Yang Xingshun believed that Laozi’s theory on “Dao” is a simple materialist philosophy, comparable to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. “Dao” does not have any artificial elements. It is the understanding of the natural world, the real world, and human life. It is not dominated by gods or divinities but follows a certain natural path (Dao). This Dao is inaccessible to our senses, it is the general law in philosophy, and it is independent of human will (Myshinskij 2015, p. 346).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the decrease in the cultural exchanges between China and the Soviet Union led to a drastic drop in the sinology research of the Soviet Union. During this period, Soviet scholars began to adopt Western academic approaches such as comparative literature, structuralism, and reception aesthetics to study literary and philosophical issues. They abandoned class interests and showed great respect for the diversity of different ideas and viewpoints. Questions and challenges began to emerge on the materialistic understanding of “Dao”, and two camps of views appeared.

The first camp adhered to the theoretical vision and research method of materialism, and they regarded “Dao” as a scientific concept and a weapon against idealism and religious thought. For example, Pozdneeva Ljubov’ Dmitrievna (1908–1974), whose views were a direct continuation of Petrov and Yang Xingshun, published *Atheists, Materialists, Dialectics in Ancient China (Ateisty, materialisty, dialektiki Drevnego Kitaya)* in 1967, believing that Zhuangzi’s materialism and atheism were inherited from the materialism of Laozi and Liezi. She interpreted “Dao” as “nature, material, namely objective reality as opposed to human subjectivity” (Pozdneeva 1994, p. 389).

Another representative was Kozlovskij Boris Jur’evich (1898–1953), who further developed the arguments of Yang Xingshun and Pozdneeva. He thought that neither Daoist

studies should give way to bourgeois scholars, because they would distort it (from idealist point of view) or refuse to look for hints of materialism and idealism altogether, nor give way to Mao Zedong thinkers, because although they recognize the materialistic character of Daoism, they would place Laozi's materialism under Marx's materialism (Kozlovskij 1976, pp. 81–88). It can be seen that while insisting on materialist theoretical methods, Kozlovskij also recognized that the existing research in the Soviet Union had obvious traces of the Marxist theory of materialism.

The second camp mystified "Dao" and criticized the materialist interpretation of Laozi's philosophy, believing that Daoism had the feature of idealism, and the representative figure was Vasil'ev Leonid Sergeevich (1930–2016), who criticized the materialist interpretation of Daoism proposed by Yang Xingshun and Pozdneeva. He believed that there were indeed elements of materialism and dialectics in Laozi's theory, but more traces of idealism and mysticism could be found. Following the footsteps of French sinologist Henri Maspero, Vasil'ev also called Laozi "a melancholic mystic". He thought that "Dao" is a universal law of nature, the beginning and end of creation, and the foundation of profound metaphysics. Dao is everything and nothing, no one created Dao, but everything happens because of it and returns to it. No one can fully comprehend Dao. Our senses cannot touch it. What can be heard, seen, felt, and understood is not the Dao (Vasil'ev 1970, p. 229). Vasil'ev also compared "Dao" with the Indian religious concept "Brahman". Scholars believe that if substantive and metaphysical divisions are made in ancient Chinese philosophy, the transcendental "Dao" is similar to the transcendent "Brahma". If the above division is not made, Daoism is similar to the naturalism of pre-Socratics. Scholars believed that "Dao" is not created by man, and that all things originate from and return to "Dao". This view is consistent with Aristotle's understanding of "Nature". From the above-mentioned discussion, we can see that Vasil'ev's interpretation of "Dao" was similar to the "old-school" academician Alekseev. Vasil'ev was also the first to mention and praise Alekseev's work in the Soviet sinology literature.

Rubin Vitalij Aronovich (1923–1981), a researcher at the Oriental Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, was another scholar whose views were contrary to that of Yang Xingshun and Pozneeva. He agreed with Alekseev and Vasil'ev's views on "Dao", saying that "Dao" is the universal rule and the mysterious origin of all things. It is the inner part of the world, it cannot be understood by emotion and reason, and it belongs to the category of mystical pantheism (Rubin 1970, p. 151).

The book by Vasil'ev and Rubin was a proof of a "thaw" in Soviet sinology, but it did not last long. In the 1960s, Sino-Soviet relations became sour, and Soviet sinology research once again fell into the hands of ideological control. The 1971 All-Soviet Scientific Conference of Sinologists became a turning point. In his report, the politician Senin Nikolaj Gerasimovich (1918–2001) reiterated Zhdanov's 1947 policy on the history of Chinese philosophy, and spoke highly of Petrov, Yang Xingshun, and Pozneeva, because their viewpoints were supported by the authorities. In contrast, Vasil'ev's viewpoint, which can be traced back to the academician Alekseev, was not recognized by the authorities. Senin sharply criticized Vasil'ev's book: "In this book, the author openly ignored the results generally recognized by Soviet researchers, and he questioned or even completely denied the existence of materialist ideas in China... Comparing Soviet sinologists with Western bourgeois sinologists in favor of the latter is something totally unacceptable to us" (Pozdneeva 1973, p. 157).

Lisevich Igor' Samojlovich (1932–2000), an expert in ancient Chinese literary theory, also challenged the view that Laozi's philosophy was materialism. He made a partial translation of the *Daodejing* with high quality and rich annotations. His views contradicted the prevailing one (Laozi and Zhuangzi are materialists), and he did not agree with the interpretation of "Dao" as "material", namely "a philosophical category that marks objective reality", which is similar to what Lenin wrote in his article "Materialism and Empirio-Criticism", because "the main feature of Dao is inaccessibility to human reason and emotion, while material is the perceptible objective reality" (Lisevich 1979, p. 10).

Sinology studies in the Soviet Period basically regarded Daoism as a theory opposed to Confucianism. At that time, Confucianism was criticized as a conservative and counter-revolutionary theory. The high-pressure political and cultural environment seriously undermined the independence and legitimacy of academic research. Many scholars had to interpret ancient Chinese philosophy in line with official ideology, and some even came to self-contradictory conclusions⁸.

4. Post-Soviet Period—Contemporary Construction from a Diversified Perspective

After the 1980s, with the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations, Russian sinologists regained their enthusiasm for research. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought massive transformation to the mainstream ideology. With the evolution of Eastern and Western perspectives and the introduction of contemporary research methods, Russian philosophical research has undergone great changes in terms of the theoretical foundations, value orientations, and research methods, putting an end to the previous ideological manipulation. Researchers started to draw on diversified theories in their work. In 1983, the third issue of the periodical *Asian and African People (Narody Azii i Afriki)* published an article about the roundtable meeting on traditional Chinese culture, which can be deemed as the turning point. At the conference, scholars criticized the view of dismissing the development of Chinese philosophy as merely a historical fight between materialism and idealism. At the same time, there was a debate on whether the Chinese classical philosophy could be rationally explained.

For example, the early views of Feoktistov Vitalij Fyodorovich (1930–2005), a researcher on Chinese thought, were completely in line with the spirit of the 1971 All-Soviet Scientific Conference of Sinologists. In his article “On the Materialist Tendency in Xunzi’s Philosophy” (*O materialisticheskikh tendentsiyakh v filosofskikh vzglyadakh Syun’-tzy*), he agreed with the views of those “recognized Soviet scholars” and regarded Laozi’s theory as a naive materialist doctrine with elements of dialectic nature. After the 1983 roundtable meeting, he changed his view and pointed out: “If the Chinese philosophers did not come up with the same concepts of matter and consciousness as their European counterparts, then the attempt to classify Chinese philosophers as materialists and idealists using terms understood by Europeans is not convincing” (Feoktistov 1997, pp. 34–35).

Russian sinologists paid special attention to the translation and understanding of key philosophical words. Kobzev Artem Igorevich (1953–), a representative of Daoist studies in the post-Soviet period, divided the Russian sinologists of this period into three schools according to different research methods and viewpoints on Chinese classical philosophy. The first was the structuralists or logicians, whose methods can be traced back to the structuralist theory of Claude Levi-Strauss (1908–2009). Representative figures in this school include Spirin Vladimir Semyonovich (1929–2002), Karapet’janc Artemij Mihajlovich (1943–2021) and Myall’ Linnart Ehdvardovich (1938–2010), a scholar of the Moscow—Tartu semiotic school. They believed that Chinese philosophy was a rationalist philosophical system composed of interrelated elements according to certain abstract rules. For example, Spirin was a groundbreaker who applied the method of modeling in sinology research. He advocated that Chinese philosophy did not exist in specific terms, but in a semiotic construction based on natural language, which can be interpreted in a rational manner. This means that the elements of this system (or category) should also be interpreted in a rational manner, and the system should be interpreted first before moving on to the elements. From the perspective of text structure analysis and mathematics, he translated the “Dao” of the *Daodejing* into a graph (grafik). A graph is very general and abstract in itself, but it can be interpreted as a great variety of concrete things. All of the concepts and ideas in the *Daodejing* is a point or multiple cross points in this graph, and “De” is a point on the graph. “Dao” and “De” are interpreted as mathematical terms by Spirin, who wrote “Mathematics has great methodological significance in the formation of Chinese philosophy, precisely because it brings the principles of rational argument” (Spirin 1976, pp. 212–19).

The second school is the interpreters or metaphorists, represented by Malyavin Vladimir Vyacheslavovich (1950–), Torchinov Evgenij Alekseevich (1956–2003), Grigor'eva Tat'yana Petrovna (1929–2014), and Zavadskaya Evgeniya Vladimirovna (1930–2002). They followed the traditional theories of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. In their view, it is impossible to explain Chinese classical philosophy with European philosophical terms because Chinese classical philosophy is a metaphor in essence, nor is it possible to explain it rationally at all. One can only “guess” the meaning of Chinese classical philosophy (Kobzev 1983, p. 65).

After the 1980s, the famous sinologist Torchinov began to study the historical religious methods of Daoism. He thought that the most important aspect of Daoist philosophy was natural science with cosmology as the core, believing that the “Dao” in the *Daodejing* had generative properties, and it was a unity of truth (ultimate meaning) and method (through path). This “Dao” was closely related to all things in nature and the practice of human life. Instead of being an abstract metaphysical “ontology” (the essence of the world), “Dao” was both “sensory and supersensory”. He was convinced that there were two “Daos” (Double Dao) in the *Daodejing*, one was “Unnamable”, which produced the universe, and the other was “Named”, which produced myriad things (Torchinov 1994, p. 95). Generally speaking, Torchinov removed the influence of Stalin’s “natural materialism”⁹ when studying Laozi, and he no longer used simple “idealism” or “materialism” to characterize Laozi’s thoughts, leaning toward the Marxist—Leninist “new materialism”. However, there were also certain limitations. Torchinov did not thoroughly implement Mann’s “materialism”, that is, paying attention to social practice and revealing the meaning of life. Popovkin Andrej Vladimirovich (1974–) pointed out when evaluating the works of Malyavin and Torchinov that, in their works, they tried to understand Eastern teachings from the perspective of phenomenological hermeneutics. Meanwhile, Malyavin and Torchinov also compared Laozi’s theory with Russian intuitionism (Popovkin 2006, p. 164).

Malyavin, a famous contemporary sinologist, has made great contributions to the Russian study on Laozi. He published a series of works such as *Laozi—the Daodejing: a Book about the Way of life (Lao-Czy—Dao-De czin: kniga o Puti zhizni)* (2010), *Daoist canons in new translations by V.V. Malyavin (Daoskie kanony v novyh perevodah V.V. Malyavina)* (2017–2019), etc. He also translated *The Library of Chinese Classics—Laozi* from Chinese to Russian in 2009 with Li Yingnan 李英男, a Russian Professor at the Beijing Foreign Studies University. This translation combines the advantages of the translators from the two countries. They took Professor Chen Guyin 陳鼓應’s *Annotation, Interpretation, and Comments on Laozi* as the parallel Chinese version, and paid great attention to the accuracy and elegance of the target language. Malyavin followed the modern hermeneutic theory of Heidegger-Gadamer. In his works, he regarded “Dao” as an independent concept with both objective and subjective dimensions, and the basis of matter and spirit co-exist in this concept (Malyavin 2010, pp. 698–99).

The third group are the symbolists, represented by Kobzev. He attempted to synthesize the above two methodologies. He believed that symbolism, or the so-called “symbol”, was the essence of traditional Chinese philosophy, and that this symbolism required multifaceted, multidimensional (including metaphorically appropriate, scientifically concrete, and philosophically abstracted) interpretations. He clarified that the symbolic concept was characterized by both the feature of poetic language and the simplicity of mathematical formulas. The characteristic of traditional Chinese philosophical terms is that they can construct texts with metaphorical properties and rational interpretation.

On the basis of Kobzev’s classification above, there are also some sinologists who have approached Daoism from a more international perspective, and are good at using research methods of Chinese and Western comparative philosophy. We think that this can be classified as the fourth school, that is, comparative philosophy, represented by Luk’yanov Anatolij Evgen’evich (1948–2021) and Grigor’eva Tat’yana Petrovna (1929–2014), etc. Luk’yanov was a representative figure in contemporary Russian Daoist research. In 1991, the People’s Friendship University published Luk’yanov’s monograph *Laozi*:

Early Daoist Philosophy (Lao-tszy: Filosofiya rannego daosizma). In 2008, Luk'yanov's latest translation of the *Daodejing* was published in Moscow. In order to express the hidden rhythm in prose language, the translation consisted of two parallel versions: the prose version and the poetic version, with the second version translated by his collaborator Abramenko Vladimir Petrovich (1932–2016). Luk'yanov believed that "Dao" was the symbol of the entire ancient Chinese philosophical culture. All natural and human systems in the world were adjusted according to the rhythm of "Dao", and they regenerated the material, spiritual, and ideal image of "Dao" in their own cycle. "Dao" was not so much a concept, but an organic whole that embodied a certain reality, forming the human–society–natural circle of the "Chinese universe". He attempted to explain the connotation of "Dao" with theories such as anthropology and cosmology. By combining relevant theories of Chinese and Western philosophy, he compared those primitive cosmological paradigms of "Dao" culture with the Indian culture of "Aum" and the Greek culture of "Logos". In 2020, Luk'yanov explained how to integrate Chinese "Dao" culture into Russian "glagol" culture¹⁰ in his article "Prospects for Russian Translation of Ancient Books of 'Dao' Culture", and built a complete system of Russian national culture. In his view, Chinese spiritual culture evolved with the continuous interpretation of the keyword "Dao", which formed the inner circle of Chinese spiritual culture. It was also one of the eternal driving forces behind the development of Chinese society. It is a pity that Mr. Luk'yanov passed away from COVID-19 in 2021, which is undoubtedly a huge loss to the Russian study on Laozi. Another representative, Grigor'eva, published her book *Dao and Logos (Dao i Logos)* in 1992. The author compared Eastern and Western philosophy and believed that the relations among cultures boiled down to the unity in diversity. "Dao" and "logos" are very different in their origin and development, but they have similarities in knowledge orientation and philosophical meaning. In her book, she discussed the unique cultural paradigms of the ancient Chinese and ancient Greeks, explored the similarities and discrepancies of the basic concepts of philosophy between the two cultures, and finally, proposed the complementarity of Eastern and Western cultures and predicted that the two will inevitably meet and be compatible in the future (Grigor'eva 1992, p.41).

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of its mainstream ideology, Russian sinologists increasingly recognized the important role played by Chinese philosophy in promoting the development of world spiritual civilization, and paid particular attention to the modern relevance of traditional sinology and the prospect of the interaction between Chinese and Western cultures, making sinology research a broader interdisciplinary field. Modern and contemporary sinologists have carried out multi-level interdisciplinary research on Daoist literature from textual analysis, linguistics, semiotics, cultural studies, and even mathematics. This debate and synthesis of different research methods have been extended and continued in Russia today.

Entering the 21st century, the study on the *Daodejing* is thriving, and it has become a new trend in Russia to study the annotated Russian translations of the *Daodejing*. The monograph of Maslov Aleksej Aleksandrovich (1964–) *The Mystery of the Dao (Misteriya Dao)* created a new model for the study of the Russian translation of the *Daodejing*, and it is the first work that reproduces the tradition and feature of the annotation on the *Daodejing*. Not only did Maslov make his own annotations, but he also translated the full text of Wang Bi's 王弼 annotations into Russian for the first time. His interpretation was full of mysticism and religious rituals, and at the same time, he used symbolism to reveal the mysterious wisdom of ancient China vividly. He pointed out: "Since the prototype of Dao is the world, the world is symbolic. On the one hand, it is absolutely real, and everything does exist. On the other hand, behind this world, there is a more real, more valuable and more essential world. But this world is empty, hidden, invisible, illusory" (Maslov 1996, p. 76).

We mentioned the concept of "Double Dao" in the *Daodejing* previously, but Maslov disagreed with this point of view, arguing that although the contradictoriness of "Dao" left some room for the "Double Dao" interpretation, this might contradict the logic of the whole book, because "Dao" is everywhere in the *Daodejing*, while You 有—Wu 無

comes from the same origin but with different names (Maslov 2005, p. 118). That is to say, the concepts of You–Wu in Chinese philosophy complement each other, unlike the contradictory Being/Non-Being division in Western thought.

As Global Laozegetics and closer cultural exchanges between China and Russia thrived, the dissemination and influence of the *Daodejing* in Russia was no longer limited to academia, but was also felt by ordinary people. Malyavin once said that “Dao” is a kind of truth that should not be objectified in concept, rather, it should be made part of people’s daily life experience. In addition to serious philosophical discussions, there are many writers who have studied and discussed the *Daodejing* in their own way. Take Burdonov Igor’ Borisovich (1948–) as an example, where his translation is full of personal subjectivity and associations. His work of translation is named *Interpreting Daodejing in Lipovka* (Dao Deh Lipovka Vehj). In the first chapter, he uses his hometown of Lipovka to refer to “Dao”, giving his hometown an abstract, perceivable yet indescribable meaning, and this was his personal rewriting and creation. In May 2018, the latest version of the *Daodejing* translated by Kondrashova Lyudmila Ivanovna was published. This edition added the calligraphy of the famous Chinese calligrapher Zhao Xueli 趙學禮 and illustrations of the famous Russian artist Konyuhov Fyodor Filippovich. With both pictures and texts, this version has both literary and esthetic value, which promotes the cultural exchange between the Chinese and Russian people. When translating, Kondrashova bore the modern readers in mind, making Laozi’s thoughts more popular and accessible to the public. During this period, scholars began to use scientific methods to conduct multi-angle, in-depth, and specific translation research on Daoism, trying to restore the *Daodejing* to the greatest extent possible in the Russian cultural context, and building a platform for Russian and Chinese people to have a cultural dialogue with each other.

Against the background of ever-growing passion in the translation and research on the *Daodejing*, in addition to the classic versions introduced above, many experts and scholars have tried to translate it in whole or in part. For example, Baranov Aleksandr Nikolaevich (1948–2021) published his translation of the *Daodejing* in 1998 based on R. B. Blakney’s English translation, and he compared the *Daodejing* to the *Bible* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. In 1999, the Russian translation by Semenenko Ivan Ivanovich (1947–) was published in Moscow, which had precise language and detailed annotations. He pointed out that the *Daodejing* helped to reveal the mystery of life and to find oneself in the “Dao”. In 2000, a translation by Polezhaeva YULiya was published, which adopted the translation strategy of domestication, thus losing the Chinese style to a certain extent. In 2002, Solov’eva Marina Pavlovna (1952–) published another version, which was more of a rewriting instead of a translation, since the author was trying to make the content easier to understand with his own narration. Vinogradskij Bronislav Bronislavovich (1957–) has translated the *Daodejing* several times, and published a separate edition in 2014, which not only provided the author’s latest version of translation, but also contained the author’s unique interpretation. In addition, some translators tried to adopt a poetic style to translate the *Daodejing* such as Borushko Oleg Matveevich (1996), Kang Yu (1991), Feano (2001, 2005), and so on.

To sum up, Russian sinologists in this period completely removed the philosophical research model of the Soviet period, broke through the simple dichotomy of materialism and idealism, and freed themselves from treating the history of philosophical development as a response to class struggle, thus revealing the intrinsic characteristics of Chinese philosophy and culture. The diversification of theories has also promoted further innovations and explorations in Chinese philosophical and religious studies in Russia. It can be seen that Russian philosophical research on the “Dao” has been developed in a more multifaceted and open direction, and its connotation has become clearer and richer in the process of cultural exchange and collision. The Russian readers’ understanding of “Dao” in the *Daodejing* has also been continuously enriched and improved.

5. Summary and Conclusions

The word “Dao” has a broad connotation and spiritual meaning that is “perceivable but indescribable”. It is not only a microcosm of linguistic and cultural phenomena, but also a multi-faceted embodiment of historical philosophy. From the perspective of translation, with the deepening of the world’s understanding of Chinese culture, sinologists have realized that “Dao” contains a wide range of meanings, and there is no Russian word that can cover all of the spirit contained in the cultural connotation of “Dao”. In the period of Imperial Russia, sinologists had different understandings of “Dao”, and they came up with different translations such as “Way” (*put’*), “God” (*bog*), “Reason” (*razum*) and so on. This kind of inconsistent translation not only affected the integrity of the terminology, but also led to the loss of cultural meaning of the source language. Nowadays, we tend to use the generally accepted transliteration of “Dao”, which has penetrated into the Russian language and become a culture-loaded word with rich connotation.

A review of different understandings of “Dao” in the *Daodejing* revealed that Russian sinologists are greatly restricted and influenced by the theoretical background, academic prejudice, social, and political environment. They tend to be pragmatic in their research, which might be religiously and politically motivated. In terms of research methods and ideas, the Russian sinologists’ research on “Dao” was affected by the political interference from the very beginning, and they were inclined to adhere to their thoughts or change their academic position with the changing ideology. In the research process and direction, the studies on Laozi in China and Russia were once in sync with each other. In terms of learning and reception, Russian scholars’ understanding and translation of “Dao” has a strong national character. Russian sinologists are good at integrating the essence of traditional Chinese culture and the self-consciousness of their own nation, refining the connotations of “wisdom”, “law”, and “nature”, which shows the Russian nation’s insistence on sticking to its original culture and its expectation of traditional Chinese culture.

Most Russian sinologists highly appraise and respect the study of Laozi and “Dao”. However, during the process of translation and research, they inevitably put “Dao” into the Russian cultural context and use Western philosophical or religious concepts to interpret Chinese keywords of traditional culture, compounded with the influence of social ideology and the limitation of the translator’s identity, cultural distortion, and misreading may occur to a certain extent, which is also the research limitations from the perspective of others. In the Imperial Russian Period, researchers were influenced by the religious vision when studying Laozi. In the Soviet Period, one of the distinctive features was applying the theoretical vision and research methods of “materialism” in the studies of Laozi. Nowadays, the research on Laozi is increasingly diversified and multi-dimensional, and it can be seen that the differences in the research methods and theoretical perspectives in different periods have presented completely different understandings and even conflicts. This article takes “Dao”, a keyword and core concept in the *Daodejing*, as the research object, investigated the understanding and interpretation of “Dao” in Russia in a historical review, and explored the interpretive trends and reception of the *Daodejing* in Russia, which, hopefully, will help to complement the traditional study on Laozi, and also enrich the depth and breadth of Global Laozegetics.

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Notes

- ¹ Sinology, in a narrow sense, refers to a comprehensive interdisciplinary study related to China and Chinese culture, it mainly involves language, literature, history, religion, and philosophy. It also includes Manchus study, Mongolian study, Tibetan study, Tangutology, and Khitan study in a broad sense, but sinology in this article is used in a narrow sense.
- ² Target-culture-oriented translation strategy refers to the translation strategy in which a transparent and fluent style is adopted to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for the target language reader. It means making the translated text recognizable and familiar and thus bringing the foreign culture closer to the reader in the target culture. It is just like Friedrich Schleiermacher's standpoint, which "leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him".
- ³ The manuscript is kept at the Archive of foreign policy of the Russian Empire, f. SPb. Main archive 1–5, 1817–1840; d.1, folder 2, l.36, autograph.
- ⁴ Tolstoyism arose in the Russian Empire in the 1880s on the basis of the teachings of Leo Tolstoj. The main principles are: "non-resistance to evil by violence", "moral self-improvement", "renunciation of hostility with any people ('love your enemies)". "Non-resistance to evil by violence" was put forward in response to the reality of Russian and Western capitalist society at that time; "moral self-improvement" focused on exploring human nature, thus eliminating the root cause of evil; "renunciation of hostility with any people ('love your enemies)" was a beautiful vision that underpinned the future of human society. Tolstoj's interpretation of "Dao" was the basis of the third principle.
- ⁵ By Orientalism, I mean what defined by Edward Said as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident,' and a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." (Edward 1979, pp. 2–3) David Schimmelpenninck Van Der Oye and Susanna Lim both showed that Orientalism in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union is more complex than the Saidian one.
- ⁶ Slavism is usually regarded as one of the main trends in Russian religious philosophy in the middle of the 19th century. The philosophy of history and the Russian view of history are its main subjects of study. In the philosophical realm, Slavism values the role played by faith. Faith is not understood as rational intuition or supersensory perception, but rather as the principle that unites the elements and forces of human intellect such as will, sensibility, and understanding. Only "faith" can overcome the limitations of individual rationality.
- ⁷ The monograph *Ancient Chinese Philosopher Laozi and His Doctrine* summarizes the position of Laozi's thoughts in the history of ancient Chinese philosophy, and gives an account of the social and historical situation as well as the ethical theory when the *Daodejing* came out. The book also discusses the materialistic nature of "Dao", and how the Western European bourgeoisie think of the *Daodejing*. In addition, it also analyzes the research on the *Daodejing* in Russia before the revolution, and it attaches the preface and translation of the *Daodejing*. This work had great influence at that time and was the representative work of studying the *Daodejing* in the Soviet era. It was translated into Chinese in 1957, and the Chinese title is 《中國古代哲學家老子及其學說》.
- ⁸ During the same period, there were also academic debates about the nature of Laozi's philosophy in China. For example, Feng Youlan 馮友蘭, Ren Jiyu 任繼愈, etc. believed that Laozi was a materialist, while Hu Ruichang 胡瑞昌, Hu Ruixiang 胡瑞祥, Yang Liuqiao 楊柳橋, etc. argued that Laozi's philosophy could only be objective idealism.
- ⁹ This article distinguishes between two kinds of "materialism": Stalin-style "materialism" and Mann's "materialism". The establishment of the "materialism" of Marxism in a broad sense is based on Marx and Engels, while the "materialism" of Mann has been widely spread in the Soviet Union because of the promotion of Plekhanov and Lenin. However, Stalin transformed the Marxist-Leninist "new materialism" into a narrow "natural materialism". Stalin-style "materialism" has always been the dominant research paradigm in Soviet social science research, and the views of Yang Xingshun we mentioned above are closer to Stalin's "natural materialism".
- ¹⁰ Luk'yanov regarded "glagol" (Глагол) culture as the archetype of Russian culture from the perspective of philosophy and culture, believing that the Russian "glagol" was the same as the Chinese Dao, the Indian Aum, and the Greek Logos, and they all had the meaning of words, speech, and discourse.

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Article

Challenge and Revolution: An Analysis of Stanislas Julien's Translation of the *Daodejing*

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Abstract: Retranslation constitutes a special case, as it involves a double creation of values that are determined not only by the ones inscribed in the source text but also by the ones inscribed in the previous translations. Therefore, retranslations initiate dialogues with and even challenges to the previous versions. This paper, rooted in the concept of retranslation, focuses on the first complete published translation of the *Daodejing* in Europe, the 1842 *Lao Tseu Tao Te King: Le Livre de la Voie et de la Vertu*, by Stanislas Julien and investigates the revolutionary way Julien interpreted this ancient Chinese classic. Through an analysis of the paratexts and extratexts related to this French version and previous translations, this paper finds that Julien challenged the Christianized and Westernized interpretations of the *Daodejing* by the European missionaries and sinologists before him and proposed a new system of interpretation: to interpret the *Daodejing* from the perspective of Laozi and based on the Daoist classics and commentaries. Julien's translation and interpretations have demonstrated his respect for heterogeneous cultures by acknowledging cultural differences, and he strengthened the authority of his translation by challenging the ideas in previous translations, which makes the retranslation an indispensable reference for the study of Laozi and Daoism.

Keywords: Stanislas Julien; *Daodejing*; retranslation; *Tao Te King*; revolution; influence; sinology

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1. Introduction

In 1842, the French translation of the *Daodejing* (a fundamental text for both philosophical and religious Daoism) by sinologist Stanislas Julien (1797–1873) was born. This French version, *Lao Tseu Tao Te King: Le Livre de la Voie et de la Vertu* (hereafter *Tao Te King*), is remarkable, as it is the first complete translation of *Daodejing* in both French sinology and Western sinology. Upon its publication, it received high praise among European scholars and contributed to the reputation of French sinology. This translation became an important reference for many European scholars who were interested in this ancient Chinese classic. The German philosopher F.W.J. Schelling (1775–1854) praised Julien for his painstaking efforts and extraordinary intelligence in this translation, saying that he could not have comprehended and appreciated the *Daodejing* without Julien's interpretation (Julien 1842a, p. 42). Charles de Harlez (1832–1899), a Belgian Orientalist, shared the same view that because of Julien's translation, European readers greatly improved their understanding of the *Daodejing* (de Harlez 1891, p. 1). Julien's *Tao Te King* has enjoyed long-lasting popularity and is still reprinted in the twenty-first century.¹ It has been regarded as a classic in the translation history of the *Daodejing* and a must-read referential book for the study of the *Daodejing*.

2. Retranslation, Paratext, and Extratext

Retranslation is the concept that describes the production of multiple translations of the same work. There are two approaches to the study of retranslation (Deane-Cox 2014). The first one is original-text-oriented, arguing for or against the retranslation hypotheses that “the later translations tend to be closer to the source text” (Chesterman 2004, p. 8). The

ontological logic that lies behind his hypotheses is that the previous translations, especially the first translation, are often defective and deficient in displaying the language complexity and cultural difference of the original text (Berman 1990). Bensimon (1990) also attributes the necessity of retranslation to the absence of foreignness and exoticisms at different levels in the first translation. Case studies following this first approach often make comparative textual analyses between retranslation and previous translations, e.g., Wei (2019). The second one is target-text-oriented, considering the relationships and interactions among the existing translations of the same work. There are indeed cases where a retranslation is produced without awareness of the pre-existing translation. Studies in this “passive” retranslation often attribute its production to the evolving social, cultural, or ideological context that “translations are markers in time that update the comprehension of a text with the linguistic sensibilities of an instant in an ever-evolving history” (Stavans and Boucetta 2020, p. 100). However, Pym (1998, p. 83) states that the more active and valuable retranslations are those that challenge the validity of the previous translations. Venuti (2013, p. 96) also implies that more attention needs to be paid to cases that “possess this crucial awareness and justify themselves by establishing their differences from one or more previous versions”. Though the dialogue between a retranslation and previous translations can be reverential or antagonistic, studies of retranslations are more likely to agree with Pym and Venuti, suggesting that “the argument of retranslation as challenge carries considerable weight” (Deane-Cox 2014, p. 15). Though the second approach is often target-text-oriented, there are many occasions where the challenge of previous translations is inextricably linked to the discussion of equivalence between these translations and the original text.

Deane-Cox (2014), in the monograph *Retranslation: Translation, Literature and Reinterpretation*, proposes a methodological approach to the study of retranslation: that is, to analyze the paratextual and extratextual materials of a (re)translation. Paratext is “what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers” in the form of peritext (such as title, book cover, introduction, and preface) and epitext (such as interviews, diary entries, and correspondence) (Genette 1997, p. 3). In the sphere of translation studies, while paratext is the material that is contributed by the translator, publisher, or other agents in the production of a (translation) book, extratext refers to the articles and reviews that are related to the translations, the translators, or other agents (Deane-Cox 2014, p. 29). The former can be used to identify the interactions between the (re)translations and assess the assumption of challenge and rivalry; and the latter can be used to explore the relationship between the work (source work, translations, and retranslations) and target fields (ibid., p. 34), such as the acceptance and influence of a retranslation in the target field. In the eyes of the researchers, these texts can help reconstruct the dialogue between the retranslation (re-translator), the original text (author), the pre-existing translations (previous translators), and even the translations (translators) in later times.

Though what Julien produced is the first complete translation in Europe, there were several selective translations before this French version. Besides, if we adopt the wide sense of translation as understanding, it leads us to the notion that “the process of translation cannot dispense with interpretation” (Ahmed 2009, p. 56); and those interpretations of lines or words in the *Daodejing* before Julien’s version can be regarded as earlier translations in European languages engaged by Julien. Therefore, Julien’s *Tao Te King* is a type of retranslation of the *Daodejing*. This paper, in a diachronic manner, will investigate the differences between Julien’s interpretations of the *Daodejing* with previous translations, particularly Julien’s challenges to previous translations with his retranslation as well as its acceptance by and influence on its readers. Drawing on the methodological approach provided by Deane-Cox, this paper will conduct a textual analysis of the paratexts and extratexts related to Julien’s retranslations of the *Daodejing*. The texts for analysis include paratexts, introduction, notes, and an article (“Observations détachées sur le texte et les différentes éditions de *Lao-tseu*”) in *Lao Tseu Tao Te King: Le Livre de la Voie et de la Vertu* (1842) and following extratexts: “Tchong-koué-hio-thang” (中國學堂) (1837) and “Réponse

à la lettre de M. Jaquet" (1838) by Julien, introduction in *Textes taoïstes traduits des originaux chinois et commentés* (1891) by Charles de Harlez, and *Simple exposé d'un fait honorable odieusement dénaturé dans un libelle récent de M. Pauthier* (Julien 1842a) by Julien.

3. Translation and Perception of the *Daodejing* in Europe before Stanislas Julien's *Tao Te King*

Misha Tadd (2019) has identified 2000 translations of the *Daodejing* in 94 languages; and according to him, the first global expansions of the translations of the *Daodejing* in Europe, "mostly fragmentary", were contributed by European missionaries "during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries" (from the late Ming dynasty to the middle Qing dynasty) (Tadd 2022a, p. 91). However, in fact, the missionaries at that time paid more attention to Confucianism than Daoism, as they realized that Confucian thoughts occupied the orthodox status in China. This preference can be found in Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), one of the founding figures of the Jesuit China missions. The Italian Jesuit priest dressed in Confucian clothes, built a close relationship with scholar-bureaucrats, and translated many Confucius classics after he began his missionary work in China in 1582. All these behaviors and activities are in line with his program of integrating Christianity with Confucian traditions, which has become a guiding principle for the latter missionaries.

Despite being less valued, the *Daodejing* and other Daoist classics were still explored by the early European missionaries in the Ming dynasty. One of their primary jobs is to build connections between the *Daodejing* and the Christian code, as it was their mission to prove the universal values of the Bible. Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730), the leading representative of the Jesuit Figurists, who are also called "suoyin pai jiaoshi 索隱派教士 (missionaries who seek the obscure)", not only believed in the "mystical and hidden messages of God" in *Yijing* (易經) (Wei 2018, pp. 3, 4) but also endeavored to find the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in the *Daodejing* (Zhang 2001, p. 327). Bouvet's assistant Jean-François Foucquet (1663–1739), however, was more focused; he concentrated on Daoism. In his commentary on the *Daodejing*, he demonstrates his ideas through the book title, "Tao designates the Sovereign God whom we Christians worship" (*Tao designari Deum Summum, quem nos Christiani colimus*) (Pfister 1932, p. 553).²

Many of these Jesuit Figurists found this association between Daoism and the Trinity in the following two sentences:

Sentence-1 (Chapter 14)

視之不見名曰夷，
聽之不聞名曰希，
搏之不得名曰微，

When you try to see cosmic law, you can't, so it gets called "invisible;"

When you try to hear it, you can't, so it gets called "inaudible;"

And when you try to grasp hold of it, you can't, so it gets called "infinitesimal."

Sentence-2 (Chapter 42)

道生一，
一生二，
二生三，
三生萬物。

Cosmic law gives birth to One;

This one gives birth to Two;

These two give birth the Three;

And these Three give birth to all.³

Joseph-Henri-Marie de Prémare (1666–1736) claims that the three Chinese characters "Yi" (夷), "Xi" (希), and "Wei" (微) in Sentence-1 produce a similar pronunciation of

“Yahweh” when they are combined, which shows the presence of Jesus in the classic (Dehergne 1976, p. 63). Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718–1793) was also fascinated by the assuming connections that his translation of the *Daodejing* is limited to Sentence-2 and Chapter 14 where Sentence-1 is located. He agrees with the idea that Sentence-2 legitimizes the relationship between Daoism and the Trinity (Amiot 1776, p. 300). Louis Lecomte (1655–1729) argues that Sentence-2, in which the Dao is regarded as the foundation of true wisdom, proves that this ancient philosopher has knowledge of the Trinity (Lecomte 1696, p. 121). The views of these representative figures paint a picture that the Jesuit Figurists aimed to Christianize the *Daodejing* and graft a Chinese version of Jesus into the Chinese classics (Wei 2020).

While these Jesuit Figurists in China during the Ming and Qing dynasty were inspired to announce that they had found the Trinity in ancient Chinese classic, Jean-Pierre-Abel Rémusat (1788–1832), the first professor of *La Chaire de langues et littératures chinoises et tartares-mandchoues* at the *Collège de France*, reminds us that these Figurists did not provide a solid foundation for the “great discovery” (Rémusat 1823, p. 2). Rémusat firmly believed in the connection and set out to find the proof. To obtain this goal, he investigated Laozi’s life and concluded that Laozi traveled to the West.⁴ He also selectively translated Chapter 1, Chapter 14, Chapter 25, Chapter 41, and Chapter 42 of the *Daodejing*, with the unconcealed purpose: “We are not investigating whether Laozi was a great metaphysician or not, but we are making sure whether he has taken ideas from the works of some other philosopher” (ibid., p. 21). These other philosophers are disclosed in the subtitle of his biographic study of Laozi, “Chinese philosopher whose ideas commonly attributed to Pythagoras, Plato, and their followers” (*Philosophe chinois qui a professé les opinions communément attribuées à Pythagore, à Platon et à leurs disciples*).

Like his predecessors, Rémusat was attracted to and devoted to the interpretation of Dao and Sentence-1. He argues that there is no ideal equivalence of Dao in Western languages, and it can only be explained with the Greek word λόγος (Logos) and its threefold meanings, namely the absolute being (*souverain être*), reason (*raison*), and word (*parole*) (ibid., p. 24). He also thinks that Chapter 14 is the most suitable material for investigating the source of Laozi’s philosophy. Under the guidance of this belief, Rémusat similarly reaches the conclusion that the *Daodejing* conforms to the doctrine of the Trinity, as the three Chinese characters “Yi” (夷), “Xi” (希), “Wei” (微) together produce the same sound as “Yahweh”. More than that, he also claims that these characters are meaningless in the Chinese language system, so they must be imported as foreign signs (ibid., p. 48). It is without any surprise that these “foreign signs” were discovered by Rémusat to be imported from the West: “I regard these characters as an indisputable mark that the thoughts of Pythagoras and Plato have been brought to China” though he admits that the Chinese obtain a more accurate and profound understanding of “Yahweh” than the Greeks (ibid.).

Rémusat managed to reverse the imbalanced attention the missionaries paid to Confucian and Daoist traditions but also sought to prove their assumptions about the connection between the ancient Chinese classic and the Trinity. Compared with his predecessors, Rémusat’s “figurist-inspired interpretations” (Pohl 2003, p. 470) of Sentence-1 go further than Jesuit missionaries (Figurists) on this intellectual trajectory. He does more than the Christianization of Chinese classics; he seeks proof of the Western influences on the Far East. However, these Christianized or Westernized interpretations are questioned by an expert in comparative literature, René Étiemble (1909–2002): “Can we push forward the Judeo-Christian imperialism and Eurocentrism any further?” (*Peut-on pousser plus loin l’impérialisme judéo-chrétien et l’eurocentrisme?*) (Étiemble 1980, p. xxx). Étiemble’s remark resonates with many translation scholars of postcolonial theory, such as Lawrence Venuti and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak from the late 1980s. However, it also finds its sympathy about 150 years ago by Stanislas Julien, the translator of the first complete published translation of the *Daodejing*.

4. Stanislas Julien's *Tao Te King*: Challenge and Revolution

Since the missionaries during the Ming and Qing dynasty emphasized Confucianism over Daoism, and they studied the *Daodejing* only to find coincidences and connections between the classics and prophetic wisdom, their translations were mostly fragmentary. The British Museum houses a Latin manuscript of the *Daodejing*, which may have been authored by the Belgian Jesuit Jean-François Noëlas (1669–1740) and is so far found to be the earliest known complete Western translation of the *Daodejing*, but this manuscript was not published by then (Tadd 2022a, p. 94) and has a limited impact (Tadd 2022b, p. 5; Pan 2021, p. 252). Rémusat, in the preface of his version of *The Book of Recompense and Punishment* (*Taishang Ganying Pian* 太上感應篇) in 1816, announced a translation project of Chinese philosophical and religious books, among which the first to be translated is the *Daodejing*, “a work as respectable for its antiquity as for the name of its author and the excellence of the maxims it contains”. He regarded a complete translation and clear interpretation of the *Daodejing* as a great contribution to sinology: “it is only when it has been translated that we will be able to pronounce with full knowledge of the facts on the religious doctrine of the Tao-sse” (Rémusat 1816, p. 7). This goal was finally achieved by his student Stanislas Julien with his translation *Tao Te King* in 1842.

However, in 1838, before Julien's publication of *Tao Te King*, Guillaume Pauthier (1801–1873), another student of Rémusat, professed that he had finished a complete translation titled *Le Tao-te-king, ou le Livre révééré de la raison suprême et de la vertu* and that it was the real first complete version in French. After Julien's *Tao Te King* was published in 1842, Pauthier wrote an open letter, “Vindiciae Sinicae: Dernière réponse à M. Stanislas Julien”, in which he accused Julien of blocking his translation's application for publication by the Imprimerie Royale in 1834. He also stated that Julien had produced *Tao Te King* based on Pauthier's translation. Julien soon made a serious response to the accusations, “Simple exposé d'un fait honorable odieusement dénaturé dans un libelle récent de M. Pauthier”, in which he mocked, “how lunatic it is for someone who is a master of Mandarin to plagiarize the awful draft of a green hand who has never contributed any accurate translations of Chinese works” (Julien 1842a, pp. 9, 12). Though Julien is reluctant to be compared with Pauthier, their different way of interpretation is easy to be identified. Julien is inclined to approach the *Daodejing* in a philological way, capturing the meanings by consulting the relevant Daoist commentaries in Chinese. On the other hand, Pauthier tends to base his philosophical interpretations on the philosophy of religions in other cultures. For example, in his earlier article on the origin of Dao, *Mémoire sur l'origine et la propagation de la doctrine du Tao, fondée par Lao-tseu*, Pauthier (1831, p. 49) argues that Laozi's thoughts belong to the Sāṅkhya and Védānta philosophies of India; and later in his “claimed-to-be” first complete translation, Pauthier (1838, p. 5), in the *Argument* (his introduction) to the first chapter of the *Daodejing*, transliterates the Dao as Tao and interprets it with words from “Christian dictionary”, such as “the supreme and primordial reason”, “the supreme principle”, “the prime cause”, and “the origin of things”.⁵ The controversy between Julien and Pauthier, to some extent, stimulated the interest of more European readers in *Tao Te King*. In the end, current records only can prove that Pauthier translated the first nine chapters of the *Daodejing*, and Julien's translation is the first full French version and is what started an influential revolution in the European study of the *Daodejing*.

As the first complete translation of the *Daodejing* in Europe, it has been appraised for its scientific and objective interpretation, having rebutted some of the ideas in previous interpretations. Though falling in the dispute with Pauthier over the “first man to have provided a complete translation of the *Daodejing* in French”, Julien, in the paratexts and extratexts, gives little space to remark on Pauthier's translation; maybe, as what he suggests in the response that he would be lunatic to plagiarize the awful draft, there is “no need” for him to talk about or challenge this “awful” translation.

4.1. Julien's Interpretation of Dao

Julien spent 16 years translating the *Daodejing*. In 1826, following the suggestion of Victor Cousin (1792–1867), the founder of eclecticism, Julien began to translate the classic and quickly completed half of it due to his talent in language. However, he ceased the work, as there arose much confusion during the effort due to a shortage of referential materials. Only in 1834 did he restart the project after being given *Laozi's Wings* (*Laozi Yi* 老子翼), *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Laozi* (河上公章句), and other commentaries. After the painstaking efforts of translation, revision, and proofreading, Julien finally presented his rigorous completed French edition, *Lao Tseu Tao Te King, Le Livre de la Voie et de la Vertu* (Julien 1842b, p. ii).

During the 16 years of translation, Julien did not stop putting effort into the comprehension of Dao and was never restricted in expressing his ideas about Dao. In July 1837, he published an article “Tchong-koué-hio-thang” in the *Journal asiatique* as a response to Karl Friedrich Neumann's (1793–1870) translation of *Tchhang-thsing-tsing king* (常清靜經, *The Sutra of Pure and Calm By Lao-Zi*) in 1836. He criticized that Neumann's translation of this philosophical work was wrong almost from beginning to end (*presque d'un bout à l'autre*); and he also provided his translation, in which he rendered the Chinese character Dao as *la Voie* (or Tao through transliteration) (Julien 1837, p. 85).

In October of the same year, the *Journal asiatique* published a letter, “Lettre à M. le Rédacteur du *Journal asiatique*”, contributed by a reader who used the pseudonym Siao-Tseu.⁶ This Tseu reader notes that Julien translated the philosophical work with great care and provided a profound interpretation of it (Siao-Tseu 1837, pp. 545–46). Nonetheless, he expresses disapproval for some of Julien's translations, in particular, the rendering of Dao as *la Voie* (road); and he argues that *intelligence* is a much more appropriate translation of the Chinese character. Like what Julien did with his critique of Neumann, the Tseu reader provides his retranslation in the letter.

Four months later, Julien published a long 38-page paper in the *Journal asiatique* in response to the comments. He first discloses the real name of Siao-Tseu, which is Eugène Jaquet, and then criticizes Jaquet's translation line by line. It is not difficult to grasp the ferocity in this long piece. Julien comments that there are no published articles nor translations to prove Jaquet's knowledge of Chinese (Julien 1838, p. 259), while there are numerous indisputable translation examples to prove the groundlessness of his revisions (*ibid.*, pp. 260–61). It is in this long article that Julien clearly explains his translation of Dao as *la Voie* for the first time. He implies Jaquet's mistaken approach to Dao by arguing that the most appropriate route to the understanding of Dao is to consult the author Laozi, as well as other philosophers who lived nearly at the same time as Laozi. Julien also criticizes modern Daoist priests who have misunderstood the founder of Daoism by interpreting Dao as *intelligence*, which only directs us away from the path towards truth (*ibid.*, pp. 262–63); by contrast, rendering Dao as *la Voie* is completely in line with the meaning of the Daoist classics. He then interprets the lines that contain Dao in the *Daodejing* and *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Laozi* to prove his ideas. After thoroughly presenting his interpretive defense, Julien reaches the conclusion that the Dao in the thought of Laozi and other oldest Daoist philosophers excludes the meaning of *cause intelligente* and that *la Voie* contributes a more inclusive and sublime connotation to the word. Only *la Voie* “corresponds to the languages of these Daoist philosophers when they speak of the strength of Dao” (*ibid.*, pp. 263–64).

In the introduction of *Tao Te King*, Julien reassures the correctness of *la Voie* and restates the idea that *intelligence* only directs us away from the path toward truth. He proposes that the Dao is the absolute being deprived of actions, thoughts, and desires. Men, according to him, to reach the most sublime state should maintain absolute peace in their minds, having no thoughts, desires, or intelligence (which attributes to the disorder of body and mind). Therefore, Dao in the classic, as interpreted by him, is sometimes “the sublime *Voie* that all creatures have come to life” and sometimes the imitation of Dao “deprived of actions, thoughts, and desires”. Julien also announces his different interpretations of Dao

from that of Rémusat. He disagrees with Rémusat translating Dao as *raison primordiale* and hopes that those European scholars who were influenced by Rémusat should refrain from regarding Daoist priests as *rationalistes*. He reminds professional readers to be cautious when conducting a comparative reading between the *Daodejing* and the classics in the West: “My research only aims to guide readers to the ancient Chinese classic itself . . . I have no intention to draw a parallel between the thoughts of Lao Tzu and that of Plato and his followers” (ibid., p. xv). F.W.J. Schelling, one of the great German philosophers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, agrees with Julien’s translation of this essential concept in his *Philosophy of Mythology*, in which he writes,

Tao does not mean reason, as which it had been translated hitherto, and the learning of Tao does not mean learning of reason. Tao means gate, the learning of Tao is the learning of the great gate that leads into being, from non-existence, from mere potential existence through which finally all existence enters [into] real existence. The entire *Tao-te-King* aims at nothing else but to show through a great diversion of most meaningful expressions the great and insurmountable power of the non-existent. (Pohl 2003, p. 471)

While proposing to translate Dao as *la Voie* in the introduction, Julien also renders it into *Tao* in the translation. A close reading of his translation reveals that he has used *Tao* 77 times, *la voie* 7 times, and *la Voie* 5 times. It is also found that Julien prefers to use *Tao* when the Dao in the original Chinese text appears without any adjuncts or modifiers, and on other occasions, *la Voie* or *la voie* is adopted, for example, “la voie”, “les voies du ciel”, and “la voie du Saint.” As a strategy of conservation, transliteration displays the translator’s “acceptance of the difference by means of the reproduction of the cultural signs in the source text” (Aixela 1996, p. 54). Julien’s interpretation and transliteration of Dao demonstrate the arrangement of arguments in a retranslation: justifying the idea of one’s own by challenging the ideas of others. In deeper thought, however, we will find that Julien not only provides his unique understanding of Dao; he also offers a different way of approaching Dao, which carefully avoids making any random or careless analogies between the *Daodejing* and the classics in the West no matter how surprising and interesting it may sound.

4.2. Julien’s Interpretation of Yi Xi Wei (夷希微)

As discussed in the second section, the representatives of European missionaries and sinologists have different purposes and reading methods when interpreting the *Daodejing*. Out of religious motivation, the missionaries only selected the materials (in these classics) that are (thought to be) connected to the dogmas of Christianity. That is why they are so interested in Sentence-1 (in Chapter 14) and Sentence-2 (in Chapter 42), and their translations are most of the time only excerpts from the book. Though not driven by religious zeal, Rémusat also believed in this connection and was more determined in his findings. He claims to have found, through close readings, not only proof of the equivalence between Yi Xi Wei (夷希微) and Yahweh but also evidence of the presence of Pythagoras’ and Plato’s thoughts in the *Daodejing*.

While Julien declares his disagreement with those missionaries and early sinologists, he is gentler and more reserved in his tone regarding his teacher. He firstly acknowledges the fame of Rémusat, “the most prestigious sinologist in Europe”, and the significance of his work (*The Life and Opinions of Lao-tzu*) before expressing his divergent opinions. He humbly states that “the detailed examinations of the *Tao Te King* and its commentaries does not allow me to admit the curious conclusions” of these representatives (Julien 1842b, p. ii). Not only does Julien point out the bases (detailed examinations) of this statement but also excludes the possibility of bias and subjectivity by placing the non-human agents (examinations and commentaries) in the subject position of this sentence. Julien doubts the supposition that “Laozi had ever traveled to the West”. After investigating the ancient Chinese classics that recorded Laozi’s journey to the West, he finds that all these materials pointed to the same original source, *Bibliographies of Immortals* (*Shenxian Zhuan*, 神仙傳),

which is a collection of hagiographies written by Ge Hong 葛洪 nearly one thousand years after Laozi's death. Thus, he concludes that the story of Laozi's journey to the West was fabricated by people after his death.⁷

Julien comments that ideas about *Yi Xi Wei* are innovative but far from being well-grounded (Julien 1842b, pp. vi–vii). He finds signs in *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Laozi* that refute Rémusat's "findings" that the three Chinese characters *Yi Xi Wei* are devoid of meaning and not commonly used. He then presents an inference to us: the Chinese commentators are rigorous in annotating the *Daodejing*, and they highlight words that are not clear and provide interpretations; if the three Chinese characters had been imported words, how could the commentators over generations not have discovered this (*ibid.*, pp. vii–viii)? Moreover, he continues his reasoning by disclosing that the book *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Laozi* already recorded that "*Yi* means colorless, *Xi* means soundless, and *Wei* means shapeless", which proves that these characters were local words in the Chinese language. As to the "ill-grounded" inferences by the representative missionaries and scholars in Europe, Julien also provides his explanations. He states that these misinterpretations may have been caused by the obscurity of the *Daodejing*, but fundamentally, they are the products of the interpretation system (*système d'interprétation*) by these missionaries and scholars: looking for evidence of Christianity in the classic. Therefore, he appeals that "we should explore what is hidden in rather than looking for what we expect from the works of those ancient philosophers" (*ibid.*, p. xiii). Compared with the subjective or overly interpretation of the *Daodejing* by the earlier missionaries and the prestigious Rémusat, Julien's *Tao Te King* is more equivalent and faithful. Scholars judge that this translation "has reversed the trend to interpret the Daoist thoughts in Western discourses" (Lu and Gao 2020, p. 57), "has ended the Christianization of Daoist philosophy since eighteen-century" (Étiemble 1964, p. 96), and "has been an essential and classical work in the challenging studies of the *Daodejing*" (Réville 1889, p. 374).

4.3. Julien's Interpretation System

Julien's revolutionary interpretations in his translation are exemplified in his understanding of Dao and *Yi Xi Wei*, which are attributed to his guiding principle of reading Laozi from the perspective of Laozi and Daoism. This basic principle is based on his extensive readings of the commentaries of the *Daodejing*. As noted in the introduction of *Tao Te King*, Julien has consulted eight commentary books (ranging from Han dynasty to Ming dynasty) by Heshanggong (河上公), Ge Changgeng (葛長庚), Wang Yiqing (王一清), Wang Bi (王弼), Xue Hui (薛蕙), Chunyang zhenren (純陽真人), Jiao Hong (焦竑), and Deqing (德清), among which Jiao Hong's *Laozi's Wings* (*Laozi Yi* 老子翼) and Xue Hui's *Collected annotations on Laozi* (*Laozi Ji Jie* 老子集解) are the main references. According to him, Xue Hui's collected annotations form the basis of his understanding of the *Daodejing*, as it includes the most representative commentaries, while Jiao Hong's *Laozi's Wings* are more helpful in identifying the edition, characters, and layout of the classic, as it is more comprehensive. He has also referenced *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Laozi*.

Though Julien "confesses" in the introduction of his translation that he has consulted eight commentary books, a close and thorough reading will unveil that about twenty famous annotators of Laozi have been quoted in the footnotes, including Han Fei (韓非), Yan Junping (嚴君平), Du Daojian (杜道堅), Wang Yuanze (王元澤), Lu Nongshi (陸農師), Zhao Zhijian (趙志堅), Dong Sijing (董思靖), Lin Xiyi (林希逸), Fu Yi (傅奕), Su Ziyou (蘇子由), Lü Huiqing (呂惠卿), Li Xizhai (李息齋), Chen Jingyuan (陳景元), Li Hongfu (李宏甫), Li Rong (李榮), Li Yue (李約), Wu Youqing (吳幼清), Lu Xisheng (陸希聲), Wang Chunfu (王純甫), and Sima Guang (司馬光). Like many other translations of ancient Chinese classics, Julien's *Tao Te King* consists of translation and annotation. In cases where different interpretations of the same line are found in his referential materials, Julien presents them together in the endnotes, giving no comments and displaying no preferences. This non-interference act adds objectivity to his translation and interpretation as it initiates

dialogues between these annotations and, at the same time, “leaves readers to select the interpretation that they find most appropriate” (Julien 1842b, p. xvii).

It is easy to find that Julien is extremely cautious in selecting referential materials. This prudence can also be found in his categorization of the commentators in his referential materials: commentators of Daoism, commentators of Buddhism, and commentators of men of letters. He proposes to interpret the *Daodejing* based on the commentaries by the two former groups and be alert to the commentaries by the Confucian men of letters. He even criticizes that these Confucian intellectuals often interpret Laozi according to the ideas particular to the school of Confucius, which intends to constrain the development of Daoist philosophy. Therefore, he argues that commentaries of such spirit are of no value to those who want to enter intimately into the thought of Laozi, and it is unnecessary to report their names and the titles of the commentaries that they have published (*ibid.*, p. xxxviii).

Julien’s rigorousness in terms of the referential materials resembles, if not follows, the method of Qian-Jia School (*Qian-Jia xuepai* 乾嘉學派), famous for its textual research, adopting the academic methods of exegesis and examination by Confucian scholars during the Han period (206BC–220AD). However, his disapproval of annotations by Confucian men of letters is to some extent harsh and unfair. Certainly, it is a fact that during the Western Han dynasty (206BC–25AD), the followers of Laozi’s tradition and the followers of the Confucian tradition looked down upon each other.⁸ It is, however, also a fact that Daoism and Confucianism cannot always be clearly differentiated although they have their own belief systems (Xiong et al. 2005, p. 437). After the Wei and Jin dynasties, the two philosophical schools have complemented each other and together formed the foundation of the traditional Chinese culture. Julien has to some extent exaggerated or only focused on the difference and contradiction between the two schools by condemning the annotations provided by the Confucian men of letters. However, whether in the practice of translation or the arrangement of endnotes, Julien still quotes many words from these men of letters. Even Xue Hui and Jiao Hong, whom he regards as important figures for his understanding of the *Daodejing*, are actually Confucian intellectuals.

Though Julien’s translation and interpretations are not free of mistakes,⁹ the introduction and endnotes in his version are as thorough as unprecedented in the French Laozi studies.¹⁰ It shows his good knowledge of bibliography and good mastering of ancient Chinese classics compared to his contemporaries in the West. In the first half of the nineteenth century, when sinology undertaken by researchers in colleges was still influenced by the studies of missionaries, Julien’s interpretive methodology, engaging Laozi from the perspective of Laozi, Daoism, and traditional commentaries, is a revolutionary in its aim to adhere to the original historical understanding of the Chinese classic.

5. Influence and Value of Stanislas Julien’s *Tao Te King*

Researchers regard Julien’s French translation *Tao Te King* as “an excellent pioneer work in the field of Sinology” (Pohl 2003, p. 470), and it has been particularly influential in sinology for a long time (Xu 2009, p. 109). As Deane-Cox (2014, p. 17) finds, “dialogue [between translations of the same work] can be antagonistic, revelatory or reverential”, and Julien’s translation has been revered by the latter translators who possess the crucial awareness of its existence.

In the late half of the nineteenth century, many of the translations of the *Daodejing* in Europe were translated directly from Julien’s French version. This version even displays its influence in the United States in the same period. According to Tadd (2022a, p. 100), “Julien’s 1842 French Laozi is the source for the earliest complete but anonymous 1859 English manuscript translation housed at Yale University, the first published English translation by Chalmers, the second German translation by Strauss, and a more recent Romanian work”. This Yale-housed version is a word-by-word (or literal) translation of *Tao Te King* and nearly adds no materials to the English text. It is such a literal translation that some words in Julien’s version are copied without any linguistic transformations. For instance, *wu-wei* (無為) is rendered as *non-agir*, which is borrowed from Julien’s translation

(Yao 2016, p. 54). John Chalmers (1825–1899), who is regarded as the first translator of the *Daodejing* in English, also admits that “The French translation by M. Julien has been very helpful to me, and I have much pleasure in acknowledging my obligations to its author”; he even implies his utmost respect to the French version (like a translator shows the reverence to the author) with the humble gesture that “I have no wish or intention to supersede by this attempt to put the thoughts of Lau-tsze into a readable English dress” (Chalmers 1868, p. xix). James Legge (1815–1897), the famous English sinologist, also adopted Julien’s principle of adhering to the meaning of the text in his translation of the *Daodejing* (Yu 2020, p. 81). Julien’s translation of the essential concept of Dao has also been adopted by these translators. For example, the Yale-housed version translates it as “Way”. Though Victor von Strauss (1808–1899), who contributed the important German version, renders Dao as Tao through transliteration, he still interprets it as “Weg” (way) in the footnotes (Tadd 2018, p. 127).

Being regarded as “the first serious translation” (*la première traduction sérieuse*) (Étiemble 1980, p. xxx) by “the first European scholar to manage to present readers a true the *Daodejing* in the eyes of Chinese” (Yu 2020, p. 36), Julien’s *Tao Te King* has been an important reference for the studies of Daoism in Europe in the late half of the nineteenth century. The French scholar Désiré-Jean-Baptiste Marceron (1823–?) cited substantial materials from Julien’s translation to introduce the *Daodejing* in his important *Bibliographie du Taoïsme* (Marceron 1898, pp. 177–94). The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) also consulted this French version when he began his research on the ancient Chinese classic (Tadd 2022a, p. 101). Many European scholars in the nineteenth century who were not experts in studies of Daoist thoughts, such as F.W.J. Schelling and Charles de Harlez, also admit that their understanding of the *Daodejing* owes much to Julien’s interpretation.

Julien is revolutionary in his interpretation system of the *Daodejing* as well as the de-Eurocentrism of the process. The Jesuit Figurists and the sinologists such as Rémusat often Christianized or Westernized the ancient Chinese classic by selecting (or searching for) the expected words or twisting the meaning of the “appropriate” words in the 5000 characters. This is “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to [European] target-language cultural values” (Venuti 2017, p. 15). Differing from the strategy of domestication in the translation or interpretation of the classic prevailed in these European missionaries and intellectuals, Julien turns to the strategy of foreignization which places “an ethnodeviant pressure on [European cultural] values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text” (ibid.). This foreignizing strategy involves a deliberate inclusion of foreignizing elements that makes the translator visible and reminds the readers that they are reading a translation of a work from a foreign culture.

The profoundly insightful introduction and the footnotes based on substantial references in Julien’s *Tao Te King* are prominent signs of this foreignizing method. He has set the principle of reading or particularly interpreting ancient or foreign classics: one should look for what is there rather than what is expected in the book. Readers, including both professional and common readers, should make efforts to perceive the linguistic and cultural differences. He also proposed the method of interpreting ancient or foreign classics: not to read the original text as isolated text but instead to create the historical context of interpretation by joining the reading of the original text with other interpretations of the same text. Venuti (2013, p. 97) points out that retranslations have the active force to “maintain and strengthen the authority of a social institution by reaffirming the institutionalized interpretation of a canonical text”. By the same logic, the fact that Julien’s translation principle and system of interpretation have been accepted by the latter translators also infers that a retranslation can serve to maintain and strengthen the authority of a person by reaffirming the rightness (accurate interpretation) and righteousness (respect to the foreign culture) of a canonical text.

It is easy to define Julien’s *Tao Te King* as an academic translation or thick translation since it indeed aims to “locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context” with substantial annotations and glosses. Looking over the transmission history of the *Daodejing*

in Europe or even the Anglo-American Word in the nineteenth century, his *Tao Te King* does help to challenge the European and English readers “to go further, to undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others” through the way of thick translation (Appiah 2012, p. 343). Contrary to his contemporaries and precedents, Julien moves the readers to the writer (foreign culture) rather than sending the writer (foreign culture) abroad. Through this French translation, Julien demonstrates Venuti’s (2013, p. 107) prediction of the translator’s ethical responsibility in the activity of retranslation, which is “to prevent the translating language and culture from effacing the linguistic and cultural differences of the source text, its foreignness”.

6. Conclusions

Julien’s *Tao Te King*, the first complete French translation and a retranslation of the *Daodejing*, is a milestone in the translation history of this ancient text. Through an investigation of the paratexts and extratexts of this retranslation and other related translations, this paper finds that this French version challenged the interpretations of this ancient classic by those European missionaries and intellectuals (Figurist) whose aim is to search for the mysteries of Christianity in the ancient classic and whose conclusion, as a result, is based on assumptions. Julien, however, walks on a different path toward the truth of the classic, that is, to return to the text and the historical context around the text. The value of Julien’s translation can be found in its quality, its challenges to the previous translations, and its influence upon later translations. However, beneath the revolutionary significance of this retranslation is the exegetic-reading method; and beneath the method is the impulse and ethical responsibility to maintain cultural differences. Julien’s (re)translation indeed represents the case in which the challenge of previous translations is inextricably linked to the discussion of equivalence between these translations and the original text. However, what he challenges is not only the interpretations of key concepts in previous translations but also the interpretation system by earlier translators. Naturally, what he aims at is not a different interpretation at the textual level out of his different/restricted interpreting context but a difference that is rooted in another culture and that can only be interpreted in that cultural context.

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Notes

- ¹ Scholars find that Julien’s translation has been reprinted 17 times by seven French presses since its first appearance in French in 1842 (Sun 2020), and it has been republished 6 times alone in the twenty-first century (Lu and Gao 2020).
- ² The English translations of materials in French references, displayed in direct or indirect citations, are provided by the authors of this paper.
- ³ As the two translations are to provide a literal meaning of the original texts, this paper has referenced William Dolby’s *Sir Old: the Chinese classic of Taoism* (which adopts strategy of foreignization to a certain degree and provides no footnotes and illustrations) (Dolby 2003) and modified his translations into the English texts in this part.
- ⁴ The biographical analysis of Laozi is found in his work *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-tseu (The Life and Opinions of Lao-tzu)* published in 1823.
- ⁵ Since the materials of challenge are written out of the (re)translator’s agency (Pym 1998) and awareness (Venuti 2013), this paper will not discuss further the different interpretations of the classic by the two French sinologists, in order to present the challenges in Julien’s translation. There are scholars who have made a comparative study of the translations provided by Julien and Pauthier (See Pan 2021).

- ⁶ Siao-Tseu shares partial pronunciation with Lao-Tseu (Laozi), which may indicate a familyhood relationship between the two. Meanwhile, Siao-Tseu can be 小子 in Chinese characters, which means a young fellow to 老子 (Lao Zi). Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that this critic wants to show his identity related to Laozi or Taoism by playing this word game.
- ⁷ In the introduction of this French translation, Julien points out that all the European books about Laozi include the story of Laozi's travelling to the West which finds its prime source in the *Bibliographies of Immortals* (*Shenxian Zhuan*, 神仙傳). Given the influence of this "journey," Julien has translated the story of Laozi in *Bibliographies of Immortals*. For the translation, see (Julien 1842b, pp. xxiii–xxxii).
- ⁸ See the The Biography of Laozi and Hanfei in the *Records of the Grand Historian of China* by Sima Qian (145–86BC).
- ⁹ For instance, Julien has confused Heshanggong (河上公) with Yue Chengong (樂臣公) (Julien 1842b, p. xxxix), Cao Wei (曹魏) with Bei Wei (北魏) (Julien 1842b, p. xl), and has mistaken Zhang Daoling's *Laozi Xiang Er Zhu* 老子想爾注 for a Buddhist commentary (Julien 1842b, p. xxxviii).
- ¹⁰ Julien is not the first sinologist to reference the commentaries of the *Daodejing*. Rémusat has mentioned Sima Guang's perception of Laozi's thoughts in his work *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-tseu* published in 1823. Pauthier in his translation *Le Tao-te-king, ou le Livre révéré de la raison suprême et de la vertu* quoted Jiao Hong's *Laozi's Wings* (*Laozi Yi* 老子翼) and Xue Hui's *Collected annotations on Laozi* (*Laozi Ji Jie* 老子集解).

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Article

A Paratext Perspective on the Translation of the *Daodejing*: An Example from the German Translation of Richard Wilhelm

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Abstract: In the German translation history of the *Daodejing*, the version rendered by the renowned German sinologist, Richard Wilhelm, has vigorously propelled the study of Laozegetics in Germany and stands as a translation of historical and scholarly significance. Wilhelm complemented the concise main text through the use of diverse, precise, and appropriate paratexts, granting his translation both readability and academic rigor. This ensures the admiration of general readers and the recognition of professional scholars. Tailored to the linguistic preferences and educational levels of German readers, Wilhelm frequently employed highly recognizable theological, philosophical, and literary concepts within the German cultural system to elucidate the *Daodejing*. This translation strategy effectively satisfies the expectation horizon of target readers. In the paratexts, Wilhelm constructs a philosophical framework of Daoism, compares the thought of Confucianism and Daoism, and broadens the dialogue between Chinese philosophical thought and Western intellectual traditions, thereby bestowing upon the *Daodejing* a renewed vitality in the German-speaking world.

Keywords: *Daodejing* 道德經; Richard Wilhelm; paratext; Laozegetics

1. Introduction

The *Daodejing*, frequently referred to as *Laozi*, occupies a significant position within the corpus of Chinese philosophical classics. As the cornerstone text of Daoism, it is recognized globally as crucial for studies in Chinese philosophy, culture, religion, and history. As noted by Misha Tadd, the number of translations and commentaries on the *Daodejing* is massive, boasting a remarkable 2051 versions in 97 different languages (Tadd 2022b). This places the *Daodejing* in the most extensively translated and deeply impactful literary compositions worldwide. Contemporary academic discourse on the *Daodejing*'s translations mainly emphasizes historical analysis (Tang 2019), parallel comparison of multiple translations (Amarantidou 2023), and the conceptual transformation of key terms such as Dao 道 (way or sense), De 德 (virtue or morality), and *xiang* 象 (symbolic imagery, images) (Zhu and Song 2022). However, the investigation of translation strategies from a "paratext" perspective remains relatively scarce.

The term "paratext" was first propounded by the French literary scholar Gérard Genette. It delineates the array of linguistic and non-linguistic forms accompanying a work, which, while not constituting the main text, invariably surround, extend, and present it (Genette 1997, p. 1). In translation works, paratexts generally include the book cover, title page, preface, footnotes, annexes, illustrative material, and the like. Paratexts mediate and enrich the dynamic nexus between the book and its readership, thus "facilitating the acceptance and consumption of the book" (Geng 2016, p. 105). Recently, scholars have used the concept of "paratext" to look at Daoist materials. For instance, by analyzing the paratexts in Daoist texts, Elena Valussi has delineated the evolution of "female alchemy" (女丹 *nüdan*) (Valussi 2008). Similarly, through meticulous investigation on the abundant talismans and diagrams in Daoist scriptures, Dominic Steavu has revealed that such paratexts

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are not merely key tools for reading and understanding the texts, but also central elements in the practice and experiential aspects of religious rituals (Steavu 2019). Such research effectively demonstrates the active role of paratexts in the construction of textual meaning.

The *Daodejing* is a classic filled with cultural connotations but presented in an exceptionally simple stylistic modality. In its translation across cultures, it inevitably experiences interpretative deviations, elisions, and metamorphoses. Owing to the constraints of the source text, the translated text frequently lacks adequate interpretive space to faithfully reproduce the abundant cultural intricacies inherent to the original composition. Therefore, regardless of the language in which the *Daodejing* is translated, it is generally accompanied by multifaceted and content-rich paratexts. These paratexts not only reflect the interplay between the translator's personal interpretation and the original text's inherent meaning, but also emerge as an important avenue for the reconstruction of the *Daodejing* within foreign cultural terrains. Considering these factors, this study endeavors to analyze Richard Wilhelm's translation—lauded by Hermann Hesse as the “optimum translation” (Hesse 1921, p. 250) in the German world—to discern the role of paratexts in the translation and reception of the *Daodejing*.

Since its publication, Wilhelm's translation has influenced European intellectuals like Hermann Hesse, Carl Gustav Jung, and Bertolt Brecht, and has become an indispensable reference for numerous subsequent translators. Until 2022, Wilhelm's translation has been reprinted nearly 30 times by diverse publishing houses, solidifying its stature as the most influential German translation of the *Daodejing*. By examining the function of paratexts, this study helps elucidate the elements contributing to the success of Wilhelm's translation. This perspective contributes to the research of transcultural adaptation models of the *Daodejing* and the interactive relationship between Chinese literature and world literature.

2. The Paratexts in Wilhelm's Translation

Wilhelm's translation has two distinct editions. The first edition was published in 1911, designated as the second volume within the series entitled “Chinese Religion and Philosophy”. After completing the initial version, Wilhelm spent several years meticulously re-examining his translation and removing sentences that were clearly imbued with theological elements (Tan 2011). The second edition was completed in 1916, yet its publication was deferred until 1957 under the editorial stewardship of his spouse Salome Wilhelm. Considering the milestone significance of Wilhelm's 1911 edition within Laozegetics (老學 *Laoxue*)¹ in Germany, this paper selects this edition as its focal point. The investigation predominantly gives attention to the paratexts in this translation, encompassing book cover, title pages, illustrations, foreword, introduction, footnotes, post-textual interpretation, and appendix.

2.1. Cover, Title Pages, and Illustrations: Identifying Book Categories and Attracting Readers

The cover operates as a gateway ushering readers into a book. Prior to readers' immersion into the main text, the cover has already begun to transfer information. As posited by Kratz, “Besides telling the kind of book, covers are also intended to convey the identity of each book, to attract and pique the buyer/reader's interest” (Kratz 1994, p. 186). Wilhelm's translation is enrobed in a hardcover, displaying its elegance and solemnity, which augments the tactile and aesthetic qualities of this book (Figure 1). The cover is adorned with a warm, orange-yellow background with the German title “*LAOTSE VOM SINN UND LEBEN*” (*Laozi on SENSE and LIFE*) at its center. Following Genette's identified basic elements of a cover—title, author (translator), and publisher—this cover solely presents the title in an extremely minimalistic fashion, indicative of a realistic cover design commonly seen in serious works (Haslam 2006, p. 165). Through this cover, readers can preliminarily perceive the stylistic tenor of this classic. Wilhelm's translation maintains the consistent cover design of the “Chinese Religion and Philosophy” series, not only unifying the coherent visual narrative of the collection but also promoting brand recognition, which in turn enhanced the cumulative market traction of the series.

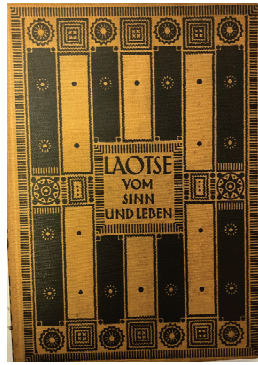


Figure 1. The book cover.

The title pages of Wilhelm’s translation also exhibit thoughtful deliberation. The first page displays the distinguishable lion emblem of Diederichs publisher.² The second page integrates Chinese copyright details, overlaid with a semi-transparent rice paper on the upper portion (Figure 2). On this rice paper, phonetic annotations and German words correspond directly to the woodcut Chinese characters beneath, offering readers information about the title, translator, and the publisher. On the third page, a graphic representation of Laozi is presented, characterized by his graying hair and frost-like temples. He is illustrated holding a stone tablet bearing inscriptions, embodying the image of a wise sage. The fourth page presents German copyright specifics, explicitly stating that Wilhelm’s translation is “translated and elucidated from Chinese”, thereby setting it apart from other German translations originating from European languages and accentuating the authority and credibility of Wilhelm’s work.

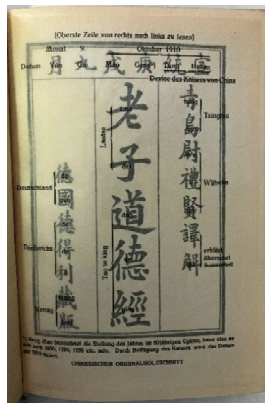


Figure 2. Chinese copyright.

On pages five and six, a highly distinctive, traditional, and realistic Chinese-style painting is showcased (Figure 3). This painting employs the “pointillism technique” (點苔 *diantai*) to delineate the textures of trees and stones, creating spatial layers in the forested landscape. It integrates the “ancient gossamer drawing style” (高古遊絲描 *gaogu yousi miao*) to manifest the detailed and natural facial features of the characters, while their clothing is elegant and flowing. The painting incorporates plots such as a border officer bidding adieu to Laozi, a servant carrying books, and Laozi riding a cow while looking back, which vividly depicts the legend of “Laozi Going Through the Pass” (老子出關 *laozi chuguan*). It is worth noting that, the title pages of a book typically consist of 1–2 pages, which means the six title pages in Wilhelm’s translation are notably atypical.



Figure 3. Laozi Going Through the Pass.

In fact, over the 40 years since the full translation of the *Daodejing* appeared in 1870, none of the existing eight translations³ have featured as many title pages and illustrations as Wilhelm's version. Both Wilhelm and Diederichs attached importance to the book's illustration. In a letter discussing the publication of the *Daodejing*, Wilhelm wrote: "There is a conventional depiction of him (Laozi) riding an ox, which is circulating in countless good and bad reproductions. I would like to secure an artistically valuable presentation for this purpose" (Wilhelm 1967, p. 178). He and the publisher aimed to meet "evolving audience needs and the precise positioning of cultural dissemination" (Zhang 2020, p. 82), using the title pages and illustrations to evoke an initial resonance of an oriental flair and Chinese atmosphere. This strategy catered to general readership, reflecting Wilhelm's focus on popularization and marketability. In 1938, the renowned German poet Bertolt Brecht was inspired by this illustration to create his poem *Legend of the Origin of the Daodejing on Laozi's Path of Exile (Legende von der Entstehung des Buches Taoteking auf dem Weg des Laotse in die Emigration)* (Tan 2012, p. 121), which undoubtedly demonstrated Wilhelm's success in the selection of paratexts.

2.2. Foreword and Introduction: Background Supplement and Text Overview

In a translated work, the foreword and introduction typically delineate the translator's translation strategy, augment background knowledge of the original text, and summarize its themes. Its chief function is "to ensure that the text is read proper" (Genette 1997, p. 197). The prefatorial segment to Wilhelm's translation is composed of three distinct components: (1) the foreword, penned by Wilhelm himself; (2) the introduction, also authored by Wilhelm; (3) another introduction entitled "*Laozi's Reflections on Human Society*", contributed by Dr. Harald Gutherz, an academic affiliated with the Department of Jurisprudence at Qingdao Dehua University. It is necessary to emphasize that as Wilhelm transitioned from a missionary to a translator, he did not intend to create scholarly translations solely for the German sinological community. Instead, he regarded the general German public as his primary readership. As early as his initial attempt to translate the *Analects* (論語 *Lunyu*) in 1904, Wilhelm recognized that existing German translations of Chinese classics were often arcane and perplexing, largely because these translations were excessively rigid (Wilhelm 1904, p. 34). Consequently, whether in handling the translation or the paratexts, Wilhelm attached importance to their accessibility and acceptability.

In the foreword, Wilhelm primarily addressed two pivotal questions: why did he undertake the translation of the *Daodejing*? And how should this mysterious and difficult classic be translated and interpreted? Before Wilhelm's translation appeared, there were at least eight distinct German translations of the *Daodejing*. Notably, the version by the theologian Victor von Strauss stands out, having been frequently cited by renowned sociologists like Max Weber. The *Daodejing* was one of the most scrutinized Chinese classics

within the German-speaking cultural sphere at that time. In Wilhelm's own words: "If one attempts to translate *Laozi* in this day, it requires an explicit apology in front of all specialized Sinologists." (Wilhelm 1911, p. I). However, Wilhelm also candidly pointed out that many scholars did not diligently study the original Chinese text, but rather transliterated the *Daodejing* into German from English or French versions. Thus, in his translation, he emphasized returning to the original source, relying on Chinese documents as the primary references, with European texts serving merely as supplementary material citation. He strived to faithfully reproduce the Chinese classic, allowing Laozi "to express his own voice once more" (Wilhelm 1911, p. II).

The introduction, spanning 29 pages and totaling 10,977 words, stands as the most critical component of the paratexts in Wilhelm's translation. Initially, Wilhelm enumerated records of Laozi from Chinese classics such as *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), *Liji* 禮記 (the Classic of Rites), *Kongzi Jiayu* 孔子家語 (the Family Sayings of Confucius), and the *Analects*. Selecting the narrative of "Laozi Going Through the Pass" from the *Shiji*, Wilhelm recreated the enigmatic legend behind the creation of the *Daodejing*. Subsequently, Wilhelm discussed the chronology of the *Daodejing*'s composition by citing ancient classics like the *Analects*, *Liezi Chongxujing* 列子沖虛經 (*Liezi*: Classic of Simplicity and Vacuity, hereafter abbreviated *Liezi*), *Zhuangzi Nanhuajing* 莊子南華經 (*Zhuangzi*: Classic of Southern Flower Country, hereafter abbreviated *Zhuangzi*), and *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (the Book of *Huainanzi*). The veneration of the *Daodejing* by emperors of the Han dynasty (漢代, 202BC–220AD), as well as the abundant commentaries and interpretations across successive dynasties, underscores its eminent position in ancient China. Wilhelm then referenced the Japanese scholar Taizai Chuntai 太宰春台 (1680–1747) to contrast the philosophical divergences between Confucius and Laozi, further contextualizing the historical backdrop of the *Daodejing*.

Wilhelm posited that Laozi's thought harbor an enduring value that transcends time, "Laozi are increasingly starting to be picked up in Europe nowadays" (Wilhelm 1911, p. XIII). At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Germany, amidst rapid industrialization and modernization, began to experience a modernity crisis of nihilism (Xu 2023, p. 62). This spiritual dilemma led many Germans to seek relief and guidance in the inner peace offered by Daoism. As Carl Gustav Jung expressed: "The spirit of the East is truly at the gates. Therefore, it seems to me that the realization of meaning, the seeking of Dao, has already become a more collective phenomenon among us to a much greater extent than is generally thought" (Jung 1982, p. XVIII). Against the backdrop of Nietzsche's prevailing philosophy and the waning of Christian faith, the Daoism to some extent took on the role of a new type of "salvation religion" for many Germans (Detering 2008, p. 27). However, Wilhelm opposed the notion of viewing Daoism thought merely as a religious concept. He specifically cautioned readers: "What is commonly referred to as Daoist nowadays can be traced back to the animistic folk religion of ancient China" (Wilhelm 1911, p. XIV). Although the *Daodejing* is a foundational text of Daoism, it should not be solely regarded as a religious text. In reality, it comprises Laozi's exploration of the world's origins and a system of metaphysical philosophical thought.

What follows are two essays elucidating the core ideas of the *Daodejing* from metaphysical and sociological perspectives. The former is authored by Wilhelm while the latter by Gutherz. Interestingly, despite approaching the *Daodejing* from disparate angles and without prior collaboration, both essays manifest many similar viewpoints. Below Gutherz's contribution, the editor appended a footnote: "In the following essay, the reader will encounter trains of thought at two points that are familiar to him from the previous work. Nevertheless, the essay was printed unchanged because it was written without knowledge of the preceding work and because the apparent repetition might be of interest as the same result found through different paths." (Wilhelm 1911, p. XXVI).

Broadly speaking, the foreword and introduction employ multifaceted narratives, encompassing literature review, background introduction, textual commentary, and intellectual critique. From these narratives, an optimal mode of textual interpretation can be

deduced, ensuring the translated text balances readability, acceptability, scholarly rigor, and fidelity.

2.3. Footnotes and Post-Textual Interpretation: Knowledge Integration and Meaning Clarification

Footnotes, endnotes, and post-textual interpretation encompass definitions of specialized terms, clarifications of facts, amplifications of viewpoints, and cited sources. Such paratexts help eliminate potential ambiguities, enhance the clarity of the text, and ensure that readers can better understand the author's viewpoints. In most translation works, these functions are conventionally undertaken by footnotes or endnotes (Genette 1997, p. 327). Contrary to convention, Wilhelm demonstrated a marked reluctance to employ footnotes and endnotes in this translation. But the post-textual interpretation extends to approximately 28 pages, comprising close to 9500 words. This is unusual, especially when compared to other German translations. For instance, Strauss's translation employs both prose and rhymed poetry, and is annotated extensively via lengthy footnotes, extending to 440 pages. Plaenckner's version, translated in prose, lacks annotations but appends extensive interpretation after each chapter, totaling 455 pages. Wilhelm's translation is entirely expressed in rhymed poetry, with only a single footnote, and interpretation appear after the end of all main texts, resulting in a total of 159 pages. Upon comparison, it is evident that the length of Wilhelm's translation is moderate and the main text is not interrupted by long annotations or interpretations, which not only ensures fluidity for general readers but also retains academic value. This very aspect was lauded by Hesse, who praised Wilhelm's version as "more potent, lucid, possessing a distinct personal touch, and hence, more comprehensible" (Hesse 1911, p. 33).

Furthermore, a closer examination of Wilhelm's other translation works reveals that the use of paratexts varied according to the genre of each text. The following table provides statistics on some of the paratexts in the "Chinese Religion and Philosophy" series (Table 1). For the *Analects* and *Mengzi* 孟子 (the Book of *Mengzi*), which primarily consist of sayings and dialogues, Wilhelm utilized footnotes to timely supplement historical knowledge and cultural context, thereby preventing the loose dialogues from creating reading barriers. In contrast, for *Zhuangzi*, *Liji* and *Lüshi Chunqiu* 吕氏春秋 (Spring and Autumn of Lübuwei), which are written in essay format and have relatively concise themes in each chapter, endnotes were used to avoid interrupting the readers. Additionally, introduction is prefaced before each chapter of *Zhuangzi* and *Liji*, serving a similar role in aiding comprehension. Facing the *Daodejing* and *Yijing* 易经 (the Book of Changes), which offer vast interpretative space, Wilhelm preferred using post-textual interpretation. Unlike footnotes and endnotes, such paratexts often contain stronger expressions of the translator's personal perspective while supplementing information.

Table 1. Paratexts for the "Chinese Religion and Philosophy" Book Series.

Chinese Classics	Foreword (Page)	Introduction (Page)	Footnote (Item)	Endnote (Item)	Post-Textual Interpretation (Page)
<i>Lunyu</i> 论语	3	31	407	-	-
<i>Daodejing</i> 道德经	3	29	1	-	25
<i>Liezi</i> 列子	2	21	-	-	42
<i>Zhuangzi</i> 莊子	2	17	-	463	-
<i>Mengzi</i> 孟子	1	18	525	-	-
<i>Yijing</i> 易经	2	11	50	-	70
<i>Lüshi Chunqiu</i> 吕氏春秋	-	13	7	731	-
<i>Liji</i> 禮記	-	18	-	588	-

In the footnote and post-textual interpretation, Wilhelm interpreted 18 terms such as *taiji* 太極 (supreme ultimate), *wuji* 無極 (ultimate of Nothingness), *chugou* 刍狗 (straw dogs), *shengqi* 神器 (mental things), *jisi* 祭祀 (sacrificial rite), and *shengren* 聖人 (sage of wisdom), which are steeped in rich cultural traditions and societal contexts. The aim is to approximate the original context as closely as possible, thereby reducing potential reading barriers for the audience. The sole footnote appears in Chapter 5, which reads “Not love in the manner of men has Nature: To her, the creatures are like straw dogs. Not love in the manner of men has the sage: To him, his people are like straw dogs” (天地不仁, 以萬物爲刍狗; 聖人不仁, 以百姓爲刍狗) (Wilhelm 1911, p. 7). In this instance, Wilhelm referenced *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on *Laozi*) to elucidate straw dogs:

In sacrificial rites, dogs were made of straw, which were festively decorated during the sacrifice, but once they had served their purpose, were carelessly discarded. (Wilhelm 1911, p. 7)

In the original text of the *Daodejing*, the connotation of straw dogs is negative, which greatly deviates from the dog’s image in German native culture, symbolizing loyalty, kindness, and wisdom. This difference might be confusing for readers, prompting Wilhelm to employ a concise footnote for clarification. However, other terms are unique to Chinese culture or do not have entirely opposites in German culture. As such, it is not necessary to interrupt readers’ fluent reading experience with footnotes. Instead, more detailed interpretations are furnished at the end of the text. For example, when clarifying *taiji* and *wuji*, Wilhelm also added two illustrations as support:

To elucidate this unity, Laozi refers to the symbolic figure of *taiji* (often translated as “Primordial Beginning”), which has significant resonance in ancient Chinese thought and has been particularly used in endless variations and adaptations, representing the intertwining of the positive and negative (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Taiji* 太極.

Wherein the white half of the circle, containing within itself a black circle with a white dot, signifies the positive, masculine, and luminous principle. In contrast, the correspondingly designed black half symbolizes the negative, feminine, and dark principle. This symbolic figure is likely alluding to the profound mystery of the unity between the existent and the non-existent (=μη ὄν, as consistently referred to by Laozi whenever discussing the “non-existent”). An even deeper mystery within this enigma would be the so-called *wuji* (translated as “Non-Beginning”, even beyond *taiji*), representing a chaotic state before any distinctions are made, typically represented by a simple circle (Figure 5). It can be described as the pure possibility of existence, akin to chaos. (Wilhelm 1911, pp. 89–90)

Considering that Laozi has used *wuji* to describe the dialectical relationship between existence and non-existence, Wilhelm similarly employed these concepts to expound some chapters of the *Daodejing*. The above paratext is used to explain the sentence in Chapter 1, “Beyond the nameable is the origin of the world. This side of the nameable is the birth of creatures” (無名, 天地之始; 有名, 萬物之母) (Wilhelm 1911, p. 3). To Wilhelm’s understanding, “beyond the nameable” closely relates to *wuji*, while the notion of “this side of

the nameable” resonates with *taiji*. When translating the sentence from Chapter 28, “Thus, he is not without eternal LIFE (LEBEN), and he can return to the Unborn (*wuji*)” (常德不忒, 複歸于無極) (Wilhelm 1911, p. 30), Wilhelm expressed *wuji* as “Unborn” and explained that “Unborn is the chaotic state of intertwined substances before the inception of *taiji*, that is, before the commencement of creation” (Wilhelm 1911, p. 100). In elucidating the sentence from Chapter 42, “The SENSE (SINN) generates the Unity. The Unity generates the Duality. The Duality generates the Ternarity. The Ternarity generates all creatures” (道生壹, 壹生二, 二生三, 三生萬物) (Wilhelm 1911, p. 47), Wilhelm explained:

The Unity refers to *wuji*, the Duality refers to *taiji*—with its division into *yang* 陽 and *yin* 陰,⁴ and the Ternarity signifies “the infinite vitality”, namely, the spirit, is, so to speak, the medium of the unification of the two dual forces. (Wilhelm 1911, p. 103)

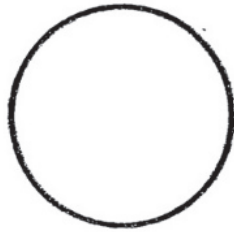


Figure 5. *Wuji* 無極.

Indeed, this corollary appears even earlier in the introduction:

The Duality encompasses the opposites of light and darkness, of male and female, of positive and negative, and the Ternarity emerging from *taiji* represents the process wherein opposing entities combine, counteracting each other, subsequently engendering myriad entities. (Wilhelm 1911, p. XXIII)

Through repeated elucidation and emphasis of these concepts, Wilhelm facilitated readers in acquiring a more profound comprehension of the dialectical unity central to the *Daodejing*.

Certainly, the ability to implement these repetitions owes to Wilhelm’s extensive use of intertextual references, as shown in Figure 6. For instance, in the introduction, when addressing *taiji* and *wuji*, Wilhelm reminded readers to consult the interpretation of Chapter 42. And in the interpretations of Chapters 28 and 42, he also guides readers to refer to the interpretation of Chapter 1. Such internal intertextual pointers amount to a total of 71 instances, reaching a level of meticulous detail. This serves to remind readers of the inner connections of the text when necessary, helping them locate related content and thus promoting a holistic understanding of the translation.

Moreover, Wilhelm frequently cites other works to provide readers with opportunities for comparative analysis or extended reading. Statistics show that the *Analects* and the *Bible* are the most frequently referenced works. Other cited texts include Chinese classics like *Liezi*, *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (the Classic of Mountain and Sea), and *Yijing*, with translations by predecessors like Strauss and Carus. Western literary works like Goethe’s *Faust* and Schiller’s *An die Freude* (*Ode to Joy*), philosophical propositions by Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Heraclitus, academic treatises by Otto Frank and Chavannes, and even Latin proverbs are also referenced.

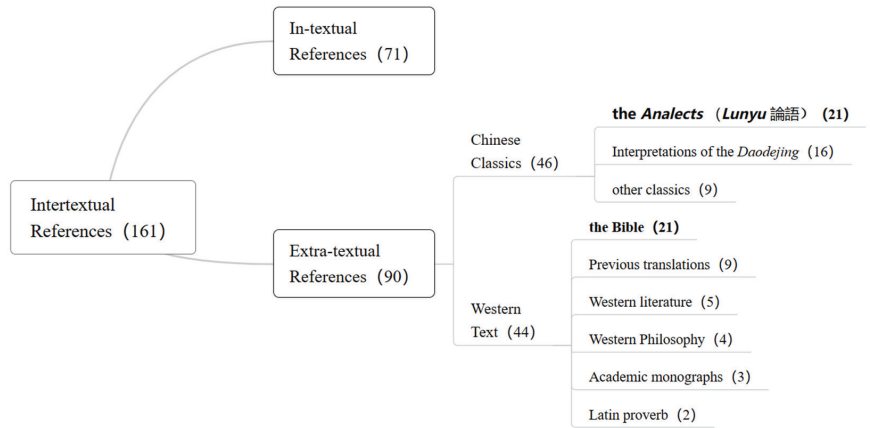


Figure 6. Statistics on the intertextual references.

2.4. Appendix: Academic Supplements and Book Series Promotion

The appendix of Wilhelm’s translation includes bibliographic references and a list of the “Chinese Religion and Philosophy” book series. In the foreword, Wilhelm articulated that his main reliance would be on a myriad of Chinese original literatures, relegating European sources to supplementary material citation. Accordingly, in the bibliography, he listed Chinese commentaries of the *Daodejing*, alongside representative translations in English, French, and German. *Heshanggong zhangju* 河上公章句 (Heshanggong’s Commentary on the *Laozi*) and Wang Bi’s 王弼 (226–249) *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on *Laozi*) serve as the primary references for Wilhelm’s translation. Additionally, other references include Lu Deming’s 陸德明 (550–630) commentary *Laozi yinyi* 老子音義 (Pronunciation and Meaning of the *Laozi*), Xue Hui’s 薛蕙 (1489–1541) commentary *Laozi jijie* 老子集解 (Collection and Annotations of the *Laozi*), Hong Yingshao’s 洪應紹 (around 1612) commentary *Daodejing ce* 道德經測 (Interpretation of the *Daodejing*), Wang Fuzhi’s 王夫之 (1619–1692) discourse on *Laozi*, and the Japanese scholar Taizai Chuntai’s *Laozi tejie* 老子特解 (Special Interpretation of the *Laozi*). These texts were compiled during the Han 漢 (202BC–220AD), Tan 唐 (618–907), Ming 明 (1368–1644), and Qing 清 (1636–1912) dynasties, spanning a period of several millennia. Among its foreign translations, the English version by James Legge and the German version by Victor von Strauss are esteemed works. These references not only help readers delve deeper into the *Daodejing*, but also enhance the academic value of Wilhelm’s translation.

The back cover of this book features a list from the “Chinese Religion and Philosophy” series, showing the distribution volume of published books and apprising upcoming publications. As Diederichs aptly posited, “one can promote the old books with every new release” (Diederichs 1936, p. 410). The publishing list on each volume’s endpaper aims to bolster the overall impact of the series, facilitating the circulation of Chinese classics in the German-speaking world.

3. The Constructive Role of Paratexts in Wilhelm’s Translation

Wilhelm translated the *Daodejing* into rhymed poetry, preserving the original text’s cultural imagery, rhetorical characteristics, and compositional style (Hua 2012, p. 125). Concurrently, his translation includes diverse paratexts, ensuring its literary value and sinological significance. Upon deeper analysis, it is evident that through these paratexts, Wilhelm constructs a philosophical framework of Daoism, compares Confucianism and Daoism thought, and broadens the dialogue between Chinese philosophical thought and Western intellectual traditions, thereby bestowing upon the *Daodejing* a renewed vitality in the German-speaking world.

3.1. Constructing a Philosophical Framework of Daoism

In the introduction, Wilhelm clarified that “The entire metaphysics of the *Daodejing* is built upon a fundamental intuition that is inaccessible to strict conceptual fixation, and to have a name, Laozi ‘provisionally’ designates it with the word Dao” (Wilhelm 1911, p. XV). When translating Dao, Wilhelm avoided existing translations such as “God”, “Way”, “intellect”, “word”, and “λόγος” (logos). He believed that: “Fundamentally, the expression holds minimal significance, as for Laozi himself, it represents merely an algebraic symbol for an ineffable concept. The preference for a German term in a German translation primarily stems from aesthetic considerations” (Wilhelm 1911, p. XV). Therefore, Wilhelm, deeply knowledgeable in biblical linguistics and familiar with German literary masterpieces, selected “SINN” (sense, meaning), a term utilized by Goethe in *Faust*, which holds an equally enigmatic and inscrutable connotation within the German context.

Recognizing the linguistic non-equivalence between different languages, Wilhelm applied a hermeneutical approach. He first acknowledged the existence of deviations, and then compared the diverse meanings of terms. He explored the semantic meanings of the Chinese term Dao, encompassing “direction”, “truth”, “talk”, “guidance”, and “pathway”. Then, he examined the different semantic dimensions of the German term “SINN”, such as “pathway”, “direction”, “intrinsic inclination”, and “sense” (Wilhelm 1911, p. XV). Through this detailed comparison, Wilhelm suggested a close concordance between Dao and “SINN”.

Likewise, his interpretation of De diverges from traditional translational norms. Historically, De has often been translated as “virtue”. However, Wilhelm, well-versed in ancient Chinese philosophical texts, draws connections to a sentence from *Zhuangzi*: “What sustains beings to come into existence is called De” (物得以生，謂之德). This narrative is congruent with, and perhaps even extends the perspective articulated in Chapter 51 of the *Daodejing*: “The SENSE (SINN) generates. LIFE (LEBEN) nourishes. The being shapes. The power completes” (道生之，德畜之，物形之，勢成之) (Wilhelm 1911, p. 56). Wilhelm thus posited that the essence of De closely parallels the thought in the *Gospel of John*: “In him was life, and that life was the light of men” (Wilhelm 1911, p. XVI). In light of this narration, Wilhelm audaciously translated De as “LEBEN” (life).

To emphasize the specific connotations of “SINN” and “LEBEN”, Wilhelm deliberately rendered these terms in uppercase. This stylistic choice draws inspiration from representation of “GOTT/HERR” (God) in the German *Bible*. For German readers familiar with Christian tradition, the uppercase “SINN” and “LEBEN” readily evoke associations with the German *Bible* as translated by Martin Luther. The unique cultural encoding behind these two core concepts not only places the *Daodejing* in an overlay region beneath German literature and theology but also evokes recollections of the *Bible* and *Faust* among German readers. Utilizing this approach, Wilhelm intimated that this Chinese classic holds a distinguished position, by no means inferior when compared to the *Bible* and *Faust*, thereby considerably heightening readers’ appreciation of the *Daodejing*.

After explaining the two most fundamental concepts, Wilhelm begun to explore the standpoint from which Laozi constructs his metaphysics. Unlike the ancient Greek philosophical systems, which seek the essence and universal principles from the external world, Chinese philosophical systems, whether of Laozi or Confucius, primarily concentrate on the realm of the human spirit. Based on the statements in Chapters 12, 38, and 72, Wilhelm summarized Laozi’s contemplation as follows:

Every principle taken from external experience will be refuted and become obsolete over time, because as human progress advances, so does the understanding of the world. On the contrary, what is recognized from central experience (from the inner light, as expressed by the mystics), remains irrefutable, provided it was otherwise purely and correctly perceived. (Wilhelm 1911, p. XVII)

Of course, Laozi is not considering singular, accidental mental experiences but the “pure self” inherent to the human group beyond the individual. The natural essence of hu-

manity forms a continuous, cyclical unity, conforming to nature and being fundamentally consistent with all things, which is De. And if one follows nature even further, beyond humanity, Dao will be found. That is, just as Dao is in humans, De exists in the world purely as spontaneity.

After elucidating Laozi's principles for explaining the world, Wilhelm continued to explore how Laozi has deduced the practical path from these highest principles. Wilhelm believed that this is precisely where Laozi struggles, not only in his personal relationship to the external world, as discussed in Chapter 20, but also in deriving the external world from Dao (Wilhelm 1911, p. XXII). Nevertheless, Laozi strives to indicate the possible direction of Dao toward reality, namely, "The SENSE (SINN) generates the Unity. The Unity generates the Duality. The Duality generates the Ternarity. The Ternarity generates all creatures" (道生壹, 壹生二, 二生三, 三生萬物) (Wilhelm 1911, p. 47). As discussed above, the Unity gives rise to contradictory opposites, and the Duality develops in contradiction and opposition. For this reason, Laozi proposes the doctrine of *wuwei* 無為 (non-action), which does not require individuals to waste life passively but states that "action" would disrupt the balanced opposing forces. By following the natural laws and the primal origin of all things, one can maintain harmony and stability in the universe. By adhering to Dao and practicing *wuwei*, individuals can also live in balance and harmony.

3.2. Comparing the Thought of Confucianism and Daoism

Existing studies have predominantly focused on Wilhelm's extensive citation of Western literature, especially the texts of the *Bible*. As Xu suggests, "This approach allows readers to find familiarity within unfamiliar texts, thereby constructing a bridge between Chinese philosophical thought and Western intellectual traditions where mutual invention and comprehension in cultural spirit are possible" (Xu 2023, p. 65). However, as shown in Figure 6, the frequency of Wilhelm's references to Chinese literature is comparable to that of Western literature, with the number of citations from the *Analects* coincidentally aligning with those from the *Bible*. Before building a bridge for Sino-Western cultural communication, Wilhelm had already created internal communication between Confucianism and Daoism.

Wilhelm's comparison of Confucianism and Daoism is multifaceted. In the introduction, he began by analyzing the character traits of the representative figures of these two schools, Confucius and Laozi. Wilhelm posited that Confucius was actively engaged with society, and hence, the *Analects* is filled with evaluations of significant figures from his time and from history. In contrast, Laozi was reluctant to engage with society and the *Daodejing* almost never evaluates any historical events or figures. However, Wilhelm also argued that this is precisely the reason why "Laozi can transcend time and space to exert such great effects in Europe" (Wilhelm 1911, p. VIII). In a letter written to Eugen Diederichs in 1910, Wilhelm mentioned that he believed the *Daodejing* would be more popular than the *Analects* because understanding the *Daodejing* "requires far fewer historical prerequisites" (Wilhelm 1967, p. 178).

Confucius was actively engaged with society, traveling tirelessly among various states in an endeavor to find monarchs willing to heed his teachings and, thus, to rescue the populace from turmoil and calamity. In contrast, Laozi believed that "the disease afflicting a state cannot be cured by a particular remedy", asserting that "any form of intervention would only exacerbate chaos. It is preferable to allow the afflicted 'body' to rest and await natural forces (Dao) to effect its restoration" (Wilhelm 1911, p. IX). Whether it is Confucius's societal engagement and salvific ideology or Laozi's naturalistic and non-interventionist approach, both are continuations of ancient Chinese spiritual traditions. Moreover, Confucius did not oppose Laozi's principle of "non-action", but rather regarded it as the highest insight in Chapter 15 of the *Analects* (Wilhelm 1911, p. 90).

Dao is not only at the core of Daoism but also central to Confucianism, although its interpretation is different between the two. In Confucianism, Dao refers to the way for a monarch to govern the state, while in Daoism, Dao is the primal origin of all things.

Additionally, Wilhelm believed that there are notable differences between Confucianism and Daoism in their treatment of *li* 禮 (the ritual system of the Zhou Dynasty). Confucius placed *li* at the core of his philosophy, believing that restoring the rites of Zhou 周 (1046 BC–256 BC) dynasty could bring an end to social unrest. However, Laozi viewed *li* as a sign of social regression. He advocated for a more ancient value system, following thought from before the Zhou Dynasty (Wilhelm 1911, p. X).

Beyond the systematic comparisons made in the introduction, Wilhelm frequently referenced the *Analects* in his post-textual interpretation. For instance, when elucidating the phrase “Respond to resentment with LIFE (LEBEN)” (報怨以德) (Wilhelm 1911, p. 68) in Chapter 63, Wilhelm expressed:

The sentence: “Respond to resentment with LIFE (LEBEN)” usually translated as: “Repay wrong with kindness”, plays a certain role in the discussions of the time. Laozi justifies it in Chapter 49 by stating that our actions necessarily arise from our nature, thus we can only be good. He thus surpasses the concept of “reciprocity”, which occupies such an important place in post-Confucian systems. Confucius had doubts about this concept for reasons of state justice (see his statement on the question in the *Analects*, book XIV. 36, page 163), although he has acknowledged the principle for individual morality (see *Liji*). (Wilhelm 1911, p. 109)

In the *Analects*, De encompasses meanings such as “nature”, “essence”, “spirit”, and “force”, which closely align with the connotations of De in the *Daodejing*. However, considering that “Respond to resentment with LIFE (LEBEN)” is often interpreted by later generations as repaying resentment with kindness, Wilhelm found it necessary to clarify this view. Thus, he compared similar viewpoints in the *Analects* and explicated the implications of this sentence at both the individual and state levels.

Cross-textual references to Chinese classics like this are numerous in Wilhelm’s translation. However, references to the *Analects* in the *Daodejing* all come from his translation published in 1910, which is meticulously accompanied by chapter locations and page numbers for the timely consultation by readers. This not only enables German readers to intuitively understand the differences between Chinese Confucianism and Daoism, but also helps to boost the sales of previous books with the publication of new ones. Wilhelm continued this method of cross-edition referencing in his subsequent translations. For example, in *Liezi* and *Zhuangzi*, Wilhelm tirelessly cites translations of the *Daodejing*. This not only maintains the continuity of the series of books but also systematically presents Chinese philosophical thought as a coherent whole.

3.3. Broadening the Dialogue between Chinese Philosophical Thought and Western Intellectual Traditions

Prior to Wilhelm’s translation, most translators interpreted the *Daodejing* predominantly as a religious theological text, with Strauss’s version being a typical example. Such interpretive norms had already been deeply entrenched among German readers, making developing a new interpretation no easy task. Therefore, Wilhelm chose to follow the path of his predecessors, extensively referencing the *Bible* to help readers understand the *Daodejing*. However, unlike Strauss, who attempted to demonstrate that Christian thought had already existed in ancient China, Wilhelm cited the *Bible* for the purposes of comparison. He consistently regarded the *Daodejing* as an indigenous Chinese philosophical system, rather than merely a religious text.

For instance, when elucidating the passage from Chapter 14, “One looks for him and does not see him: His name is: The Equal (夷 *yi*). One listens for him and does not hear him: His name is: The Subtle (希 *xi*). One reaches for him and does not grasp him: His name is: The Minute (微 *wei*)” (視之不見, 名曰夷; 聽之不聞, 名曰希; 搏之不得, 名曰微) (Wilhelm 1911, p. 16), Wilhelm wrote:

The three names of the SENSE (SINN): “The Equal” “The Subtle” “The Minute” signify its supernatural qualities. Attempts to read the Hebrew name of God

from the Chinese sounds I, Hi, We may now be at an end. (Victor von Strauss, as is well known, still believed in this; see his translation.)

The fact that the view of SENSE (the deity) outlined here has some parallels in Israelite teachings is not to be denied; see especially the passages in Chapter 33 of the *Exodus* and Chapter 19 of the *Book of Kings* for our section. However, such agreements are understandable enough even without direct contact. This view of the deity simply represents a certain stage of development of human consciousness in its understanding of the Divine. Moreover, the fundamental difference between Laozi's impersonal pantheistic conception and the sharply defined historical personality of the Israelite God must not be overlooked. (Wilhelm 1911, p. 94)

Strauss once deciphered the Hebrew name Jehovah from the syllables of the Chinese word "Yi-Hi-Wei", positing that Chinese people had early acknowledgment of the existence of Jehovah. He suggested that during the destruction of ancient Israel and Judah (in 720 BCE and 586 BCE, respectively), Jewish refugees might have fled to China. This could have provided Laozi the opportunity to learn the name of God from them. He then proposed that Laozi subtly incorporated and concealed the three characters of "Jehovah" within Chapter 14 of the *Daodejing* (Strauss 1870, pp. 61–75). Wilhelm explicitly opposed such a far-fetched conclusion, considering this recognition merely a manifestation of collective consciousness appearing at a certain stage of human development, rather than a result of one side influencing the other. He thus delineated the distinct differences between Laozi's thought and Christian doctrines.

In addition to establishing a religious comparative pathway distinct from his predecessors, Wilhelm also incorporated texts from Western classical philosophy and German literature into his translation. As mentioned above, when discussing Laozi's metaphysics, Wilhelm compared it to ancient Greek metaphysical thought. When interpreting the sentence "The Ternarity generates all creatures" (三生萬物) (Wilhelm 1911, p. 47), Wilhelm reminded readers, "It deserves noting how the rational philosophy in Laozi treads precisely the same paths as it does in Hegel, two and a half millennia later" (Wilhelm 1911, p. XXIII). This departs from the previous religious interpretation that likened "The Ternarity generates all creatures" to the Holy Trinity. Further, when discussing reducing human intervention and advocating *wuwei*, Wilhelm even cited a sentence from *Faust*, "Reason becomes nonsense, benefit turns into torment" (Wilhelm 1911, p. 107), for additional clarification.

By extensively citing Western religious, literary, and philosophical works in the paratexts, Wilhelm consciously expanded the dialogue space between Chinese philosophical thought and Western intellectual traditions. He neither criticized the *Daodejing* as a heretical work nor arbitrarily dissected Chinese philosophy by forcing it into Western philosophical systems. Instead, he demonstrated the compatibility of Chinese philosophy with 20th-century thought by utilizing Western concepts. Compared to earlier translators, Wilhelm's interpretive principles undoubtedly represent a significant advancement.

4. Conclusions

This article, taking Wilhelm's translation as an example, explores the significant role of paratexts in the translation of the *Daodejing* and the multiple interpretative paths that Wilhelm achieved. Utilizing the varied and easily comprehensible paratexts, Wilhelm's translation strikes a balance between popular appeal and academic rigor, obtaining unanimous approval from both general readers and academic scholars. More importantly, Wilhelm changed the long-standing interpretative practice of religiously metaphorizing the *Daodejing*. Previous translations merely treated the *Daodejing* as exotic material that could be cut or taken out of context, forcefully employing it to corroborate Christian thought. However, Wilhelm commenced from the Chinese thought itself and facilitated readers' understanding of the *Daodejing* through a combination of Chinese classics and Western literature. Since its publication, Wilhelm's translation has been reprinted nearly 30 times

and translated into 9 different languages, including English, French, and Italian. Moreover, 13 German translations of the *Daodejing* have referenced Wilhelm's version for retranslation (Tadd 2022a, pp. 146–147). With the canonization of Wilhelm's translation, theological interpretations of the *Daodejing* have decreased, while philosophical interpretations have significantly increased. For example, in Debon's interpretation of the *Daodejing*, he extensively references Chinese classics such as *Liezi* and *Zhuangzi*, evidencing a discernible influence from Wilhelm's framework (Debon 1961). In later editions of Strauss's translations, there is a notable reduction in theological content. Accompanying this change, extensive footnotes have been moved to post-textual interpretation, similarly influenced by Wilhelm's use of paratexts (Strauss 1987). Till today, the eminent Sinologist Eva Lüdi Kong, in her translation of *Xiyouji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West), employs extensive paratexts to facilitate comprehension. In her annotations, Kong often refers to Wilhelm's interpretations of Dao (Hu and Tan 2021), demonstrating the enduring influence of Wilhelm's methodology in contemporary Sinology.

However, the appropriate use of paratexts is only one of the reasons why Wilhelm's edition became a classic German translation. In addition to his own capabilities in translation, the cooperation with Diederichs publisher also contributed to the success of his translation. Renowned in Germany at that time, Diederichs publisher wielded considerable influence in the German-speaking world. Their great economic strength enabled Wilhelm's translation to maintain substantial circulation, even amidst the challenges of World War I and the post-war German economic crisis, securing its place in the German book market. Beyond translating Chinese classics, Wilhelm also published numerous papers and monographs on Chinese philosophy. His ever-increasing status in the fields of translation and sinology is another crucial factor in sustaining high interest in his *Daodejing* translation. Furthermore, Wilhelm organized over sixty public and academic lectures, various cultural seminars, themed exhibitions, and art lectures through the Frankfurt China Institute (das China-Institut Frankfurt am Main), which he founded (Leutner 2003, pp. 43–44). All these activities served as effective pathways to promote the acceptance and dissemination of his translation of the *Daodejing*. In addition to focusing on textual research, studying the global dissemination and canonization of the *Daodejing* from a sociological perspective could provide additional valuable insights for future studies.

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Notes

¹ “Laozeitics” emerges from the Chinese study of *Laoxue* 老學, which means “the study of, doctrine of, school of, knowledge of, or field of study of Laozi the person or Laozi the text” (Tadd 2022b, p. 2). Laozeitics shifts the focus from seeking the original text and its original meaning to appreciating the hermeneutical and historical value of the various translations and interpretations on the *Daodejing*, including those in different cultures and languages.

² Diederichs publisher was founded by Eugen Diederichs (1867–1930) in 1897. Since then, Diederichs has always led discussions on important social issues in Germany, dedicating himself to introducing the finest cultures of various nations into the German-speaking world. He can be considered one of the most significant figures in the German cultural sphere in the first half of the 20th century (Diederichs 2014, p. 8). In addition to the “Chinese Religion and Philosophy” series, Wilhelm also published a large number of academic monographs at this publishing house.

- ³ Before the appearance of Wilhelm's translation, there were eight full German translations of the *Daodejing* (Tadd 2022a, pp. 145–146, 156): 1. *Laò-Tsè's Tao Tè King* (Victor von Strauss 1870); 2. *Lao-Tse Tao-Tè-King, der Weg zur Tugend* (Reinhold von Plaenckner, 1870); 3. *Taòtekking von Laòtsee* (Friedrich Wilhelm Noak, 1888); 4. *Theosophie in China. Betrachtungen über das Tao-Teh-King* (Franz Hartmann, 1897); 5. *Lao-tsi und seine Lehre* (Rudolf Dvorák, 1903); 6. *Die Bahn und der rechte Weg des Lao-Tse* (Alexander Ular, 1903); 7. *Des Morgenlandes grösste Weisheit. Laotse Tao Te King* (Joseph Kohler, 1908); 8. *Lao-tszes Buch vom höchsten Wesen und vom höchsten Gut* (Julius Grill, 1910).
- ⁴ *Yang* 陽 and *yin* 陰 are two significant concepts in Chinese philosophy, representing two fundamental forces in nature that are both opposing and interdependent. *Yang* symbolizes traits such as positivity, masculinity, daylight, and strength, while *yin* represents passivity, femininity, nighttime, and gentleness. These two principles are considered as the foundation for the existence and development of all things. Wilhelm's interpretation here referred to the content of Chapter 5 of *Yizhuan Xici* 易傳·系辭 (Commentary on the Attached Verbalizations of the *Yijing*), which states, "The interaction of *yin* and *yang* is called Dao".

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Article

The LATAM's *Laozi*: The Reception and Interpretations of the *Laozi* in Latin America

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Abstract: The *Laozi* has a long and variegated exegetical history inside and outside of China. This history shows the flexibility of a text that is always able to transform and adapt to the specific cultural context and historical period in which it emerges. Due to the expansion of Orientalism among Latin American intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th century, the *Laozi*, among other texts, began to propagate, producing a series of translations and original interpretations of the text. These works are the products of several Latin American writers who engaged with the *Laozi* mainly through the mediation of European and North American interpretations. From these cross-cultural interactions emerged some original interpretations and translations that created different ways of reading the *Laozi*. In this paper, I outline the major characteristics of the *Laozi*'s translations and interpretations in Latin America's sub-regions. I draw a tentative sketch of what could be defined as the Latin American *Laozi*'s experience, better called the *LATAM's Laozi*.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy; *Laozi*; Daoism; Latin America; orientalism; translation

1. Introduction

Each time the Way has descended to the earth, it has been different [. . .] Thus, Han dynasty commentators produced a Han *Laozi*, Jin dynasty commentators produced a Jin *Laozi*, and Tang and Song commentators produced Tang and Song *Laozis* (Chan 1991, p. 4).

The quote above from the Song dynasty Daoist priest Du Daojian highlights a common approach in the history of the translation and interpretation of the *Daodejing* (hereafter *Laozi*). The underlying idea is that the *Laozi* represents a mysterious and obscure wisdom that can easily adapt to the context and the time in which it is received. As Du Daojian claims, the capacity of the *Laozi* to adapt and transform according to different cultural contexts and historical periods explains the success and longevity of the text. Its longevity, today, includes around 2000 translations in 94 languages (Tadd 2022, p. 88). This considerable quantity and variety of translations—even within the same language—show the popularity of a text that goes beyond sinological studies. Proof of this phenomenon is indicated by the more than 50 authored translations and re-translations—in Spanish and Portuguese—produced in and for the Latin American market. Some of these versions shows interpretative readings of the text that create or follow what Robinet (1998, p. 121) calls the “school of reading”, that is, a way to interpret the text that involves emphasizing some aspects over others.

While the history of the translation and interpretation of the *Laozi* in the European cultural context is well-documented, this is not the case for the Latin American (hereafter, LATAM) sub-region. LATAM does not have a long tradition in either Asian studies in general or in sinological studies in particular. The interest in Chinese literary production for academic or informative purposes has emerged in the last decades due to the increasing popularization of the image of China and Chinese culture in this part of the world. However, to claim that the classics of Chinese thought were hitherto unknown in the region would be wrong, especially if this claim refers to the *Laozi*.

The aim of this paper is to outline the major characteristics of what I will call the *LATAM's Laozi/s*. I describe the major readings of the text developed within the Latin

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American context and draw a tentative sketch of its identity. The relevance of this study covers several different interests that range from the history of cultural transmission to research on translations, the global history of ideas, and so on. However, the main aim is to analyze the *Laozi* from a new standpoint that goes beyond the typical East–West narratives. The history of the Latin American interpretations and translations of the *Laozi* show the LATAM’s effort to go beyond Eurocentrism and build a horizontal mutual recognition with new rising world actors.

To trace the history of the translation and interpretation of the *Laozi* in Latin America is a complex task that needs to consider several elements that comprise the different cultural and linguistic contexts in the region. Latin America is a broad term that defines a variegated cultural and linguistic context, and I am aware of the oversimplification of taking LATAM as a single reference. However, a coherent and single thread can be identified when we talk about LATAM’s relationship with Orientalism and Oriental culture. In this paper, I only consider Spanish and Portuguese works, leaving aside other languages spoken in the region since significant works in these languages have not been produced on the *Laozi*. Another issue is LATAM’s cultural interchange with European countries, such as Spain and Portugal, for obvious historical reasons. In the publishing industry, Spanish and Portuguese books circulate in both European and Latin American markets, and therefore, it is often difficult to determine the main target market of a specific text. My solution here was to consider first editions published in LATAM’s context, mainly written by Latin American authors,¹ including re-translations of previous *Laozi*’s translations published in Europe or North America. The distinctive element here lies in the target market the product was originally intended for, despite its later impact. Finally, the last issue is the uncountable production of *Laozi* translations published by independent publishers. This kind of product is often anonymous and usually produced in esoteric environments. At this time, I only analyze authored works published by recognized publishers based in LATAM countries.

This paper is organized in the following fashion: First, I present a brief history of the introduction and first development of “Oriental thought and texts” in the LATAM context. This will help to better explain the purpose behind Latin American intellectuals’ interests in Daoism and the *Laozi*. Second, I frame the translations and interpretations of the *Laozi* as types of readings regarding their focus and targeting audience. I divide the readings into three types: the mystical/spiritual reading, the academic reading, and the miscellaneous reading. The taxonomy employed here only serves as a support to understand the kinds of readings that are produced in the LATAM context. I am aware that some works do not totally fit into one specific category and could lie among two or three different ones.

2. The Introduction of *Laozi* in Latin America

The introduction and the popularization of the *Laozi* in Latin America have taken place in different cultural contexts. Each context has conveyed a different aim, has targeted a different kind of audience, and has generated or influenced specific ways of reading the text—or what Misha Tadd (Tadd 2022) calls interpretive lineages.

The first introduction of the *Laozi* in Latin America occurred with the fascination toward Oriental culture that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century in different Latin American countries. This fascination contributed to shaping a particular form of Orientalism that can be called Hispanic Orientalism.² As Kushigian (1991, p. 3) claims, Hispanic Orientalism differs from Said Orientalism because it is not characterized by hegemonic paradigms, and it is based on the construction of a dialogue and exchange of ideas with the East. At the beginning of the 20th century, Asia gradually became the new horizon for Latin American young intellectuals moved by anti-imperialist and anti-positivist sentiments. “The Orient” represented the alternative political and cultural reference to the Western decline, which manifested its tipping point in the outbreak of the First World War. Dealing with similar colonial issues, Asian countries and leaders became important references for young Latin American reformists, from the Mexican Atheists to the Argentinian Modernists and Reformists. In this context, the ideas and the works of

Gandhi, Sun Yat-sen, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao Zedong, among others, began to circulate among LATAM's intellectual circles.

Following the so-called “awakening of the Orient” (see Bergel 2006, p. 110), academic and informative journals began to publish translations and articles on Asian pre-modern and modern thought and culture. To give a few examples, the first volume of the *Revista Oriental*—a left-wing journal founded by the “Friends of Russia Association”—was published in 1925 in Argentina. The *Revista Oriental* published articles on political anti-colonialist movements of India, China, Morocco, and so on. Another example is Francisco Zamora's *Claridad* publishing house.³ *Claridad* published a collection between 1922 and 1926 called *Los Pensadores*. In this collection, Zamora dedicated a few issues to Gandhi and the famous Orientalist Romain Rolland (see Devés and Bao 2005, p. 6).

The first and foremost interest in “the Orient” and its culture had a political purpose. However, along with the ideological and political vehicles, several Asian philosophical and religious traditions spread around Latin America and had a significant cultural impact.⁴ The key aspect of LATAM's attraction to Asian philosophy was the new kind of spirituality that Buddhism, Hinduism, and Daoism seemed to be able to offer. Literary modernists and esoteric groups—Theosophists, Spiritualists, Masons, and Paganists, among others—were the major groups attracted to this “new form” of spirituality that supported their anti-positivism and anti-scientism.

LATAM's attitude to Eastern spirituality followed the European Orientalist romanticized view of “the Orient”.⁵ The reason behind this approach was the fact that LATAM's interaction with “the Orient” was frequently mediated by European and North American interpretations. As Devés and Melgar stated:

Orientalism did not come to us through contact between our intellectuals and those from the East, but rather through the Europeans and North Americans, in their French and English translations, and to a much lesser extent via the Spanish versions. Certainly, our Orientalism was second- and even third-hand. (Devés and Bao 2005, p. 8)

Second- and third-hand Orientalism means that LATAM's intellectuals read and understood the classics of the Far East through European translations or re-translations and through the filter of Western-specific interpretations. This occurred with the promotion of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism through Theosophist authors such as Annie Besant, Helena Blavatsky, and Jinajaradas, who were well-known in Latin America.

Regarding the *Laoyi*, the promotion and understanding of the text in Latin America followed the general Orientalist model explained above. LATAM's first engagement with Daoism was through the works of Western sinologists and Orientalists. To give some examples of this engagement, the Mexican philosopher Antonio Caso (Caso 1975, p. 273) affirmed that his approach to *Laoyi* was mediated by the work of the Italian sinologist Giuseppe Tucci and the translation of the German sinologist Richard Wilhelm (1985). The Argentinian novelist Jorge Luis Borges became fascinated with the Daoist classics thanks to the translations of Herbert Giles (1905), James Legge (1879), and Arthur Waley (1954) (see Zhu 2018). Leon Wieger and Bryce (1991) and Alberto Castellani (1927)—among others—were the main references for the works on Daoism by the Argentinian Orientalist Angel Cappelletti (1964). In Brazil, the first works on Daoism were mediated by the understanding of French Orientalist authors such as Pauthier, Remusat, and Julien, among others. Traces of this influence can be found in the works on Chinese culture of Mendonça, Lisboa, and Cordeiro, and the translations of *Laoyi* by Huberto Rohden (see Bueno and Czepula 2020).

Due to the growing interest in Daoism at the beginning of the 20th century, several LATAM publishers and journals began to publish Spanish and Portuguese translations of Daoist works. These publishers were often related to—and funded by—esoteric international networks such as Theosophy, Masons, and Spiritualists, which begin to expand in Latin America at the end of the 19th century. Some examples are the important publishers Kier and Sudamericana in Argentina and Orion and Diana in Mexico. These publishers decided to dedicate a part of their production to translations, re-translations, and works

of Oriental classics and released several *Laozi* versions. The Argentinian publisher house *Kier*—initially called *Libreria Teosofica*—published three versions of the *Laozi*: a Spanish translation of Waley’s (1979) *Laozi*, the well-known translation by Edmundo Montagne (1947), and one by Samuel Wolpin (1980). The *Sudamericana* published two works by Yutang Lin (1945a, 1945b) and Adolfo Carpio’s (1957) translation of the *Laozi*. In Mexico, the Orion and Diana publishers released two series edited by two Spanish Theosophists who had migrated to Mexico, Maria Sola de Sellares and Josefina Maynade. The 1954 *Orion* series was called *Grandes Maestros de la Humanidad* [Grand Masters of Humanity], which included a Spanish version of the *Laozi* called *Lao tse el Maestro de la Humanidad* [*Laozi the Master of Humanity*]. The 1972 *Diana* series was called *Tradición sagrada de la humanidad* [*The Sacred Tradition of Humanity*], which included Roberto Pla’s *Laozi* translation.

In Brazil, the major actor in the distribution of *Laozi* was the publisher *Pensamento-Cultrix*, which was funded at the beginning of the 20th century by the Portuguese immigrant Antônio Olívio Rodrigues. Directly linked with the first esoteric society of Brazil, *Pensamento* published esoteric works of various kinds, including translations of several Oriental classics (see Ramachandra 2007, p. 21). *Pensamento-Cultrix* published several Portuguese translations and re-translations of the *Laozi* and other Daoist works. To quote some of the most important: the *Laozi* translation by the Theosophist and Buddhist monk Murillo Nunes de Azevedo was published in 1971. The Portuguese version of Wilhelm’s translation of the *Laozi* was published in 1978 (Wilhelm 1978). In 1985, *Pensamento* published the famous interpretation and contemporary adaptation of the *Laozi* by John Heider (Heider 1985), *El Tao de los Líderes* [*The Tao of Leadership*]. In 1985, the Portuguese translations of Henry Normand’s work, *Os metres do Tao* [*The Masters of Daoism*], were published (Normand 1985).

Along with international esoteric networks, the introduction and promotion of *Daodejing*’s concepts and translations in Latin America took place through the works of modernists. Novelists, poets, and painters turned to the East and to Daoism in search of alternative aesthetics and religious values (Hagimoto and College 2013). As Bruno Podesta (1974, p. 235) confirmed, Orientalism and mysticism were important elements in modernist writers since they offered those spiritual elements capable of contrasting the materialistic Western values. Among the Eastern disciplines, Daoism was one of the most important. To give some examples, the Cuban writer Jose Martí referred to Daoism in his chronicle *Un funeral chino* [*A Chinese Funeral*]; Jorge Borges often employed Daoist references—mainly Zhuangzi—in his writings (see Hagimoto and College 2013, p. 19). Another example of modernist fascination was by the Argentinian group of painters and poets called Orion. Among the founders, the poet Ernesto Rodríguez and Aschero (1940) gave several lectures on the figure of Laozi and published a full translation of the *Laozi* in 1940 (see Figueira 1955, p. 340).

A further vehicle—but one with a minor impact—for the introduction of Daoist concepts and texts in Latin America took place with the Chinese migratory waves to the region. Migration facilitated the introduction and the popularization of Daoist-related disciplines, such as *taiji*, *qigong*, and traditional medicine, and contributed to the establishment of Daoist institutions and associations, on this topic, see (Costa 2019). This vehicle seems to have had a significant impact in Brazil, where there are some of the most important Daoist associations in Latin America.⁶

In sum, the introduction and first promotion of the *Laozi* in LATAM countries can be framed as a sentiment of fascination toward “the Orient” that emerged among young intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th century. This fascination was primarily drawn by political purposes and spiritual interests and developed in intellectual circles of several kinds. The context in which the promotion of Daoist ideas and texts took place conveys specific missions that influenced the production of ways of reading the *Laozi*. Each context determined—or at least influenced—the authors’ translations and interpretations, targeting a specific audience. In the next sections, I frame the most important LATAM translations and interpretations of the text in the above-mentioned taxonomy: mystical/spiritual reading,

academic reading, and miscellaneous reading. Each of them was developed in a specific context, emphasizing the specific elements that targeted specific audiences.

3. The Mystical/Spiritual Reading of *Laozi*

I define mystical/spiritual reading as the kind of interpretation that emphasizes—or over-emphasizes—a mystical/spiritual approach to the text. This view tends to describe the *Laozi* as a universal wisdom that can be grasped or experienced through individual spiritual cultivation. This is the most common reading of the text in Latin America and, thus, covers a broad range of audiences. The reasons for the great impact of this kind of reading are related to the Orientalist fascination mentioned above, with its interest in the spiritual elements of the Far East's wisdom. This kind of reading tends to emphasize a mystical interpretation of the *Laozi*, often prioritizing cultivation techniques and subjective understandings. The main aim of this kind of reading is spiritual development, and thus, circulates in esoteric environments. However, it is often accepted in academic circles.

The Edmund Montagne *El libro del sendero y de la línea recta de Lao-tse* [*The Book of the Way and the Straight Line by Lao-tse*—published in Argentina in 1916—is one of the first translations of the *Laozi* published in Latin America.⁷ Montagne basically proposed a re-translation of Alexandre Ular's (1900) French version of the text following his mystical and anti-modernist approach. Montagne read the key elements of the *Laozi* through a mystical lens. To give some examples, Montagne described *Laozi's* sage as the “perfected one” (Montagne 1916, p. 41) who is able to “participate in Universal Unity” (Ibid., p. 39). The sage is the one who can reach complete identification with the Dao—“the primordial and organizing energy of nature” (Ibid., p. 25)—expanding his/her spirit: “the supremacy of the spirit over the senses, in their constant parallelism, leads to identification.” (Ibid., p. 10) Montagne also follows Ular's anti-modernist approach in reading the text as a critique against any form of predetermined organization. This reading is in line with the critique against Western positivism and the focus on Eastern spiritualism promoted by young LATAM modernists and reformists. For instance, Montagne read Chapter 48 as “not-wanting, nothing-doing, is the essence of social organization” (Ibid., p. 23) and Chapter 57, “By suppressing the will, one can organize the society” (Ibid., p. 27). Even though this work is a re-translation of a previous French version, Montagne's translation had a significant impact on the Latin American understanding of the text, and his version has had multiple editions.⁸

A similar approach to the *Laozi* that has been equally successful in Latin America is that of the Chinese author Lin Yutang. Lin Yutang's works on Oriental philosophy became well-known in Latin America in the 1940s. Lin's philosophy is one of the best examples of the Oriental fascination mentioned above. Regarding his most famous work—*The Importance of Living* (La importancia de vivir, Lin 1945a)—the Argentinian Eduardo González says in his review of the work:

“*The Importance of Living* is the Bible of Common Sense embodied in the patient Chinese people. People chosen by that Holy Spirit of Common Sense.” (González 1940, p. 81)

Lin Yutang's works embodied “the alternative solutions” and “the ideal ways of life” of the Oriental world that could be employed in Latin America. Regarding the *Laozi*, Yutang Lin's (1945a) Spanish and Portuguese (Lin 1945b) translations were published in Argentina and Brazil in 1945. These translations have had a significant number of re-editions and countless citations in later works. To quote some of them, the *Recompilacion Taoista* [*Daoist Collection*] edited by Waldamer-Verdugo Fuentes (1983) includes Lin's re-translation of the *Laozi*. The translation by the Cuban poetess Mireya Piñeiro Ortigo published in 2003 is based on Lin's reading. In Brazil, Haydee Nicolussi published a re-translation of Lin's *Laozi* in the volume *A Filosofia Materialista Chinesa* [*The Chinese Materialistic Philosophy*] in 1967 for the “Asociacao Macrobiotica do Porto Alegre” (Nicolussi 1967).

Lin Yutang *Laozi's* success in Latin America was due to three major factors. First, his version was one of the first *Laozi* translations available in the region and the first in

Brazil (see Bueno 2016, p. 10). Second, at the time, Lin was already a well-known author in North America, and his popularity gradually spread throughout Latin America. Third, the emphasis on spirituality and religious elements he offers in his reading resonates in several other LATAM readings of the *Laozi*.⁹

Further examples of the promotion of this kind of reading in the LATAM context are the works of Jesuits sinologists, missionaries, and theologians, such as the Spanish Carmelo Elorduy (1961); the French Guillaume Pauthier (1891); and the German theologian and sinologist Richard Wilhelm (1985). Elorduy's version became a referential work for several later Spanish translations published in Latin America.¹⁰ Pauthier's *Laozi* influenced the first works on Chinese culture and Daoism published in Brazil by Salvador Mendonça y Henrique Lisboa (see Bueno and Czepula 2020). Wilhelm's re-translation was published in Argentina (1985) and Brazil (1978) and is often taken as a referential translation in works such as Gaston Soubllette, Samuel Wolpin, and Antonio Caso, among others.

Regarding the original *Laozi* translations published in Latin America that follow a mystical/spiritual understanding, there are several works worth mentioning. In Brazil, three stand out for their impact and originality. The first is the translation by the theologian and philosopher Huberto Rohden (1982), "*Tao Te Ching—o livro que revela Deus [The Book that Reveals God]*".¹¹ Rohden's reading is a very interesting example of creative engagement with the text. He frames his reading of the *Laozi* within his philosophical system called *Filosofia Universica*—a syncretic philosophy that reflects on the very nature of the constitution of the universe.¹² Rohden reads concepts such as *Dao*, *qi*, *yinyang*, and so on, within this framework, which follows a transdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach that mixes religion with science and Hinduism with Buddhism and Daoism. Rohden's approach emerges clearly from the title of his work, *O livro que revela Deus*. He understands and translates the concept of *Dao* as *Deus* (God), a transcendental divinity similar to the Christian God, Brahman, and Yahveh. Commenting on the opening of the text, he states:

Dao is the unfathomable reality, the Absolute Brahma, the Transcendent Divinity that cannot be achieved by our finite knowledge. Dao, the Ontological Being, goes beyond our logical knowledge. We get to know the transcendent divinity in the form of the immanent god. Our finite knowledge finitizes the Infinite Being. (Ibid., pp. 14–15)

Rohden's syncretic approach reflects the spiritual universalism preached by New Age and esoteric groups, which have had a significant presence in Brazil since the 1950s. This approach emphasizes, on the one hand, a universal message beyond cultural peculiarities, but on the other hand, highlights an individual approach and experience of the text. Rohden (1982, p. 159) understands the Daoism of the *Laozi* as a mystical journey characterized by spontaneous individual freedom, a liberal political system, and a self-transformative experience.

Another important translation in the Brazilian market follows a similar approach—the one by the Buddhist monk and Theosophist Murillo Nunes de Azevedo (1971). Azevedo's version, *O Livro do Caminho Perfeito [The Book of the Perfect Way]*, emphasizes the same spiritual universalism and Rohden's cross-cultural syncretism. Commenting on *Laozi's* first chapter, he states:

That which has no name is therefore the Nameless, that is, what the Hindus call Tat, That, the Unmanifested God of the Christians. Now, what has a name, the nameable, the Manifested God, let's say is like the Japanese Buddhists Oyasama, Father and Mother of all things. (Azevedo 1971, p. 2)

Being a Buddhist Monk and a member of the Brazilian Theosophic Society, Azevedo follows the idea that the *Laozi* expresses a universal sacred wisdom shared by several ancient cultures. He reads the text as a mystical wisdom that helps us to "dive into the transcendent reality where we live without knowing" (Azevedo 1996, p. 60). "*Laozi* possesses [...] that cosmic consciousness revealed to the elect of the gods" (Ibid., p. 60). Hence, the final goal

of the *Laozi*, which is to reach the ultimate unity with the Dao/God/Nature, is mystical. Continuing the comments on the first chapter, Azevedo states:

Let's shed light on the keywords that open the text. Let's start with the word "followed". Here there is a clear indication that we can only follow, evolve, continue effortlessly, when we discover our "vocation": our path which is a word often used in the spiritual life. Each of us, or rather, each human being, visible or not, has it. The individual path is different from all others, because it is like a person's DNA, like the fingerprint record that makes him unique and never repeated in the nature that surrounds us. When we found it, the perfect way was found, and everything will be easy. (Ibid., p. 60)

Azevedo reads Dao in terms of the individual path one should follow in order to evolve into a sage. He defines this path as "unique" for each person, an individual vocation. Moreover, this path seems to be primarily a spiritual path that focuses on individual spiritual development.

The last example of this kind in the Brazilian context is the translation by the philosopher and theologian Ivo Storniolo. Storniolo reads the *Laozi* as a mystical journey toward the experience of the Dao. This journey goes beyond the kind of knowledge that searches, explores, and stores more and more facts: "In order to reach the Dao, it is necessary to go deeper and deeper, until reaching the point of unity, where the individualized personality comes into contact with the cosmic totality" (Storniolo 2001, p. 270).¹³ Storniolo understands Dao as the source and the foundation of nature and of the whole universe. Dao is present in everything, and it also surpasses everything. (Ibid., p. 10)

[Dao is the] Cosmic God known to the mystics such as Democritus (Greek philosopher), Francis of Assisi (Christian mystic) and Spinoza (Jewish philosopher) [. . .] Bonaventure's presentation of God applies to him: [. . .] God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. This is not pantheism (=God is everything), but panentheism (=God in everything). The visible reality would be the witness of the Tao, which makes everything evolve to the point where, as the apostle Paul says, God will be "all in all". (1 Corinthians 15:28). (Ibid. p. 11)

Storniolo reads the text describing a panentheistic mystical experience. Dao is everywhere and in everything, and thus, human beings can easily taste it and participate in it. The idea of an all-pervading Dao, and of human mystical effort to reach ultimate Unity with it, emerges throughout the text, for instance, in chapter titles such as Chapter 14, "Dao the all in all" (Ibid. p. 67); Chapter 32, "Dao is the source and the end of everything" (Ibid., p. 119); and Chapter 40, "Dao is everything and nothing" (Ibid., p. 142).

The spiritual and mystical reading of the *Laozi* tends to emphasize—or over-emphasize—self-cultivation techniques such as meditation, contemplation, and breathing practices. Focus on these techniques is usually found in editions published by small publishers connected to the esoteric network. These editions do not show either the authors or the translators, and they are a mix of the most famous previous editions. However, in addition to these non-authored examples, there are a few authored works that are worth analyzing. The first example is Roberto Pla's translation of the *Laozi* published in Mexico in 1972 by the publisher house *Diana*. This version was released in the collection series called *Tradición Sagrada de la Humanidad* [*The Sacred Tradition of Humanity*], edited by the Theosophists Maria Sola de Sellares and Josefina Maynade. In the Introduction, Pla (1972, pp. 7–22) describes the philosophy of the text as an ancient and transcendent "philosophy of living" rooted in the traditional wisdom of China. Pla reads the *Laozi* primarily as a manual of self-cultivation where the aim is to live a good life in harmony with the cosmos and nature:

Lao Tse advocates individual development as the only possible way to achieve a better life in the world, and therefore his Science is Reality, and his moral doctrine is Life itself. The wisdom of the *Tao Te Ching* is the wisdom of Life, the secret of knowing how to live in harmony with everything. (Ibid., p. 22)

Pla interprets the Daoism of Laozi as a philosophy of life. He leaves behind metaphysical and cosmological elements of the text, choosing to concentrate his reading on self-cultivation. The *Laozi* shows how human beings can achieve a deep connection with nature through meditation and other self-cultivation techniques, for example, in the opening of Chapter 56:

Who knows does not speak. Who speaks does not know. The Sage closes his mouth and eyes, overshadows his senses and becomes impenetrable to the outside world, to which only his heart opens. He collects himself in his inner world gathering all the intimate lights. He put in order his thoughts: discard the superficial ones and meditate on the deep things. Then the Sage merges with everything. What it means: hidden fusion with the Tao. (Ibid., p. 83)

Pla interprets the passage of Chapter 56 as a meditation technique for a mystical purpose—to achieve unity/fusion with the Dao. This approach is followed in several other passages. For instance, Pla emphasizes the attitude of the Daoist sage in living his/her life in a contemplative quiet state, free from worldly concerns (Ibid., pp. 6–12). Commenting on the end of Chapter 51, he states: “Time calms the mind. Things are transient. A serene, empty mind gives way to intuition; this is the meditation.” (Ibid., p. 86) Similar readings are found throughout Pla’s translation, showing the purpose of presenting the text as a training manual for spirituality.

The reading by the Argentinian Samuel Wolpin is along the same line. Wolpin—who published several works on Chinese philosophy—first published *Aforismos del Sendero y la Virtud* [*Aphorisms on the Way and Virtue*] in 1976 (Wolpin 1976), followed by *Lao Tse y su tratado sobre la virtud del Tao Te Ching* [*Laozi and his Treatise on the Virtue of the Daodejing*] in 1980, both in Argentina. In the first work, he presents a selection of aphorism from the *Laozi*; in the second he dedicates the last section of the book to a complete translation of the text. Wolpin’s translation follows the most influential interpretations without adding anything new. He relies on and often quotes Legge (1879), Giles (1905), Wu (1989), Lau (1963), and the Spanish versions of Carpio (1957), Oviedo (1976), and Elorduy (1961). However, the character of his interpretation often resonates with the trend that reads the *Laozi* as a manual of meditation and self-cultivation. This approach emerges from the word choices in his translations. To give some examples, in Chapter 1, he reads the phrase *zhongmiao zhi men* (衆妙之門) as the “Gate for the Supreme Wisdom” (Wolpin 1980, p. 68). In Chapter 39, *shen de yi yi ling* (神得一以靈) becomes “[from the unity] the [individual] spirit [becomes] strong (Ibid.,). In Chapter 45, the phrase *qingjing wei tianxia zheng* (清靜為天下正) is translated into “rest and tranquility put the universe in order” (Ibid., p. 118). Finally, in Chapter 10, “When the last vestiges of illusion are cleansed, the mind appears without cracks” is the translation for *dichu xuanlan neng wu ci hu* (滌除玄覽能無疵乎) (Ibid., p. 79). “Supreme Wisdom”, “individual spirit”, “put the universe in order”, and “cleaning of the mind” are typical vocabulary found in meditative and mystical environments.

Another important example of mystical/spiritual reading with a focus on self-cultivation is the translation of Juan Fernandez Oviedo. Oviedo published a translation of the *Laozi* in Argentina in 1976 and then a new edition edited by Javier Cruz in 2012. This latter edition was released in a collection called *Sabiduria Practica Oriente Occidente* [*East and West Practice Wisdom*], which aimed to interpret the classics of philosophy through the lens of self-cultivation/perfection. In the prologue of the edition, Javier Cruz (Oviedo 2012, p. 16) exposes the objective of the work: “Reading this book carefully will already involve a risk: that of having to reformulate and perhaps completely change our way of thinking and relating to ourselves and to our environment”. Oviedo and Cruz’s edition of the *Laozi* does not simply aim to present the classic to a Spanish reader. They want to lead the reader through a practical and personal experience of the book in daily life. While Oviedo’s translation basically follows the main translations,¹⁴ the 2012 edition’s core part is the commentary section. To give a paradigmatic example of their approach, in the comments on the opening of Chapter 10, Cruz reads *baoyi* (抱一)—usually translated into “embrace the One”—as a “gesture of love and commitment” to life, and he suggests to “live

in the present, which is the only moment capable of being lived" (Oviedo 2012, p. 52). This reading is backed by Oviedo's translation of the passage: "May your body and vital soul be United in an embrace without separation" (Ibid.). Oviedo's choice resonates with that of Gia Fu Feng and English's (1972) famous English translation that influenced a New Age and spiritualist reading of the text in the 1970s.¹⁵ However, the comments introduce a new way of reading the passage in practical terms.

A further and last example of this kind is the Portuguese translation by the German-Brazilian sensei Christian Haensell, published in 2003. Haensell understands the *Laozi* as a universal text beyond Chinese cultural borders. The text's wisdom goes beyond words and is based on individual practice: "The Tao Te King is merely a theoretical tool. Just reading it won't get us anywhere. We have to live it" (Haensell 2003, p. 8). Haensell's version proposes—together with an original translation—a commentary section that includes practical exercises. The practical part—affirms the author—"allows us to recognize ourselves. Looking at it, we learn, little by little, to get rid of the masks that we constantly use. We learn how to be spontaneous. Looking in this mirror we can recognize that you are me and I am you" (Ibid., p. 7). To give an example of the practical exercises he proposes, in the commentary section of Chapter 1, he presents a meditation exercise that can help the reader to better understand the verses "the mystery of mysteries, the essence of the secrets of life" (Ibid., p. 18). The exercise's aim is to improve the concentration of the mind. Through concentration, one can overcome the surface of the manifold phenomena and get to the essence (Ibid., p. 18). In addition to reading the *Laozi* in practical terms—as a manual of self-cultivation—Haensell remarks that the idea of the *Laozi* is an "individual/private experience" subject to personal understanding: "Don't be alarmed when in a few months or years you will suddenly interpret the same text completely differently. That's a nice sign you are alive, a sign that you are changing." (Ibid., p. 7) The focus of the book is the discovery of one's true self and learning how to live a good life, and the understanding of the *Laozi* must be intimate and personal, contextualized in one's own life.

4. The Academic Reading of *Laozi*

A second section of the Latin American translation and re-translation of *Laozi* is dedicated to those works produced in the academic context.¹⁶ These works are usually translations by philosophers who read the *Laozi* through Western philosophical categories as their main methodological approach and support their translations using previous sinological works. The focus of this reading is less interested in mysticism or cultivation techniques and tends to emphasize metaphysical and ethical aspects.

One of the first successful Spanish translations of the *Laozi* framed in this category is the one by the Argentinian professor and philosopher Adolfo Carpio. The book was published in Argentina in 1957, and it represents one of the first referential academic works on the *Laozi* published in Latin America. Carpio's work is based on Alberto Castellani's Italian translation published in 1927. Carpio justifies his choice in the prologue, stating: "the previous Spanish translations have not been taken into consideration because they lack seriousness and often simply fantasize" (Carpio 1957, p. 30). Carpio generally follows Castellani's translation throughout his translation, however, he also relies on other sources, such as those by Legge (1879) and Giles (1905). Carpio's approach follows the European sinological trend in reading the *Laozi* as a philosophical text in contrast to religious and mystical interpretations. To give an example of his approach, in the prologue, he justifies the choice of not translating the concept of Dao:

Translators gave to the term [D]ao the most varied interpretations: reason, substance, logos, absolute, monad, sovereign, God, etc. Perhaps the concept of Principle could be the most accurate translation, but it is preferable—like Legge, De Harlez, Strauss, and Castellani, among others—to leave it without translation. (Carpio 1957, p. 23)

Carpio follows the major European sinological translations of the *Laozi*, emphasizing a philosophical interpretation of the text. Even if he does not translate the word Dao as

Principle, he reads it in that way, as is attested in chapter titles such as “Return to the Principle” (Chapter 16) and “Thinking about the Principle” (Chapter 63).

Another example that falls into the same category is the translation by the Italian Orientalist and philosopher Onorio Ferrero, based at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. Ferrero published a Spanish translation of the *Laozi* in Peru in 1972. Ferrero’s translation differs from most of the previous works published in Latin America, as it is one of the few real sinological studies. The references for his readings are primarily within the Chinese philosophical tradition. In his commentaries, he refers to texts such as the *Wenzi*, the *Huainanzi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Yijing*, among others. Ferrero’s approach is similar to that of Carpio’s, preferring a metaphysical reading over a mystical one, and he relies on Wang Bi’s commentary for his reading (Ferrero 1972, p. 5). To give some examples of his focus on metaphysics, Ferrero refers to Dao as the “Principle of the universal order”, which corresponds to “the unity between the manifest world and the not-yet manifested one” (Ibid., p. 13). Referring directly to Wang Bi’s interpretation, Ferrero understands *wu* 無—non-being—beyond the privative sense of not being a being, but as “the principle that lies at the base of being” (Ibid., p. 39).

The third Spanish translation, which can be defined as academic—or semi-academic—represents one of the most original examples. This is the translation by the Chilean professor, philosopher, and musicologist Gaston Soubllette (1990). While Soubllette’s translation does not consistently diverge from previous works, his interpretation can be framed in a much broader purpose that includes his cosmic vision and his philosophical system. Soubllette is not a sinologist and thus bases his translation on previous European sinological translations and interpretations. As he acknowledges in the prologue: “among the important translations and commentaries in European languages I consulted, this translation principally follows Richard Wilhelm’s work, with some variations” (Soubllette 1990, p. 17). In addition to Wilhelm (1985), Soubllette also refers to other translations, such as the works of Legge (1879), Waley (1954), Castellani (1927), and Elorduy (1961). Therefore, his translation could be framed within the European sinological tradition and does not represent anything new. Nonetheless, his interpretation of the text does, since he proposes a different approach. Soubllette’s objective is not merely to translate and interpret the text. Soubllette wants to convey to the readers his own specific world-view that coincides with the ideas expressed in the *Laozi*. In doing so, he builds a personal hermeneutics that, on the one hand, wants to “follow the Daoism to its true extreme” in a way that Catholic sinologists such as Wieger and Elorduy could not (Ibid., p. 30). On the other hand, he wants to open the text to an intercultural dialogue, finding parallels with other ancient traditions that range from Europe to LATAM’s aboriginal thought.

Soubllette is clear in the goal he wants to achieve with his interpretation of the *Laozi*. He wants to convey a message that resonates with his own philosophical purpose. The message expresses the need to recover the global popular wisdoms as the only way to overcome what he calls “the megacrisis” (see Soubllette 1992–1993) that grips modern societies. The *Laozi* is part of those ancient wisdoms transversally found in aboriginal cultures: a kind of wisdom that searches for a connection between human beings and nature without thinking of the latter as a resource to be exploited.

Regarding the Portuguese academic translations published in Brazil, there are a few works worth mentioning. The first is the translation by Professor Mario Sproviero (1997), which can be defined as the first work on the *Laozi* by a Brazilian sinologist, as he claims in the prologue:

It is necessary to carry out an accurate translation [of the *Laozi*] into Portuguese, based on the original text in classical Chinese. The translations that we have in Portuguese are translations of translations. Therefore—in some cases—the meaning is changed so much that it expresses the opposite (Sproviero 1997, p. 1).

Sproviero justifies his work with the necessity of a new Portuguese translation of the *Laozi* directly from the Chinese versions. His translation relies on Chinese commentaries

such as *Heshang gong* and that by Wang Bi and is supported by philological analysis. Regarding this work, Andre Bueno states:

It is the first national translation by a specialist in Chinese literature. Sproviero made a masterful use of the Portuguese language, adapting the versified translation of the Chinese text, creating a unique image capable of conveying the essence and revealing the core of a highly spiritualized and philosophical poetry [...] Sproviero's artisanal work reveals a unique mastery of Chinese, and an unparalleled skill in transcribing it into Portuguese. (Bueno 2016, p. 74)

Sproviero (1997, p. 12) sees the *Laozi* as a fundamental text that teaches human beings "to live integrated to the Course, the foundation of existence. [To do that] one must penetrate the mystery, not reduce the mystery to the human realm. Renew the mystery in the mystery itself". The *Laozi* does not teach some form of esoteric mysticism nor a religious doctrine; it expresses the doctrine of Dao "the moving course of everything, from where we could think that reason, spirit, meaning, logos can express their own essences" (Ibid., p. 39). The Dao teaches how the spiritually cultivated human being could live in accord with nature.

A second Portuguese work that should be mentioned in this category is Giorgio Sinedino's translation of the *Heshanggong* commentary of the *Laozi*, *Escritura do Caminho e Escritura da Virtude com os comentários do Senhor às Margens do Rio* [*The Scripture of the Way and the Scripture of the Virtue with the Commentary of the Master on the River*]. The work was published in Brazil in 2015 and represents the first *Laozi* commentary translation published in Portuguese in Latin America. The book is a sinological work that includes a historical contextualization and is supported by primary references. Sinedino reads the *Laozi* as a political and self-cultivation text following the attitude expressed in the *Heshanggong* commentary and its common interpretation in Western academia.

5. The Miscellaneous Reading of *Laozi*

The miscellaneous reading is a broad category that includes readings of the text in specific contexts with a focus on specific topics such as religious practices, political ideologies, and dietary regimes, among others. As a broad category that covers different topics, the target audience usually coincides with the context in which it emerges. The first example in the LATAM context is the anarchist reading. This interpretation landed in Latin America due to the Japanese anarchist Yamaga Taiji's Esperanto translation of the *Laozi*, which was re-translated into Spanish by the anarchist Eduardo Vivanco (1963). The work was first published in Mexico in 1963. This kind of reading follows a well-established line of interpretation of the *Laozi* in both European and American scholarships,¹⁷ and it was promoted in Latin America by the anarchist journal *Tierra y Libertad* [*Earth and Freedom*]. Following Esperanto's version, the Vivanco re-translation is particularly interesting in the commentary section of each chapter, which is where the anarchist elements fully emerge. To give an example, commenting the line of Chapter 57, "Manage the country with justice and the army with strategy. If you know how to control your actions you will win the world" (2007, p. 32), Yamaga/Vivanco states: "This chapter was the first anarchist declaration against the futility of politics and the domination of man by man. Lao Tsé [*Laozi*] declares himself opposed to the State, laws and capitalism" (Ibid., p. 32).¹⁸ Generally speaking, Vivanco's work is a pure re-translation of Yamaga's version and does not add anything new. However, thanks to this translation, the anarchist reading reaches a considerable impact among Orientalist circles in Latin America.¹⁹

In Brazil, there are another two original Portuguese translations of the *Laozi* that emphasize specific aspects of the text. The first is Tomio Kikuchi's translation published in Brazil in 1966 (Kikuchi 1966). The second is the Portuguese translation by the Daoist monk Wu Jyh Cherng, based in Brazil, published in 1998 (Wu 1998). Kikuchi's translation can be easily framed within the Orientalist reading of the text shown above with its focus on spirituality and self-cultivation. However, his version stands out for his attention to specific food consumption and macrobiotic alimentation for cultivation purposes. This aspect

resonates with the dietary practices that have emerged in several Daoist religious texts and in the *Xiang Er* commentary of the *Laozi*.²⁰ Conversely, Wu's Portuguese translation could be framed in the religious institutional context where it emerged. As a Daoist monk who migrated to Brazil, Wu reads the *Laozi* as a sacred revealed text. To give some paradigmatic examples, Wu reads the character *sheng* 聖—usually translated as sage—as “sacred man” emphasizing the religious aspect of the Daoist adept. At the end of Chapter 20, the phrase *er gui shi mu* (而貴食母) is explained by Wu in terms of “feeding on what precedes everything, it is the One Breath of the Previous-Heaven of Taoist alchemy” (Wu 1998, p. 23). Following the lineage within Daoist Institutions, Wu's commentary of the text largely employs references on Daoist cultivation and alchemical texts and practices.

6. Conclusions

Defining *Latin America's Laozi* is an arduous task given the cultural complexity of the territory that we normally define as Latin America. Taking Latin America as a collective and shared identity raises several problems that cannot be analyzed in this work. However, following the works of Devés and Bao (2005), Kushigian (1991), and Tinajero (2003) on Latin American Orientalism, a single and coherent thread could be drawn to define the LATAM's approach to Oriental culture. LATAM's approach to the *Laozi* goes along a similar track. *Latin America's Laozi* is a product of the fascination of LATAM intellectuals toward “the Orient” that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. This fascination existed on political and spiritual levels and was promoted mainly in political, artistic, and esoteric circles. Theosophists, Modernists, and Orientalists—among others—were the major actors in the promotion of the most common translations and interpretations of the text in their circles and the production of new interpretations. These new works tend to emphasize specific elements over others, reflecting the cultural context and aim of their production. The stress on spirituality over metaphysical concern. The emphasis on mystical and self-cultivation techniques over ethics. The praise of the subjective and private interpretation over the search for an objective “true message”. The focus on a “spiritual experience” of the text is thought of primarily as a “private experience”.²¹ We can find all these elements represented in the first and most common works on *Laozi* in Latin America. I define this approach as the mystical/spiritual reading.

All the characteristics mentioned here do not cover all the readings produced in Latin America. In addition to the mystical/spiritual reading, original translations of the *Laozi* can be also found within academic circles. In contrast to other academic contexts, these works are usually not the product of trained sinologists who deal with Chinese historical and literary sources. The authors of the *Laozi*'s new translations and interpretation within LATAM academia are mainly philosophers whose approach to the text is mediated by European and North American interpretations. This second- or third-hand approach sometimes creates original interpretations constructing a fruitful dialogue between Latin America, the Western sinological tradition, and the *Laozi* itself. One paradigmatic example of this kind is the interpretation of the Chilean philosopher Gaston Soubllette. While Soubllette's translation is mediated by European sinological works, his interpretation is framed in his own philosophical system.

Finally, I employ a further category—miscellaneous reading—to include the works that show specific readings of the text. This broad category shows the flexibility of a text that is always able to transform and adapt to specific contexts. The religious, macrobiotic, and anarchist approaches presented here are just a few examples of the different kinds of readings that can be found in Latin America. The context determines the aim of the reading and shapes its interpretation.

In conclusion, I can sketch a tentative identity of LATAM's *Laozi* as a set of readings produced in different cultural contexts that, in most cases, share a similar approach. The large presence of spiritual and cultivation practice in most of the readings highlights the main element of attraction of the text in the LATAM context: spirituality. As the version by Soubllette—among others—confirms, the *Laozi* shows that “wisdom is an experiential/living

knowledge that teaches us the sense of life” (Soublette 2016, p. 237). This idea of the *Laozi* as a “philosophy of life” often taken as a plausible alternative to the Western culture emerges in the majority of interpretations shown above regardless of the type of reading. Clearly, the stress on spirituality and individual cultivation is more evident in the spiritual–mystical reading. However, traces of these elements can also be found in some academic works, such as those by Sproviero (1997) and Sinedino (2015), and in semi-academic work, such as the one by Soublette (1990).²² The focus on spirituality also emerges in the three examples of miscellaneous readings shown, regardless of their different emphases. For example, in the anarchist emphasis, Yamaga/Vivanco’s version often refers to spiritual cultivation (see Chapters 12, 14, 37, 40, 52, and 71) and mystical experiences (see Chapters 45, 56, and 65).

The readings of the *Laozi* in the LATAM context show the effort of Latin Americans in searching for new experiences through new paths. These new paths are often described in a romanticized Orientalist fashion, pointing to the ancient mystical Orient as the main universal reference. The *LATAM’s Laozi* is a paradigmatic product of this effort, and for this reason, the *Laozi* has become one of the most translated classics in the region.

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Notes

- ¹ A few exceptions of non-Latin American authors are presented in this paper. The exceptions are the translations of Eduardo Vivanco (1963), Jyh Cherng Wu (1998), and Tomio Kikuchi (1966). Despite the origin of the authors, the three works are clearly written for LATAM’s specific contexts, as it is shown in the text.
- ² On the definition of Hispanic Orientalism, see (Kushigian 1991; Tinajero 2003; and Camayd-Freixas 2013).
- ³ For a study on the history of the *Revista Oriental*, see (Bergel 2006).
- ⁴ To give some examples, the influence of Hindu and Buddhist texts on Mexican post-revolutionary intellectuals, such as Francisco Madero, is quite well-known. Madero—one of the heroes of the Mexican Revolution—translated and commented on the Bhagavad Gita and took the Hindu classics as important references for his writings on democracy and the principles of revolution (see Muñoz 2020). Other examples in Mexico are the “Ateneo de la Juventud”, a group of intellectual reformists who promote an anti-positivist and anti-determinism view for the re-orientation of Mexican education. Most Atheists were attracted to “the Orient” as an alternative path to European culture and values. Examples include José Vasconcelos and Antonio Caso, among others.
- ⁵ For example, the representation of Oriental philosophy as a coherent whole is circumscribed in its ontological opposite position to the “rational” West.
- ⁶ There are other Daoist associations around LATAM’s countries, but they are not funded by Chinese migrants and did not produce any particular readings of the *Laozi*.
- ⁷ The first translation of the *Laozi* I recovered is by the forbidden Mexican Orientalist Augustin Bazán y Caravantes, *Lao-tseu-tao-te-king: libro de la via eterna y de la virtud* published in Mexico in 1870. The author himself believed he delivered the first translation of the text for Latin American readers, as he states in the prologue: “With fear, but with happiness, Julien translated it [the *Laozi*] in Europe: with more fear, I translate it in America. May God bless my work!” (Bazán 1870, p. 1).
- ⁸ I counted more than ten editions of the text from 1916 to 2020.
- ⁹ See, for example, Soublette (1990), Piñeiro (2003), and Rohden (1982).
- ¹⁰ To quote some examples, Soublette (1990), Wolpin (1980), and Pla (1972) directly refer to Elorduy.
- ¹¹ Rohden’s work is a paradigmatic example that lies between the mystical/spiritual reading and the academic one. As a distinguished professor of several international universities, my choice to frame Rodhen’s translation within the mystical/spiritual category lies in its emphasis on spirituality and self-transformative experiences characterized in his work.
- ¹² The *Filosofia Universica* is a New Age syncretic philosophy that reflects on the very nature of the Constitution of the Universe. See (Rohden 1978).
- ¹³ Here, Storniolo quotes Richard Wilhelm’s work on the *Daodejing*.
- ¹⁴ His main references are Legge (1879), Gia Fu Feng and English (1972), and Wu (1989), among others.
- ¹⁵ This kind of reading tends to over-emphasize pacifism, self-actualization, mysticism, and human interconnection with nature (cfr Tadd 2022, p. 107).
- ¹⁶ I define “academic context” as authors and publishers related to academic institutions.

- 17 Graham: “Western anarchists have claimed Laozi as one of themselves ever since his book became known in the West in the 19th century” (Graham 1989, p. 299).
- 18 The version quoted here is the digital version published in 2007 by the digital publisher Biblioteca Virtual Antorcha http://www.antorcha.net/biblioteca_virtual/filosofia/tao/indice.html, accessed on 7 May 2022.
- 19 The anarchist reading of the *Laozi* was especially promoted in Orientalist and theosophic circles around LATAM countries. For a study on anarchism in Latin America, where the idea of Daoism emerged as a proto-anarchist movement, see Cappelletti (1983).
- 20 It is interesting to note that Brazilian macrobiotic circles were an important vehicle for the promotion of the *Laozi*. To give an example, in addition to Kikuchi’s translation, the *Asociacao Macrobiotica do Porto Alegre* published the first Portuguese translation of Lin Yutang’s version of the *Laozi* in 1945.
- 21 Living Daoism as a personal and private experience is a common attitude in Western Daoism. As Palmer and Siegler showed in their study, the common view in the West is that “the authentic Dao is to be found within oneself, and can only be verified through one’s own experience” (Palmer and Siegler 2017, p. 50).
- 22 There are several examples of the emphasis on spiritual elements and cultivation techniques in the three works. In Sinedino’s translation, this emphasis is originally given in the primary source—the main focus of the *Heshanggong* version of the *Laozi* is self-cultivation. In the Sproviero’s and Soubllette’s works, there are several references, as shown above (see pp. 13–14).

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Article

Qian Xuexi and William Empson's Discussion of Arthur Waley's English Translation of the *Daodejing*

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Abstract: Between June and August 1947, Qian Xuexi and William Empson exchanged 12 letters on the issue of Arthur Waley's misinterpretation of the *Daodejing*. Through a thorough analysis of these new-found letters and Qian's English translation of the *Daodejing*, I intended to show that the central arguments between Qian and Empson are around two major problems concerning Waley's translation: Waley's ideas of the *Daodejing* being part of the "Yoga-Quietism" tradition that Waley himself tried to invent, and Waley's idea of opposing Daoism to Legalism. Qian firmly rejected that the ideas in the *Daodejing* were the same as some Western ideas. Neither did he accept that the ideas of the *Daodejing* were under the influence of either Western culture or Indian religious philosophy. Instead, Qian explained that the so-called "Yoga-Quietism" did not derive from China. Therefore, in his view, Waley's approach was fundamentally problematic. Qian's view eventually convinced Empson, who initially opposed Qian's stance. Qian and Empson's letters and Qian's English translation of the *Daodejing*, though never published, indicate the value of Qian's ideas and the meaning of their intellectual interaction.

Keywords: Qian Xuexi (Chien Hsueh-hsi); William Empson; Arthur Waley; English translation of the *Daodejing*

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 2020, Professor Ji Jin 季進 of Soochow University wrote to inform me that the archives of the late Professor C. T. Hsia 夏志清 of Columbia University contained some manuscripts from his friend, Qian Xuexi (Chien Hsueh-hsi 錢學熙), including 12 letters between Qian and William Empson (dating from June to August 1947) and a printout copy of Qian's English translation of the *Daodejing*. In the mid-1980s, Hsia was eager to help publish Qian's writings, so Qian's daughter, Qian Manli 錢曼立 of Sun Yat-Sen University, sent Qian's manuscript from Guangzhou to Hsia in New York. For some unknown reasons, these manuscripts remained unpublished. With many people's help, I eventually connected with the descendants of Qian's family in Guangzhou. Visiting the family, I obtained other relevant materials, including another copy of these 12 letters and Qian's English translation of the *Daodejing*. Through further effort, I also acquired a third copy of Qian's correspondence with Empson from the William Empson Papers at the Houghton Library of Harvard University. Through all of this preparation work, those 12 letters were finally transcribed, proofread, and translated into Chinese for publication (Guo and Yao 2020; Ji 2020). A discussion between Qian and Empson about Arthur Waley's misinterpretations as reflected in his English translation of the *Daodejing* stands out as one of the most intriguing topics in my study.

Qian, a self-taught scholar and an English teacher, was deeply influenced by the New Criticism theory and most likely by Contemporary New Confucianism. Qian was in intellectual contact with Xiong Shili 熊十力, one of the representatives of Contemporary New Confucianism. In 1938, under the guidance of Xiong, Qian translated one of Xiong's philosophical works, *新唯識論* (*New Treatise on the Uniqueness of Consciousness*), from classical Chinese into modern Chinese, in preparation for its English translation version.

Contemporary New Confucianism had the characteristics of cultural nationalism and subscribed to the firm belief that Chinese cultural tradition had an intrinsic value. Thus, the subjectivity of Chinese thinking needed to be honored in order to carry on its essential role in the modern world. Qian shared the same ideas.

In the late 1940s, both Qian and Empson were professors in the English Department at Peking University. As Empson's colleague, Qian's first letter was written humbly and politely. He asked Empson for advice on issues related to Waley's translation of the *Daodejing*. Hoping to receive Empson's guidance, he came up with two plans. First, to better explain the problems in Waley's translation, he planned to consult Shih Tsun 石峻, a scholar of Buddhist studies at Peking University, for assistance with writing an article of sufficient weight to answer all the critical inquiries. However, I have examined Shih Tsun's anthologies and archives and found no evidence of him commenting on Waley's translation. Second, Qian proposed that he translate a new English version of the *Daodejing*. When it was completed, he would need to ask Empson to polish the final draft. This translation was finalized during Qian's interaction with Waley. However, Qian's English translation of the *Daodejing* did not have the chance to be published.

In addition to his correspondence with Empson, Qian also discussed this topic with Shih Tsun, a friend of the Hsia brothers (one of them was C. T. Hsia). Like Qian, the Hsia brothers had exchanges of ideas with Empson and were influenced by him in literary criticism. We can speculate that Qian's view may have been inspired by Shih, although there is a lack of relevant materials to support this view. In 1940, Shih Tsun wrote a critical essay comparing the three English translations of the *Daodejing* rendered by John C. H. Wu, C'hu Ta-Kao, and Hu Tse-ling by pointing out their achievements and deficiencies (Shih 2013). Shih's article had not mentioned Waley's *Daodejing*, published in 1934, indicating that Shih might not have read Waley's version. No other related treatises on the topic of the English translation of *Daodejing*, either by Shih or Qian, survived after 1947.

Both Waley and Empson were significant figures who had a long-term influence on modern Chinese writers and literary scholars, whereas Qian has already been passed into oblivion. Perhaps my investigation could rediscover a forgotten translator, a literary critic, and a talented young scholar, who had an academic dialogue with the well-established scholar Waley, and an intellectual interaction with Empson, during a difficult time (the 1940s). Since it would be somewhat unfair to directly examine Qian's criticism of Waley without clarifying Waley's contributions and deficiencies, it is necessary to explain Waley's interpretation of the *Daodejing* before we can further understand Qian's criticism of him.

2. The Principles of Translation in Waley's *Daodejing*

Before examining Qian's criticism of Waley's *Daodejing*, it is necessary to explore the basic principles underlying Waley's translation, including how Waley reflected on the *Daodejing* and how Waley reflected Chinese thought in terms of his principles. Waley's work *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought* (Waley 1958) was first published in 1934. Before this, the *Daodejing* had been translated into many European languages, including the highly influential French version rendered by Stanislas Julien (1842) and the German version by Richard Wilhelm (1911), to say nothing of the English translations by John Chalmers (1868), Frederic Henry Balfour (1884), James Legge (1891), Paul Carus (1898), and Lionel Giles (1905). The question then arises: For what purpose was it necessary for Waley to retranslate the *Daodejing*?

For Waley, "Scriptures are collections of symbols. Their peculiar characteristic is a kind of magical elasticity" (Waley 1958, p. 12). In his view, the canonicity of the scriptures carries its original meanings and connotations to reach out to the new reality. If this does not reveal all the intentions behind it, I think Waley's distinction between two types of translation: scriptural and historical, can help further clarification. For Waley, (1) scriptural translation tells the readers what the book means to them nowadays; (2) however, the other one returns to the historical context to trace the text's original purposes (Waley 1958, p. 13). Therefore, unlike scriptural translation, historical translation does not particularly consider

the present-day meaning of the book. With the idea of these two kinds of translation, Waley articulated that translators' interpretations of classical texts always have practical relevance. However, the most important task for the translators of this historical sort is to discover the text's original meaning.

In order to achieve this translation aim, Waley develops his own literary and philological methods and provides an explanation for them. Waley assumed that different strategies should be adopted to render different types of texts. Thus, he differentiated two sorts of translation. First, when a work's essential quality is its beauty, the translator must be prepared to sacrifice a great deal of accuracy to preserve this original quality. This approach is called literary translation. The second is philological translation. The *Daodejing* is both a literary and philosophical text, but Waley believed that the profound intellectual and ideological thoughts it contained were most important. Consequently, his translation aimed to "reproduce what the original says with detailed accuracy" (Waley 1958, p. 14). Waley regarded his translation as a historical, philological one that returned to the original context, by which he unearthed the original meanings.

The translation exemplar that Waley cited to assert his purpose and method among all of the translations of Chinese classics that he had reviewed was Richard Wilhelm's German translation of *The Book of Change*. Despite the imperfections of Wilhelm's translation, which many commentators have condemned, Wilhelm "tells us far more lucidly and accurately than any of its predecessors regarding the unique significance of *The Book of Changes* for the average reader in the Far East today" (Waley 1958, p. 13).

As Waley mentioned, the translations of the *Daodejing* have several good examples of the scriptural translation, the best of which was Wilhelm (1911)'s German translation, and next to it, Carus (1898)'s English version. However, there was no version of the historical translation (Waley 1958, p. 13). Therefore, Waley's English translation of the *Daodejing* aimed to deliver the book's original meaning. For Waley, almost all the previous English translations had problems since they could not meet Waley's standard of historical translation.

Moreover, Waley evaluated the long-term commentary tradition of the *Daodejing* before he started his own work. Undoubtedly, *Daodejing* has a long commentary tradition before Waley. In Waley's time, the earliest version of the *Daodejing* that existed was the commentary version by Wang Bi 王弼 (Wang Pi). Waley argued, "All the commentaries, from Wang Pi's onwards down to the 18th century, are 'scriptural'; that is to say that each commentator reinterprets the text according to his own particular tenets, without any intention or desire to discover what it meant originally" (Waley 1958, p. 129). The study of the *Daodejing* in China opened up a new era in the 18th century as two new research approaches emerged, as Waley noted: the study of textual variants and the historical study of grammar. The latter was critically important because, through this method of analyzing the grammar of the text, Waley conjectured that the author of this text was "typical of 3rd century B.C. philosophers" (Waley 1958, pp. 127, 129).

To better understand the text's original meaning, it is necessary to clarify who the author was and when the text was completed. However, the author of the *Daodejing* and the time of its creation have always been controversial issues. Waley invented an ingenious solution to this puzzle and made bold speculations. He supposed that many early documents could not help determine the author or the time of the composition of the *Daodejing*. Waley compared the records of Laozi (Laotzu) in Sima Qian's *Record of the Grand Historian* (史記) with other accounts of Laozi, by which he reasoned that Sima Qian's account or other biographical texts regarding Laozi all came from unorthodox records. He acknowledged that "the facts in it were transformed in the process of oral transmission, systematized and romanticized" (Waley 1958, p. 123). Therefore, Waley was more inclined to think that the author and textual content of the *Daodejing*, and many contemporary texts, sentences, or words with similar expressions to the *Daodejing*, might have a common source. This source, which Waley called "a common oral fund of stories about Quietist

sages” (Waley 1958, p. 122), used to exist, but there were now no traces of it. Waley’s theory seems to rest on bold speculations.

Waley argued that his theory could be applied in order to explain many texts and literary phenomena in the same period. He utilized a simple example to demonstrate the validity of the hypothesis. Provided that three memoirs from the 1890s tell the same story about Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), we should not arbitrarily assume that any one of them cites the other unless one explicitly references another. For the same reason, the *Zhongyong* (*The Doctrine of the Mean*) and the *Daxue* (*The Great Learning*) include four phrases similar to those in the *Lunyu* (*The Analects*), which does not imply that either the former two cited the *Lunyu* or that the *Lunyu* came before the other two. Just as in the case of the three memoirs of Wilde that may have come from the same source, similar sentences, phrases, and words in *The Analects*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean*—in Waley’s view—may have come from other texts of the same period (such as the earlier oral tradition). Therefore, he concludes that his theory could be used to explain the earlier writings of the so-called Quietism. Waley described his theory as a novel but persuasive approach to studying the *Daodejing* and an imaginative way of answering the question of how to reconstruct the conditions under which early Chinese books arose.

On the other hand, it is worth pointing out that Quietism, as a religious practice, also has a long European tradition. In the Catholic traditions of Spain, France, and Italy in the 17th century, Quietism was a spiritual theology with a mystical tendency. It was condemned as heresy by the Holy See at that period. “Quietism, a doctrine of Christian spirituality that, in general, holds that perfection consists in passivity (quiet) of the soul, in the suppression of human effort so that divine action may have a full play” (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2021). Waley borrowed the term from European religious tradition, reflecting his interesting thinking on comparative religions. In this way, Waley boldly speculated about the *Daodejing* as a text of Quietism.

Waley placed the *Daodejing* in the context of other early Chinese philosophical texts and invented a “Quietism” tradition that never occurred in the Chinese tradition. Waley’s *The Way and Its Power* contains an English translation of the *Daodejing* with commentaries and his research introduction, which is 140 pages long, more than half of the 259 pages of the entire book. In this long introduction, Waley provided a comprehensive analysis of the *Daodejing*. In Waley’s theory, the *Daodejing* and the accounts of Laozi and Sima Qian’s narration came from the earlier Quietist sage. Waley believed that in the fourth and fifth centuries B.C., there were many different factions of Quietism in China, but only a tiny part of their writings survived. Waley explained his understanding of the self-cleansing practice of Daoist (Taoist) Quietism:

Such cleansing consisted above all in a “stilling” of outward activities, of appetites and emotions; but also in a “returning” for the soul was looked upon as having become as it were silted up by successive deposits of daily toil and perturbation, and the business of the “self-perfecter” was to work his way back through these layers till ‘man as he was meant to be’ was reached. (Waley 1958, p. 44)

In Daoist terms, this static sitting for purification of one’s soul is called “zuowang” (坐忘, sitting with the blank mind). Waley described, “Slackening limbs and frame, blotting out the sense of hearing and sight, getting clear of outward forms, dismissing knowledge and being absorbed into that which Pervades Everything” (Waley 1958, p. 117). Waley called this form of practice “the Taoist Yoga”. In India, it is called Yoga, Dhyana, or other names; in Japan, it is called Zen. In the following discussion, Waley classified these Oriental schools of quiet sitting and the similar European schools of Quietism into the same category, as all have the characteristics of mysticism. He mentioned, “The Quietist, whether Chinese, Indian, German or Spanish, has always made the same reply: by such practices three things are attained, truth, happiness and power” (Waley 1958, p. 45). From this answer, we know that Waley considered all practitioners of Chinese and foreign schools to achieve the purpose of cultivation (to obtain truth, happiness, power, and become a perfect person) through “sitting in meditation,” all of which were called Quietism.

Waley's dissatisfaction with all previous Western language translations of the *Daodejing* was the main reason for his retranslation. Therefore, finding out what caused this dissatisfaction is necessary. After completing *The Way and Its Power*, Waley read the *Gushibian* (古史辨, Evaluations of Ancient Historiography) Vol. IV, and found that he and Gu Jiegang (顧頡剛, the editor and primary author of *Gushibian*) held precisely the same views about the date and authorship of the *Daodejing* (Waley 1958, p. 15). Influenced by Western historiography, the younger generation of historians from the 1920s to the 1940s began challenging the traditional views of ancient Chinese historiography, questioning the authenticity of Chinese classics and early Chinese history. This group of historians later became known as the school of Gushibian (古史辨派). Under this ideological trend and new historical research methods, many essential Chinese classics have been re-examined, and the cultural background of ancient history has been systematically deconstructed and reconstructed. Waley assumed that his new approach and the conclusion for interpreting the *Daodejing* were very similar to the historians of Gushibian. There is a possibility that both Waley and the historians of Gushibian were influenced by a similar class of contemporary Western historians.

3. Discussion between Qian and Empson

Qian discovered the problem with Waley's translation far earlier than his contemporary and later scholars. In the era of Waley and Qian, Qian's insight was of particular historical significance. Waley understands the text and context of the *Daodejing*, and where Qian thinks Waley's theory was wrong or which points were invalid are questions worthy of further exploration.

In these 12 letters between the two scholars, Empson played the roles of a supervisor, an audience member who posed many questions, and an arbitrator who made the final decision. Empson did not stubbornly insist on one point or another but kept asking Qian whether he was being unfair to Waley, why he thought this way and required him to explain issues in more detail. Therefore, the discussion between Qian and Empson was conducted as follows: Empson coached his colleague, Qian, to elaborate upon his views further and helped him to complete his English translation of the *Daodejing*. Thus, Qian's criticism of Waley is the main object of the following discussion.

In a letter from Qian to Empson dated 25 June 1947, Qian explained, "If I am to define my grievance against Waley, I shall say: it is just his grafting on Lao Tzu the Yoga-Quietism and the definite antagonism against 'realists'" (Chien Hsueh-hsi's letter to William Empson 25 July 1947; Guo and Yao 2020, p. 143). These two points were repeatedly explained in Qian's letters and gradually elaborated in detail during his discussions with Empson.

As Qian pointed out, in the context of Chinese tradition, the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* (*Chuangtzu*) could not be incorporated into the "Yoga-Quietism" system. Furthermore, in the texts of the *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Hanfeizi* (*Han Fei Tzu*), there were no sections related to the physical skills of Quietism. Even if some passages might have evocative hints, these texts would often refer to a state of mind rather than the technique of practice, which was quite different from the traditional Indian Yoga practice that Waley mentioned frequently.

Qian objected to Waley's categorization of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* into Quietism. Qian responded to Waley in this regard:

Let alone the physical techniques in Lao Tzu, even the physical techniques in Chuangtzu are not so "Quietist" as Waley manages to make them out. And what will perhaps sound almost staggering is that even in Han Fei Tzu (Pien 51), from which Waley (p. 43) seems to have derived the term Quietist and Quietists, there is absolutely no warrant to be found for the term Quietist and for Quietism the original is but content or self-sufficiency. (Chien Hsueh-hsi's letter to William Empson 9 July 1947)

Waley's usage of "Yoga-Quietism" defined the theory of religious practice in the *Daodejing* as related to his view on the juxtaposition of Taoism and Legalism as two sets of opposing ideas. In Waley's text, the term "Quietist" he employed corresponds to those

philosophers who emphasize “tian dan 恬淡” (tranquil, indifferent). The word “tian dan” comes from Chapter 31 of the *Daodejing*, “恬淡為上，勝而不美，而美之者，是以樂殺人”。 James Legge’s translation of the sentence reads, “Calm and repose are what he prizes; victory (by force of arms) is to him undesirable. To consider this desirable would be to delight in the slaughter of men” (Legge 1891, p. 74). As Wu Cheng 吳澄 (d. 1333) clarified, “tian 恬 means not to delight in, dan 淡 means diluted or bland. [It] refers to what a person does not enjoy” (Chen 2020, pp. 209–10). Waley translated this line into English as: “The Quietist, even when he conquers, does not regard weapons as lovely things. For to think them lovely means to delight in them, and to delight in them means to delight in the slaughter of men” (Waley 1958, p. 181). In this part, Waley’s footnote referred to two documents with similar expressions: Chapter 51 of the *Hanfeizi* and Chapter 10 of the *Zhuangzi*. In Waley’s theory, the relevant phrases of the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Hanfeizi* were woven into an intertextual network of interpretation.

In terms of “no-action” (無為), the *Zhuangzi* uses the teaching of no-action to oppose the teaching of action and points out that the latter, not the former, is the source of social disorder. The last sentence of the 10th chapter of the *Zhuangzi* reads, “釋夫恬淡無為而悅夫噶噶之意，噶噶已亂天下矣！” Legge’s English translation reads, “...the quiet and unexciting method of non-action is put away, and pleasure taken in ideas garrulously expressed. It is this garrulity of speech which puts the world in disorder” (Legge 1891, pp. 289–290). However, there were opposite viewpoints in the *Hanfeizi*: the teaching of inaction was the root of chaotic society. In the introduction to his book, Waley reserved a section for exploring so-called Quietism in the Chinese intellectual tradition, and the literature he quoted as proof was drawn from the *Hanfeizi*.

The 51st chapter of the *Hanfeizi*, “Loyalty and Filial Piety” (忠孝), has the following paragraph (as Waley mentioned and translated):

Han Fei Tzu speaks of people who “walk apart from the crowd, priding themselves on being different from other men. They preach the doctrine of Quietism, but their exposition of it is couched in baffling and mysterious terms. I submit to your Majesty that this Quietness is of no practical value to any one and that the language in which it is couched is not founded on any real principle... I submit that man’s duty in life is to serve his prince and nourish his parents, neither of which things can be done by Quietness. I further submit that it is man’s duty, in all that he teaches, to promote loyalty and good faith and the Legal Constitution. This cannot be done in terms that are vague and mysterious. The doctrine of the Quietists is a false one, likely to lead the people astray”. (Waley 1958, p. 3; Liao 1959, pp. 315–16; Wang 1998, pp. 467–68)

In this part, the term “恬淡之學” was translated by Waley as “the doctrine of Quietism” and by W. K. Liao as “the philosophy of peace and quietude,” and the term “恍惚之言” was translated by Waley as “baffling and mysterious terms” and by Liao as “the doctrine of vagueness and illusion” (Liao 1959, p. 315). Both terms, in the context of the *Hanfeizi*, referred to the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi. The passage above came from the chapter “Loyalty and Filial Piety,” which refuted the philosophies that were not conducive to governing the state, and required people to abide by the law, be dedicated to serving the ruler, and be loyal to the king. The doctrine of Quietism was likely to lead the people astray, was unable to make individuals filial to their relatives and loyal to the king, and was not conducive to maintaining social order. Waley categorized the *Hanfeizi* in the school of “the Realists” (he dropped the term “the Legalists”), and thus the “Legalist-Realists” was the complete opposite of “Taoist-Quietism” (or “Yoga-Quietism”). This was the logic of Waley’s thought.

Qian was unsatisfied with Waley’s theory and resisted Waley’s idea of the definite antagonism of the Daoists against the Legalists (Realists). Qian raised three reasons: (1) because Laotzu in the original does not warrant such an interpretation and emphasis, (2) because the Laotzu tradition with the cultured Chinese has always emphasized the metaphysical and spiritual aspects, (3) and because the metaphysical and spiritual aspects

are more basic and hence more important than the political in philosophy (Chien Hsueh-hsi's letter to William Empson 9 July 1947). He had more to say about this view. Qian pointed out, "The English term Quietism may not differ much from content and self-sufficiency in its original sense. But in Waley's hands, it does. As to 'the baffling and mysterious terms' in the *Hanfeizi*, it is clear in a fuller context that it is but a feint of his". Qian mentioned that he translated the full text of the *Hanfeizi* into English in the 1930s, which had previously been submitted to a publisher (now lost). In this place, he alluded to how he was particularly familiar with the *Hanfeizi*. He thus had the expertise to comment on Waley's mistakes in his comparison of the *Hanfeizi* and the *Daodejing*.

Empson's questions often led Qian to think further and make reasonable explanations. In one of the letters, Empson asked, "Your argument that the term Quietism is not in Han Fei Tzu, from which Waley appears to derive it, does not seem to me strong. The English term does not in itself mean what it has come to mean, but only some theory or system based on quietness, and this looks to me the same as your 'content or self-sufficiency'. If Waley is right in making Han Fei Tzu say that the doctrine is expounded in baffling and mysterious terms, that seems enough to make it probable that there was some kind of mystical doctrine". To answer Empson's inquiry, Qian argued that Waley grafted the *Daodejing* into Quietism. The source was the above-quoted paragraph from the *Hanfeizi*, in which the *Hanfeizi* heavily lambasted "the philosophy of peace and quietude" and "the doctrine of vagueness and illusion". Waley regarded all these philosophies and doctrines as Quietism and tended toward mysticism, while Qian disagreed with this idea.

Waley classified Taoist "zuowang" (坐忘), Yoga or Dhyana from India, and Zen from Japan as falling into the same category of "Quietism". However, Qian did not believe this classification had any degree of justification. The word "zuowang" comes from the chapter "The Great and Most Honored Master" (大宗師) in the *Zhuangzi*, but it is not mentioned in the *Daodejing*.

In the chapter "The Great and Most Honored Master", Zhuangzi uses Yan Hui's words to criticize Confucianism. The passage reads:

Yan Hui said, "I am making progress". Zhongni replied, "What do you mean?" "I have ceased to think of benevolence and righteousness," was the reply. "Very well; but that is not enough". Another day, Hui again saw Zhongni, and said, "I am making progress". "What do you mean?" "I have lost all thought of ceremonies and music". "Very well, but that is not enough". A third day, Hui again saw (the Master), and said, "I am making progress". "What do you mean?" "I sit and forget everything". Zhongni changed countenance, and said, "What do you mean by saying that you sit and forget (everything)?" Yan Hui replied, "My connexion with the body and its parts is dissolved; my perceptive organs are discarded. Thus leaving my material form, and bidding farewell to my knowledge, I am become one with the Great Pervader. This I call sitting and forgetting all things". Zhongni said, "One (with that Pervader), you are free from all likings; so transformed, you are become impermanent. You have, indeed, become superior to me! I must ask leave to follow in your steps". (Legge 1891, pp. 256–57; Wang and Liu 2012, pp. 68–69)

As discussed in their correspondences between Qian and Empson, although some ideas in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Daodejing* look similar at some points, these two works are still quite different in many aspects. Benevolence, righteousness, and the culture of ritual and music: all these virtues and values emphasized by Confucianism were too practical for the Daoist philosopher. In Zhuangzi's view, the spiritual cultivation of an individual was far more valuable than the Confucian practical pursuit of serving the king and the state by "cultivating one's body, aligning the family, governing the country and the world" (*The Great Learning*). Unlike Zhuangzi's philosophy of spiritual cultivation, much of the *Daodejing*, like that of Confucian classics, was deeply involved in the art of governing the state. However, Zhuangzi assumed that the ideal life of a human being should surpass all these realistic Confucian pursuits by practicing the way of quiet-sitting and forgetting all

mundane affairs (zuowang). The highest purpose of this pursuit was to get rid of excessive desires and achieve the spiritual discipline of forgetting oneself.

Qian's criticism of Waley's theory of "Yoga-Quietism" shifted to the subject of re-examining one's desire and discrimination related to the interpretation of the Dao (道). By this method, Qian could disassemble the theory of Quietism and the mysticism Waley had constructed. Qian acknowledged, "Lao Tzu only advises against the perversion of vital needs into desires and vital perception into desire-prompted discrimination. The more one follows the said advice, the less fuss one makes over one's life and the more at peace with oneself and at ease with the world one comes to be. It is all very simple and un-mystical (by the way)" (Chien Hsueh-hsi's letter to William Empson 25 June 1947). Again he noted, "To my mind, the Taoistic peace or union with all (even the peace of true mystics) is far from 'mystical'; it can be reached by simple reasoning upon commonly-accessible experience" (Chien Hsueh-hsi's letter to William Empson 25 June 1947). This was also echoed in the way in which Taoists treated the object of desire. In Qian's view, it was necessary to distinguish between general needs and desires, for true Taoists become Taoists because they have long known the consequences of having desires on the individual. Desire (and the passion for knowledge and power in Confucian philosophy) created an illusion that clouded "nature" (ziran 自然) and ultimately resulted in the individual's inability to obtain the truth and happiness he sought. Hence, Qian argued that Taoists exalt Taoist nature over Confucian benevolence (ren 仁), "because following nature one will be bountiful without the fuss of benevolence" (Chien Hsueh-hsi's letter to William Empson 25 June 1947).

Qian disagreed with Waley's mystifying interpretation of the *Daodejing*. He assumed that the word "no desire" (無欲) and "zuowang" in the *Daodejing* could not be equated with that of Indian Yogic philosophy. "No desire," unlike in Yoga, was not achieved through physical effort but a spiritual state accomplished through mental effort. Moreover, he was deeply skeptical about the physical skill of Yoga. He stated, "Spiritual results, the divine release of the soul or spirit, can be reached only by spiritual effort; and it is almost impossible for those who know the true way to reach the result to simultaneously advocate other false ways" (Chien Hsueh-hsi's letter to William Empson 9 June 1947). Why was that? In Qian's view, those who did not have spiritual enthusiasm and depth would especially appreciate the physical skill of Yoga and pursue esoteric art more than true wisdom.

Furthermore, Qian supposed that the *Daodejing* expressed the view that excessive desire and discrimination were the roots of all troubles. This idea was derived from the principle that "the Dao follows the example of what is self-so (道法自然)" (Chen 2020, p. 171). Nevertheless, this view is completely different from Waley's understanding. Qian articulated that "The reason I prefer 'the state before discrimination' to 'the pure consciousness' is that the latter is a sophisticated affair and so is remote from nature and cannot chime in with the trend of Lao Tzu" (Chien Hsueh-hsi's letter to William Empson, 25 June 1947; Guo and Yao 2020, p. 156). "The state before discrimination" is natural, whereas the state of "pure consciousness" achieved through hard work (such as through the practice of Yoga) is far too complex. Unlike Waley's view that Yoga guides people to achieve Quietism through physical exercise, Qian argued that "Yoga only occults desire and renders it harder to be disillusioned" (Chien Hsueh-hsi's letter to William Empson 9 July 1947; Guo and Yao 2020, p. 146). Therefore, he assumed that Waley's translation and theory indicate that he did not understand the plain yet profound thoughts in the *Daodejing*. Thus, he concluded: "So far, my feeling has been that he jars on spiritual earnestness, is occult but silly, where Lao Tzu is plain and yet wise and often turns sayings, general and timeless, into specific girds and flings" (Chien Hsueh-hsi's letter to William Empson 25 July 1947; Guo and Yao 2020, p. 156).

Qian neither accepted the viewpoint that the ideas in the *Daodejing* were the same as some Western ideas, nor did he approve the claim that the composition of the *Daodejing* was under the influence of Western culture or Indian religious philosophy. Waley presumed that Quietism in ancient China had come from an external source. What he indicated was the Indian tradition of Yoga. But Qian rejected this notion. In the following correspondence,

Qian provided some chapters of the *Daodejing*, which he translated into English. Followed by his English version of Chapter 16, Qian concluded that in Chinese tradition, whether ancient or modern, there was no such term as “Quietism” or “Quietists”. Therefore, it was Waley who borrowed these two terms from the Western tradition, referring to all Yoga-like practices and their practitioners. Qian further elaborated on the relationship between desire and discrimination in different traditions, by which he distinguishes the distinct ideas of Daoism and Buddhism on the same subject. He pointed out:

In Buddhism, desire includes all becoming and all nature (vital needs); in Taoism, desire means only sophisticated appetite or crav[ing] for pleasure which differs from nature or unsophisticated appetite in wanting its protracted alertness, whereas the latter wants only its own allayment. As to discrimination, it means in Buddhism all perception, but I mean by it only be discrimination that is promoted by desire and in turn promotes desire. So with Buddhism, all life or the universe is a delusion and to be deprecated. With Taoism, only the life or the universe built up by desire and the discrimination as above defined, the life of sophisticated appetites and sophisticated discrimination is a delusion and to be deprecated. (Chien Hsueh-hsi’s letter to William Empson, undated; Guo and Yao 2020, p. 142)

At the end of their discussion, Qian briefly summarized, “In XIX ‘to have no desire’ (wuyu 無欲) and ‘to have few desires’ (guayu 寡欲), when desire is interpreted in the sense I defined, seem equal to have little bearing on ‘Quietism’” (Chien Hsueh-hsi’s letter to William Empson 9 July 1947; Guo and Yao 2020, p. 147). The content discussed in Chapter 19 of the *Daodejing* demonstrated the difference between Daoism and Confucianism. Its key notion was very close to Qian’s concept of “exalt Taoist nature over Confucian benevolence” discussed above.

As for Waley’s date for the writing of the *Daodejing* (about 240 B.C.), Qian responded vaguely: “I do have doubts not only about Waley’s date for the writing of Tao Te Ching but about the existence at the date of precisely such a controversy as he has pieced out and about the evidence, as well, of the grammar and the rest for such a date” (Chien Hsueh-hsi’s letter to William Empson 9 July 1947). Qian said he would invite his friend Shi Jun, who confirmed that his opinion was different from that of Waley and was happy to answer these questions. For unknown reasons, these questions have not received any further responses. None of their subsequent responses, by means of letters or academic writings, have survived.

In their last correspondence, Empson was persuaded, for he honestly admitted that Waley’s references to Zhuangzi’s mystical bodily skills could not prove his point. In the reply, Qian noted that after rereading Lionel Giles’s English translation, he was convinced that Giles’s version was more reliable. As Qian mentioned, “It is an orthodox thing” (Chien Hsueh-hsi’s letter to William Empson 5 August 1947; Guo and Yao 2020, p. 158). In addition, he mentioned, “It is perhaps the scriptural version according to Waley, and his version of historical translation was meant to be an improvement upon it. But his acuteness of intellect, scholarship, and language brilliance succeeded only in building up a splendid hoax” (Chien Hsueh-hsi’s letter to William Empson 9 July 1947; Guo and Yao 2020, p. 153). Qian mocked Waley’s theory as a kind of “a splendid hoax”, indicating that he did not accept Waley’s translation, especially Waley’s over-interpretation and misinterpretation in the introduction of his translation.

Nevertheless, at the end of their discussion, Qian learned to appreciate the merits of Waley’s translation. He described, “I shall add now that I am well aware of the glamor of Waley. His emphasis on Quietism and political controversy add to Lao Tzu the charms of mystic depth and intellectual brilliance” (Chien Hsueh-hsi’s letter to William Empson 10 August 1947; Guo and Yao 2020, p. 157).

4. Conclusions

In my evaluation, Qian’s criticism was somewhat unfair to Waley since Qian made the harsh critiques without reading Waley’s other writings published earlier. In his 1939

monograph *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*, Waley noted, “Taoism to some extent influenced almost all writers of the period. Hsun Tzu’s twenty-first chapter, the genuineness of which I see no reason to doubt, contains a long mystical section about ‘the heart,’ which is typically Quietist” (Waley 2005, p. 207). Hanfeizi, a student of Xunzi, was also in the circle of this influence. Waley further explained, “This is borne out by the fact that Hanfeizi contains several chapters in which a small amount of Realism is diluted with a strong dose of Taoism”. Thus, Waley concluded, “Taoism was in the air, and every writer was liable to be affected by it (Waley 2005, p. 208). In light of these discussions, Qian’s criticism of Waley, especially the opposition between Daoism and Legalism, was invalid, which indicated that Waley had the opportunity to make an adequate justification for himself in his subsequent writings. However, Qian did not see this. Furthermore, Qian did not discuss Waley’s translation in the broader context of the English translation of the *Daodejing*, and there seem to be too many unfair comments regarding Waley’s translation in general.

In many cases, Waley mixed up philosophical Daoism (Daojia 道家), religious Daoism (Daojiao 道教), and Laozi’s ideas in the *Daodejing*. This indiscriminate method makes it impossible for readers to understand what it means. Waley’s English translation has been included in UNESCO’s Collection of Representative Works—Chinese Series. So far, this translation has had a significant influence and is widespread in Europe and the United States. Waley’s *Daodejing* is undoubtedly excellent, but the interpretive system presented by the various paratexts supporting his translation has weaknesses. Waley invented a theory of “Yoga-Quietism”, of which the *Daodejing* was a product, and he also emphasized the complete opposition between Daoism and Legalism.

The newly discovered documents of Qian Xuexi, including 12 letters between Qian and Empson, and Qian’s English translation of the *Daodejing*, have not been published yet. From the discussion above, we can see the value of Qian’s thinking on the *Daodejing*. Qian might have been inspired by his friend Shih Tsun, and was supervised by Empson in their correspondence. The various questions that Qian put forward about Waley’s theory and approach were valid. Empson ultimately accepted Qian’s view that the *Daodejing* could not be classified into the theory of Quietism Waley invented. In this case, Chinese and Western scholars’ interaction and exchange of ideas played a significant role in solving problems and jointly advancing academic research.

After discussing Waley’s translation with Empson, Qian translated the full text of the *Daodejing* into English. This article left some topics untouched, since it did not further explore the similarities and differences between Qian’s and Waley’s translations in specific passages and their respective views on interpreting the *Daodejing*. In addition, Qian translated the *Hanfeizi* and carried out some research on the text of *Hanfeizi* as well. However, unfortunately, his translation has been lost. How he and Waley translated the *Hanfeizi* individually might also have something to do with how they understood early Chinese texts and the *Daodejing*. In his prime in 1947, when Qian was 41 years old, his criticism of Waley’s *Daodejing* showed his highly critical talent, academic training, and profound thinking. After 1949, Qian accepted Chinese Marxist literary theory and turned to write articles with a novel spirit. Since then, he has not published any articles or books on the translations and interpretations of the Chinese classics.

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Article

Four Approaches to *Daodejing* Translations and Their Characteristics in Korean after Liberation from Japan

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Abstract: This article gathered and analyzed the *Daodejing* (DDJ) translations in Korean that appeared after the liberation from Japan and classified them into four perspectives: the perspective continuing Gyeonghak 經學 (Traditional Confucian exegetics), the literary and linguistic perspective, the religious perspective, and the philosophical perspective according to the academic perspective and methodology of translation. Simultaneously, this paper clarified the translation characteristics by comprehensively examining the formation process of each perspective in their historical contexts. Although Daoism had been excluded from the academic curriculum during the pre-liberation era along with Buddhism as heresy, it was later hastily embraced within the category of Oriental Studies to build a cultural consensus when the modern and contemporary educational system was established. In the post-liberation era, the formation of each DDJ translation perspective is directly related to the academic status of Daoism during the modernization of the Korean educational system—a process in which the years 1990 and 2015 stand out as essential turning points. The characteristics of DDJ translations in Korean can be analyzed from five perspectives depending on the Ur-text, ideological perspective, linguistic methodology, national characteristics, and relation to Christianity.

Keywords: Daodejing; translation; Korean; Daoism; Oriental Studies; Gyeonghak

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1. Introduction

Aside from the Bible, the *Daodejing* 道德經 (DDJ) is the book with the largest number of translations worldwide. One of the most important reasons the DDJ, consisting of only about 5000 characters, has been able to exert its influence in various cultures for over 2500 years is its implicit and ambiguous linguistic characteristics that allow for multiple interpretations and imaginations. According to the records of Ban Gu's *Hanshu Yiwenzhi* 漢書·藝文志, by the time of the Later Han dynasty, there were already three different DDJ commentaries. Since then, the DDJ has been annotated by various people of different positions or classes including scholars, Daoists, monks, etc., regardless of their persuasion of Confucianism, Buddhism, or Daoism. There exist more than 700 commentaries alone, of which more than 350 commentaries have been passed down to this day (Chan 1963, p. 77). In the case of South Korea, Wang Bi's 王弼 edition from the Wei-Jin period, Heshanggong's edition from the later-Han dynasty and Fu Yi's 傅奕 edition from the late Sui and early Tang dynasties are referred to as the *Tonghaengbon* 通行本 (received text) in the sense that they are the most prevalent editions to date. In terms of content, Wang Bi's commentary interprets from the viewpoint of *yililun* 義理論 (theory of meaning-pattern) that came from the Xuanxue tradition. In contrast, Heshanggong's commentary argues from the perspective of *Yangshenglun* 養生論 (theory of preserving one's health), which was the essence of Huang-Lao thought. Later, the discoveries of the Mawangdui manuscripts in 1973 and the Guodian manuscripts¹ in 1993 accelerated discussions about the Ur-text of the DDJ.

Korea, along with China and Japan, is one of the significant constituent countries of East Asia². These three countries are bound together by the cultural sphere of Chinese characters, Confucianism ideas, etc. It is estimated that Korea began to accept Chinese

literature in the 5th century. The general view is that the DDJ was brought by envoys whom Fu Jian 符堅 (338–385), the third ruler of the former Qin dynasty, had dispatched from China to Korea during the period of King Sosurim 小獸林 (?–384) of the Goguryeo 高句麗 dynasty (Park 2019a, pp. 74–75). Although Korea accepted Chinese texts relatively early, Daoist ideas have rarely been in mainstream Korean thought or practically used as a political tool. Instead, they have exerted their influence on civilian religion. Meanwhile, a recent study found that sporadic probes into the religious literature related to Korean folk beliefs have discovered a considerable number of records related to Daoist texts existing in Korea³. This means that there is an unexplored area for studying Daoist texts including the DDJ in Korea, and it also shows the potential for future development. Formal Korean DDJ commentaries mainly began to appear only in the 16th century.

Since the first DDJ translation was published in 1957 after the liberation of Korea, about 182⁴ Korean DDJ translations have been published. This accounts for one of the largest numbers of publications after the English versions. The quantity proves that Koreans have a special interest in DDJ from different viewpoints. Nevertheless, so far, only a handful of studies have been published on the current status of DDJ translations in Korea, and even this has been mainly conducted to introduce translation books by era or point out errors in content. Thus, it was difficult to grasp the characteristics of DDJ translations in Korea. Oh Jintak selected 20 Korean translations of the DDJ published over about 20 years and summarized the problems of the Korean translation of Chinese classics from the perspective of Korean literature as follows: (1) The trend of undervaluing translation; (2) Lack of professionalism of the translator; (3) Lack of clear principles for the translation of original Chinese classics; (4) Unnatural translation with the archaic tone, (5) The versatility of Chinese characters was neglected (Oh 1997a, pp. 176–79). However, he did not analyze any unique characteristics or problems that Korean translations of the DDJ have.

On the other hand, Rhee Jae-kwon's research showed a relatively complete form of study on the current state of DDJ translation in Korea. Rhee selected Korean DDJ translations that he deemed necessary and organized the bibliographies by period (Rhee 2013, p. 281). Rhee's work is of great significance insofar as he was the first to classify a large number of Korean translations of the DDJ. However, some deficiencies remain such as the criteria for his classification or the relationship between the classification groups remaining unclear. Kim Si-cheon classified Korean DDJ translations in the 20th century into three groups: a philosophical, religious, and historical category (Kim 2004, p. 337). In this paper, a partial acceptance of Kim's classification was made with a modification of the historical category by dividing it into two new translation categories: Traditional Confucian exegetics and linguistic studies. This is because the academic method of Traditional Confucian exegetics is directly related to the problems of pre-modern DDJ interpretations. For this reason, this paper will first examine the position of pre-modern DDJ interpretations centered mainly on the Joseon dynasty as a preparatory step for analyzing DDJ translations.

2. The Acceptance and Interpretation of DDJ in Pre-Modern Korea

Modern Koreans recognize the DDJ as one of the core scriptures that reveals the three principal types of spirits that compose the Korean people, along with Confucianism and Buddhism. Therefore Oh, the translator of a DDJ Korean translation considered to be the most influential among DDJ translations into modern Korean published by Hyeonamsa, said: "If ethical and realist ideas of Confucius influenced the outer world (*yang* 陽) in our lives, metaphysical and mystical ideas of Laozi moved the inner world in our lives (*yin* 陰)" (Oh 2020, p. 7). The actual discussions about Daoism historically appeared in the 7th century, in the period of King Yeongryu 榮留王 (618–642) of the Goguryeo dynasty. Yeon Gaeomun (淵蓋蘇文, 603–666) and his military experts engaged in Daoism for the political purpose of suppressing Confucianism and Buddhism, which were the political ideologies of King Yeongryu's forces (Park 2019b, p. 73). At that time, *wudoumi jiao* 五斗米教 (Celestial Masters Daoism) was prevalent in Goguryeo (Kim 2019a, p. 68), which shows that the Daoism they accepted had a strong religious character, focused on health preservation

and shamanistic rituals, rather than being a philosophy⁵. However, along with the fall of Goguryeo, the prevalence of Daoism subsided, leaving virtually no literature related to DDJ during the Unified Silla period. In the following Goryeo dynasty, the DDJ began to appear again in the literature records. Goryeo promoted Buddhism as a state religion, but the ritual of *jecho* 齊醮—a ritual of performing ancestral rites to the sky and the stars—was still performed. For that, religiously trained Daoists were required. In particular, King Yejong 睿宗 (reigned in 1122) made an effort to promote Daoists, and according to the records “Wangwu 王僎 (King Yejong) had a strong Daoist faith, and established the first Daoist temple Bogwongwan 福源觀 during the period of Jeonghwa 政和 (1111–1118), and had about 10 Daoists with high achievement there” (Xu 1937). According to the records of the *Yejong Munhyo Daewang yi* 睿宗文孝大王二 (Yejoing, Great King Munhyo, volume 2) chapter in the eighth volume of *Goryeosajeolyo* 高麗史節要 (Essentials of Goryeo History), in the 13th year (1118) of the Musul 戊戌 period, “Yejong ordered Han An-in 韓安仁 to let Daoists lecture about *Laozi* (DDJ) at Cheongyeongak 淸燕閣” (Institute of Korean Studies Culture and Literature 1973, p. 216). Although no DDJ text from the Goryeo dynasty has been preserved until today, we can infer that the DDJ was being distributed and studied as an essential scripture at the time.

All DDJ texts handed down in a relatively complete form until today are from the Joseon dynasty. As of 2022, a total of five editions have been preserved. All of them have been translated into the modern Korean language, and research on them is continuously increasing. Even though the *Seongrihak* 性理學 (i.e., the abstract theory of human reason and nature advocated by Joseon dynasty Neo-Confucians) was at its peak, the gap between the theory and actual problems of society widened. Therefore, some Neo-Confucians started annotating the DDJ to overcome practical issues at that time. Nonetheless, Daoism could never enter mainstream philosophy during the Joseon dynasty. Instead, it was rejected, like with Buddhism, as *idan* 異端 (heterodox), since it deviated from the Korean political ideology of Neo-Confucianism.

The first attempt to interpret the DDJ was made by Neo-Confucian scholar Lee Yi (Lee Yulgok 李栗谷, 1536–1584), a proponent of the tradition of Neo-Confucianism during the Joseon dynasty. His interpretation was subsequently dismissed as heresy by Joseon Confucian scholars. Lee Yi selected only what he viewed as the necessary chapters from the DDJ and compiled them into *Sun-eon* 醇言 (Unmixed Words). Lee Yi’s position follows the philosophical thought of Lee Hwang (Lee Toegy 李退溪, 1502–1571), who regarded *Laozi* and Zhuangzi as heretics (Yi 1989, p. 335). However, unlike Lee Hwang, Lee Yi stated that the fundamental contradictions between Daoists and Confucians were as follows: “Those who study the *Laozi* reject Confucianism, and those who study Confucianism also reject the *Laozi*, thus if their *dao* is not the same, they cannot talk about their common interests” (Lee 1814a). In other words, the contradictions between Confucianism and Daoism can be overcome only by finding the parts of their *dao* (way or teachings) that harmonize. Under this point of view, Lee Yi selected only those chapters from the DDJ that could support Neo-Confucianism and compiled them into *Sun-eon* 醇言.

The fundamental reason why the Neo-Confucianism scholars in the Joseon dynasty—who were studying the philosophy of human reason and nature based on Zhuxi’s 朱熹 theory—rejected the DDJ as heresy is that they understood the DDJ as a pure theory of *qi* according to their theory of *li* and *qi*. However, by interpreting *dao* from a Confucian idealist (*lixue* 理学) point of view rather than leading the DDJ discussion to the pure theory of *qi*, Lee Yi not only tried to establish a contact point between Confucians and Daoists but also to increase inclusiveness among different schools and prevent political division. From a practical point of view, the purpose of Neo-Confucianism asserted by Lee Yi is to correct the *dao* of the world and the present situation. The methodology for this is the theory of correcting the innate temperament (Gyogijilron 矯氣質論: “It is contained in the teachings of the sages, and among them, there are three most important things: deliberation (*goongli* 窮理), magnificence (*geogyong* 居敬), and exertion (*yeok-haeng* 力行)” (Lee 1814b). This thought is contrary to Zhu Xi’s “return to one’s good nature true character” theory of

cultivation, and it shows that Lee’s position is not based on Zhu Xi’s theory of the innate good of human nature that was the basis of the political system during the Joseon dynasty, but rather on the theory that human nature is fundamentally evil. In addition, Lee Yi’s practical way to correct a wrong disposition was to “empty the mind”, even forget “the *li* of heaven” (law of nature). For this purpose, he felt attention should be paid to the practical theory of Daoism. Lee Yi interpreted the DDJ in the same way as the Confucian scriptures (Kim 2020a, pp. 105–29).

After Lee Yi, who was the first Neo-Confucianist, attempted to accept and interpret DDJ among Joseon scholars, the DDJ interpretation was later extensively developed by Neo-Confucian scholars with an Anti-Neo-Confucian stance including Park Sedang⁶. In the 17th century, when Park Sedang was active, Joseon suffered a series of political divisions during the 16th century, followed by the Imjin War and the Manchu invasion of Korea. While the national power weakened, reflections on the existing political order increased, and doubts about the Neo-Confucian ideology grew. With an empirical and practical attitude, Park Sedang tried to break away from Neo-Confucianism (especially focusing on *Cheng-Zhu* 程朱 thought) and regain the original Confucianism (*wenzhi binbin* 文質彬彬). To this end, he regarded Lee Yi’s theory of *li* as *yili* 易理 (the theory of change). For the first time, a scholar of the Joseon dynasty wrote a commentary on both DDJ and the *Zhuangzi*, the *Sinju Dodeokgyeong* 新註道德經 (A New Annotation to the Daodejing), and *Namhwagyeong Juhae Sanbo* 南華經主解刪補 (An Annotation to the Nanhuajing, revised and expanded), respectively.

Park paid attention to the practical parts of Confucian, Laozi’s, and Zhuangzi’s philosophies and considered that all of them had a common purpose “to cultivate oneself and govern others” (*xiujizhiren* 修己治人) to become sages. Here, the theory of *taiji* 太極, Yin-Yang, and the theory of being (*you* 有) and non-being (*wu* 無) in the Book of Changes provides the metaphysical basis for how *dao* turned out to be substance. For this reason, Park criticized Wang Bi’s commentaries, the most commonly distributed edition of the time, and instead selected about 40 commentaries he deemed necessary and added annotations to them. This is because the standpoint of “to take nothingness as root” (*yiwuweiiben* 以無爲本) and to consider nothingness precious (*guiwu* 貴無), etc., which are at the core of Wang Bi’s *Xuanxue* thought, deviated from the *yili* discussion. Instead of being rejected as heresy, the DDJ could now become the literature of reasons for exploring truth (Jo 2010, p. 280). In short, skepticism toward and reflection on Neo-Confucianism originated in the 16th century, whereas direct criticism began in the 17th century, and both opened a new possibility for engaging the heretical *Laozi*.

In the 18th century, the idea of Anti-Neo-Confucian thought was largely visible in three schools. First, the Nam-in 南人 school reorganized its ruling principle after the Confucianism of the Han dynasty. Second, the Wang Yangming 王陽明 school introduced the Yangming study as a political ideology. Third, the school shared the scholarly lineage of Park Sedang and introduced the Daoist thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi to shape a new political ideology. The two books *Dodeokjigwi* 道德指歸 (The Intention of Dao and De) annotated by Seo Myeong-eung (1716–1787), and *Chowondamno* 椒園談老 (Chowon’s Discussion about Laozi) annotated by Lee Chung-ik (1744–1816) were both published in the 18th–19th century and shared the academic lineage of Park Sedang insofar as they considered Laozi’s *dao* to intersect that of Confucianism, abandoning the dichotomy of *li* and *qi*. However, unlike the 16th–17th century attempts of Lee Yi and Park Sedang to break away from the limitations of Neo-Confucianism through annotating the DDJ, Seo Myeong-eung tried in the 18th century to transform the Neo-Confucian worldview through traditional mathematical science (*surihak* 數理學) and mathematical interpretation of the book of change (*sangsuhak* 象數學). The reason why he was looking for a method to modify Neo-Confucianism with *sangsuhak* is likely to be due to the shock caused by the contact with Western civilization starting in the 17th century and a sense of shame when realizing the advanced stage of astronomy and science in the West (Kim 2013, p. 206). After that, Lee Chung-ik also interpreted *dao* in *Laozi* as *taiji* (Jo 2005, pp. 139–68), which

is clearly distinguished from other DDJ annotators in the Joseon dynasty including Seo, who interpreted *dao* with Laozi's ideas of *wuwei*, and the being (*you*) and non-being (*wu*) concepts, but did not link *dao* to the theory of *taiji* and *yin-yang*. Thus, it is noticeable that Lee Chung-ik is taking an extreme standpoint that denies Neo-Confucianism and even the original Confucianism.

The trends of Korean philosophy in the 19th century can be mainly divided into three categories: first, development through the improvement of Neo-Confucianism; second, criticism and attack on Neo-Confucianism; third, overcoming Neo-Confucianism through a religious mind (Cho 2016, pp. 119–21). The government tried to keep Neo-Confucianism as the political ideology from the first standpoint. Still, the public was already aware of Western and European dominance, for which they blamed Neo-Confucianism. Subsequently, this critique turned into a movement that attacked Neo-Confucianism with skepticism and criticism. Hong Seokju is an example who belongs to the first trend and tried to modify and develop Neo-Confucianism in a more practical way. For this reason, in Seok-ju's DDJ annotation, *Jeongno* 訂老 (To Rectify Laozi), he rejected the abstract and metaphysical parts of Neo-Confucianism, but actively adhered to the *gyeongseron* 經世論 (the theory of managing the world), which he judged to be useful for minimizing the evils in reality and protecting the authority of Neo-Confucianism as a political ideology. To this end, he chose a strategy that attributed both Neo-Confucianism and DDJ to original Confucianism (Kim 2013, p. 203).

As shown above, it can be confirmed that the perspectives of the DDJ commentaries that appeared during the 16th–19th century in the Joseon dynasty were determined by how the commentators understood the relationship between Daoism and Neo-Confucianism. These DDJ annotations all tried to resolve political divisions and the practical problems resulting from them through DDJ interpretation. However, there was a big difference in the attitude toward Neo-Confucianism and to what extent they should adhere to, transform it, develop it, criticize it, or outright deny it. Neo-Confucianism significantly influenced the state's political ideology, and accordingly, the perspective of each DDJ interpretation was also clearly different⁷. The interpretations of DDJ by Joseon Neo-Confucianists continued until modern times and provided the basis for scholars after liberation to interpret DDJ in a contemporary sense. After entering the stage of modernization, the political influence of Joseon Neo-Confucianism reached its limits, but that did not lead to an elevation of the status of Daoism. During the Japanese Colonial period, the political influence of Neo-Confucianism receded considerably. In 1914, the Korean linguist Gang Mae 姜邁 (1878–1941) argued that the principles of Western philosophy were deeply rooted in Ancient Greek and Roman thought. In contrast, the principles of philosophy in East Asia originated from the rationalism of Cheng and Zhu, from the philosophy of the mind (*xinxue* 心學) of Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 and Wang Yangming 王陽明, from Itō Jinsai 伊藤仁齋 in Japan, and from Neo-Confucian of Lee Toegye in Joseon (Shin 2014, p. 36). Here, he compared the concept of “East Asian philosophy” on an equal footing with “Western studies” (*seohak* 西學). However, the former was still centered on Neo-Confucianism, while Buddhism and Daoism remained excluded.

3. The Analysis of DDJ Translation Trends in the Korean Language after the Liberation from Japan

Pre-modern Joseon underwent many political changes and transformations to achieve modernization during the opening period in the late nineteenth century. Self-conversion to a modern academic system also occurred, but when it came under the Japanese colonial period in 1910, the independent development of academics was inevitably sanctioned. With the establishment of Gyeongseong Imperial University—the first modern university in Korean history—in 1924, the pre-modern academic structure collapsed, and a new intellectual category of “Oriental studies” was formed. However, the so-called “Orient” only referred to China, while Joseon was excluded (Seo-Reich 2020, pp. 136–40). Kim Youngyeon argues that studies on Daoist literature in Korea became common in the 1920s. Still,

these works had a distinctly different character because they aimed to overcome the colonial period's national crisis (Kim 2022, pp. 249–71). In the wake of the liberation, Oriental studies were juxtaposed with Western studies for comparison, and Daoism and Buddhism, which had thus far been only considered heterodox in Korea, were now discussed on an equal footing with Confucianism for the integrity of complete oriental culture and building a cultural consensus. The academic discussion of the DDJ in Korea was formally established in 1956 with the opening of the *Dokyo* 道教 (religious Daoism) curriculum at Yeonhee Junior College (Shin 2014, pp. 309–19), which means it was established in the category of religious studies, not philosophy (Kim 2019b, p. 337). Later, with the development of Daoism studies in Korea, *Doga* 道家 was established as the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi within the category of Eastern philosophy that corresponded to Western philosophy. At the same time, *Dokyo* was set within the category of religion.

For this reason, most studies about former DDJ translations in Korea focused on translations after the liberation. For instance, Kim Gapsu limited the scope of his research on DDJ translations in Korea to the 20th century. However, his research shows that DDJ translations, of which there were only two in the 1950s and 1960s, respectively, have since steadily increased to 14 in the 1970s, 21 in the 1980s, and 31 in the 1990s, and after 2000, has rapidly grown in both quantity as well as in the diversity of perspective (Kim 2003, pp. 213–38). Accordingly, this paper set the scope of research by focusing on the time after the liberation of 1945—when translation and study of the DDJ in the modern sense began—when it analyzed the categories according to the academic perspective of the DDJ translator.

This paper was based on the results of prior research on Korean translations of the DDJ after the Korean liberation, but partially reconstructed it for the purpose of revealing the characteristics of DDJ translation in Korean that can be distinguished from DDJ translations in other languages. Since the Korean liberation in 1945, DDJ translations in Korean have rapidly increased to the point where it is difficult to find similar numbers in other countries. Nevertheless, there were only a few types or trend analysis studies targeting this subject that moreover merely analyzed the characteristics of the translation according to the publishing years. This analysis method of former research is meaningful insofar as it presents the developing process of the DDJ Korean translations but has its limits when it comes to explaining the characteristics typical of the Korean translations, their historical causes, and the connections between various perspectives. Therefore, this paper accepts the Christian religious point of view from the relatively recent analysis of Rhee Jae-kwon. At the same time, it takes the categorization by Kim Si-cheon, who modified Rhee's three translation types—the philosophical, religious, and historical—but splits them into four perspectives from the viewpoints of Traditional Confucian exegetics, philology, religious studies, and philosophy. The main reasons for separating “the perspective of Traditional Confucian exegetics”, which is often discussed in the category of Oriental or Chinese philosophy, into an independent perspective of DDJ Korean translation are as follows: First, Gyeonghak (Traditional Confucian exegetics) has already played an important role as a pre-modern knowledge system in Korean and academic methodology beyond the category of the study of Confucianism. Second, Sino-Korean literature (*Hanmunhak* 漢文學), which has Confucian literature as its main research object, inherited this pre-modern academic method. However, from the perspective of the modern and contemporary academic structure, it is difficult to completely attribute it to any one field because the study of Gyeonghak is located at the intersection of philology, linguistics, and philosophy. Furthermore, in the case of philology, the tendency to focus on characteristics in purely linguistic terms including grammatical differences between the two languages (Ancient Chinese and Korean) is noticeable. This needs to be established as a separate translation perspective because it has been overlooked despite its importance in terms of performing the basic function of translation.

In short, the first translation perspective reflects changes in the knowledge system, methodology, and national self-awareness in the transition from the pre-modern to the modern era. The second translation perspective reflects the linguistic function and char-

acteristics of translation from Ancient Chinese into modern Korean. The third translation perspective reflects a religious perspective, and the fourth translation perspective reflects a philosophical perspective. The above contents show that each of these four perspectives forms an independent translation tendency.

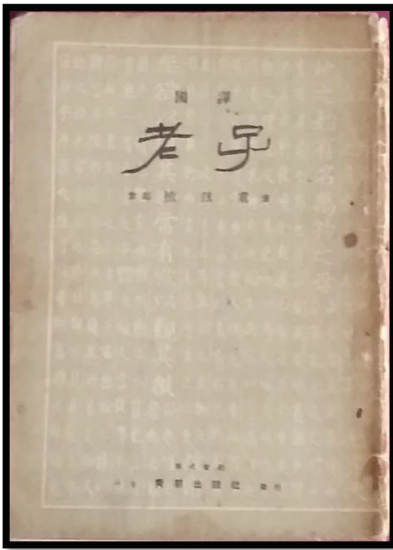
3.1. Translation from the Perspective of Traditional Confucian Exegetics (Gyeonghak 經學)

After the liberation, the Gyeongseong Imperial University under Japanese imperialism was rebuilt as Seoul National University, a modern academic institution, and departments of Sino-Korean literature⁸ were established quickly at Seoul National University, Yeonhui University, and Korea University. The areas of pre-modern academics including Traditional Confucian exegetics of Joseon Neo-Confucianism were thus rearranged into departments that matched their characteristics. The term “Traditional Confucian exegetics” here refers to *jingxue* 經學, which can be considered as the main form of study in East Asia during the pre-modern era. In Korea, it has been called Gyeonghak and formed the center of the educational system. The study methodology was based on the form of annotation letters, phrases, and sentences of Chinese Confucian classics with *Hyunto* (grammatical particles) and the Korean pronunciation of Chinese characters.

For Traditional Confucian exegetics, due to the grammatical differences between Chinese and Korean, it has always been challenging to interpret the original Chinese text directly. For this reason, the *Hyunto* 懸吐 (i.e., to add Korean endings to classical Chinese phrases) was invented to help interpret the Chinese classics. The word *to* 吐 here means a Korean component such as a letter or syllable inserted in between or added after the Chinese text. Most of them belong to the postpositional particles (*josa* 助詞) used to mark grammatical structures in modern Korean. Joseon Confucian scholars succeeded in producing vernacularized editions of the Confucian classics (*eonhaebon* 諺解本) by utilizing *to*. Especially between the 16th and 17th centuries, the vernacularized edition began to be printed to strengthen the Confucian regime and became widespread. Park Si Nea tried to find the reason for the success of this perspective in both the vernacularization and dissemination of the Confucian classics—aside from political factors—also in the linguistic characteristics of the vernacularized edition:

I argue that at the core of the creation of *The Vernacularized Classics* were concerns about how to mobilize orality (utterance) and aurality (hearing) to provide Chosŏn readers with vernacular aural proxies of the Confucian Classics. The Chosŏn state created *The Vernacularized Classics* as books that inscribe the voice of an imaginary tutor’s vocalization of the Confucian Classics in the vernacular language for Chosŏn readers to imitate. (Park 2019b, p. 132)

This interpretation of scriptures based on the *Hyunto* was centered on Confucianism until the Joseon dynasty, but after the liberation, it was also applied to both Daoist and Buddhist texts. The DDJ translations made shortly after the independence of 1945 follow this *Hyunto* method of former Joseon Confucians. The first officially published Korean translation of the DDJ is 1957 *Gugyeok Noja* 國譯老子 (Korean Translation of Laozi), translated by Shin Hyunjung. Shin added *Hyunto* to the original text commonly available edition of the DDJ in the same way that *The Vernacularized Classics* had done it and wrote a corresponding Korean translation, which provided a model for DDJ translations for the next 30 years⁹. Figure 1 below is Shin’s translation with *Hyunto* and its explanation of the first lines of DDJ Section 1 (Shin 1957, p. 3):



道可道는, 非常道요.

(Dogado 道可道 is bisangdo 非常道.)

도를 도라고 할 수 있을 때 그것은 벌써 길이 변함 없는
도가 아니요.

(When do 道 can be told as do 道, it is already not the do 道
of constant way.)

名可名은, 非常名이니.

(myeong-ga-myeong 名可名 is bisangmyeong 非常名, so)

이름을 이름이라 할 수 있을 때 그것은 벌써 길이 변함
없는 이름이 아니어니.

(when a name can be called a name, it is already not a name
of constant way, thus)

無名은 天地之始요. 有名은 萬物之母니라.

(mumyeong 無名 is cheonjijisi 天地之始, and youmyeong

有名 is mamurjimo 萬物之母.)

이름할 수 없는 것이 천지의 비롯이요, 이름 있는 것은
만물의 어미라.

(what cannot be named is the origin of heaven and earth, and
what is named is the mother of all things.)

Figure 1. The first translation of Laozi in Korean with Hyunto after liberation from Japan.

As we can see in the excerpt above, the biggest problem with the *Hyunto* translation is that its purpose is to “recite”, like with *The Vernacularized Classics*, and not to interpret or decipher their contents. In other words, since the grammatical parts have been adjusted to fit the Korean grammar, it is helpful for reading and grasping the linguistic structure. Still, it is not enough to be considered as a complete Korean translation because many Chinese characters are left as they are. Thus, from the linguistic point of view, the *Hyunto* translation has limitations in the following two aspects. First, it is used to add corresponding grammatical components to Chinese sentences so that Chinese lines can fit the Korean word order and grammar structure. However, since the expressions used in the *Hyunto* system belong to an antiquated style, it is not only unnatural to people’s ears nowadays, but it is also difficult to understand when people are listening. Second, it is difficult to see it as a complete form of translation because the *Hyunto* system sees a Chinese character as a fixed concept and only adds the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese characters but does not attempt to specify the various meanings. For this reason, Oh Jintak criticizes *The Vernacularized Classics* in the pre-modern era: “Philosophical thought merely developed around Chinese characters, but it failed to take root in people’s daily lives at that time because they could not utilize everyday language properly” (Oh 1997b, pp. 169–79).

Another problem with the vernacularizing translations before the 1990s was the lack of awareness about which DDJ version was used as the original text by the author. For example, most translations before the 1990s stated that the *Tonghaengbon* was taken as the original text, but did not clarify which version was used. Regarding this, Kim Si-cheon—who carried out a contrastive analysis between the actual contents of translations and commonly available editions published before the 1990s—found out “whether the translations mentioned Wang Bi’s commentaries or not, they all correspond to Wang Bi’s commentary *Laozizhu* 老子注, which in turn has created a tendency in Koreans to completely ignore versions other than Wang Bi’s” (Kim 2004, p. 262).

The criticism and reflection on the problems of the *Hyunto* method translations before the 1990s led to three changes in the 1990s. First, DDJ translations in the 1990s tended to stray from the realm of Sino-Korean literature and expanded in various directions under new categories of modern studies such as linguistics, Chinese literature, religious studies, and philosophy. Furthermore, there was a tendency to interpret conceptual words that previously had been replaced by phonograms in the *Hyunto* translation. Moon Seongjae’s

Cheoeumbuteo Saero Ikneun Noja Dodeokgyeong (Laozi's Daodejing, read anew from the beginning) (2014) is a prime example of this tendency. As the title suggests, instead of adopting the *Hyunto* method, the author not only attempted to conduct etymological research through literature such as *Erya* 爾雅 (the first exegetical work in the history of linguistics in China), *Fangyan* 方言 of Yang Xiong 揚雄, and *Shuowen* 說文 of Xu Shen 許慎, but he also ascertained the meaning of specific characters through paleographic research referring texts including silk manuscripts, oracle bones, inscriptions on bronze, seal script, and clerical script. Second, there was also the translation of the DDJ commentaries by Joseon Neo-Confucian scholars, which provided a way to carry on the national characteristics and traditions in the context of the diversification of the DDJ original texts. The DDJ commentaries of the 16th–19th century Korean Confucians that we have examined in Section 2 of this paper all belong to this last case and were most actively developed around 1995. Third, in the post-liberation period, Daoism was forced to be incorporated into the realm of the “East.” These attempts can be found in DDJ translations early after liberation. A relatively early example of this is the *Gugyeok Hwadamjip · Sinju Dodeokgyeong* (Korean Translation of Hwadamjip 花潭集 · Sinju Dodeokgyeong), one of a series of Korean classical translations directed by the Research Institute of Korean Studies at Korea University, with the clear intent of promoting Korean self-identity and ethnicity. The author grouped and translated Park Sedang's annotations to the DDJ and the collections of Seo Gyeongdeok's articles, representing the debate in Joseon in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The three translation trends from the perspective of Traditional Confucian exegetics discussed above differ in their specific methodologies. Nevertheless, they still all seek to express the original text's meaning as much as possible in pure Korean language. As a result, this led to a shift from the *Hyunto* interpretation method, which uses a language that is difficult to communicate, to a language that corresponds to that spoken in daily life. The role of the linguistic interpretation played by Traditional Confucian exegetics has expanded to Chinese and Korean literature. Regarding the number of publications, DDJ translations utilizing the methods of Traditional Confucian exegetics have declined sharply since the 1990s. Still, efforts to translate it into pure Korean from the ideological perspective of Confucianism are continuing.

The prime example of this trend is the interpretation of Lin Xiyi's 林希逸 (1193–?) *Laozi Laoziyanzhaikouyi* 老子鬻齋口義, translated by Kim Mankyum (Kim 2014). The commentator Lin Xiyi, a scholar of the Song dynasty, sought to prove the unity of the three religions—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—by annotating *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Liezi* through the “theory of the non-dual-mind” (*wuxinlun* 無心論). He appreciated Confucius' concise words while he uttered criticism of Laozi's excessiveness. Lin's commentary is important in the history of Confucianism because he employed the Confucian philosophy of mind to comment on the DDJ, thus creating room for the DDJ literature to be accepted by Korean Confucian scholars. The *Sinju Dodeokgyeong*, Park Sedang's annotation of the DDJ, and his commentary on *Zhuangzi*, the *Namhwagyong Juhae Sanbo*, discussed earlier in Section 2, both took Lin Xiyi's commentaries on these two Daoist classics as base texts. These two books were engraved on printing blocks (*gyongjaja* 庚子字)¹⁰ and printed as copies for distribution in the seventh year of King Sejong 世宗 (1425). It can be inferred that Lin's commentary on the DDJ was also widely read by Joseon scholars in the 15th century¹¹. Currently, the translations of Lin's DDJ commentary broaden our knowledge of how Confucians during the Joseon dynasty understood the philosophies of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*.

3.2. Translation from a Literary and Linguistic Point of View

From the viewpoint of translation, even *The Vernacularized Classics* succeeded in unraveling Chinese classics following the word order and basic grammar of Korean; it reduced the need for the translation of Chinese characters, but it failed to interpret the philosophical implications within them in a way that fit the contemporary language environment. Nonetheless, DDJ translations into pure Korean, which dispensed with Chinese characters,

did finally appear later. The first pure Korean DDJ translation attempts were made in the 1950s, not by Confucian or literature scholars but by several Christians. At that time, the literature translation experience of religious individuals who had encountered “Western studies” including Catholic or Christian thought was an indirect cause of these perspectives on translations. The Confucian regime had been suppressing these Christians because they rejected specific ritual customs and ancestor worship, which were highly valued in Confucianism. Thus, Western religious individuals at the time targeted commoners for missionary activities to avoid the oppression of the elite Confucian regime, and naturally, taking into account the language habits of the audience, delivered their doctrine in pure Korean rather than in Chinese.

The first DDJ translation in pure Korean was included in Park Yeongho’s *Bicheuro Sseun Eol-ui Norae* (The Song of Eol Written by Light) (Yu 1992). The translation was started relatively early in the 1950s by Park’s teacher, Yu Yeongmo. Even so, it was distributed in the form of printed material issued inside the church, not as a formal publication¹². Consequently, the translation was not significantly influential at that time, yet it became widely known when it was officially published in 1992 through his student Park. Yu Yeongmo’s intention to translate the DDJ only into pure Korean can be seen in the title of *Neulgeuni* (an old man)—the literal Korean translation of DDJ. The most challenging aspect of this method utilizing pure Korean is translating the components of combined Chinese characters. In Korean, one Chinese character generally has only one syllable, while in contrast, one pure Korean word has two or more syllables. Consequently, when Chinese characters are translated into pure Korean, the number of letters increases several times. Be that as it may, Yu compressed the translation as much as possible to match the number of characters of the original text of the DDJ to protect the phonological features of the original text. For example, Yu Yeongmo takes issue with the fact that *dao* in the DDJ has previously been translated as *do*, the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese character *dao* 道, and therefore proposes the single syllable pure Korean word *eol* 열 as the translation for *dao* shown below, without considering the different meanings of *dao* in the DDJ.

The *dao* of Laozi means the genuine oneself, just like the *eol* of Jesus (πνεμα), the law (法) of the Buddha (Dharma), and the *xing* 性 of *The Doctrine of the Mean*. Since Westerners do not know this well, thus they either transliterate it phonetically as *dao* or paraphrase it as “way.” There is a reason why Laozi referred to *eol-na* (the authentic genuine self) as *dao*, which means the way. The only way out of this annihilating world is to grasp life *eol*. Therefore, *eol* is the way, and the way is *eol*. (Yu 1992, pp. 21–22)

In addition to *eol*, the translation of *dao* seen above, Yu also translated key concepts such as *mul* 物 (thing) into *mon*, the numbers *man* 萬 (ten thousand) and *bak* 百 (one hundred) into *jeumeun*, and *on*, all of which are the old Korean expressions utilized during the pre-modern era. However, these Korean expressions decreased in use after liberation; moreover, they were utilized in compressed forms in Yu’s translation, creating a situation where it was even more challenging for the general public to understand¹³. Because of this difficulty, Yu’s pupil, Park Yeongho, had no choice but to re-translate the sections where the meaning was not clearly conveyed while organizing Yu’s manuscript of the DDJ translation (Yu 1992). For example, Yu translated the beginning part of DDJ chapter 1 as “The *gil* (way) that is right is not *neul* (always) the *gil*, and the name that can be called is not *neul* the name”. Park knew that *gil* here means the same as *eol* in Yu’s words, so Park added modern Korean words to Yu’s translation. “The unspeakable *cham* (truth)—*eol* in Yu’s words—is not *neul* (everlasting) *cham* (truth). The God who can be named is not the *neul* (everlasting) God”. It is worth noting that Park highlights god’s existence in the pure Korean interpretation of the DDJ. Yu’s disciple Ham Seokheon’s book, *Ssi-al-ui Yetgeul Puri* (Ssi-al’s Interpretation of Old Writings) (Ham 1988), included a partial translation of the DDJ. That effort continued Yu’s translation tradition of using pure Korean and also further increased its religious overtones. Starting from that early beginning, Christian translations of the DDJ all revealed the characteristics of Christian doctrinal interpretations¹⁴.

Since the 1990s, translators of the pure Korean DDJ have increasingly been linguists, not religious or Traditional Confucian exegetics scholars. By 2015, this shift became even more noticeable¹⁵. These linguists tried to linguistically analyze DDJ's literary characteristics and translate them to suit the habits of the linguistic peculiarities of the Korean language. They paid particular attention to the poetic expressions in the DDJ as linguistic features. In this regard, Yang Hweseok criticizes that previous DDJ translations did not grasp the linguistic characteristics revealed in their poetic terms, only attempting to explain the meaning through bibliographic knowledge such as adding lengthy annotations. As a result, not only did the translation not sound like Korean, but it also did not reveal all the aspects inherent in the poetic language of the DDJ (Song 2008, pp. 208–10). From Yang's view, the DDJ is a beautifully decorated poem, not just a literary work of prose. Thus, his translation has a solid phonetic character and feels poetic. For example, all sentences in his translation end with an expression characteristic of poems such as *~yiji* (expressing enlightenment), *~ine* (expressing admiration), and *~rira* (expressing will or strong guesses). Moreover, he focused on analyzing the phonological components and interpreting passages of the DDJ text. For example, the following passage is Yang's explanation of the first chapter of the DDJ:

It consists of four paragraphs. The first paragraph is *rhymed in the sentence*, *do* and *myeong* 名 are repeated three times each to rhyme. The second paragraph is also made up of a reply, and here the rhymes are *si* 始 and *mo* 母. The third paragraph is also done in reverse, and its rhymes are *myo* 妙 and *yo* 微. Most of the characters are repeated in the form of “常○, 欲以觀其△”. Therefore, it can be considered as alliteration and *rhyme in the sentence*. The fourth paragraph is prose as a whole, but the *hyeon* 玄 rhymes with *moom* 門. (Yang 2018, pp. 19–20)

According to Yang's analysis above, DDJ rhetoric has strong poetic characteristics, such as reciprocation, word chains, metaphors, etc. Aside from phonology, it is highly likely that the DDJ originated from oral literature, not written prose. A number of literature scholars¹⁶ insisted that an additional reason for the phonological characteristics of the DDJ is that it was initially an oral religious tradition before the text was fixed in the written form. Rhymes and rhythms are characteristic of these kinds of texts, as they would assist in memorization. The spiritual attributes of the DDJ have been a driving force that motivated its translation from different religious perspectives, including those of Buddhists, Christians, and Daoists. Numerous Christians have accepted the opinions of these linguists and attempted to translate and unravel the religious sentiments of the DDJ in the form of poetry.

3.3. Translation from a Religious Point of View

There always have been two different perspectives in interpreting the DDJ, both in the East and the West: One perspective reads the DDJ as a philosophical, political, or ideological text, while the other focuses on the mystical, religious, or spiritual aspects. This difference in perception stems from the different features and interpretations in the commentaries of Wang Bi and Heshanggong and to which of them the author referred in his understanding. As mentioned in the introduction, among *Tonghaengbon*, these two DDJ editions are universally read in Korea. Primarily, the majority of translations in Korea utilize *Laozizhu* by Wang Bi as the source text. Wang Bi's edition has been associated with the study of *Xuanxue* in the Wei-Jin period and with *Daoxue* 道學 during the Song and Ming dynasties. Nevertheless, in Korea, during the Joseon dynasty, it was grouped with Buddhism as *nobul* 老佛 or *seokbul* 釋老 and regarded as a form of heretical thought.

The other edition is *Laozi Heshanggong Zhangju* 老子河上公章句. Heshanggong's commentary combines the ideas of *Huangdi Neijing* 黃帝內經 and *Laozi*, and reflects the Huang-Lao school's views on *yangsheng* 養生 (preservation of one's health) and administering the state, which is also discussed in *Dongi Bogam* 東醫寶鑑 (Precious Mirror of Eastern Medicine) in the Joseon dynasty (Heo 2002, pp. 19–21). According to *Huangdi Neijing*, human life consists of *jing* 精, *qi*, and *shen* 神, yet the system of how these three

elements interact is not fully explained. In the Yangsheng school, these three elements were esteemed as *sanbao* 三寶 (three treasures): *jing* was defined as the origin of human life, *qi* as the driving force in life, and *shen* as the expression of life. Based on these two ideas, Heo Jun clarified the system and structure between *jing*, *qi*, and *shen* in *Dongi Bogam* (Kim 2020b, p. 110). Especially in the *Jibye* 集例 chapter, Heo stated that “*doga* is based on the cultivation of a clean mind, and medicine is based on medical herbs, diet, acupuncture, and moxibustion as a method of curing disease”, which shows that Heo’s understanding of Daoism focused on the practical aspects. As a result, the “Daoist hygienic system was highly estimated and adopted in the former chapters of the *Precious Mirror of Eastern Medicine* published by a royal order” in the Joseon dynasty (Kim 2007, p. 1). Heo’s concept of *yeongseong* 靈性 discussed in *Dongi Bogam* is based on the concepts of *gushen busi* 谷神不死 (the god of the valley never dies) and *xuanpin* 玄牝 (mysterious female) in DDJ. At this point, Heo explained *yeongseong* both as the mechanism of the cosmic circulation of *jing*, *qi*, and *shen* and as the mechanism of the human body (Jung 2014, pp. 219–21). In the *Naegyeong* 內景 chapter of *Dongi Bogam*, he also described the process of creation of things in the order of “*taeyeok* 太易- *taecho* 太初-*taesi* 太始- *taeso* 太素,” which corresponds to “The Dao has produced one; one has produced two; two has produced three; three has produced all beings.” (Yao 2016, p. 154) in DDJ chapter 42. Here, Heo directly quoted a commentary on the *Cantongqi* 參同契 written by the religious Daoist Chen Xianwei 顯微微 of the Song dynasty, and this shows that Heo accepted the religious perspective of Daoism in understanding DDJ (Seong 2000, p. 259).

Until the 1960s, research on Daoism from a religious perspective—one of the dominating DDJ research trends in Western academia—greatly influenced the Korean academic community. As discussed in Section 3.2, from a linguistic point of view, the translation of the DDJ by Christians has tremendous significance for advancing texts in pure Korean without utilizing any Chinese characters. Since Christians had been working on translations since the early 1950s, they had a foundation that enabled their DDJ research to be rapidly established. As a representative example, Ham Seokheon published excerpted translations of the DDJ in his 1988 book, where he explained the reason for his DDJ translation: “One of the important things that we must do nowadays for the idea of *Ssi-al* 씨알 is to reread the old classical texts in the correct way. Among them, in particular, the old classics of the Orient” (Ham 1988, p. 13). At this point, he mentions the concept of *Ssi-al*, the core idea of Ham’s Christian thought. Ham discovered *Ssi-al* from reading the DDJ and later attempted to reveal the dynamic tension in the relationship between oneself and god by interpreting the DDJ (Park 2012, p. 99). According to Ham’s explanation, the letter “ㅇ” in the syllable *al* 알 represents the maximum or “transcendent sky,” “.” in *al* 알 means the minimum or “intrinsic sky” (i.e., oneself), and “≡” signifies “active life.”¹⁷ Ham attempted to prove that Daoism and Buddhism are both consistent with god’s teachings based on the idea of *Ssi-al*.¹⁸ Ham’s translation shows thoughts similar to those of Holmes Welch, whose book *The Parting of the Way: Lao Tzu and the Taoist Movement* (Welch 1957) was also translated and published in Korea (Welch 1990). At this juncture, Welch also revealed the linguistic and philosophical similarities between the DDJ and the Bible and was influential in the Korean Christian interpretation of the DDJ during the 1990s.

Other Christian DDJ translations after Ham show prominent religious characteristics in their content. For example, *Nalgaereul dan Noja* (Laozi with Wings) (2000), translated by pastor Jang Ilun and his disciple Pastor Lee Hyeonju, is based on the *Laoziyi* 老子翼 by *Jiaohong* 焦竑 (1540–1620), a commentary from the Ming dynasty that was frequently referenced during the Joseon dynasty. Consequently, this work can be viewed as an attempt to select a new source text for DDJ translation. Its interpretation reveals a clear religious perspective, often quoting Bible verses similar to the DDJ scriptures or comparing Daoist sages and Jesus.

Christian DDJ translations remained stagnant in the 2000s. Still, in 2010, Pastor Lee Hyeonju’s revised edition of *Nalgaereul dan Noja* came out, and more diverse forms of similar translations began to be published. Kim Sang-u attempted to interpret the meaning

of lines in the DDJ by referring to verses from the Bible that he considered similar to the DDJ in his translation, *Noja Saeroun Tamsaek* (New Exploration of Laozi) (2010). Jeon Jaedong, a Christian literature expert, translated the DDJ in 2016 as a Christian-style poem in *Si-ro Purosseun Dodeokgyeong* (Poetic Interpretation of Daodejing). Recently, in 2018, theologian Lee Myungkwon attempted to interpret the DDJ by comparing concepts from the DDJ and the Bible. For example, he paired the ideas of *ziran* 自然 (self-so) in the DDJ and the “self-transformation of God”, as well as “*dao*” with Christian God, Jesus, and Logos (Lee 2018, pp. 17–18).

Aside from a Christian perspective, Korean DDJ translations have also taken the religious points of view of Buddhism and Daoism. As translations of the received DDJ text in Korea used Wang Bi’s edition until the 1990s, no translation truly followed the religious Daoist tradition. The ambiguous relationship between these two “Daoisms” has long been the most challenging aspect of DDJ translation. Accordingly, H. G. Creel classified different kinds of Daoism as “Philosophic Taoism” and “*Hsien* 仙 Taoism”. If the so-called philosophic Daoism, “a philosophy saying much that is still pertinent even in this day of great sophistication and scientific complexity” (Creel 1970, pp. 23–24), is based on Wang Bi’s commentary, then the *Hsien* Daoism, “aiming at the achievement of immortality by a variety of means, [has its] roots in ancient Chinese magical practices and a cult of immortality” (ibid., p. 24), is based on Heshanggong’s commentary, and these two concepts are entirely in contradiction. The DDJ, which had been dealt with without distinction between religious and philosophical characteristics until the 1990s, came to be embraced by Korean scholars of religion and philosophy within the modern educational system. There it has obtained its academic status as one of the main Eastern traditions, as well as one of the world religions.

According to published information provided by the National Library of Korea, the first translation representing a religious Daoist DDJ was officially published in 2004 by Jo Yunrae and Kim Hakmok. Nonetheless, this work had previously been released in an unpublished form. *Hyunto Yeokju Dodeokgyeong* (Hyunto Commentary Translation of Daodejing) (Tanheo 1983) by Buddhist monk Tanheo¹⁹ follows the *hyunto* translation method of Traditional Confucian exegetics, as shown in the title, and adds annotations and interpretations.

Through the contents of Table 1 seen above, it can be confirmed that there is no significant difference between the original text with *hyunto* and the *hyunto* translation. For this reason, there has been a barrier that keeps individuals lacking knowledge of Chinese characters from comprehending it, which was the same problem with the translations by Traditional exegetic scholars. According to Lee Jaehyeok’s literature analysis, in terms of content, Tanheo’s annotation is based on *Laoziyi* annotated by Jiao Hong, and the interpretation refers to the *Daodejing jiangyi* 道德經講義²⁰ the annotation of Song Longyan 宋龍淵, the eighth generation of descendants of the Longmen 龍門 sect of Quanzhen 全真 Daoism. The DDJ translation by a Buddhist monk like Tanheo offers a highly unusual case in Korea; moreover, it is difficult to say whether his translation even represents the viewpoint of Buddhists, as it refers to the interpretation of religious Daoists. The translations that more explicitly reveal the perspective of Buddhism are *Gamsanui Noja Puri* (Gamsan’s Interpretation of Laozi) by Oh Jintak and the *Noja Geu Bulgyojeok Ihae* (A Buddhist Understanding of Laozi) by Song Chan-u, both published in 1990. Both of these translations took *Daodejingjie* 道德經解 of Hanshan-Deqing 憨山德清 (1546–1623), an eminent monk in the late Ming dynasty, as their source text, and their translations make Hanshan’s interpretation of the three-way convergence of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism obvious. These examples make it apparent that the understanding of the DDJ from a Buddhist viewpoint in Korea is practically presented as integration of Buddhism and Daoism.

Table 1. Tanheo’s translation of the beginning of the first chapter of DDJ.

Original Text with <i>Hyunto</i>	<i>Hyunto</i> Translation
道可道 堧 非常道 堧 <i>Do ga do myon bi sang do yo</i> 名 可名 堧 堧 非常名 堧 堧 <i>Myong ga myong i myon bi sang myong i ni</i> 無名 堧 天地의 始 堧 <i>Mu myong eun chon ji ui si yo</i> 有名 堧 萬物의 母 堧 堧 <i>Yu myong eun man mul ui mo ni ra</i>	道를 可히 道라 한다면 常道가 堧 堧 堧 If (one) <i>ga</i> 可 (can) call <i>do</i> 道 as 道 <i>do</i> , that is not <i>sangdo</i> 常道 名을 可히 名이라 한다면 常名이 堧 堧 堧 If (one) <i>ga</i> 可 (can) call <i>myong</i> 名 as <i>myong</i> 名, that is not <i>sangmyong</i> 常名 無名은 天地의 始 堧 <i>Mumyong</i> 無名 is <i>si</i> 始 of <i>chon ji</i> 天地 有名은 萬物의 母 堧 堧 <i>Yumyong</i> 有名 is <i>mo</i> 母 of <i>man mul</i> 萬物

Meanwhile, regarding the translation of the DDJ from the religious perspective of *Dokyo*, the foundation for its research was laid when the *Heshanggong Zhangju* edition was translated and published as *Gi Suryeoneuro bon Dodeokgyeong* (Reading Daodejing as Seen Through Qi-Training) by Jo Yunrae and Kim Hakmok published in 2004, and *Noja Dodeokgyeong* (Laozi Daodejing) by Lee Seokmyeong published in 2005. Significantly, they were the first in Korea to focus on the practical sections according to the religious characteristics of the *Heshanggong* commentary. Furthermore, they provided a foundation for the study from the viewpoint of religious Daoism. Subsequently, Choi Jinseok and Jung Jiwook translated *Daodezhenjingyishu* 道德真經義疏 of Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (608–669), an outstanding Daoist scholar from the Tang dynasty. Moreover, their translation of *Laozi Shuyi* 義疏 had a considerable influence on scholars of Daoism and the Korean academic realm of philosophy. The *Heshanggong* edition, which was previously ignored in favor of the commonly available edition, received attention as one of the four significant editions, along with the bamboo slips, the silk manuscript, and Wang Bi’s edition for the decade between 2005 and 2015. Although the DDJ translation from a religious Daoist perspective did not show a significant amount of prominence during this period, for the reason mentioned above, it can be said that a profound understanding of the DDJ was gained.

Finally, other religious Daoist scriptures derived from the DDJ began to be translated around 2015, and DDJ translation from a religious perspective marked its second revival. In 2014, Korean medicine scholar Jeong U-jin translated *Laozi Xiangerzhu* 老子想爾註, the scripture central for the *Wudoumi jiao* (Celestial Masters Daoism), and added the theory of self-cultivation through mind and body, the concept of good and evil from the perspective of preserving one’s health, breathing techniques, and Chinese medicine, to the interpretation (Jeong 2014). At this point, the pragmatic Daoist commentaries centered on the original text of the DDJ were translated from a religious perspective. In 2017, Kim Beomseok and Jeong Ilhwa translated the religious Daoist text *Heshanggong Zhangju bashiyihua* 河上公章句八十一化 with an interpretation by the Daoist Tao Suxuan 陶素耜 from the Qing dynasty, also known as Qingjingxin Jushi 清淨心居士 (Daoist of the pure heart) or Tongwei Daoren (Tongweidaoren 2017), which focuses on *mifa* 密法 (the secret method) and *danfa* 丹法 (the inner alchemy method) in religious Daoism. The preface was intended to prove its Daoist legitimacy by attaching a foreword from the *Xiuxiang Daodejing* 繡像道德經 written by Yue Chongdai 嶽崇岱, the first chairman of the Chinese Daoist Association and abbot of the Shenyang Taiqing palace. In 2018, Choi Sang-yong, an expert in *qigong* study and *qi* study (2018), translated the *Heshanggong* edition based on modern human physiology and an understanding of the *Huangdi Neijing* and Huang-Lao studies (Choi 2018). In the most recent case, in 2020, Lee Seunghun, a trainee of Wang Liping 王力平—the 18th generation lineage holder of the Longmen sect of Quanzhen religious Daoism—translated *Chunyang Zhenren Shiyi Daodejing* 純陽真人釋義道德經 ascribed to the Tang dynasty Daoist immortal Lu Dongbin 呂洞賓. As noted above, it can be seen that since 2014, DDJ translation from a religious point of view has developed with a focus on revealing the spiritual tradition of

Dokyo, and it has attempted to clarify the issues of body and health preservation through the interpretation of the DDJ.

3.4. Translation from a Philosophical Point of View

During the 1990s, the Kim Youngsam government promoted diversification and specialization within Korean universities. In particular, philosophy departments and the various language departments became increasingly specialized. Following the reform of national universities by the Kim Daejung government in 1998, expanded the philosophy departments and stabilized the academic research environment. Under these circumstances, DDJ translation, which had been primarily carried out by scholars of Traditional Confucian exegetics, linguists, and Christians until the 1990s, was extensively developed by both Eastern and Western philosophy experts, as they considered it a significant text underlying Lao-Zhuang thought. Their shared perspective was that they attempted to philosophically²¹ interpret Lao-Zhuang thought in their DDJ translations, setting their gaze beyond its linguistic aspect.

The translators producing philosophically minded translations mainly from 2000 to 2015 shifted away from the commonly available DDJ edition, most often used as the source text for other translations. The first of these changes involves the translation of excavated documents. The Mawangdui manuscripts were already first translated into Korean by Park Heejoon in 1991 but did not draw much academic attention at this time. It was only more than a decade later when a widely recognized improved rendering was produced by Kim Hongkyung in 2003, which added detailed interpretations to each phrase and a long preface to better understand the original text. It was similar to the case of the Guodian manuscripts that were first partially translated and released by Choi Jinseok and Lee Kidong, both experts in Daoist philosophy, together with parts of the *Tonghaengbon*, in 2001. Later, Yang Bangwoong fully translated them in 2003, and then Choi Jaemok subsequently penned an even more detailed version, complemented with commentaries and explanations by the translator.²²

The translation of the excavated manuscripts of DDJ, which was a trend in the 2000s, eventually led to another perspective on DDJ translation, namely translation through comparison, contrast, and analysis between various editions that had been translated or discovered at the beginning of the 21st century in Korea. Representative examples include *Baekseo Noja* (The Silk Text Laozi) (2003) by Lee Seokmyeong and *Nojau Dareujiman Gateun Gil* (The Different but the Same Way of Laozi) (2015) by Ahn Seongjae. With the appearance of translations in this trend, the bamboo strip edition, the silk text edition, the Heshanggong edition, and the Wang Bi edition solidified their positions as the “four major editions of the DDJ”²³ in Korea.

The third translation style that has emerged since the 2000s uses modern Chinese language editions of the DDJ, instead of the original classical Chinese, as the source texts. This significant change occurred following the establishment of diplomatic ties between Korea and China. For example, *Jingoeung-i Purihan Noja* (Laozi interpreted by Chen Guying) (2004) by Choi Jaemok and Park Jongyeon is the translation of Chen Guying’s 陳鼓應 *Laozi Jinzhu Jinshi* 老子今注今譯, one of the most influential modern translations of the DDJ not only in China but also internationally, and this opened the possibility for a new DDJ translation style, the translation of contemporary interpretation of the DDJ in modern Mandarin. Furthermore, modern interpretations of the DDJ in modern Chinese such as *Laozi Yidu* 老子釋讀 by Ren Jiyu 任繼愈, *Xinyi Laozi Duben* 新譯老子讀本 by Yu Peilun 餘培林, or *Ren Wang Dichu Zou* 人往低處走 by Li Ling 李零 were all translated into Korean respectively in 2009, 2011, and 2019.

The fourth translation style is a method in which numerous DDJ editions, commentaries, translations of DDJ modern Chinese interpretations, and other materials are selectively adopted and utilized for translation if they suit the translator’s particular viewpoint. This translation perspective has been steadily increasing since 2015, when the rate of new DDJ translations reached a new high. For example, in 2017, Kim Si-cheon comprehensively

used the four DDJ editions, as well as DDJ research from both the East and the West. He also appended translated materials directly related to the DDJ such as *Laozi Weizhi Lielüe* 老子微旨例略 of Wang Bi or the “Laozi Liechuan” 老子列傳 (The Biography of Laozi) chapter of *Shiji* 史記. In the same year, Jeong Segeun, who focused on the theme of “femininity”, selected and translated only the parts from the four common editions of DDJ, Fu Yi’s received edition, the commentaries from the Tang, Song, Ming, Qing, and Joseon dynasties, and the *Laozi Jinzhu Jinshi* of Chen Guying that fit the parameters of his theme.

Meanwhile, DDJ translations from the perspective of Western philosophy began to appear around the last decade of the 20th century. This paper summarizes these developments from three chief perspectives. The first is from a comparative philosophical point of view. The second is the perspective of religious study that has a particular relationship with the Christian perspective, which has been discussed in Section 3.3 of this paper. Even so, religious studies perceived the DDJ text as an object of study rather than from a religious point of view. The third is the perspective of Western philosophy led by Western philosophy scholars. Specifically, in the case of the second perspective, it cannot be ignored that it was influenced by the Western tendency during the 1970s to switch from a religious perspective to a philosophical one when studying Daoism.

The comparative philosophical perspective can be observed in Kim Yongok’s *Noja Gilgwa Eodeum* (Laozi: The Way and its Achievement). Kim majored in Oriental philosophy in East Asia and North America and was directly influenced by his contemporaries Yu Yeongmo and Ham Seokheon. For this reason, he also tried to interpret the problematic Chinese character concepts of the DDJ into pure Korean, simultaneously interpreting the philosophical ideas contained in the lines based on modern philosophical thought through his unique perspective. For instance, he translated an excerpt in chapter 11 of the DDJ as follows: “Thirty spokes of a wheel gather on one hub. The use for the cart lies in the emptiness of hub . . . Therefore, existence becoming a benefit is because of the use of non-existence” (Wang 2014, p. 54). In this case, Kim interprets “wheel (*gu* 轂)” as “civilization” from the perspective of criticism of material civilization in modern philosophy and explains that humankind can overcome the gap between civilization and nature through the “emptiness” of *gu*. However, according to the research of Chinese philosophers (Kim 2004, pp. 265–66), wheels have been used as a symbol of means to govern people in much of the literature of the time, e.g., in the “Tianjingzhongwan Shijia” 田敬仲完世家 (The Family of Jingzhong 敬仲 Chenwan 陳完) chapter of *Shiji* 史記. In this case, the wheel (*gu*) here was likely utilized as a metaphor for the means of governing people.

Nevertheless, this is far from the meaning of “civilization” symbolized by a wheel in Kim’s translation. Aside from this, *Daodejing* (2003) by Kim Hapung—a re-translation of his English DDJ translation *Reading Lao Tzu: A Companion to the Tao Te Ching with a New Translation*—also belongs to the translations from a comparative philosophical point of view. Kim re-translates it into Korean by comparing Western philosophy with oriental Zen 禪 thought.

Secondly, Oh Gangnam’s *Dodeokgyeong* (Daodejing) (1995) can be cited as an early DDJ translation from the perspective of religious studies. Oh majored in Western religious studies (not theology) in Korea and religious studies centered on Korean Buddhist thought in North America. His attitude from the angle of religious studies is expressed well in his translation of chapter 1 of the DDJ.

Therefore, if there is no greed, the mystery (*xuan* 玄) can be seen, and if there is always greed, you can see its manifestation. Both have the same origin. The name is different, but all are mysterious. (It is the) Mystery (*xuan* 玄) of mysteries (*xuan* 玄), the door to all mysteries (*miao* 妙). (Oh 2020, p. 19)

As noted above, while Oh interprets both *xuan* 玄 as *miao* 妙 as “mystery” and at this point goes beyond the logic of language, simultaneously, he explains in the paragraph that “historically, many thinkers continued to ask the question, why are there things at all, other than nothing?” and expressed the mystery by saying ‘mystery of being’ or ‘shock of being.’ The mystery of existence and the shock of existence, but what about the mystery of

non-existence that makes existence possible? What about the shock of non-existence? The DDJ leads us to the mystery of the existing world, the mystery of the non-existing world that includes and controls the realm of the current world and is the basis of this ‘gate of mystery’” (ibid., pp. 22–23). Through this, it can be confirmed that he perceived the DDJ from a typical perspective of mystical religious studies, contrary to philosophical analysis.

The final one is a translation of Western philosophy scholars. There is Kim Hyeonghyo’s *Sayuhaneun Dodeokgyeong* (Thinking Daodejing) (2004) from the perspective of structuralism, deconstruction, and ontology, and Lee Sujeong’s *Nojaneun Ireoke Malhaetta* (Laozi Said Like This) (2020), which was translated from a recent ontological perspective of German philosophy. Nonetheless, these would not become mainstream DDJ translations in Korea. DDJ translations and interpretations from this point of view have been carried out in the West since the 1970s but had insignificant amounts of influence in Korea itself.

The classification of the Korean DDJ translations according to the translator’s perspective after liberation discussed above has limitations in the ability to derive distinguished classification results due to the feature of the research subject—“translation”. This is because, unlike research works, translation does not clearly state its standpoint from the beginning but is determined solely by the academic tendencies and perspectives of individual translators. For this reason, it is often found that one translator is also included in multiple categories from different viewpoints. A representative example is Ryu Youngmo, a Christian, who maintains a religious interpretation of the translation content. Still, it linguistically adopts the translation method utilizing pure Korean words according to the tradition of a Christian missionary in contrast to the methodology that Gyeonghak took. These two perspectives seem to be in entirely different categories, but they are linked to each other in the process of historical flow. Therefore, this paper classified them into four perspectives to convey the characteristics of the Korean DDJ translations more clearly, which was the primary purpose of this paper, and added an explanation of the organic connection formed between different perspectives.

4. Conclusions

In this article, the DDJ translations in Korean that appeared after the liberation from Japan were gathered and analyzed and subsequently classified into four perspectives according to the academic field and the methodology of translation: the perspective continuing Traditional Confucian exegesis from where the diversification started, the literary and linguistic perspective, the religious perspective, and the philosophical perspective. Simultaneously, the translation characteristics were clarified by comprehensively examining the formation process of each view in context.

The characteristics of DDJ translation in Korean can be essentially summarized into five points. First, in terms of the original DDJ text selection, most translations until the 1990s depended on Wang Bi’s edition. However, this means that Wang Bi’s edition was popular, not that the interpretations closely followed Wang Bi’s commentary. Second, the interpretations of the DDJ varied depending on whether the *Dogyo* or the *Doga* approach was followed. The standpoint of religious Daoism prevailed until the Goryeo and Joseon periods. However, in the Joseon dynasty, the interpretation of philosophical Daoism was also becoming compatible with religious Daoism. Finally, the liberation led to the DDJ becoming an object of Traditional Confucian exegesis, to a religious perspective, and a philosophical perspective, respectively. Third, the shock of contact with Western civilization during the enlightenment and the Japanese colonial period created the awareness of the necessity of establishing national independence and, for that purpose, building a cultural consensus. Eventually, DDJ and other Daoist texts that had been excluded from the academic field as heresy before the liberation were officially integrated into the modern academic field. Fourth, the Christian ideas, which were accepted during the opening port era, provided the methodological basis for the DDJ translation into pure Korean and opened a new and unique way to interpret the DDJ. Fifth, the characteristics of the translations varied according to whether the translator accepted *hyunto*—the unique Korean

method to interpret Chinese classics—and followed the interpretation method of Traditional Confucian exegetics or whether they rejected it and followed a linguistic interpretation method. Furthermore, the new translation method, which deviated from the *hyunto* method, using pure Korean language, was first attempted by Christians.

The period between the years 1990 and 2015 was essential in the formation process of DDJ translations. The main reasons for this are that the academic identities of philosophy, Chinese literature, Chinese classics, and religious studies were completed when the modern structure of universities took shape in the 1990s, and direct academic exchanges between China and Korea increased after the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Korea in 1992. Subsequently, since 2015, the translation of the DDJ in Korea has expanded its horizon and added depth based on the profound achievements made in the 25 years before.

The above research results show that DDJ translation in Korea after the liberation goes beyond mere translation and is closely linked to significant issues such as the Korean cultural identity, the academic structure of knowledge, the acceptance and dissemination of religion, and the methodology of Traditional Confucian exegetics. As a result, the DDJ translation in Korean was able to develop rapidly in various fields and from different perspectives, resulting in the nowadays second-largest corpus of DDJ translations after the English language.

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Notes

- ¹ Mawangdui silk edition of the *Laozi* was used as a grave good presumably around the 2nd century B.C. and the Guodian bamboo strip edition of the *Laozi* dates to around 300 BC.
- ² For concepts of East Asia and views on East Asian studies, see Seo-Reich (2020, pp. 129–64).
- ³ For more on the distribution and research status of Korean Daoist literature, see Kim (2022, pp. 249–71).
- ⁴ According to Kim Gapsu’s research, there are about 70 Korean translations of DDJ published up until the 1900s (Kim 2003, pp. 213–38). According to my own survey, which relied on the publication registration data released by the National Library of Korea (www.nl.go.kr) (accessed on 4 August 2022) and the data released by Kyobo Bookstore (www.kyobobook.co.kr) (accessed on 4 August 2022), which has the largest publication data in Korea, about 112 DDJ Korean translations have been published from 2000 to 2022 (excluding novels and educational books). To be more specific, from 2015 to 2022, 65 translations have been published, considerably more than the 47 translations published between 2000 and 2014, which shows the increased interest in the DDJ.
- ⁵ For information on the acceptance of Daoism in Goguryeo, see: Lee (2008, pp. 51–102) and Kim (2010, pp. 163–202).
- ⁶ This is based on Lee Byungdo’s view, which was the cornerstone research regarding Sedang Park’s literature. He defined Park as an anti-Neo-Confucianist (Lee 1966, pp. 8–18).
- ⁷ Lee Bongho largely classified the three trends of commentaries to *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* during the Joseon dynasty: first, “Daoism as heresy” (閉異端論); second, “using Confucian thought to explain Daoism” (以儒釋老); third, “breaking away from Neo-Confucianism” (脫朱子學). However, in this paper, the author argues that the first trend also aims to integrate Laozi’s ideas into Confucianism, and that the second and third also share the intention to solve problems in reality by applying practical Daoist thoughts to Neo-Confucianism or original Confucianism (Lee 2004, pp. 11–47).
- ⁸ Regarding the modern Sino-Korean literature (漢文學), Kim Jin-kyun pointed out that “modern civilization’s perspective, Chinese characters and traditional Sino-Korean literature were from the exterior or China, so ultranationalists called those Chinese studies. Afterwards, nationalistic scholars found the national characteristics in the Chinese studies, so they called that traditional Sino-Korean literature” (Kim 2011, p. 165).
- ⁹ Shin Hyunjung first attempted to translate the DDJ via the *Hyunto* method according to their exegetics tradition, and this became the most common translation form of the DDJ until the 1990s (Shin 1957). This article includes exempla such as Nam (1970); Shin, Dongho (1970); Lee (1975); Jang (1977). DDJ translations, which follow this traditional translation method, appear steadily even

after the 1990s, but it is difficult to say that it is mainstream, because there has been a sharp drop in publications. No (1999); Park (2011) can serve as examples.

Gyongjaja 庚子字 are bronze metal types made at *Jujaso* 鑄字所 from 1420—the second year of King Sejong (Academy of Korean Studies 1995).

For more information about the acceptance and understanding of *Lin Xiyi's* commentary by Confucian scholars during the Joseon dynasty, see Choi (2003, pp. 315–40).

It seems impossible to find the original manuscript of Yu Yeongmo's first pure Korean DDJ translation that he completed in the 1950s because it was not registered as an official publication. However, Park Yeongho released the original text of Yu Yeongmo's DDJ translation without any revisions in the appendix "Daseok Ryuyongmo-ga Omgin Noja" (Laozi Translated by Daseok Ryu Youngmo) of his second DDJ translation in 1998 (Park 1988, pp. 412–17).

The difficulty of Yu's translation has been pointed out by a number of scholars in the linguistics and Chinese philosophy research field including Oh Jintak and Rhee Jae-kwon (see Rhee 2013, pp. 286–87).

This will be dealt with in further detail in Section 3.3.

Since 2015, the pure Korean translation of DDJ through linguistic experts has been possible from increasingly diverse angles. This article mentions examples such as Kim (2018), who translated from the perspective of Sino-Korean literature, Yang (2018) who worked from the perspective of Chinese literature and phonology, or Yoon (2020) from the perspective of Korean language studies.

Jeon (2016) can be the representative example for this.

This content is a quote from Park Jae-soon's summary of the original data from the back cover of *Ssi-al-ui Sori [The Sound of the Ssi-al]*, vol. 146 (Ham 1999). For additional details, see Park (2012, p. 99); Lee (2016, pp. 283–307).

In this regard, Ham Seokheon said that he read Buddhist scriptures and Daoist literature while in prison to obtain information on the Joseon spirit in his collection of works *Bible Korea* during the Japanese Colonial period. During this time, he realized that the ideas of Buddhism and Daoism were in agreement with Christian thought (Ham 1964, pp. 250–51).

The real name of Tanheo 呑虛 is Kim Geumtaek 金金鐸. However, he used his Buddhist name Tanheo for a significant majority of his publications, this text included.

Although Tanheo did not directly mention the source text for the translation of his *Hyunto yokjju Dodeokgyeong* 縣吐譯註道德經, from the contents of the commentary, it is presumed that he took *Daodejing jiangyi* 道德經講義 (A Lecture on the Daodejing), printed in Taipei in the 1970s before the establishment of diplomatic relations between Korea and China as the original text. It became the first DDJ translation of Daodejing in Korea interpreted from the Daoist perspective. See for comparison: Tanheo (1983), Song (1970).

In this paper, I considered the category of religious studies as another category of philosophy because they share many methods, since the establishment of philosophy as an independent modern discipline began with the separation of philosophy from the theological seminary (Seo-Reich 2017, pp. 90–99).

Furthermore, in 2020, Daecheol Jeong showed the rather extreme opinion that only the Daodejing on bamboo scripts could be acknowledged as the genuine literature of Laozi, and that other editions should be doubted.

"Four major editions of the DDJ" is an expression that began to be used since Ahn Seongjae presented them in his book Ahn (2015).

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Article

The Dissemination of Laozi's Text and Thought in the Arab World

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Abstract: Based on Chinese and Arabic literature, this paper summarizes the spread of Laozi's text and thought in the Arab world. The specific course of dissemination can be divided into two stages: from 1966 to 2000, the *Dao De Jing* was disseminated on the basis of indirect translations; from 2000 to today, the spread of the *Dao De Jing* in the Arab world reached a climax when the first direct translation was published. Laozi's text and thought have gained acceptance and popularity largely because of their soothing function and similarity to the Sufi spirit found in Arab culture. The spread of Laozi's text and thought in the Arab world presents three features: a long and friendly history of cultural exchange has served as a foundation; languages such as English and French have functioned as intermediaries; and similarities between Sufism and Daoism have provided points of connection.

Keywords: *Dao De Jing*; Laozi's thought; the Arab world; intercultural communication

1. Introduction

During the Western Han Dynasty, the historian Sima Qian wrote in the "Treatise on the Dayuan" chapter of the *Shiji* that "Tiaozhi lies thousands of miles west of Anxi, near the west sea" (Sima 2019, p. 261). The "Tiaozhi" referred to in the citation is part of the Arab world. Although China and Arab countries geographically are far apart and have cultural differences, exchanges between China and Arabia have a long and profound history. This continuous trade since ancient times has also facilitated the exchange and collision of ideas. Laozi's philosophy, as an excellent achievement of Chinese civilization, provides a meaningful example of this exchange of Chinese between Arab civilizations.

Laozi's *Dao De Jing* and its theories began to be disseminated in the Arab world a few decades ago, with the first Arabic translation of the *Dao De Jing* published in 1966. By the end of 2020, there were already 19 *Dao De Jing* translations in Arabic, 16 relevant research papers, and 19 other research works. After nearly 60 years of dissemination and development, the number of translations and research on this work continue to increase year by year. The list of Arabic translations of *Dao De Jing* can be seen in Table 1.

Non-Islamic people often have a limited understanding of Islamic culture, concluding that Arabs are too conservative to be interested in the cultural achievements of other civilizations. This paper reviews the spread of Laozi's thought in the Arab world, hoping to break this stereotype. We found that Laozi's ideas of care for the spiritual world and return to nature have attracted certain Arab intellectuals, who integrated these ideas with Islamic philosophy. This research aims to modestly contribute to the history of Sino-Arab civilizational exchange, and also highlight the status of *Dao De Jing* in the Arab world through its repeated translation into Arabic. This article offers the first ever overview of Arabic *Dao De Jing* translations and the spread of its thought in the Arabic world.

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Table 1. List of Arabic translations of *Dao De Jing*.

Publication Date	Translation	Translator	Publishing House/Location of Publishing House	Original Language
1966	Kitābu at-Ṭāu wa al-Fadīla كتاب الطاو والفضيلة	‘Abdu Al-Ghafār Makāwī عبد الغفار مكاوي	Egypt Dār Al-maārif دار المعارف	German
1980	Kitābu at-Ṭāu الطاو كتاب	Hādī Al-‘Alawī العلوي هادي	Lebanon Dār Al-Kūnūz دار كنوز	English
1992	Daodejing:at-Ṭarīk Ila al-Fadīla الطريق إلى الفضيلة Tao Te Ching	Alā’u Ad-Dību أديب علاء	Kuait Sūād Sabāh دار سعاد الصباح	English
1995	Kitābu at-Ṭāu الطاو كتاب	Hādī Al-‘Alawī هادي العلوي	Lebanon Dār Al-Kūnūz دار كنوز	English
1998	Kitābu at-Ṭāu: Injīlū al-Hikmatī at-Tāwīyya Laozi كتاب التاو -إنجيل الحكمة التاوية	Farās As-Sawāh السواح فراس	Syria Dār Alā’u Ād-Dīn دار علاء الدين	English
2001	Tao التاو	Ranyā Mishlib رانية مشلب	Lebanon/Arab Communication Foundation	English
2002	At-Ṭarīk wa Ṭakatuh الطريق وطاقته	Yuḥannā Qumayr يوحنا قمير	Lebanon Luizeh	French
2005	Kitābu at-Ṭāu كتاب الطاو لاوتسي	Muḥsin Farjānī محسن الفرجاني	Egyptian National Translation Center	Chinese
2008	Lao Zi الحكماء يتكلمون - لاوتسي	Alī Mulā علي مولا	Lebanon Arab Scientific Publishers	English
2009	Mūhtārāt min Ash’āri Laozi مختارات من أشعار لاوتسه	Amal Porter أمل بورتير	Jordan Fadā’āt press فضاءات للنشر والتوزيع	English
2009	Greater China Library -Laozi لاوتسو	Farās As-Sawāh فارس السواح Xue Qingguo 薛庆国	Beijing—Foreign language teaching and Research Press	Chinese, English
2015	The Straight “dao” at-Ṭarīk al-Kawīm تاو تيتشينج الطريق القويم	Muḥamed Safā صفا محمد	Egypt	English
2015	Kitābu at-Ṭāu wa al-Fadīla كتاب الطاو والفضيلة	Alā’u Ad-Dību علاء أديب	Egypt Al-karma للنشر	English
2016	Akwalu Al-Faylasūf Lao Tsi أقوال الفيلسوف لاوتسي	SINOLINGUA 华语教学出版社	Lebanon Arab Scientific Publishers الدار العربية للعلوم ناشرون	Chinese
2017	Lih Tsi Fi Aḥdani Al-Rih ليه تسي في أحضان الريح	Wang Youyong 王有勇	Lebanon Arab Thought Foundation	Chinese
2017	Kitābu al-Daodejing Kitābu Assin al-Mūkaddas, Kitābu at-Ṭāu aw Sirātu al-Abdāl كتاب التاوتي - تشينج كتاب الصين المقدس كتاب التاو أو صراط الأبدال	Musallam Sakka Amīnī أميني سقا مسلم	Syria Dār Al-Fikr	Japanese
2018	Ghayyir afkārak, Ghayyir hayātak, ‘Aysh fann hikmat at-Ṭāu غير حياتك أفكارك غير التاو حكمة فن عيش	Haytham Sobeh صبح هيثم	Lebanon Dār al-khayāl دار الخيال	English
2020	Ṭarīk alḥaq wa Fadīlatu al-Hūdā الهدى وفضيلة الحق الطريق	Mohammed As’ad الأسعد محمد	Kuait Dār Al-Salāsīl دار ذات السلاسل	English
2022	Al-Sufiya Assiniya Fi Kitāb Lao Tsi Al-Kitābu al-Mūkaddas ..الصوفية الصينية في كتاب لاوتسي ..الكتاب المقدس	Abdu Al-Aziz Hamdī عبد العزيز حمدي	Egypt Dār Al-Kitāb Al-Hadīth دار الكتاب الحديث	Chinese

2. The Dissemination of *Dao De Jing* in the Arab World in the Past Sixty Years

Compared with Britain, France, Germany, and other regions, the translation of *Dao De Jing* started late in the Arab world. The first Arabic translation, *Kitābu at-Tāu wal-Fadīla* (كتاب الطاو والفضيلة), was published in 1966, finally opening the door to the translation of and research on the *Dao De Jing* in the Arab world. The specific course of dissemination of *Dao De Jing* in the Arab world can be divided into two stages: from 1966 to 2000, and from 2000 to today.

2.1. 1966–2000, the Dissemination of *Dao De Jing* Based on Indirect Translations

The spread of *Dao De Jing* in the Arab world during this period was largely influenced by Germany, France, and Britain. The Arabic translations were based on indirect translations, whose source language is not Chinese, but German, English, and French. During the 34 years from 1966 to 2000, five Arabic translations of *Dao De Jing* were published. In 1966, *Kitābu at-Tāu wal-Fadīla* (كتاب الطاو والفضيلة) translated by ‘Abdu Al-Ghafār Makāwī (عبد الغفار مكاوي) was published by Egypt Arabs Archives Press. This translation originated from a German translation by Günther Debon, a German sinologist and one of the most prominent German translators of Chinese poetry. In 1980, Hādī Al-‘Alawī (العلوي هادي) translated and published *Kitābu at-Tāu* (كتاب الطاو) in Lebanon, which originated from an unknown English version.

In 1992, an Arabic translation of *Kitābu at-Tāu* (كتاب الطاو), based on the 1972 English translation of Feng Gia-fu and Jane English, was published in Kuwait. Alā’u Ad-Dību (علاء أديب), the translator of the book, said, “the English translation I have chosen is a simple, brilliant and vivid one. One professional reviewer commented that it is very ‘vivid and easy to understand by converting previously obscure text into simple text’ (Alā’u Ad-Dību 2016, p. 8). This translation lacks any notes, but does include a short introduction. There, he repeatedly praised Laozi’s thought as an amazing and perfect philosophical system.

In 1995, Dār Al-Kūnūz (دار كنوز) published *Kitābu at-Tāu* (كتاب التاو) in Beirut, and it was widely and enthusiastically received by Arab scholars and readers. The first translator Hādī Al-‘Alawī (العلوي هادي) wrote a preface of over fifty pages to introduce Laozi’s thought and elaborate on Laozi’s ontology, life conception, and political outlook. Meanwhile, the book compares and analyzes the similarities and differences between Laozi’s thought and the Sufi ideas found in Islamic philosophy. According to Hādī Al-‘Alawī, his translation is derived from the original Chinese language with reference to the English translation. He explains, “In my translation of the *Dao De Jing*, I refer to the English version translated by Chinese-American scholar Feng Gia-fu (1919–1985). For some of the parts of the translation, I give priority to the famous British sinologist Needham’s translation” (Al-‘Alawī 1995, pp. 53–54).

In 1998, Farās As-Sawwāḥ (السواح فارس), a Syrian cultural scholar, revised and polished the translated version and finally completed *Kitābu at-Tāu: Injilū al-Hikmatī at-Tāwīyya Laozi* (كتاب التاو-إنجيل الحكمة التاوية). He notes, “I translated the *Dao De Jing* into Arabic based on three English translations” (Al-Sawwāḥ 1998, p. 10). This version is based on the English of D. C. Lau and refers to the English and French translations by Feng Gia-fu, Chung-yuan Chang [张钟元], and Nanqi Liu [刘楠祺]. In this third edition he explains, “After I finished my translation, I compared it with Kia-hway Liou’s [刘家槐] French version, and when the third edition was published, Dr. Xue Qingguo proofread my Arabic translation with reference to the original Chinese version” (Al-Sawwāḥ 1998, p. 10). Sawwāḥ also stressed the reliability of his translation and said, “In my Arabic translation of *Dao De Jing*, there is no such groundless content as in other translations” (Al-Sawwāḥ 1998, p. 10).

Compared with previous Arabic translations of *Dao De Jing*, this version is of high academic value. At the beginning and the end of the translation, the author attaches a detailed introduction and an explanation to compare the similarities and differences between Laozi’s philosophy, Islamic philosophy, and Western philosophy. He interprets the *Dao De Jing* according to modern scientific theory, offering many unique insights. In addition, this book is presented as having significant practical value. The author resolutely

conveys that the translation of *Dao De Jing* can enable as many people as possible to perceive Laozi's extensive and far-reaching wisdom and so find solutions to many problems of modern civilization.

2.2. From 2000 until Today, the Dissemination of *Dao De Jing* in the Arab World Has Reached a Climax

Although Sino-Egyptian economic cooperation is not new, its scope widened after 2000, following the initiation of China's "Going Out" strategy in combination with Egypt's mounting socioeconomic problems. In 1999, China signed with Egypt the "Joint Communiqué on Establishing Strategic Cooperative Relationship Between the People's Republic of China and Arab Republic of Egypt." These political developments led to Arab sinologists beginning to translate Chinese classical texts directly from Chinese.

Since 2000, more and more scholars in the Chinese Department of Egyptian universities have studied Chinese literature. In addition to 17 teachers specializing in Chinese literature in the Chinese Department of Ain Shams University, 13 students in the preparatory class of the Chinese department have chosen to study Chinese literature. Furthermore, the head of the national translation project of the Supreme Council of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture often encourages Egyptian Chinese experts to make greater efforts to introduce Chinese culture and literature to the Egyptian people. Since 2000, the project has published many Arabic versions of Chinese culture and literature writings, and this coincides with significant improvements in the quantity and quality of the Arab translations of and research on the *Dao De Jing*. During this period, the total number of Arabic *Dao De Jing* translations rose to 14, and the first Arabic *Dao De Jing* translated directly from Chinese was also published.

In 2001, Ranyā Mishlib's (رانية مشلب) translation of *Tao* (التاو), based on an English translation, was published in Lebanon. In 2002, the Lebanese literary writer Yūhannā Qūmayr (يوحنا قمير) translated *Aṭ-Ṭarīk wa Ṭākatuh* (الطريق وطاقته) "The Path and its Energy" from a French translation. In April 2005, the Egyptian National Translation Center published sinologist Muḥsin Farjānī's (محسن الفرجاني) translation of *Kitābu aṭ-Ṭāu* (كتاب الطاو), which was the first Arabic translation direct from Chinese and serialized in the *Egyptian Literary News*. Doctor Farjānī (الفرجاني) is a well-known Sinology professor and translator. He is a lecturer of the Chinese Department in Ain Shams University and member of the Chinese Expert Group of the National Translation Center of Egypt. He also has translated a great quantity of Chinese classical works, such as the *Analects of Confucius*, *Strategies of the Warring States*, *Sun Tzu's Art of War*, and *The Four Books*, making important contributions to the spread of Chinese culture in Egypt and the Arab world. In the Cairo International Book Fair in 2011, Doctor Farjānī won the Translation Award granted by the former General Administration of Press and Publication of the People's Republic of China.

In describing his process of translating the *Dao De Jing*, Doctor Farjānī explains his serious scholarly process as follows, "I collected three different versions of the original Chinese manuscript in order to understand and translate the original text more accurately" (Farjānī 2005, p. 16). He also included brief and accurate notes that further enhance the translation's academic value. The response to this pioneering work has been quite positive. For example, author and scholar Jamel Khaldūn speaks highly of Mohsin Farjānī's translation: "Only Dr. Muḥsen's translation has won the popularity of the Egyptian literary and art circles. It has truly introduced to the Arab world the essence of Chinese culture and the wisdom of Laozi. Mohsen's translation opens the door for Chinese culture and literary classics to be introduced to the Arab world" (Hussein 2008, p. 121).

In 2009, the translation of Amāl Porter (أمل بورتير), *Mūhtārāt min Ash'āri Laozi* (مختارات (من أشعار لاوتسه), was published in Jordan. After referring to versions of *Dao De Jing* in different languages and regions and incorporating suggestions from many Chinese friends, she finally completed the translation after 15 years of revision and adjustment.

In the same year, China Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press published a new Arabic translation of *Dao De Jing* translated by Xue Qingguo and Farās As-Sawāh

(السواح فارس). This translation is based on Farās As-Sawāh’s translation published in 1998, modified by Xue Qingguo, and then further polished by Farās As-Sawāh to present readers with an ideal translation faithful to the original meaning, fluent in language and detailed in interpretation. This joint work by Chinese and Arab scholars is the first attempt in the history of Arabic translation of *Dao De Jing*.

In 2017, *Kitābu al-Daodejing Kitābu Assīn al-Mūkaddas Kitābu at-Tāu aw Sirātu al-Abdāl* (التاوتي - تشينغ كتاب الصين المقدس كتاب التاو أو صراط الأبدال) created by Musallam Sakkā Amīnī was published in Syria. He considers *Dao De Jing* to be a very important religious classic in China and presents religious reflections on Laozi’s thought. This translation was directly translated from Japanese versions, although the process was more complex than that: “I referred to four authoritative English translations, the original Chinese text, Japanese translations and three different versions of English annotations to complete my translation, and I also consulted dozens of research books on the book,” the translator said (Musallam 2017, p. 19).

In 2018, *Ghayyir Afkarak, Ghayyir hayātak: ‘Aysh fann hikmat Al-Tāw*, based on the English translation of Wayne Dyer and translated by Haytham Sobeh (هيثم صبح), was published in Lebanon by Dār al-khayāl press (الخيال دار). In December 2020, based on an English translation by American Roland Bernard Blakeney, Palestinian poet and novelist Mohammed As‘ad (محمد الأسعد) published *Tarīk alḥak wa Fadīlatu al-Hūdā* (الطريق الحق وفضيلة الهدى). In addition, *Hūsīn Alwān Hūsīn* (حسين علوان حسين) translation *Tarjamāt Kitāb Al-Tāw (Tarīk Al-akel)* (منون الطاو لا اسم له) and *Ibrahīm Bin Saīd’s Matūn at-Tāu Lā Isma Lahu* (طريق) (ترجمة كتاب الطاو) are all translations from this period. *Tarjamāt Kitāb Al-Tāw (Tarīk Al-akel)* (طريق) (ترجمة كتاب الطاو) is based on multiple English translations: *Tao-Teh King* by James Legge, *The Law of Reason and Virtue* by D. T. Suzuki and Paul Carus, and *Laotzu’s Tao and Wu Wei* by Dwight Goddard, Henri Borel, and M. E. Reynolds.

With the dissemination of *Dao De Jing* in the Arab world, the concept of “Dao,” which is purely a category of ancient Chinese philosophy, began to appear frequently in books, newspapers, and academic forums in Arab countries, particularly in Egypt. Laozi’s thought has been understood and accepted by more and more Arab people. The dissemination of *Dao De Jing* in the Arab world has been mainly concentrated in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Kuwait.

3. Reasons for Spread of Laozi’s Text and Thought and Their Influence in Arab World

3.1. Reasons Why Laozi’s Text and Thought Have Been Accepted and Welcomed in the Arab World

Despite the conservative tendency in Arab Islamic countries, Laozi’s text and thought are becoming increasingly popular in the Arab world. Although Muslims in the Arab world are united in their belief in God and the Prophet Muhammad, they have widely differing views about many other aspects of their faith, including how important religion is to their lives and what practices are acceptable in Islam.

There are three main reasons Laozi’s thought has become popular and welcomed in the Arab world:

Firstly, it has a positive psychological impact on readers. The *Dao De Jing* has touched the hearts of Arab translators and readers, for whom Laozi’s thoughts are soothing and bear “healing” wisdom. They specially focus on the value of Laozi’s idea of “following nature’s course” in the construction of modern people’s spiritual world.

Alā’u Ad-Dību (أديب علاء), one of the Arabic translators of the *Dao De Jing*, said, “This book (*Dao De Jing*) is closer to my spirit than my brain, and perhaps it reveals one of the fundamental contradictions of mankind. ‘Dao’ calls for integration, not contradiction. The philosophy prevailing in the Middle East and Europe is a cultural contradiction that involves good and evil, peace and anti-war, night and day” (Alā’u Ad-Dību 1992, p. 4). Essentially, the meaning of the above passage is that, according to Laozi, the distinction between good and evil is a wrong-headed human contrivance, whereas Western culture emphasizes a duality between good and evil, and a call to embrace the good and spurn

the evil. This idea is expressed by Laozi through the terms Yin and Yang. The two words mean the fundamental and opposite forces or principles in nature. Yin meant “sunless” or “northern”. It was associated with darkness, emptiness, and passivity. The opposite state was Yang, which meant “sunny” or “southern.” Yang was associated with light, fullness, and action. These traits appear oppositional on first inspection. However, that opposition is only a surface illusion in Laozi belief. In fact, the two states of nature require each other.

Farās As-Sawāḥ (السواح فارس), a prominent Syrian cultural scholar, explained his motivation for, and the effect of, translating *Dao De Jing* as follows: “I want as many people as possible to enjoy that kind of peace, so I translated the *Dao De Jing* for Arab readers. As soon as the translation was published, it received a wide response. Readers told me that ‘I changed a lot after reading *Dao De Jing*,’ and that ‘*Dao De Jing* has changed my life.’ I firmly believe that modern civilization, with its many problems, can benefit from the thoughts of this Chinese sage” (Xue 2017, pp. 25–29). As many readers of the book explain, Laozi teachings are intended to be utilized as a guide to daily living. Their greatest value lies in their ability to direct people toward our own process of self-exploration, growth, and transformation, which connects us deeply to ourselves and to the world around us. In fact, teachings of Daoism as Simplicity, patience, compassion are considered a great way to navigate life with harmony. The Dao is a principle that embraces nature, a force which flows through everything in the universe. Daoism encourages working with natural forces. This is also represented graphically by the Yin-Yang concept.

Secondly, there are concepts in Arab culture similar to or even connected with “Dao” It is no accident that Daoism has been accepted and welcomed in the Arab world. Gamāl Khaldūn (خلدون جمال), one of the most important contemporary Egyptian writers, also loves the book *Dao De Jing*. He once said, “After reading *Dao De Jing*, a Classic of Chinese culture, I found that it is similar to many masterpieces of Arab Sufi philosophy, whose core is the search for truth. Whether it’s the *Dao De Jing* or the Sufi classics, they are the home of my soul” (Zong 2009, pp. 137–42). As Gamāl Khaldūn pointed out, there are many similarities between Daoist thoughts and Sufi thoughts, the spiritual gem of Arab Islamic culture. Both emphasize grasping the world through the non-rational way of direct comprehension, and advocate for getting rid of unnecessary and overelaborate formalities, returning to nature and pursuing freedom. They both advocate an implicit and mysterious aesthetic taste.

Hādī Al-‘Alawī (العلوي هادي), an influential Iraqi thinker in the Arab world, went to China in the 1980s and 1990s and studied Chinese during his stay in China. He wrote in the preface to his 1994 book *Collecting Treasures in China* that “Chinese philosophy is good at dialectics, especially in Daoist thoughts.” His idea is representative among Arab scholars. He also mentioned that Chinese philosophy pays more attention to man than to nature, which is similar to the Sufi thought in the Islamic world. Al-‘Alawī (العلوي) explained Laozi’s philosophy as an authentic “Eastern” tradition similar to Sufism philosophy in terms of its “communal” spirit and concern for the people, as well as what he perceived to be its inexorable opposition to the state and the monopolization of wealth (Al-Sudayrī 2014, pp. 19–20).

Another Arab scholar, Muhammed al-Sudayrī, explained in his article “Hadi al-‘Alawi, Scion of the Two Civilizations” that al-‘Alawī’s interest in Chinese culture stemmed from what he saw as a natural affinity between Islamic and Chinese civilizations, unified as they are by a common “humanistic” essence that contrasted with the spiritual emptiness and corruption of the West. This notion explains al-‘Alawī’s affinity for the dual traditions of Sufism and Daoism, wherein he identified a *masha’i* or communal tendency driven by a sense of dignity and defense of the downtrodden against authority. More importantly, he valued the attempts of these traditions to rein in man’s unbridled whims and ease his return to an essential nature (*fitra*), which is *masha’i* in its most basic form. Of course, those people who attain this lofty rank are exceptions, comprising what he called “universal intellectuals” or “prophets” (of different categories) such as Muhammad, Ibn al-Hallaj, Laozi, Goethe, and Marx.

In addition to Arab scholars, some European and American scholars are also concerned with the similarities between Sufism and Taoism. Toshihiko Izutsu's *Sufism and Taoism* is a comparative study of Islamic Sufism philosophy of Ibn Arabi and its connection with Daoism (Izutsu 1983). In this work, Izutsu compares the metaphysical and mystical thought-systems of Sufism and Daoism and discovers that, although historically unrelated, the two share features and patterns which prove fruitful for a transhistorical dialogue. In addition, according to M.A. Rostamian, an Assistant Professor at the University of Religions and Denominations, despite doctrinal differences among Muslim Sufis and Daoists, followers of these traditions have a great deal in common when it comes to spiritual practice, and this is not surprising since each of these traditions was founded upon spiritual insight rather than speculation or belief. Daoism and Sufism both grew by establishing fundamental teachings about human insight and spiritual practices (Rostamian 2010, pp. 141–52).

In addition to China being a great civilization competing for dominance in the Islamic Arab world, Arab intellectuals are trying to undertake further studies on China's culture, religions, and history in many areas, including the issue of prophethood and divine books in this region. The *Dao De Jing* has inspired many Arab intellectuals to reflect on the relation between Western religion and Islam. Ibrahim Burkan's critical study investigates the Daoist religion, its doctrine of divinity based in the *Dao De Jing*, and Islam's attitude towards it. The study reached a number of conclusions. Despite the multiple similarities between Daoism and Islam, however, Daoism still differs from Islamic doctrine in terms of the unity of creator and creation, which is basically why Daoism is not considered as a divine religion. According to Ibrahim burkân, Daoist Scriptures contain few hints about how Daoism is compatible with the Islamic view of God and the conception of divinity, He is viewed as the origin and destination of all sentient beings, great, one and only, unlimited by time and place, eternal, and unperceived by the senses (Ibrahim burkân 2017, p. 88).

Thirdly, as the Chinese departments in Egypt universities became focused more on the research and translation of Chinese literary writings, more Egyptian teachers have engaged Chinese texts. Their work is encouraged by the Chinese government, and the Chinese Embassy in Egypt often invites Egyptian and Chinese experts to discuss cultural exchanges between China and Egypt. China has been striving to introduce Chinese culture to the Egyptian people, often showing representative Chinese films, and inviting cultural and literary celebrities to talk about Chinese culture and literature to Egyptians. The establishment of the Chinese Cultural Center in Cairo has become a convenient bridge for cultural exchanges between Egyptian and Chinese peoples. These efforts undoubtedly provide a broad space for the long-term sustainable development of Chinese literature and research in Arab countries.

Chinese culture and Arab culture are both similar and complementary. It can be said that this unique charm is the fundamental reason for the mutual attraction and interaction of the two ancient civilizations.

3.2. The Influence of Laozi's Text and Thought on Arab Culture

At the beginning of the 20th century, when there were no published translations of *Dao De Jing* in Arabic, Arabic scholars got to know and disseminated Laozi's thought through translations in other languages.

According to Syrian scholar Farās As-Sawāh (السواح فاراس), it was renowned Lebanese writer Mihāil Nūaymān (نعيمه ميخائيل) who first introduced the *Dao De Jing* to Arab readers. In the 1930s, Mihāil Nūaymān read the *Dao De Jing* in the United States. In 1932, he published a collection of essays titled *Stages*, in which an article entitled *The Face of Laozi* (لاوتسو وجهه) quoted many passages in *Dao De Jing* to explain Laozi's philosophical ideas and express his admiration and love for Laozi. He regarded Laozi as "the angel of peace, the messenger of serenity, the saint of virtue, the model of contentment, and the disseminator of 'Dao', the spirit of all souls" (Xue 2017, pp. 25–29). He called Laozi's "Dao" mother and praised it as "owning everything but not claiming to be a king, being a benefactor but

not claiming to be virtuous, nurturing everything but not dominating them” (Xue 2017, pp. 25–29). He strongly affirmed the practical significance of Laozi’s idea of letting things take their own course: “Oh, Laozi! I wish that the law-makers and religious jurists on earth would recognize, like you, the great difference between the eternal order of “Dao” and the artificial temporary order of the moment” (Xue 2013).

Mihāil Nūaymān (نعيمية ميخائيل) benefited from the different sources of the literary philosophical thoughts of the Eastern and Western culture, and his works reflected them. His novel *Mirdād* (مرداد), which he wrote in English, has significant place in his literary legacy. It is a novel based on divine ethics akin to Sufi mysticism. Different subjects presented in the novel can also be seen in Sufism as well as in Daoism. Some scholars pointed out that “both stories of *Mirdād* (مرداد) and the Chinese master and philosopher Laozi are extremely similar” (Xue 2017, pp. 25–29). Mihāil Nūaymān’s views about life, being, death, God, and many other subjects have been conveyed in this novel. The author takes the story of the great flood in the Bible as the background, and records the words and deeds of *Mirdād* (مرداد), the main character, who volunteered to be a servant in Noah’s Ark. These words and deeds have strong enlightenment characteristics, and they are quite consistent with Chinese Daoist thought. In fact, the narrator, who ascends the Altar Peak through Flint Slope, facing many difficulties during this journey, symbolizes a man who wants to set himself free from the clutches of this temporary world and attain a divine position, although the journey of the seeker, who is heading towards the divine goal by purifying his desires, is looked at from the Sufism perspective. Besire EZIZELIYEVA explained in “The Book of Mirdad” the ideas that are rooted in Islam and Christianity, and that Sufism and the mysticism are connected around different subjects. When talking about the temporary and divinity, the notion of “I”, the spiritual evolution of the human being, and prophetism, the writer presents many original ideas of his own in addition to his references to the above-mentioned sources (different schools of thoughts) EZIZELIYEVA (Besire 2014, pp. 75–88). The spiritual books Daodejing and *Mirdād* (مرداد) both expand the reader’s understanding of life and tell about how to heal and purify the soul. Although the book of *Mirdād* (مرداد) has a particular poetic language and vision, it has also multiple versions; however, it has not been translated into more than 30 languages like Daodejing.

The Arab poet Gibrān Halīl Gibrān (جبران خليل جبران) was deeply influenced by Laozi. He believed that Confucius and Laozi should be ranked among the top philosophers in the world. In his essay *Lakum Fikratukum wali Fikrati* (لكم فكرتكم ولي فكرتي) he said, “You think the glory of nations comes from heroes such as Nero, Nebuchadnezzar, Rameses, Alexander, Caesar, Hannibal, Napoleon, etc., while I believe in Confucius, Laozi, Socrates and Plato” (Xue 2017, pp. 25–29).

Al-‘Alawī was particularly attracted to Daoism. Following in the footsteps of the medieval freethinker Abu al-‘Alā al-Ma‘arri, and inspired by Daoism’s emphasis on radical simplicity and non-action (无为 *wuwei*), Al-‘Alawī abjured the consumption of meat and stuck to a strictly vegetarian diet for the rest of his life. He also refused to have children. He considered himself a son of Chinese civilization; this is demonstrated by the placard he hung atop the door to his house: “Here lives Hādī Al-‘Alawī, scion of the two civilizations” (Al-Sudayrī 2014, pp. 19–20)—meaning the Islamic and the Chinese civilization.

Jamel Khaldūn (خلدون جمال), a contemporary Egyptian novelist, calls himself “one of the many people who greatly admire China.” He highly respects Laozi’s philosophy. During his tenure as the chief editor of *Literary News* (جريدة أخبار الأدب), the newspaper published the complete and partial translations of many Chinese cultural classics, such as *Dao De Jing*, *Sun Tsu’s Art of War*, and *The Book of Songs*. In addition, Tunisian novelist Mahmūd el-Mes‘adī (المسعودي محمود) also included an Oriental philosopher character in his short story *Al-Musāfir* (المسافر), who is very similar to the image of Daoists in Chinese culture (Xue 2017, pp. 25–29).

Indeed, the smooth acceptance of Laozi’s text and thoughts in the Arab world influenced Arabic scholars and helped readers better understand China amid the Asian country’s growing global influence. There is a desire to learn more about China’s culture, so as

to better cooperate with China. Chinese to Arabic Translations of *Dao De Jing* are proving a real success. That is because people from Arabian countries have become increasingly interested in China after the Belt and Road Initiative, dating back to 2013, encouraging the translation of Chinese books into Arabic for Arab audiences.

4. Conclusions

Although the translation of *Dao De Jing* started late in the Arab world, it has already made an impact. By examining the historical path of the dissemination of Laozi's text and thought in the Arab world and exploring the reasons for its acceptance and popularity, we identified the following three major features.

First, the two-thousand-year history of friendly exchanges between China and Arab countries is the foundation. In the history of China–Arab civilization exchanges, peace, friendship, inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit have always occupied a central position. Since the second half of the 20th century, the two ancient civilizations have carried out more exchanges and equal dialogues, achieved harmonious coexistence, and promoted the spread of Laozi's thoughts in the Arab world.

Second, languages such as English, French, German, and Japanese have played an important role in the translation and research of Laozi's writings and thoughts, and their dissemination in the Arab world. From the perspective of the translation history of *Dao De Jing* in the Arab world, most of its Arabic translations are retranslated from translations in English, French, or other languages. This is due to the impact of imperialism on the Arab world. Like China, Arab countries had experienced and suffered from the tragedy of imperialist colonial oppression and struggled for independence. Later, the national liberation movements of Arab peoples against imperialism and colonialism emerged, while China established diplomatic relations with Egypt, Syria, and other Arab countries. Now, more and more Chinese works are directly translated into Arabic, bringing Arab readers into a world of Chinese classics brimming with wisdom and culture. This is in contrast to the past, when Chinese works were translated into Arabic through French and English as intermediaries, which made the works lose their original brilliance.

Third, although historically unrelated, Sufism and Daoism share features and patterns that prove fruitful for a transhistorical dialogue, opening doors in the study of comparative philosophy and mysticism. More and more scholars turn their attention to an analysis of parallel concepts of Taoist thinkers and Islamic thinkers, as returning to nature and pursuing freedom are basic concepts shared between Sufism and Daoism.

It is worth mentioning that the spread of *Dao De Jing* is mainly concentrated in countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Kuwait. Moreover, the collation and thematic study of Laozi's thought started late in Arab academic circles, and there is room for further improvement in terms of both quantity and quality.

The world today is undergoing profound changes unseen in a century. As a force beyond national boundaries and nations, economic globalization has become an irreversible trend. With the expansion and deepening of global economic integration, the exchanges between the civilizations of the world are gradually increasing. Based on the principles of "respecting the diversity of civilizations" and "civilizations are enriched by exchanges and mutual learning," China and Arab countries have carried out more frequent and in-depth cultural exchanges and integration. In recent years, there has been a "Chinese learning craze" in Arab countries. Major universities such as Ain Shams University, Cairo University, Al-Azhar University, and Suez Canal University are competing to establish or are planning to establish their own Department of Chinese Language and Literature, and to incorporate Chinese language study into their curricula.

To cope with the trend of cultural development under the trend of globalization, the two peoples have taken concrete actions, including successfully holding and launching the China–Arab Civilization Dialogue Seminar, China–Arab Art Festival, China–Arab Press Cooperation Forum, China–Arab Radio and Television Cooperation Forum, and Translation and Publication of Chinese and Arabic Classics Project. In *Culture and Imperialism*,

Said argues that “In our time . . . We shall see imperialism continues to exist, as it has in the past, in specific political, ideological, economic and social activities and in the cultural sphere in general” (Said [1993] 2003, p. 56). In global cultural communication, the Western culture shows consistency with the cultural expression of globalization to some extent, and gradually occupies a dominant position in the cultural communication and integration of the age of globalization (Sun 2017, p. 12). In the face of the dominant posture of Western culture, maintaining cultural independence and integrity, and effectively avoiding cultural colonization and hegemony of Western countries, have become an arduous task and a requirement for cultural development in China and Arab countries. China and Arab countries should continue to adhere to the traditional spirit of exchange and mutual learning between civilizations to promote the mutual learning between the great civilizations of the two nations and foster cultural achievements that will benefit the modern world.

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Article

Translative Trends in Three Modern Greek Renderings of the *Daodejing*

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Abstract: Many Chinese and Western scholars have looked into the relation between Daoist and Greek thought, implementing Greek philosophical vocabularies to explain or highlight the distinctness of Daoist terms. This paper offers a view of an alternative and unexplored area of such endeavors: the translation of Daoist philosophy in modern Greek. More specifically, I offer an account of the reception and interpretation of the text by looking at three renderings of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (or *Laozi* 老子) in modern Greek. I first summarize the translators' methodologies, overall understanding of the *Daodejing*'s focus and current relevance, and views on authorship and translation, and identify a set of translative trends: reliance on familiar notions, frameworks, and cultural experiences; mystification; attention to poeticity; and emphasis on a perceived remedial function of the text for a modern Greek readership. I then look at the renderings and explications of the key notions *dao* 道 and *de* 德 in four passages as case studies. The final section sums up the findings and concludes that the dominant interpretive tendency and translative trend in the examined translations is the assumption of similarity between Daoist and more familiar beliefs and frameworks.

Keywords: *Daodejing*; modern Greek; translation; *dao*; *de*; comparative studies

1. Introduction

The first translation of the *Daodejing* in a European (classical) language, in Latin, came as late as 1788.¹ An even more belated encounter was that of the *Daodejing* with the modern version of another classical language, namely, with modern Greek. Assumed resonances between Daoism and ancient Greek philosophical traditions have been the focus of much comparative work of East and West, and there is abundant research that compares and/or contrasts Chinese with classical Greek notions, (e.g., *dao* 道 with *logos* λόγος and *de* 德 with *arete*² ἀρετή)³. The perception and transformation of the *Daodejing* in modern Greek is an alternative, unexplored field of similar comparatist work. For the purpose of this paper, I have selected and focus on three Greek⁴ renderings of the *Daodejing*. I take the key notions of *dao* and *de* in four passages as entry points to the textual transformation and appropriation of the text in the modern Greek linguistic context. More specifically, I look at the first Greek translation of the *Daodejing* (1971) by Mania Seferiadi, Giorgos Alexakis's 1996 translation, and a very recent translation (2021), the first from classical Chinese, by Konstantinos Polymeros. In Section 2, I look closely at the introductions, notes, and appendixes provided in these editions, and present the translators' expressed aims, methodologies, and overall understanding of the *Daodejing*'s focus and relevance, as well as views on authorship and translation. These supplementary materials reveal a set of interpretative attitudes and foreshadow the following translative trends: reliance on familiar notions, frameworks, and cultural experiences; mystification; attention to poeticity; and emphasis on a perceived remedial function of the text for a modern (Greek) readership. In Sections 3 and 4, I look at the renderings and explications provided on the key notions *dao* 道 and *de* 德 in four passages as case studies. The conclusion sums up the findings and identifies the assumption of similarity between Daoist and more familiar beliefs and frameworks as the dominant translative trend in these works.

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2. Overview of the Translations: Interpretive Attitudes and Translative Trends

Since its first translation in modern Greek,⁵ the *Daodejing* 道德經 (or *Laozi* 老子) has become the most translated Chinese classic in the Greek publishing world.⁶ With one exception, Greek renderings of the Daoist text are translations of (English and/or French) translations. Overall, lack of access to classical Chinese has not allowed direct engagement either with primary sources or with the Chinese commentarial tradition, and references to Western commentators are limited to non-existent. This paper specifically looks at three translations of the *Daodejing*: Mania Seferiadi's⁷ *Lao Tsu: Tao Te King* Λάο Τσου: Τάο Τε Κινγκ (Laozi: Daodejing),⁸ the first translation of the text in Greek (Seferiadi [1971] 1995); Giorgos Alexakis's *Lao Tse Tao Te King: To Vivlio tou Logou kai tis Fysis* Λάο Τσε Τάο Τε Κινγκ: Το Βιβλίο του Λόγου και της Φύσης (Laozi Daodejing: The Book of Logos and Nature; Alexakis 1996); and Konstantinos G. Polymeros's *Tao Te Tzingk: To Poiima tou Giraiou* Τάο Τε Τζινγκ: Το Ποίημα του Γηραιού (Dao De Jing: The Poem of the Old Man) (Polymeros 2021), the first Greek translation of the text from classical Chinese that has been published until today.

As a Daoist scholar and translator of the *Daodejing* has succinctly put it, “the text, despite its cryptic nature, makes sense as a whole” (Moeller 2007, p. vii). The co-existence of antithetical elements as a feature of the text itself (abstruseness and appeal to common sense and experience) has led to two opposing tendencies in the translations examined here: (over)reliance on familiar notions, frameworks, and cultural experiences coupled with attempts to preserve the text's enigmatic character through mystification. Moreover, there is attention to the poetic qualities of the text and emphasis on what is perceived as its remedial function for a modern (Greek) readership. More specifically, the introductions and supplementary materials (notes, comments, glosses, and appendixes) examined here reveal an assumed-as-self-evident similarity between Daoist and more familiar themes, categories, and frameworks, mainly from Greek, but also from other non-Chinese philosophical, literary, religious, and folk traditions. Overall, these connections are presented without justification or reference to supporting sources or alternative readings. Secondly, there is at the same time an acknowledgement of the distinct character, difficulty, and even impenetrability of the classical Chinese language and/or of the *Daodejing* itself. Whether a religious (Seferiadi), philosophical (Alexakis), or political (Polymeros) reading of the text is prioritized, there is, in varying degrees, an emphasis on its perceived mystical or esoteric character. Thirdly, all translations reveal some degree of attentiveness to the text's poetic elements (rhythm, terseness, elusiveness, suggestiveness, ambiguity). Lastly, the *Daodejing* is more or less explicitly proposed as beneficial and even remedial for its (Greek) readers, on an individual and/or communal level. In what follows we will look at varying manifestations of the above translative trends in each of the translations, starting with the first published translation of the *Daodejing* by Mania Seferiadi.

Mania Seferiadi's 1971 translation has been considered a “standard” for years. In her prologue to the edition, the translator admits she had no option but to use several earlier translations⁹ internationally regarded as authoritative in order to “understand what the Chinese text says, or what it probably says.”¹⁰ Seferiadi notes that any access to the primary text was through secondary sources, and occasionally references specific characters or “ideograms” (according to the traditional terminology, still used in Greek literature), and their alternative meanings. She does not fail to stress the difficulty of the text and cautions about its “fluidity” and its “rough and steep thought” (Ibid., p. 10). As the poet Giorgos Seferis (d. 1971) pointed out to her, the *Daodejing* “breaks bones,” and Seferiadi admits that sometimes her “foot slipped” (Ibid.). She cautions that, faced with the immense difficulty, one is tempted to “hold on to the rope one carries” with them, that is, to resort to familiar notions and frameworks, projecting one's own ideas (Ibid., p. 11). A historical example she mentions is the Jesuits' reading of Chapter 42¹¹ as proof that the Chinese knew the Holy Undivided Trinity (Seferiadi [1971] 1995, p. 12).

Seferiadi's awareness of the danger of cultural reductionism is evident in the absence of any connections with non-Chinese ideas or cultural experiences in her own commentary of the translation (150 notes with glosses and alternative translations of words or phrases). The epigraphs to the edition, however, indicate an assumed commensurability between Daoism and more familiar sources: pre-Socratic philosophy and the New Testament. Explaining *yin* and *yang* and their relation in the introductory "Notes", the translator describes them as opposites but not opponents; "victory does not mean exterminating one of the two, but unification of the two in absolute harmony" (Ibid., p. 16). The epigraphs, combined with other related references, as we will see below, imply that unification of conflicting forces or states often expressed in paradoxical language is taken to be a common idea in sources as diverse as the *Daodejing*, the Gospel of Matthew (10:16: "Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves"), Empedocles's cosmogony of conflict between love and strife (Fragment 109), and Heraclitus's paradoxical teachings (Fragment 71: "Remember the one who forgets where the logos leads" (Diels 1903, p. 76)). Heraclitus is also quoted¹² in the "Additional Notes" (Seferiadi [1971] 1995, pp. 185–89) section, where the translator describes the theory and practice of *dao* as "unification of opposites," holding that "Heraclitus saw something similar" (Ibid., p. 189).

These associations fit in with Seferiadi's reading of the *Daodejing*, which she seems to appreciate primarily for its religious content. Discussing the issue of authorship in her introductory "Notes" (Ibid., pp. 13–16), the translator mentions the possibility of the text being the product of an oral tradition in passing, but mostly elaborates on the stories around the legendary author of the *Daodejing*, Laozi or Lao Dan 老聃. Moreover, she describes the Daoists as "famous alchemists and magicians," and, as we saw, one of the mottos of the translation is a quote by Empedocles, known for infusing his philosophy with religious and magical beliefs and practices. In her "Additional Notes," Seferiadi refers to Daoist practices (breathing, *coitus reservatus*) and adds the translations of two classical texts of folk Daoist religion in Appendixes A and B, respectively: the *Taishang ganying pian* 太上感應篇 (Treatise of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution) and the *Qing jing jing* 清靜經 (Classic of Clarity and Tranquility). The translator offers some information on these texts' religious and ethical import, making no reference to authorship, textual matters, or the relation between the teachings therein with those in the *Daodejing*. She again seems to appeal to the reader's common sense when she notes that "there is no need to interrupt the reading of the text with notes" in her brief introduction to Appendix B (Ibid., p. 202). She also appeals to the Greek reader's (Christian) religious experiences in the few notes added in Appendix A. There, as in the translation of the *Taishang ganying pian*, words such as "sin" (*amartia* ἀμαρτία), "Lord" (*kyrios* Κύριος), and "neighbor" (*plision* πλῆσιον) trigger associations with biblical teachings (Ibid., pp. 193–98).

Poeticity is evidently also one of the translator's main concerns, and Seferiadi's language is undoubtedly most elegant and powerful. One year before the first publication of the *Daodejing* in Greek and one year before the death of the poet Giorgos Seferis (in 1971),¹³ her uncle, Seferiadi notes in her prologue that Seferis "brought the text to life" and the language of her translation "bears his mark." Lastly, Seferiadi refers to the remedial function of the *Daodejing* for a modern Greek reader with a brief note describing the relation between *yin* and *yang* as a "holy marriage" (Ibid., p. 16). Perhaps, she argues, this understanding, which is the "true alchemy" of the Daoists, is a remedy for "the divided human" of the modern world (Ibid.).

In Giorgos Alexakis's translation, published twenty-five years after Seferiadi's, the above interpretive attitudes and translative trends are comparatively more salient. The lengthy introduction (Alexakis 1996, pp. 9–21) to the translation evinces reliance on an abundance of familiar notions, traditions, and frameworks. Alexakis parallels the *Daodejing*'s teaching to the Socratic examination of one's life and summarizes it through twelve key ideas. Among them are the "mean/measure" (*to metro* το μέτρο), an interpretation of the text's promotion of female (soft) rather than male (hard) qualities in Chapter 39, and "love" (*agapi* αγάπη), the liberal translation of *xiu* 修 ("cultivation") in Chapter 54. The

translator is more concerned with the philosophical rather than the religious import of the text, which he describes as “a book with poetic aphorisms about life and self-knowledge” (Ibid., p. 9) through the experience of Dao. He also dedicates a separate section in his epilogue to the “Parallel Lives” of Laozi and Heraclitus, whose philosophy, he agrees with Seferiadi, is in many respects reminiscent of that of the “wise old man” (Laozi). Alexakis finds resonances between Heraclitus’s *logos* (λόγος) and the central teaching of the *Daodejing*, stressing “the notable historical phenomenon” of finding two thinkers who lived in places very remote from one another and having “almost identical” teachings (Ibid., p. 118), specifically in terms of “the struggle and harmony of opposites,” constant flux, and “the hubris of arrogance” (Ibid., p. 117). Moreover, as the introduction informs the reader, the translator’s commentary is made up of explanatory notes, later Daoist comments and aphorisms, and passages from holy books of various religions, philosophers, poets, and writers, including a few passages from the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes) and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, two references to Wang Bi 王弼 (d. 249), many Heraclitean fragments and sayings from the Bible, the Quran, the Vedas, T. S. Eliot, Hermann Hesse, Khalil Gibran, Kafka, and others.¹⁴

The reader is invited to reflect on what seem to be taken as self-evident connections between the text and a variety of religious, philosophical, and literary sources, while the translator argues that the *Daodejing* only has a “seemingly puzzling style and paradoxicality,” meant to help the reader grasp the “duality and continuous succession of phenomena” and their inner unity and harmony (Ibid., p. 111). The text is described as readily accessible without explication or popularization, and the reader is prompted, if they wish, to ignore the translator’s comments (Ibid., p. 21). Quoting Fritjof Capra (b. 1939) and Alan Watts (d. 1973), Alexakis stresses the idiosyncrasy of the Chinese language and gives a brief account of his own personal experience of translating the text (which started in 1983).¹⁵ With a focus on familiarity and accessibility, he supports the legitimacy of translating English translations quoting Dimitris Velissaropoulos,¹⁶ who writes, “the only language that has certain analogies [with Chinese] is English; there are few grammar rules in English, words are not declined, and they are often used as nouns, but also as verbs or adjectives” (Alexakis 1996, p. 15). However, there is also a mystifying tendency in the translator’s epilogue. “Laozi’s Dao” is, Alexakis argues, directly associated with Heraclitus’s *logos*, understood as the Inexpressible, according to Jean Brun (d. 1994), whom the author references (Ibid., p. 117). It is “what is situated in someone’s very heart and remains deeply hidden there;” it is the “original cause,” what Jacob Boeme (d. 1624), the philosopher and Christian mystic, also referenced by Alexakis, describes as *Urgrund*; it is the “Mysterium Magnum.” (Ibid.) These analogies are made without further elaboration. Moreover, in his introduction, Alexakis focuses on the legends around the figure of Laozi, translated as “wise old man (*sofos geros σοφός γέρος*)” or “old friend (*palios filios παλιός φίλος*)” and treated as the thinker behind the teachings found in the *Daodejing*.

In a separate section of his epilogue entitled “The Current Relevance of Laozi’s Teaching,” but also twice in his notes on the translation, Alexakis stresses the corrective function of the *Daodejing* as “a timeless text of global significance” that proposes “a meaningful, simple, friendly, and conscious life” by promoting measure and simplicity against greed and confusion, faith and friendliness against suspicion and negativity, and focus and awareness against distraction and illusion (Alexakis 1996, p. 122). Finally, even though at the expense of accuracy sometimes, the translation successfully reproduces the original text’s poetic-aphoristic style, preserving its terseness in the modern Greek version.

The third translation examined here, by Konstantinos Polymeros, is the first from classical Chinese. In his prologue, Polymeros offers a “pessimistic,” as he calls it, “Account of Betrayals.” Quoting the Italian saying which says “traduttore traditore,”¹⁷ he recognizes that, despite his work’s uniqueness, translation still remains a “necessary betrayal” since the translator is compelled to choose one meaning of a character among many, one version of the text among various versions, and a certain number of commentaries among many (thus “betraying” all others) (Polymeros 2021, p. 5). It is evident, however, that

Polymeros put every effort in making up for the limitations of his endeavor. He is the only one among the three translators who draws directly on traditional and contemporary Chinese and Western scholarly work, as is also evident in his extensive bibliography. Unlike Seferiadi and Alexakis, Polymeros emphasizes the political import of the *Daodejing* and pays particular attention to the notion of “the people” (*laos λαός*), viewed as “perhaps the most complex notion in the text,” (Ibid., p. 125) which, however, is not discussed further.¹⁸ The focus on the political philosophy of the *Daodejing*, Polymeros explains, is the reason for choosing the commentaries and editions of the “Old Man on the Riverside”¹⁹ (Heshang Gong 河上公 [c. 200 CE]) and, to a much lesser extent, Wang Bi—other thinkers are seen by the translator as more metaphysical and less political. This choice of commentary and the political reading, unlike “methods of breathing and meditation,” are regarded as beneficial for contemporary Greek society, which is characterized by “political cannibalism and moral decay” (Polymeros 2021, pp. 7–8). Polymeros considers the political dimension of the key term *wu wei* 無為 (non-purposeful or effortless action) as “revolutionary” not only for antiquity, but also for the present.

Apart from recognition of the text’s remedial function, the supplementary sections in Polymeros’s translation (prologue, introduction, commentary, and appendix) reveal other translative trends as well: reliance on familiar notions, frameworks, and cultural experiences, as well as mystification. The main body of the introduction makes use of Chinese classics, such as the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經), the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), the *Analecets* (*Lunyu* 論語), and others. However, the translator draws on a variety of disciplines and sources, too: Greek and world mythologies, ethnography, Eastern religions, ancient Greek philosophy (e.g., Heraclitus and Plato) and literature (e.g., Homer and Euripides), the New Testament, and world folk traditions. Special emphasis is placed particularly on rituals and magic (sacrificial and divinatory practices). Some scholars have argued that the imagery and philosophy of the *Daodejing* can be traced back to an ancient imagery connected to rituals.²⁰ Polymeros seems to imply a connection between the *Daodejing*’s political philosophy and ritual practices but does not adequately support or elaborate on the connection. Moreover, folk traditions, ritual practices, and beliefs across time and cultures are presented as “coincidentally” similar. The frequent use of expressions such as “is remindful of,” “is related to,” and “is similar to” is telling. The translator resorts to familiar categories and traditions, and also seems to imply that world cultures share a common origin or can be explained in terms of a perceived shared humanity.

Along with assumed similarity, mystification is another feature of the translator’s approach, evident in the supplementary materials and commentary. Polymeros describes the “mythical mist” created around Laozi, who is treated as a historical figure that eventually developed into a religious figure and deity (Polymeros 2021, p. 9). The legends around Laozi are, again, “very remindful of” the “various conjectures about the divine or human nature of Jesus, Bachus, etc.” (Ibid., p. 10). Laozi is also compared to Jesus and the Buddha in terms of the institutionalization and monetarization of their teaching. The epilogue, entitled “The Dark History of the People,” (Ibid., pp. 125–34) adds to the mystical atmosphere surrounding the discussion. It is introduced as a collection of “often dark” “details and personal thoughts,” and comprises three parts: on “The Mythology of Fear,” “Fear, Horror Movies, and Bourgeois Ethics,” and “Symbolization of Ancient Rituals.” Overall, there seems to be no unifying thread connecting the numerous notes and additional materials, which ultimately obscure rather than highlight the political message of the text. Finally, Polymeros seems attentive to the text’s poeticity and his Greek has measure and rhythm, as well as a certain poetic quality thanks to particular lexical choices and preferred structures.

In the following section I will look closely at how the translative trends discussed above play out in the explications and translations of the key notions *dao* 道 and *de* 德 in four passages. I situate the understanding of these two notions in each translator’s overall take on the text and the Daoist proposal, starting with one of its core notions, *dao*.

3. Dao 道: “TAO,” “Way,” “Path,” “Logos”

Dao 道 (or *Tao*) is a central notion in the Chinese cultural tradition and a fundamental idea in Chinese thought. From the basic meaning of “path,” “course,” “way,” and “road,” as well as “to speak” and “method,” *dao* acquired the broader meaning of the general principle of the world and human life (Yang 2011, p. 319). *Dao* thus involves both an ontological and a moral, both a descriptive and a prescriptive aspect. The *Daodejing* abounds with illustrations, allusions, and images relating to *dao*, which is also often described in paradoxical or negative terms—empty fullness, changeable constancy, the unnamable, the ineffable, the unformed, the solitary, or the silent. Its meaning and connotations differ between chapters and even within sentences. In the *Daodejing dao* can refer to a metaphysical entity understood as ultimate true existence, to natural laws or patterns, or to exemplary models of human life (Chen 2020, p. 2). In English editions of the text, *dao*, *Dao*, or the *Dao* is often left untranslated or translated as “Way,” “the Way,” or, with an emphasis on its processual and dynamic character, as “way-making” (Ames and Hall 2003).

In this section I look closely at the opening lines of Chapter 1 (Table 1) and Chapter 42 (Table 2). I present the three Greek translations, offer a brief discussion on the translation choices in each case, and summarize the commentaries identifying instances where the translative trends identified above (reliance on familiar categories and frameworks, mystification, attention to poeticity, and emphasis on current relevance) are most evident. The Chinese text²¹ and the three Greek renderings with transcriptions and rough English translations are as follows:

Table 1. Chapter 1.

Original Text	Seferiadi (1971) T1	Alexakis (1996) T2	Polymeros (2021) T3
道可道 非常道 <i>dao ke dao</i> <i>fei chang dao</i>	To TAO που μπορούμε να πούμε TAO δεν είναι το αιώνια αμετάβλητο TAO.	Ονόμασέ το Λόγο, όμως δεν λέγεται.	Αν η Οδός περιγράφεται με λόγια, δεν είναι η αιώνια Οδός.
	To TAO <i>pou boroume na poume TAO</i> <i>den einai</i> <i>To aionia ametavlitito TAO.</i>	<i>Onomase to Logo,</i> <i>omos den legetai.</i>	<i>An i Odos</i> <i>perigrafetai me logia,</i> <i>den einai i aionia Odos.</i>
	The TAO we can call TAO is not the eternally unchanging TAO.	Name it Logos, but it cannot be said.	If the Way is described with words, it is not the eternal Way.

Reliance on the familiar is apparent in all three translations of both verses (Tables 1 and 2), in varying degrees and ways. First, capitalization, non-existent in Chinese, is one method the translators employ to point to the centrality of *dao* in the teachings of the *Daodejing*. In one case *dao* is left untranslated (T1: TAO²²), and also rendered as *o Dromos* in Chapter 9 (*tian dao* 天道, ο δρόμος του Ουρανού ο *dromos tou Ouranou*, the Way of Heaven). In her introductory note, Seferiadi defines *dao* as a noun meaning “road,” “path,” “method,” or “way something happens,” and as a verb meaning “to say” or “to lead, to guide.” She further compares *dao*, in the broader sense it gradually acquired, with Western equivalents of “the One” and “Being,” such as the Gnostics’ *Nous* (Mind) and Heraclitean *logos*. In the other two translations (T2 and T3), *dao* is also identified with what are seen as similar central concepts in the Western philosophical and religious tradition: with the Greek terms *Logos* (λόγος; here mainly: “word,” “speech”) (T2) and *Odos* (οδός) (T3); the Koini Greek²³ variant for “road,” “path,” “way,” “passage,” and “method”; and Jesus’s self-description in the New Testament.²⁴

Table 2. Chapter 42.

Original Verse	Seferiadi (1971) T1	Alexakis (1996) T2	Polymeros (2021) T3
道生一， 一生二， 二生三， 三生萬物。 <i>dao sheng yi</i> <i>yi sheng er</i> <i>er sheng san</i> <i>san sheng wanwu</i>	Το ΤΑΟ γέννησε το Ένα, το Ένα γέννησε το Δύο, το Δύο γέννησε το Τρία και το Τρία γέννησε όλα τα όντα και τα πράγματα του κόσμου. Το Tao gennise to Ena, to Ena gennise to Dyo, to Dyo gennise to Tria kai to Tria gennise ola ta onta kai ta pragmata tou kosμου.	Ο Λόγος είναι ένας αλλά έγινε ζευγάρι, έπειτα τριάδα, ώσπου γέννησε τα μύρια πράγματα. O Logos einai enas alla eginε zεvgari, epeita triada, ospou gennise ta myria pragmata.	Η Οδός γέννησε το Ένα. Το Ένα, γέννησε τα Δύο. Τα Δύο, γέννησαν τα Τρία. Και τα Τρία, γέννησαν όλα τα πράγματα. I Odos gennise to Ena. To Ena, gennise ta Dyo. Ta Dyo, gennisan ta Tria. Kai ta Tria, gennisan ola ta pragmata.
	The Dao gave birth to the One, the One gave birth to the Two, The Two gave birth to the Three and the Three gave birth to all beings and things of the world.	Logos is one but it became a couple, then a triple, until it gave birth to the myriad things.	The Way gave birth to the One. The One, gave birth to the Two. The Two gave birth to the Three. And the Three, gave birth to all things.

While noting the absence of articles and plural markers in the Chinese language, as well as the verbal use of *dao*, all three translators opt for translating *dao* as a proper noun in the singular and with the definite neuter (T1), masculine (T2), and feminine (T3) article, respectively: *to* ΤΑΟ το ΤΑΟ, *o* Logos ο Λόγος, *i* Odos η Οδός. *Dao* is presented within a Western two-world theoretical framework solely in terms of oneness: as a single, unified principle generating, governing, and retaining an independent status in relation to all things and affairs. Moreover, in many Indo-European languages, articles accompany substantives and are thus related to substances. In Chinese, words that could be categorized as common nouns or substantives do not behave solely as substantives if at all. The addition of the definite article in all translations examined here reveals a reliance on the more familiar Western metaphysics of substance.²⁵ Particularly with regard to Chapter 40 (Table 2), the exclusive use of the singular number (“the Dao,” “the Way,” *Logos*) and the definite article brings *dao* into the familiar hermeneutic framework of Western metaphysics, rendering it unilaterally an absolute principle of unity that produces and explains multiplicity. *Dao* is thus perceived as independent and outside multiplicity. As we saw above, in some instances *dao* is in fact alternatively translated or understood as the Absolute, the One, the Cause, the divine, or even God.

The pun in the original verse of Chapter 1, with the multiple meanings of the character *dao* 道 (“way,” “to speak/to be spoken,” and its cognate *dao* 導 “to guide/to be guided”), is untranslated and unexplained. Only in one case (Table 1, T2) does the translator attempt to preserve the alliteration (*logos-legetai* λόγος-λέγεται, “speech—it is said/spoken”), and he gives a paradoxical twist to the opening line (Name it Speech [*Logos*], but it cannot be spoken), while seeming to focus on the ineffable aspect of *dao* and taking the third *dao* of the line (*chang dao* 常道) as also referring to speech. In the other three translations, *chang* 常 is translated with the adjective *aionios* αἰώνιος (“eternal”) and the adverb *aionia* (*ametavl-ito*) αἰώνια (αμετάβλητο), meaning “eternally” (“unchanging”), a word often used in the Bible and in Christian theology to describe the eternally existent God. *Dao* is thus assigned to a realm beyond time. Seferiadi, in particular, makes a related note in the Appendix. Dao as “being” or “presence” (*you* 有) is the source of all things, “outside place and time” (Seferiadi [1971] 1995, p. 189).

Dao is not translated as *logos* in T1 and T3, but the connections with Heraclitean philosophy and Christian theology are still present, as discussed in the previous section. In Greek, *logos* λόγος, a concept as vast in scope and versatile in meaning as *dao*, is related to spoken language, rationality, and ratio: “what is said,” “word,” “story,” “account,” “mathematical ratio,” “proportion,” “calculation,” “right reckoning,” “reasonable proportion,” “reason,” “cause.” The explicit or assumed relation between *dao* and *logos* in these translations is an example of a long-standing trend. Discussions on the relation between *dao* and *logos* abound in both Chinese- and non-Chinese-speaking academia.²⁶ One of the first Chinese thinkers to discuss the commensurability between *dao* and *logos* was the writer Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書 (d. 1998), who argued for the universality of the logical structure of thinking, even though he also acknowledged that thinking can be formulated in time- and culture-specific ways.²⁷ Many scholars have read the two terms as meant to serve similar purposes and as having cosmological, epistemological, and ethical functions. Among the three translators, Alexakis (T2) is the only one who renders *dao* as (capitalized) *Logos*, adding three quotes in the footnotes: from the Gospel of John²⁸, the *Rig Veda*²⁹, and Timothy Leary:

Tao is best translated as ‘energy’, as energy in process. Energy in its pure, unstructured state (the E in Einstein’s equation), and energy in its countless temporary states of structure (the M of Einstein’s equation).³⁰

Here, apart from the connection to Heraclitean *logos* and Jesus Christ, the embodied *Logos* in Christian theology³¹, parallels are also drawn between *dao* and Om (ultimate reality) in Hindu philosophy, and, as we saw, with Socratic self-knowledge. Alexakis also offers a lengthy list of alternative nouns and adjectives as possible renderings: *Onoma* Ονομα (“Name”), *Noima* Νόημα (“Meaning”), *Odos* Οδός (“Path,” “Way”), *Pneuma* Πνεύμα (“Spirit”), *Aitia* Αιτία (“Cause”), *Theos* Θεός (“God”), *Nomos* Νόμος (“Law”), *Afto* Αυτό (“It,” “This”), *Ena* Ένα (“One”), *On* Ον (“the Being”), *Mi-On* Μη-Ον (“the Non-Being”), *Apolyto* Απόλυτο (“Absolute”), *Ateleftito* Ατελεύτητο (“Inexhaustible”), *Ametavlitto* Αμετάβλητο (“Unchanging”), *Eintai* Είναι (“Being”), *Nous* Νους (“Mind”), *Energieia* Ενέργεια (“Energy”), *Armonia* Αρμονία (“Harmony”), and *Logos* Λόγος (“Speech,” “Word,” “Reason”).³² The numerous references to what are viewed as parallel texts and similar ideas (T2, T3), and the abundance of what are perceived as related or equivalent terms (T2), in the absence of any accompanying explication, mystify rather than clarify aspects of the notion of *dao*. Scarce and brief comments such as, “in religion, it [*dao*] meant the magical communication with the divine and the spirits” (T2), and “in religion and magic it [*dao*] meant communication with the divine and spirits” (T1) (Seferiadi [1971] 1995, p. 13), intensify the mystification of the specific term and the text as a whole. Lastly, in all three translations there is concern for preserving the text’s aphoristic and poetic style in modern Greek. Examples are Alexakis’s choice of the more poetic *myria* μύρια instead of “thousands” for *wan* 萬, and *zevgari* ζευγάρι (“mating couple”) (Table 2). The metaphor of human reproduction is used in all three translations (*sheng* 生 is rendered with the more vivid *genise/genisan* γέννησε/γέννησαν, “it/they gave birth/generated”), whereas there is also attention to metric rhythm, especially in Seferiadi’s translation.

4. De 德: “TE,” “Virtue,” “Power,” “Grace”

De 德 gives its name to the second or, for some scholars, the first part of the *Daodejing*³³, *Dejing* 德經 (The Classic of Power). *De* is a central notion, not only in the *Daodejing*, but in the entire Chinese tradition. One of the most common translations of *de* is “character,” often understood as “good character.” As Lin Yutang 林語堂 (d. 1976) notes, “[a]part from the English, few nations have laid such stress on character in their ideal of education and manhood as the Chinese. The Chinese seem to be so preoccupied with it that in their whole philosophy they have not been able to think of anything else” (Lin [1935] 1938, p. 42). *De* is, however, also understood as having a broader cosmic and political meaning, and it is related to its cognate *de* 得 (“to get,” “to receive,” “to attain”), as will be explained below.

On the ontological level, *de* and *dao* are viewed as two aspects of the same reality. As the root of all things, *dao* has a metaphysical quality, but its physical manifestation in the myriad things (*wan wu* 萬物) is *de* (Yang 2015, pp. 79–80). Moreover, in the *Daodejing*, one of the aspects or expressions of *dao* is to serve as a standard of human life, and that aspect is *de*. In the political realm, *de* describes the virtue a ruler gives forth but also what the ruler receives (*de* 得) from the people in return. *De* thus denotes the optimal relationship between the ruler and the ruled; it is “both the ‘beneficence’ extended to the people in response to their worth, and the ‘gratitude’ expressed by the people in response to the largesse of a worthy ruler” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 76). In English, *de* is translated as “virtue,” “virtuosity,” “nature,” “potency,” “power,” “efficacy,” or “excellence,” which generally refer to the potential, power, or individual nature (*shuxing* 属性) of each thing (Chen 2020, p. 14), but also as “moral charisma,” “kindness,” “generosity,” “integrity,” “rewards,” “gratitude,” or “vibes,” which take *de* as a kind of virtue, bringing out the ways *de* manifests in one’s interaction with the world and others. Scholars have found resemblances between *de* and ancient Greek *arete* ἀρετή (“virtue”), *ithos* ἦθος (“moral character”), *charis* χάρις (“grace”), *kalokagathia* καλοκαγαθία (“benignity,” “benevolence”), *dynamis* δύναμις (“power,” “potential”), *evnoia* εὐνοία (“favor,” “grace”), and *christotis* χρηστότης (“probity,” “decency”).

In this section I look at two key verses on *de* from Chapter 21 (Table 3), which has been characterized as one of the most important if not the most important chapter of the book (Chan 1963, p. 151), and Chapter 38 (Table 4). I present the three Greek renderings, offer a brief discussion on some translation choices, and summarize the commentaries identifying instances where the translative trends identified above (reliance on familiar categories and frameworks, mystification, attention to poeticity, and emphasis on current relevance) are most evident. The original text and the three Greek renderings with transcriptions and rough English translations are as follows:

Table 3. Chapter 21.

Original Verse	Seferiadi (1971) T1	Alexakis (1996) T2	Polymeros (2021) T3
孔德之容， 唯道是從。 <i>kong de zhi rong</i> <i>wei dao shi cong</i>	Η μεγάλη δύναμη πηγάζει μόνο από το ΤΑΟ. I megali dynami pigazei mono apo to TAO.	Η πιο μεγάλη χάρη είναι ν’ ακολουθείς το Λόγο. I pio megali chari einai n’ akoloutheis to Logo.	Το περιεχόμενο της Μεγάλης Αρετής, ακολουθεί την Οδό. To periechomeno tis Megalis Aretis, akolouthei tin Odo.
	The great power springs only from <i>dao</i> .	The greatest grace is to follow Logos.	The content of the Great Virtue follows the Way.

Table 4. Chapter 38.

Original Verse	Seferiadi (1971) T1	Alexakis (1996) T2	Polymeros (2021) T3
上德不德， 是以有德。 <i>shang de bu de</i> <i>shi yi you de</i>	Το ανώτατο ΤΕ δεν είναι δύναμη ούτε αρετή γι’ αυτό και είναι ΤΕ. To anotato TE den einai dynami oute areti gi’ afto kai einai TE.	Η φυσική αρετή δεν προβάλλεται και είναι αληθινή. I fysiki areti den provalletai kai einai alithini.	Αυτός που εκτιμά την Αρετή, δεν δείχνεται για ενάρετος. Γι’ αυτό και έχει την Αρετή. Aftos pou ektima tin Areti, den deichnetai gia enaretos. Gi’ afto kai echei tin Areti.
	The highest <i>de</i> is neither power nor virtue that’s why it is <i>de</i> .	Natural virtue does not display itself and it is true.	He who appreciates Virtue, does not appear as/show himself to be virtuous. That’s why he has Virtue.

In the three translations we focus on here, *de* is rendered as “power” (*dynami* δύναμη) (T1), “virtue” (*areti* αρετή) (T2), and “grace” (*chari* χάρις) (T3). Two translations (T1 and T2) follow the division of the text into *Daojing* 道經 and *Dejing* 德經, respectively, the latter extending from Chapter 38 to 81. *Dejing* is translated as *Te Kingk* Τε Κινγκκ (Dejing) (T1), and *To Violio tis Fysis* Το Βιβλίο της Φύσης (The Book of Nature) (T4).

As with renderings and explications of the key notion of *dao* discussed in the previous section, reliance on familiar notions and frameworks aimed at illuminating the key notion *de* and explaining its role in the philosophy of the *Daodejing* has instead the effect of mystifying it. Little to no justification for what are seen as common-sensical parallels also adds to this effect, which becomes easily apparent in the supplementary notes and translations of *de*. This is perhaps less so in Seferiadi’s translation (T1), which informs the reader about the diverse meanings of *de*. She provides the nominal and verbal meaning of *de*, and thus assigns both a substantive and a dynamic aspect to the term, rendering it as both “virtue” (*areti* αρετή) and “power” (*dynami* δύναμη). She explains that *de* is “the hidden power, the potentiality inside the seed, the egg, or the field”; “to gain” (*apokto* αποκτώ) and “profit/gain” (*kerdos* κέρδος); the quality of a thing, its nature; and, finally, “the magical power it radiates” (Seferiadi [1971] 1995, p. 12). Translating *de* as “nature” (*fysi* φύσις), Seferiadi adds, is also precise and consistent since “TE” (*de*), “initially TEK (*tek*)” etymologically originates from the ancient word “NTXIEK” (*dchiek*), which means “to plant.”³⁴ Still, the translator is relying on the more familiar understanding of etymology in Indo-European languages when she assigns a single etymological root to the character *de*. In line with a common interpretation that relates *de* to the Greek *areti* αρετή (“virtue”), she connects the etymological roots of *de* and *areti*, *ar-*, also found in *Aris* Άρης (“Mars”), *aristos* άριστος (“excellent”), etc., that corresponds to the Latin root *vir-* in words such as *virtus* (“virtue”). Both of these roots she understands to have the double meaning of “power” and “virtue”.

Seferiadi also notes the different usages of *de* in the text. Unlike virtue, the translator explains, *de* is not only perceived as positive, since “bad *de* can come from a bad thing,” even though TE [*de*] is usually good and life-giving” (Seferiadi [1971] 1995, p. 12), and second, by preserving the paradoxical formulation *shang de bu de* 上德不德 in Chapter 38 in the Greek rendering (Table 4, T1). To this purpose, the words *dynami* (“power”) and *areti* (“virtue”) are here used negatively: “The highest *de* is neither power nor virtue, that’s why it is *de*.” In a footnote, Seferiadi offers an alternative translation: “The highest *de* is not *de*.” In the absence of elaboration on the paradox, however, the term and the verse ultimately remain obscure. Lastly, *cong* 從 is given a poetic rendering with ontological implications: *pigazei* πηγάζει (“it springs from”), a verb derived from the word *pigi* πηγή (“water source”), renders the relation between *de* and *dao* as one of derivation, as noted above, and thus assigns temporal precedence and supremacy to *dao* in relation to *de*.

Attempts to explain the paradoxical formulation in Chapter 38 are evident in the other two translations (Table 4, T2 and T3). The verbs “is displayed” (*provalletai* προβάλλεται) (Table 4, T2) and “appears as” or “shows himself to be” (*deichmetai* δείχνεται) (Table 4, T3) imply that *shang de* 上德 is understood as “true” (*alithini* αληθινή) and “natural” (*fysiki* φυσική) *de* (T2), to be displayed, superficial, or pretended 不德 *bu de*. A connection to the more familiar concept of *areti* (“virtue”) is found in T3 (Table 4). Here, the anthropocentric reading of *de*, which is rendered as “he who appreciates virtue,” and the essentialistic understanding of *de* as an attribute or quality one possesses (“he has Virtue”), are reminiscent of ancient Greek (Platonic) conceptions of *areti* in the broad sense, the essence of specific virtues such as courage, wisdom, etc.

Similarly, Alexakis offers a basic understanding of *de* as “going straight to the heart or coming straight from the heart, from the essence.” In his translation and explanatory notes, he seems to further embed *de* in a Western paradigm by listing a number of possible meanings for *de*: *Dynami* Δύναμη (“Power”), *Ousia* Ουσία (“Substance”), *Areti* Αρετή (“Virtue”), *Gignesthai* Γίγνεσθαι (“Becoming”), *Dynatotita* Δυνατότητα (“Capability”), *Taxi* Τάξη (“Order”), *Drasi* Δράση (“Action”), *Axia* Αξία (“Value”), *Chari* Χάρις (“Grace,” “Favor”),

Agapi Αγάπη (“Love”), *Zoi* Ζωή (“Life”), *Fysi* Φύση (“Nature”), *doro* δώρο (“gift”), *eug-nomosyni* ευγνωμοσύνη (“gratitude”), *ofelos* όφελος (“benefit”), and the medicinal power of plants (Alexakis 1996, pp. 16–17). Moreover, like Seferiadi, Alexakis also mentions the etymological relation of *de* to “to plant” (*tiēk* τιεκ), which “implies the deeper nature of things where authentic virtue and spontaneous power spring from” (Ibid., p. 16). *De* is thus to be understood in terms of a perceived “depth” or as an intrinsic essence, contrasted, as we will see below, with false or inauthentic appearance.

In his translation (Table 3, T3), Polymeros seems to draw on a similar, and familiar, paradigm of distinction and opposition between “depth” and “surface,” true essence and false appearance, or genuineness and pretense. He offers some explanation on the meaning of the word *kong* 孔 (“opening,” “hole,” “great”) as a characterization of *de*, juxtaposing Heshang Gong’s and Wang Bi’s readings. The translator opts for Heshang Gong’s reading of *kong* 孔 as “great” and translates *kong de* 孔德 as “Great Virtue” (*Megali Areti* Μεγάλη Αρετή), instead of Wang Bi’s reading of the character *kong* 孔 as its homophone *kong* 空 (“void,” “empty”). Among the four translators, Polymeros is the only one who translates the character *rong* 容 (“capacity,” “volume,” “to contain,” “appearance,” “manner”). He chooses the word “content,” or, more literally, “what is contained” (*periechomeno* περιεχόμενο), rather than “what contains.” The word *periechomeno* in modern Greek implies a juxtaposition and superiority to a perceived appearance that can be less real, less true, and less valuable. This lexical choice creates associations with the familiar distinction and hierarchy between appearance and reality (e.g., in Parmenides and Plato). *De* is thus understood as possessing a content that is hierarchically higher than an implied appearance or semblance of *de*, since it is the content of the Great Virtue that follows or models *dao*.

The three instances of *de* in the first verse of Chapter 38 are translated in similar manners. In two cases (Table 4, T1 and T2), the translators understand the first instance of *de* to be referring to a “highest” (*anotati* ανώτατη), “higher” (*anoteri* ανώτερη), or “natural” (*fysiki* φυσική) virtue, implicitly juxtaposed to a lower, unnatural, or ingenuine kind. Understanding the relation between the first instance of *de* (*shang de*) and the second as one of opposition and subordination evades the paradox and brings the reading of *de* closer to more familiar categories, such as truthfulness, genuineness, integrity of character, and the acquisition of positive character traits or moral excellence. Moreover, in all the translations examined here, the relation between *dao* and *de* is viewed in terms of a Western metaphysics of universals and particulars, according to which concrete manifestations of specific *de* derive from or model a superordinate principle, essence, or universal—*dao*.

5. Conclusions

Comparative studies that explore resonances between Daoist and Greek philosophies abound in the literature. This paper offered a view of an alternative and unexplored field of similar comparatist work: modern Greek translations of the most fundamental among Daoist texts, the *Daodejing*. I have focused on three modern Greek renderings of the *Daodejing* and have discussed the translators’ methodologies, expressed aims, general understanding of the text’s focus, and current relevance, as well as views on authorship and translation. The analysis has revealed a set of translative trends: reliance on familiar notions, frameworks, and cultural experiences; mystification; attention to poeticity; and emphasis on a perceived remedial function of the text for a modern (Greek) readership. I have looked at how these translative trends are evinced in the explications and translations of the two key Daoist notions *dao* 道 and *de* 德 in four passages. The analysis has shown that in the translations examined here, there is expressed awareness of the idiosyncrasies of the Chinese language and, in most cases, a recognition of the ambiguity and open-endedness of the particular text. The translations evince attempts to preserve these qualities through attentiveness to poeticity and emphasis on what is perceived as the mystical and esoteric nature of the text. At the same time, the translators rely more or less heavily on an assumed commensurability between key Daoist notions and Greek lexical equivalents for which they provide little to no justification. Specific translation choices, accompanying

comments and glosses, and other supplementary materials create associations and evoke connections with ideas and cultural experiences familiar to Greek readers. Overall, the dominant translative trend in these renderings is assumed similarity between the teachings in the *Daodejing* with Greek philosophical proposals in general, primarily with Heraclitean philosophy and with teachings in the Bible (particularly the New Testament), as well as with other non-Chinese religious and literary sources and traditions. Considering the perceived remedial function of the text, it is plausible to assume that, even at the expense of clarity, the translations examined here are primarily meant to be inspiring rather than informative.

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Notes

- 1 This first translation of the *Daodejing* in a European language was completed by the Jesuits and came to London in 1788 as a present to the Royal Society. For more on the historical background of the Western reception of Daoism, see Karl-Heinz Pohl (2003).
- 2 For Chinese and Greek text, the phonetic transcription is followed by the original script. The transliteration of Greek characters into Latin characters follows ELOT [Ellinikos Organismos Typopoiisis Ellhnikós Organismós Typopoíihs, The Hellenic Organization for Standardization] 743 (2001), the transliteration system that complies with the International Standard ISO 843 and has been adopted by the Greek government. Monotonic orthography (the standard system of modern Greek) is used throughout.
- 3 A very recent example, indicative of the persistent appeal of such comparisons in Chinese academia, is Zheng Kai’s 郑开 “Dao yu logos: zhaxue de shijie lishi shiye zhong de discourse yu reality” 道与 logos: 哲学的世界历史视野中的 discourse 与 reality (Dao and Logos: Discourse and Reality from the Perspective of World History of Philosophy), a paper presented at the “Chinese Philosophy from the Perspective of World Philosophy” 22nd International Conference of the ISCP (International Society for Chinese Philosophy) hosted online and on site from 27 June to 1 July 2022 by East China Normal University (Shanghai). Another is Yu’s (2015).
- 4 I use “Greek” and “modern Greek” interchangeably in this paper. I use “classical Greek” when referring to ancient Greek.
- 5 By Mania Seferiadi, in 1971. See below.
- 6 Comparatively, there are very few translations of the *Analects* (or *Lunyu* 論語) in modern Greek, the standard (and only one from classical Chinese) among them being that by Sotiris Chalikias (b. 1947), by far the most prominent and prolific translator of philosophical and literary Chinese works from classical Chinese into modern Greek. Chalikias was the first to translate the *Four Books* (*Si Shu* 四書) of classical Confucian learning, as well as the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and the *Liezi* 列子, into modern Greek. He is also currently working on a Greek translation of the *Daodejing* (personal communication, 28 May 2022).
- 7 Mania A. Seferiadi (d. 2018) is the niece of Giorgos Seferis (the pen name of Giorgos Seferiadis, d. 1971), one of the greatest modern Greek poets and the first Greek to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1963. Seferis guided Seferiadi through the process of the translation on matters of poetic expression in Greek. The *Daodejing* was a text that Seferis himself had been preoccupied with at an earlier period of his life; Seferiadi ([1971] 1995, p. 12).
- 8 Seferiadi, Mania, A. (first ed. 1971; second ed. 1983; third ed., 1995) (Seferiadi [1971] 1995). For this article, I have used the revised and most recent 1995 edition.
- 9 Seferiadi lists the sinological works, translations of Chinese classics (the *Yijing*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Analects*), and the three English and two French translations she compared and combined to come up with her own: J. Legge’s (1891), A. Waley’s (1937), D. C. Lau’s (1963), J. J. L. Duyvendak’s (1953), and Liou Kia-Hway’s [Liu Jiahuai 刘家槐 b. 1908] (1967).
- 10 Seferiadi ([1971] 1995, p. 9). Translations from modern and classical Greek belong to the author.
- 11 From Chapter 42: “The Dao generates Oneness. Oneness generates Twoness. Twoness generates Threeness. Threeness generates the ten thousand things”; trans. by Moeller (2007).
- 12 Seferiadi quotes part of Fragment 67 from the Diels edition: “God is day night, winter summer, war peace, satiety hunger (all the opposite things); my translation. Diels (1903), p. 76.
- 13 Seferiadi’s first translation of the *Daodejing* in modern Greek was published during the period of the Greek junta (1967–1974). It is plausible to assume that censorship would not have allowed a political reading or a discussion on the political relevance of the *Daodejing* for a Greek readership. It may also be possible to conjecture that, read as a spiritual and religious scripture of self-cultivation, the *Daodejing* may have offered Seferiadi, and Seferis, a vocal opponent of the dictatorial regime, some route of escape from what many intellectuals of the time saw as political and cultural decadence, but also perhaps a cryptic language for indirect criticism of the political and social pathologies of that period.

- 14 Ibid., p. 20; see also footnotes throughout the translation.
- 15 At that time, Alexakis relied on the English translations by D. C. Lau (d. 2010), Feng Jiafu 馮家福 (d. 1985), and Jane English (b. 1942), as well as on previous Greek translations (by Andreas Tsakalis, Mania Seferiadi, and Petros Kouroupoulos). Revising his older translation, he also turned to the English translations by Ch'u Ta-Kao (Chu Ta-Kao 初大告; d. 1987), who published five editions of his English translation of the Laozi between 1937 and 1972, and Raymond B. Blakney (d. 1970).
- 16 Dimitrios K. Velissaropoulos served as ambassador of Greece to China from 1976 to 1979 and has authored a two-volume history of Chinese philosophy in Greek, among other works.
- 17 “Translator, traitor”.
- 18 The reader is referred to Polymeros’s previous work (Polymeros 2020).
- 19 The translator explains that the interpreter is “an anonymous commentator of the late pre-Christian era, known as ‘the old man on the river bank,’ or, in short, *Parochthios Geron* Παρόχθιος Γέρον [Old Man on the River Bank] (河上公 hé shàng gōng)”; Ibid., p. 7.
- 20 See Pu (1995), quoted in Moeller (2007). Moeller has in fact proposed that the *Daodejing* “secularized” the ritualistic and cosmological imagery of the culture and state of Chu 楚, transforming it into a philosophical imagery.
- 21 For *Daodejing* passages, I have used the version on the Ctext.org database.
- 22 In Seferiadi’s translation many key notions are capitalized, including the title of the text (TAO TE KINΓK Dao De King), Daoism (TAOΪSMOΪ Taoismos), yin-yang (ΓΙΑΝΓΚ-ΓΙΝ Yang-Yin) and others. Seferiadi notes that the word TAO is stressed on the last syllable, which makes evident that she relied on French translations. (In French, the stress falls on the final syllable of a word.)
- 23 Koini (κοινή, lit. “common”), Hellenistic or Biblical Greek is the language that developed and flourished during the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods. It was based on the Attic and Ionian dialects of classical Greek and its descendant is modern Greek.
- 24 John 14:6. Jesus’s followers called themselves or were called Hodosites (Roadies; Those Of The Way (See Acts 9:2, 19:9, 19:23, 22:4, 24:14, 24:22 and Isaiah 35:8). Source: Abarim Publications online Dictionary, accessed at <https://www.abarim-publications.com/DictionaryG/o/o-d-o-sfin.html> (accessed on 20 November 2022).
- 25 In some English translations of the *Daodejing* attempts have been made to avoid the trap of monistic or essentialist readings of *dao*. For instance, Chad Hansen opts for the plural (“ways”), Ames and Hall for a gerund (“way-making”), and Hans-Georg Moeller uses the indefinite article (“a Dao”), interchanging it with the definite article (“the Dao”), thus capturing the dual structure of *dao* as one and many.
- 26 See for instance Burik (2018), where the author examines the resonances between Heidegger’s reading of Heraclitean *logos* with *dao*; Jia Y. and Jia X. look at the different linguistic worldviews of *dao* and *logos* in Jia and Jia (2008); Ming Donggu argues for “the perfect compatibility between the Dao and Logos” in Ming (2002); Zhang Longxi explores the common ground between Eastern and Western thought through a comparative study of the central concepts of *dao* and *logos* in Zhang (1992); and Elena Butti offers a balanced account of similarities and differences between *logos* and *dao* in Butti (2016).
- 27 In his *Guan Zhui Bian* 管籥編 (Pipe-Awl Chapters). Quoted in Zhang (1985, pp. 393, 397).
- 28 “In the beginning was the Word [. . .] through Him all things were made and without Him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1: 1–3).
- 29 No reference to the specific verse is included.
- 30 Alexakis (1996), p. 25; no page number is included in the citation. The Greek edition of Leary’s book is listed in the bibliography: Leary (n.d.).
- 31 A fascinating discussion taking the opposite perspective is Ziporyn (2021).
- 32 Alexakis (1996), p. 16. Capitalization in the original.
- 33 Based on the Mawangdui manuscripts (discovered in 1973), some scholars have argued for placing the *Dejing* before the *Daojing*. See Henricks (1989).
- 34 Seferiadi does not cite sources. “Tek” is a phonetic reconstruction of *de* in the pre-Han era, accepted by many scholars. “Dchiek” (NTXIEK) is probably “drək,” the phonetic reconstruction of *zhi* 直 (“upright”), part of the character *de* 德 and the phonetic component of *zhi* 植 (“to plant,” “to grow”).

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Article

Reconsidering the Term *Dai* 待 in *Zhuangzi* 莊子

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Abstract: Developing from Laozi's ideals of non-action and naturalness, the ultimate goal in Zhuangzi's philosophy is a state of *xiaoyao* 逍遙 (free and easy). This is often also described with the Chinese term *wudai* 無待, variously understood to mean "not depend on anything", "depend on the ten thousand things", or "depend on *Dao* 道". This confusing expression has sparked a long and considerable debate. However, upon revisiting the original text, it becomes evident that Zhuangzi's key expression is not *wudai* but rather *dai* 待 (depend on). I argue that the crucial phrase *bi qie wuhu dai zai* 彼且惡乎待哉 (not depend on anything, or, what can you depend on?) cannot simply be glossed with *wudai*, as it often is, but instead hints at the way one can become free and easy. This statement entails two interconnected inquiries: what to depend on and how to depend on it. The answer to both relates to Heaven. It is what we must depend on and this "depending" on Heaven can be divided into internally depending on one's own self-transformative nature and externally depending on one's relationship with Heaven. How we properly depend on Heaven involves realizing an interdependent relationship with Heaven that is seemingly non-interdependent, something only made possible by our full participation in *hua* 化 (transformation).

Keywords: *Zhuangzi*; *wudai* 無待; dependence; Heaven; transformation

1. Introduction

Laozi elevated *Dao* 道 from an ordinary word into a profound philosophical term, and the pursuit of attaining *Dao* emerged as the ultimate goal within Daoism. Nevertheless, Laozi's notion of *Dao* is enigmatic and obscure. Zhuangzi subsequently evolved Laozi's abstract *Dao* into the more relatable and concrete state of *xiaoyao* 逍遙 (free and easy). Thus, the nature of this *xiaoyao* and how to achieve it is the key issue of Zhuangzi's philosophy. Entangled with this theory is the concept of *dai* 待 (depend on), which relates not only to the profound meaning of *xiaoyao* but also to any subject's way of being in the world. However, after Guo Xiang 郭象 (252–312) first employed the two terms *you dai* 有待 (depend on something specific) and *wu dai* 無待 (depend on everything; *literally*: depend on nothing) to reflect on this topic, related interpretive debates, including contemporary ones, almost exclusively have focused on the question of *wudai*. *Dai* as found in the original text rarely receives attention. This paper will first illustrate the undesirability of placing the term *wudai* at the center of this debate. It will then explain that the confusion around *wudai* is terminological and not conceptual and that, if we return to the *Zhuangzi*, we find that Guo Xiang's interpretation is still best. Unfortunately, his unclear language has caused unnecessary confusion. Finally, by shifting our language from *wudai* back to the original *dai*, we will see more clearly that there are both internal and external objects of this ideal.

2. Returning to the Text: From *Wudai* to *Dai*

The terms *you dai* and *wu dai* were first articulated by Guo Xiang, who believed that only *wu dai* leads to being *xiaoyao*. As a result, scholars have engaged in many discussions around *wu dai*. However, it is inadvisable to continue this discussion centered on *wu dai*. Neither it nor its pair *you dai* appear in the *Zhuangzi*. Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 previously has noted this, and although the text occasionally employs the terms *you* and *dai* together, he argued it does not utilize them as a single philosophical concept. Liu explains, "Guo Xiang's

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Annotations on Zhuangzi initially proposed *youdai* and *wudai* as philosophical concepts” (Liu 1981, p. 63). He further says:

We cannot take as their basic and principal point of view the tendency accidentally revealed by philosophers nor what is derived from later generations based on the ancients ... Utilizing Guo Xiang’s *dai* and *wudai* to elucidate Zhuangzi’s philosophy oversimplifies its complexity and fails to capture its distinctive features, thus rendering it inadequate. (Liu 1981, p. 64)

Thus, from the perspective of the original text, it is impossible to fully understand the ideal of *xiaoyao* with *wudai*.

The name *wudai* is also confusing; the term *wu* 無 has the basic meaning of “nothing”, and it is easy for scholars to mistakenly think that *wudai* refers to “depending on nothing”. Chung Wu, for one, suggests, “Zhuangzi hinted that we should get rid of dependency altogether” (Wu 2008, p. 28).¹ This interpretation can lead to the view that true freedom is only possible outside the world,² which not only negates the value of everything but also risks devolving into subjective fantasy.

Chen Yun 陳雲 has criticized this desire to escape reality and instead seek solace in a subjective psychological or spiritual existence. He argues that:

Within the phenomenal world governed by causal laws, we cannot exist in an abstract state of unpredictability that disregards relationships and conditions, such as our unalterable and inherent reliance on air for breathing and dependence on food. We must establish societal structures with others and live in certain patterns of relationships. (Chen 2020, p. 270)

Similarly, Luo Xiangxiang 羅祥相 identifies a hidden danger of Guo Xiang’s *wudai*—it may lead to “false *xiaoyao*”. This so-called “false *xiaoyao*” means that, even in the face of a bad living situation, the follower will not reflect on it but only affirm it and then, by way of spiritual victory (self-deception), falsely think that they are mentally in a *xiaoyao* state (Luo 2021).³ This would mean that *wudai*, as proposed by Guo Xiang, allows even the worst living situation to become an object to depend on. In my opinion, Luo misunderstands Guo’s meaning.

The key to much confusion around Guo Xiang’s theory is his ambiguous term *wudai*. If we understand what he really means by *wudai*, it becomes clear his reading accords with Zhuangzi’s original intention. Guo employs *wudai* to mean depending on everything,⁴ because for him, *wu* (nothing, without) in the term *wudai* is not directly a negative but instead an inclusive, because no one thing is depended on. *You dai*, the opposite of *wudai*, means to depend on something specific.⁵ Put another way, *wudai* means transcending one’s dependence on any particular thing; one is not bound by any single thing but can depend on anything, ensuring that no particular thing becomes a constraint. Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692) explains further:

When it is cold, wander in the cold. When it is hot, wander in the heat. Then you can ride and wander even on the great droughts and great floods ... The village or country can be wandered in; inner, outer, praise, blame—all can be wandered in. The graceful wind can be wandered in, but the howling storm and the raging thunder, the scorching sun and the drenching rain can also be wandered in. (Ziporyn 2009, p. 133)

The ability to depend on everything implies a state of unboundedness that enables one to infinitely wander free and easy (*xiaoyao*).

Although Guo’s unclear language has caused much confusion, his interpretation that the goal is to depend on everything remains desirable. In order to avoid being mired in distracting debates, this article will ignore the term *wudai* and return to Zhuangzi’s own words to see how Zhuangzi addresses this problem. Let us first consider the core passage on this topic from the “Free and Easy Wandering” chapter:

A man who has enough wisdom to fill an office effectively, conduct good enough to impress the community, virtue sufficient to please the ruler, or talent sufficient to be called into service in one state, has the same kind of self-pride as these little creatures. Song Rongzi certainly burst out laughing at such a man. The whole world could praise Song Rongzi and it wouldn't make him exert himself; the whole world could condemn him and it wouldn't make him mope. He drew a clear line between the internal and the external and recognized the boundaries of true glory and disgrace. But that was all. As far as the world went, he didn't fret and worry, but there was still ground he left unturned.

Liezi could ride the wind and go soaring around with cool and breezy skill, but after fifteen days he came back to earth. As far as the search for good fortune went, he didn't fret and worry. He escaped the trouble of walking, but he still had to depend on something to get around. If he has only mount on the truth of Heaven and Earth, ride the changes of six breaths, and thus wander through the boundless, then what would he have had to depend on? [*bi qie wuhu dai zai* 彼且惡乎待哉?] Therefore I say, the Perfect Man has no self; the Holy Man has no merit; the Sage has no fame. (Watson 2013, p. 3)

The line *bi qie wuhu dai zai* 彼且惡乎待哉 (then what would he have had to depend on?) is what Guo Xiang aimed to explain by introducing the term *wudai*. As the original only includes the term *dai*, that should be the key focus when reading this passage. Thus, below I will explore how Zhuangzi addresses the issue of *dai*, leading to an awareness of the importance of *dai-X* (i.e., the object on which to depend).

3. The Meaning of *Dai*

Dai is mentioned 49 times in the *Zhuangzi*, and scholars have elucidated numerous meanings for these different *dai*, including dependence, anticipation, expectation, treatment, possession, and preservation. This article does not discuss the meaning of *dai* as a single Chinese character but, rather, explores its philosophical connotation as a categorical concept, specifically examining the relationship between *dai* and *xiaoyao* in the *Zhuangzi*. As *dai* in this context refers to "depend on", it can be understood as a relational concept.

The idea of *dai*, as employed in the "Free and Easy Wandering" chapter cited above, is used to differentiate four levels of people: those who have the same kind of self-pride as little creatures, those like Song Rongzi, those like Liezi, and those who merge with *Dao*. Scholars unanimously agree that those like Liezi and the lower-level people all depend on something; they all belong in Guo Xiang's category of *you dai* (depend on something specific). Above them, at the highest level, are those who mount on the truth of Heaven and Earth and ride the changes of six breaths. They are described with the sentence *bi qie wuhu dai zai*,⁶ and its interpretation is the crux of this debate.

Broadly speaking, scholars propose two distinct approaches to comprehend the essential line. As the first person to comment on *Zhuangzi*, Guo Xiang explained it with the term *wudai* which, for him, signified the ability to depend on anything. Christine Tan explains it as "a type of freedom that acknowledges the deep importance of dependence in being independent" (Tan 2023). However, Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (ca. 601) offers a different traditional reading of the sentence. He uses *yuhe* 於何 (a rhetorical question implying a negative) to gloss *wuhu* 惡乎 (an interrogative pronoun or denial). Cheng Xuanying claims that "if one can wander in the infinite, how could [yuhe 於何] one possibly be dependent [you dai 有待]?" (Guo 2012, p. 23). According to this view, *bi qie wuhu dai zai* is interpreted as a rhetorical question. Thus, the passage is understood as follows: "If you have mounted the truth and ridden the changes of the six breaths, do you need anything to depend on? No!" In other words, it signifies not being dependent on anything. As previously mentioned, if the sentence is interpreted as "not depending on anything", *xiaoyao* will inevitably retreat to a purely spiritual realm that rejects the real world and even subjective illusions. However, this interpretation not only lacks practicality but also deviates from Zhuangzi's normal use of language. Considering how the word *wuhu* is used

elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*, *bi qie wuhu dai zai* should not be interpreted as depending on nothing.

In ancient Chinese, *wuhu* serves not only as a rhetorical word but also as an interrogative word, encompassing inquiries about objects and methods. *Zhuangzi* frequently employs *wuhu* in this way. For instance, “The understanding of the men of ancient times went a long way. How far did it go [*wuhu zhi* 惡乎至]? To the point where some of them believed that things have never existed—so far, to the end, where nothing can be added” (Watson 2013, pp. 11–12). In the “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” chapter, it also says, “When Gongwen Xuan saw the Commander of the Right, he was startled and said, ‘What kind of man is this? How did he come to lose his foot [*wuhu jie ye* 惡乎介也]? Was it Heaven? Or was it man?’” (Watson 2013, p. 20). In the “Secret of Caring for Life” chapter, it states, “Nanpo Zikui asked: ‘Where did you happen to hear this [*zi du wuhu wen zhi* 子獨惡乎聞之]?’” (Watson 2013, p. 47). Lastly, when glossing another appearance of *wuhu* in a passage from “the Great and Venerable Teacher” chapter, Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (1842–1917) uses the interrogative term *heyi* 何以 (how, what).⁷ This further confirms that in all these passages, the *wuhu* functions as a normal interrogative.

Other Pre-Qin texts further prove this is a historically defensible way to read *wuhu*. For example, in *Mencius*, we find, “‘May I presume to ask you, Master, in what do you excel [*wuhu chang?* 惡乎長]?’ Mencius told him, ‘I understand words. I am good at nourishing my vast, flowing *qi*’” (Bloom 2009, p. 30). *Xunzi* includes “Learning—where should it [*wuhu*] begin and where should it [*wuhu*] end? I say: its proper method is to start with the reiteration of the Classics and conclude with the reading of the Rituals” (Knoblock 1999, p. 13). *The Book of Rites* also says:

Bze-yû asked about the articles to be provided for the mourning rites, and the Master said, “They should be according to the means of the family”. Bze-yû urged, “How can [*wuhu*] a family that has means and one that has not have things done in the same way?” “Where there are means”, was the reply, “let there be no exceeding the prescribed rites”. (Legge 1885, pp. 153–54)

These all are clear examples of *wuhu* being used to ask questions regarding objects or methods of action. They suggest that we should at least consider *wuhu* as an interrogative word. The result is that *bi qie wuhu dai zai* is most likely an expression that requests the reader to explore the conditions under which the highest state of mounting the truth of Heaven and Earth and riding the changes of the six breaths occurs. In other words, it is a question concerning the factors essential for reaching the supreme level.

Brook Ziporyn translates the passage and the aforementioned sentence in this way:

But suppose you were to chariot upon what is true both to Heaven and to earth, riding atop the back-and-forth of the six atmospheric breaths, so that your wandering could nowhere be brought to a halt. You would then be depending on—what?” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 5)

Ziporyn then elsewhere offers his interpretation of this, stating:

The sentence “who does the sounding ultimately depend on?” in Discussion on Making All Things Equal and answers that it is the *wuhu dai* in Free and Easy Wandering, which means that “there is no time, no land, no matter, nothing does not depend on things”. Therefore, *wuhu dai* remains dependent, but it depends on the six breaths, which does not imply the absence of dependence or its reliance on a specific entity. (Ziporyn et al. 2022)

Here, Ziporyn affirms the interrogative nature of *wuhu* as a question word, instead of a rhetorical word, and emphasizes that ultimate dependence pertains to an unknown object. However, he fails to recognize that *Zhuangzi*’s question encompasses not only the object on which one should depend but also the way one achieves it—specifically, the type of interdependence required to attain *xiaoyao*. Investigating both the object and mode of this

dependence relationship is important for interpreting Zhuangzi, and these two inquiries serve as pivotal elements in achieving *xiaoyao*.

The intent of the “Free and Easy Wandering” passage is to inquire into what to depend on and how to depend on it so one can reach the state where one mounts on the truth of Heaven and Earth and ride the changes of six breaths. The focus of Zhuangzi’s consideration is not whether there is dependency—because the answer is obvious—but what is real dependency and how one achieves it. Similarly, Zhuangzi’s idea of “no self” does not concern whether the self exists but instead implores us to ask: What is the real self?

4. Dai’s Object: Zihua and Tianshu

Based on the preceding discussion, I affirm that the term *wuhu* serves as an interrogative rather than rhetorical word, a conclusion that further necessitates exploring both the object of *dai* (dependence) and the way this dependence is used to attain *xiaoyao*. In this section, I will first discuss *dai*’s object, i.e., that on which we should depend. As this is depicted ambiguously in Zhuangzi’s writings, we must read carefully. Consider this famous passage:

Penumbra said to Shadow, “A little while ago you were walking, and now you’re standing still; a little while ago you were sitting, and now you’re standing up. Why this lack of independent action?” (Watson 2013, pp. 17–18)

Zhuangzi affirms that there must be a mutual dependency between all things and, subsequently, scholars like Lai Xisan 賴錫三, Zhang Heping 張和平, and Huang Shengping 黃聖平 have concluded that this interdependent relationship is inescapable and essential.⁸ Accordingly, the dependency of *dai* serves as an essential prerequisite for attaining *xiaoyao*, a point repeatedly emphasized in the text through the use of the construction *cheng-X 乘X* (go along with/mount/ride-X)⁹. There are expressions such as “go along with things and let your mind move freely” (*chengwu yi youxin 乘物以遊心*), “rides the clouds and mist” (*chengyunqi 乘雲氣*), “ride on the Light-and-Lissome Bird” (*chengfu mangmiao zhi niao 乘夫莽眇之鳥*), “mount Heaven and Earth” (*cheng tiandi 乘天地*), “Climb up on the Way and its Virtue” (*cheng daode 乘道德*), and “ride on the sincerity of Heaven and Earth” (*cheng tiandi zhi cheng 乘天地之誠*).¹⁰ These things like clouds and mist or Heaven and Earth are necessary prerequisites for being *xiaoyao*; they cannot be eliminated. Zhuangzi, furthermore, associates all these clouds, birds, things, and Heaven and Earth with *Dao*, clearly stating that “*Dao* permeates all aspects of the ten thousand things”.¹¹ On the one hand, not all things are considered proper objects for dependence; on the other hand, it is said that we depend on these mounted things that are all part of *Dao*. Thus, how to resolve this tension is unclear.

The perfect music in “The Turning of Heaven” chapter reveals some clues: “Perfect music ... now dead, now alive, now flat on the ground, now up on its feet, its constancy is unending, yet there is nothing that can be counted on” (Watson 2013, p. 110). Zhuangzi refrains from directly providing the ultimate object of dependence; instead, he presents a situation wherein I depend on an object that, in turn, depends on another object, which inevitably leads to endless questioning. Zhuangzi answers this question with an infinite inquiry: the absence of a specific source or ultimate unmoving object on which to depend. There is only the process of transformation formed by the birth and death and rise and fall of all things. Consequently, depending on *Dao* implies a dependence on *dahua* 大化 (the changes of all things as one whole).

Zhuangzi argues that nature is an indivisible organism and that the basis for the organism’s complete self-sufficiency is *Dao*. As an organism, the world born out of *Dao* advances itself in a dynamically balanced manner. Under this cosmology of eternal movement, the objects to depend on can be divided into two parts: “the self-transformation of all things” (*zihua* 自化)¹² and “together by Heaven” (*tianshu* 天屬) relationships that exist between all things. I summarize these two parts as being “internally dependent on the self-

transformative nature of all things¹³ and “externally dependent on together by Heaven relationships”.

Let us first consider the internally dependent aspect. “The Great and Venerable Teacher” chapter mentions Mr. Mengsun, who does not know why he should go ahead and does not know why he should fall behind. Zhuangzi describes him as follows:

In the process of change, he has become a thing [among other things], and he is merely waiting for some other change that he doesn't yet know about. Moreover, when he is changing, how does he know that he really is changing? And, when he is not changing, how does he know that he hasn't already changed? (Watson 2013, p. 51)

People usually focus on their own body, naming it “self”. Yet, in this case, Mengsun's body is shown only as a temporary object formed by the gathering of *qi* 氣 (energy), thus highlighting the inevitable changes in the human body and acknowledging that both life and death represent natural and great transformations.

In this scenario, it is imperative to follow the inherent transformations of all things themselves. Zhuangzi makes it very clear that self-transformation exists as a node in the great transformation of the universe's self or *dahua*. Therefore, from the individual point of view, dependence is ultimately a dependence on the self. Mengsun embraces the profound transformations within his body; in essence, he fundamentally accepts all natural changes. Zhuangzi explicitly emphasizes that the process of self-transformation plays a pivotal role in *dahua*. As our own transformations are inseparable from those of others, it is imperative for each individual to embrace the transformation in others brought about by *dahua*. Consequently, from an individual perspective, dependence on *dahua* signifies dependence on a self-transformative nature.

Zhuangzi not only affirms a subject's dependence on the natural transformation of all things but also the dependence on its own self-transformation and unique nature.

Mark what I say! In the case of the body, it is best to let it go along with things. In the case of the emotions, it is best to let them follow where they will. By going along with things, you avoid becoming separated from them. By letting the emotions follow as they will, you avoid fatigue. And when there is no separation or fatigue, then you need not seek any outward adornment or depend on the body. And when you no longer seek outward adornment or depend on the body, you have in fact ceased to depend on any material thing [*gu bu dai wu* 固不待物]. (Watson 2013, p. 162)

From the Three Dynasties on down, what a lot of fuss and hubbub they have made in the world! If we must use [*dai*] curve and plumb line, compass and square, to make something right, this means cutting away its inborn nature; if we must use [*dai*] cords and knots, glue and lacquer, to make something firm, this means violating its natural Virtue. (Watson 2013, p. 61)

In the first example, which comes from “The Mountain Tree” chapter, Watson's translation presents *bu dai wu* as “cease to depend on any material thing”. However, if *bu dai wu* is interpreted in this way, it means Zhuangzi is promoting pure spirituality and subjective fantasy. However, if people want to survive, they must rely on external material resources; people must depend on things like air. Therefore, in reality, it is impossible to abandon all things.

Luo Xiangxiang makes a distinction between things that can be depended on and those that cannot, indicating that “people can get rid of things that are useless to life” (Luo 2021). These useless things include wealth and fame, along with all man-made objects that deviate from human nature (i.e., unnatural things). The problem with Luo's viewpoint is that to reject things that are “useless” still indicates at different kind of dependence, being “dependent on the non-existence of these things”. In other words, to be free and at ease depends on these useless things not existing. Ziporyn makes a similar point when he notes the following, “If one seeks ‘unconditionality,’ this is in fact precisely to be conditioned by

and dependent on something, since what one seeks becomes something one is dependent on" (Ziporyn 2003, p. 89).

"The World" chapter reveals that Zhuangzi does not dismiss the concepts of right and wrong but embraces being *xiaoyao* amid a human world that includes such distinctions. So, in the phrase *bu dai wu*, the term *bu* 不 (not) does not negate *wu* 物 (thing) but, rather, *dai*. Zhuangzi rejects the negative relationship of a dependence on extrinsic things but not extrinsic things themselves. Chen Guying 陳鼓應 and Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 refer to this interdependent relationship as bondage or the involvement of external forces. Chen Guying claims that "*you dai* means to be constrained, leading to a lack of spiritual autonomy, thereby hindering the attainment of inner peace" (Chen 2009, p. 20). Xu Fuguan explicitly states that "the reason humans are oppressed and not free is that they cannot maintain control over themselves but rather are entangled with external forces, which subsequently impose restrictions or even dominance upon them" (Xu 1993, p. 309). Zhuangzi severed the negative dependence of his own nature on external things, not to negate the existence of these things but to eradicate their infringement upon his intrinsic nature and maintain his self-sufficiency and resilience. This independence aims not to escape or avoid things but to properly engage with and respond to them. There are always types of fame and fortune in this world; the *xiaoyao* state means you have nothing to do with these things, although they continue to exist, because whether or not you have them becomes inconsequential. The real way to be unconstrained is to not grasp or refuse. When things come, we respond to them; when things do not, we do not seek them. Behaving in this way, fame and other artificial things no longer affect our nature. In the face of all temptations, the heart remains undisturbed and at peace.

When the subject is no longer dependent on artificial and unnatural things, it becomes an independent subject that is not confused by external things and is self-sufficient in its nature. The remarkable potential of this detached attitude is shown in the case where the little bird laughs at the giant *Peng* bird flying so high. The little bird is confined within its inherent nature and, so, cannot fly high. This implies it is restricted to living within its own natural environment and cannot access the boundless *Dao*. I describe this as wandering in one's internal nature but not connecting to the whole external world. The real *xiaoyao* does not mean rejecting the world or things; it involves holding to one's own nature and, at the same time, being open to everything in the external world.

Having described what I term "internal dependence" (*neidai* 內待), where we depend on our inner nature, I will now deal with the mutual interconnection of all things enabled by being open to each other. I call this "external dependence" (*waidai* 外待). The "Imputed Words" chapter elucidates this inherent interdependence among all things by exploring the correlation between the Penumbra and the Shadow:

Penumbra said to Shadow, "A little while ago you were looking down, and now you're looking up; a little while ago your hair was bound up, and now it's hanging loose; a little while ago you were sitting, and now you're standing up; a little while ago you were walking, and now you're still—why is this?" Shadow said, "Quibble, quibble! Why bother asking about such things? I do them, but I don't know why. I'm the shell of the cicada, the skin of the snake—something that seems to be but isn't. In firelight or sunlight, I draw together; in darkness or night, I disappear. But do you suppose I have to wait around for those things? (And how much less so in the case of that which waits for nothing!) If those things come, then I come with them; if they go, then I go with them; if they come with the Powerful Yang, then I come with the Powerful Yang. But this Powerful Yang—why ask questions about it?" (Watson 2013, p. 237)

This aforementioned passage depicts the world as an interdependent whole, where things fluidly interact with each other. There is nothing in this oneness that should be privileged or marginalized, for all are dependent on each other as inseparable ones within the One. Zhuangzi calls this natural relationship of mutual dependence "together by Heaven" (*tianshu* 天屬), and he explicitly explains it in "The Mountain Tree" chapter:

[Lin Hui] threw away his jade disk worth a thousand measures of gold, strapped his little baby on his back, and hurried off. Someone said to him, "Did you think of it in terms of money? Surely a little baby isn't worth much money! Or were you thinking of the brother? But a little baby is a great deal of bother! Why, then, throw away a jade disk worth a thousand measures of gold and hurry off with a little baby on your back?" Lin Hui replied, "The jade disk and I were joined by profit, but the child and I were brought together by Heaven. When pressed by misfortune and danger, things joined by profit will cast one another aside; but when pressed by misfortune and danger, things brought together by Heaven will cling to one another. To cling to one another and to cast one another aside are far apart indeed!" (Watson 2013, p. 161)

This natural relationship of interdependence is characterized by following the nature of all things, mutual induction through the nature of all things, and being together without human cause.

The large system formed by this interdependence of nature is called the "substantial interdependent system" (*shizhi xiangdaixing xitong* 實質相待性系統) by Fang Dongmei 方東美. He describes it as:

[An] all-encompassing system of information in which all things live according to their nature, exist in their own place, and do absolutely no harm to any other being ... It is a system of mutual integration, in which all things by nature need each other, interact with each other, and do not exist alone ... It is a system of interdependence and inclusion, in which everything has its own value and importance and is sufficient to produce an effect of considerable value, which in turn affects everything else. (Fang 2012b, pp. 145–46)

It is worth noting that the concept of "together by Heaven" involved in *dahua* encompasses not only a reciprocal relationship of mutual accomplishment but also the co-existence of contrasting dynamics. Fang Dongmei further refers to this interconnected universe as "an infinite sequence of double reversals" (*shuanghuxiangshi zhi wuqiong xulie* 雙回向式之無窮序列), suggesting that all beings within the realm of existence can undergo endless repetition that create an infinite sequence of dual circles. For instance, the inherent interdependence between *you* 有 (something) and *wu* 無 (nothingness) is theoretically reconciled, possibly due to their harmonious coexistence in a mysterious and profound state of *chongxuan* 重玄 (double mystery). This amalgamation unifies the universe into an infinite organic whole where "This and that interrelate, blend, and mutually involve each other" (Fang 2012b, p. 146). The antithesis of the harmonious relationship bestowed by Heaven, which Zhuangzi criticizes, is an artificial and coerced relationship driven by self-interests, which is a fallacious, additive, and mutually detrimental association.

Achieving "together by Heaven" solves the problem of artificial external dependence because it involves the mutual interconnection of all things. Thus, the true essence of *xiaoyao* lies not only in self-sufficiency in one's nature, but also in the ability to constantly engage in the larger interdependent system governed by Heaven. By doing so, one can effectively dissolve artificial relationships forged solely based on personal interests. Only through this process can a profound symbiosis manifest. Guo Xiang revealed that *xiaoyao* includes both "self-made success" (*zitong* 自通) and "keeping in step with things" (*chang-tong* 常通). He says, "Only one who arcanelly merges with things and abides with great transformation can be free from dependency and thus always keep in step with things. How could this ever be just the result of self-made success and nothing more!" (Lynn 2022, p. 9).

At this point, Luo Xiangxiang's misunderstanding of Guo Xiang's *wudai* (depending on everything) becomes clear. Luo believes that depending on everything leads to "false *xiaoyao*", since spiritual self-deception as a way to "overcome" an evil enemy actually prevents active resistance to said enemy in real life. Yet, according to Guo Xiang, *xiaoyao* includes self-made success and keeping in step with things. The former is based on the self-

transformative nature of self, while the latter involves a natural connection between all things. This type of *xiaoyao* requires the maintenance and protection of this open relationship in reality and, conversely, the avoidance of behavior that destroys the interdependent relationships rooted in Heaven. Hence, everyone has the responsibility to improve the living environment. “False *xiaoyao*” escapes reality by retreating to the inner spirit in the face of external encroachment, which not only harms one’s inner nature but also violates one’s open relationship with all things. Instead of supporting the life of the individual, the external world becomes something that obstructs the functioning of natural relationships, resulting in a worse type of existence.

Overall, the objects of dependence can be confirmed as internal self-transformative nature and external Heaven-based relationships. As one’s nature also happens to be bestowed by Heaven, we can more narrowly conclude *dai*-X equals “being dependent on Heaven”.

5. The Ideal Expansion of *Dai*: The Interdependent Relationship with Heaven That Is Seemingly Non-Interdependent

“Depend on Heaven” can function as a general term for both depending on one’s self-transformative nature internally and depending on Heaven-based relationships externally. This means the object of dependence is clear, but the “Xu Wu Gui” chapter raises another issue when it states, “The True Man of ancient real people! Treat them with heaven [*yi tian dai zhi* 以天待之], not with man, the ancient real person!” (Watson 2013, p. 212). What does Zhuangzi mean by “treat them with Heaven”, which I take to mean “depend on Heaven”? This returns us to my other core question: How should one properly *dai* or depend on anything?

Other scholars use *wudai* to deal with the question of “how” to *dai* (depend on). Zhang Heping claims that *wudai* means “not being dependent on a particular thing and consists of ‘not being dependent on the fixed self internally, not being dependent on a particular environment externally’” (Zhang 2021). The idea that *wudai* means to not be dependent on a particular thing reveals it as a dynamic type of dependence. Ziporyn further notes the transformational nature of this, stating the following:

The *wuhu dai zai* is actually depending on the six breaths rather than not being dependent on anything but does not involve being dependent on a specific object; it is beyond the dilemma on both sides. This can be called “in essence inwardly dependent on external objects”, where the *dai* is not a specific state (realm) or a specific external thing. Such a paradoxical state can be conveyed by “not depend on anything and not depend on nothing, not depend on nothing and not depend on anything”. (Ziporyn et al. 2022, p. 8)

The Zhuangzi itself presents this complex relationship of dependence and non-dependence in the “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” chapter. It says, “Even though the transforming voices [*huasheng* 化聲] may depend on something [*xiang dai* 相待], it is tantamount to not depending on anything at all [*bu xiang dai* 不相待]” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 21).¹⁴ In this article, I refer to this dual aspect as “the interdependent relationship with Heaven that is seemingly non-interdependent”. On this topic of “transforming voices”, Wang Fuzhi further says, “The piping of Heaven refers to the transforming voices ... One needs to abandon one’s pre-given mind and change with the *qi* so as not to damage the True” (Wang 2011, p. 102). Gao Tang 高嶠 likewise affirms, “Transforming voices means the piping of Heaven” (Fang 2018, p. 365). In this example, the *hua* 化 (transforming) in *huasheng* (transforming voices) concretizes the meaning of depending on Heaven; thus, depending on Heaven is depending on *hua*, i.e., depending on “the interdependent relationship with Heaven that is seemingly non-interdependent”.

To more deeply understand the idea of “the interdependent relationship with Heaven that is seemingly non-interdependent”, consider the sentence following the previously quoted passage. It says, “Harmonize them all with the Heavenly Equality [*Tianni* 天倪], leave them to their endless changes, and so live out your years” (Watson 2013, p. 17). Zi-

poryn alternatively translates *Tianni* as “Heavenly Transition” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 21). This translation is more revealing, and the translator elaborates on the meaning of *ni* in a note, explaining that it literally means “beginnings or child on the one hand and division on the other, put together here to form the meaning transition—a beginning that crosses a division” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 21). *Tianni* can be understood as a reunification after the emergence of individualization and division, signifying the attainment of a complete unified *Dao*. However, amidst chaotic differentiation, the challenge is re-establishing this unified *Dao* while also affirming the existence of divisions.

The state of *Tianni* certainly affirms division and gives meaning to individual independent existences. Tao Chongdao 陶崇道 (1580–1650) explains Zhuang Zhou’s butterfly dream by saying, “what is seemingly non-interdependent? Zhuangzi and the butterfly, the difference between the two is very clear ... the thing, I, right, wrong, the distinction was originally clear” (Fang 2018, p. 384). This not only affirms division as natural and individuals as having inherent value, but also reveals the fundamental order of the two parties. This order must “Harmonize them all with *Tianni* (Heavenly Transition)”, meaning to remove human factors. The result is a reunification that also restores their original contrastive relationships and certainly does not eradicate conflict or antagonism within a perfect unity.

Qian Chengzhi 錢澄之 (1612–1693) explains, “only by illuminating everything in the light of Heaven can the natural distinctions between things become apparent. This is the interdependent relationship with Heaven that is seemingly non-interdependent” (Qian 2014, p. 47). Here “illuminates all in the light of Heaven” describes the realization of natural divisions after a return to genuine existence. Qian Chengzhi further explains that this requires achieving “no-mind” (*wuxin* 無心), stating:

Tianni illuminates the bright and undimmed places in “that”. Right and wrong, since neither I nor you nor any third party can know them, require selflessness to be understood ... this is the interdependent relationship with Heaven that is seemingly non-interdependent ... “No-mind” allows the subject to align with everything, embodying the subtlety of the “seemingly non-interdependent”. (Qian 2014, pp. 42–43)

Tao Chongdao concurs with Qian’s perspective that the interdependent relationship with Heaven, which is seemingly non-interdependent, means to “empty the mind and depend on all things” (*wuxin zhi dai* 無心之待). This sense of emptiness refers to eliminating the fixed, static, single, closed perspective of the self. This withdrawal from a limited self enables one to comply with the changes of all things, due to the constant transformation of the subject’s perspective and shared identity with things.

Ziporyn also realizes this, as he interprets the Perfect Man to have no self (*zhiren wuji* 至人無己) to be the Utmost Person who has no definite identity (Ziporyn 2020, p. 5). If the subject’s identity or perspective can be freely and unobstructedly transformed, a profound mutual understanding between the subject and object can be achieved, enabling them both to transcend their individual limitations. This necessitates standing on the pivot of *Dao* (*daoshu* 道樞)—specifically, to keep opening yourself up. The hinge of *Dao* resembles the central axis of a ring, positioned in the void without bias. It can change direction and perspective at any time, thus possibly leading to shifting in the opposite direction. Ziporyn further states that standing in the hinge of *Dao* means:

Standing at any given time and being able to temporarily choose another perspective. The characteristic of the hinge of *Dao* is that it does not have its own fixed right and wrong, so the current operation of the right and wrong have the same value. Therefore, there is always a possibility of turning to opposite values; that is, every “right” opens into another opposite perspective. It is the never-ending growth of new horizons. For example, the “fasting of the mind” (*xinzhai* 心齋) is a wild card with no fixed content. (Ziporyn et al. 2022, p. 2)

The wild card is a card that has no fixed content of its own and can act as any number or suit, so it has no fixed good or bad and can thus make all perspectives equal. At the same time, the wild card also shows respect for the object; it is infinitely open and inclusive, meaning that it will not change any other card. Because of its own emptiness, it can play any card, which achieves an “all things are One” perspective; all perspectives are mutually exclusive and implicated simultaneously so that the transformation and connection between perspectives are open.

Holding this perspective undoubtedly transcends the internal boundaries of the subject, breaking down the line between the subject and the object so that they can understand each other, which Fang Dongmei calls “the intersubjective mind” (*tonghu zhuti zhi ji de xinling* 通乎主體之際的心靈) (Fang 2012a, p. 244). Losing oneself or having “no self” disrupts one’s rigid sense of self and shakes up fixed perspectives of right and wrong or this and that. This causes the subject to reimagine right and wrong or this and that as involving the compatibility between opposites. Zhuangzi describing the “transforming voice” as depending on something is just like this. As Fang Dongmei says, “getting rid of all self-centered powers of prejudices, mental attachments and self-attachments to achieve mutual understanding—connecting self and other and equalizing right and wrong” (Fang 2012b, p. 144). Yang Lihua 楊立華 similarly explains “This and that are connected and become integrated, implying that both this and that possess subjectivity” (Yang 2020, p. 138). It is precisely through this authentic experience that one can adhere to and follow the myriad things, encompassing both subject and object in a unified flow, enabling seamless navigation with the pure essence of Heaven and Earth.

In short, depending on *hua* (transformation) enables the subject to leap from the finite to the infinite when it integrates into *dahua* (the great transformation), which is the key to wandering with the Creator. Conversely, integration with *dahua* is the way to establish an interdependent relationship with Heaven that is seemingly non-interdependent. Lin Yidu 林疑獨 perfectly encapsulates this point:

The interdependence of all things arises from their mutual relationships, and when these relationships are bestowed by Heaven and harmoniously integrated into *dahua*, there will be no trace of dependency. For instance, sound can transcend itself and become a constant sound. (Chu 2014, p. 75)

The term “constant sound” refers to a sound not contingent upon any specific thing. That is why it has an interdependent relationship with Heaven which is seemingly non-interdependent.

6. Conclusions

Since Guo Xiang proposed the expression *wudai* to explain Zhuangzi’s ideal kind of *dai* (depend on), scholars have repeatedly used it to interpret the Zhuangzian goal of *xiaoyao*. On the one hand, the term *wudai* has sparked unending and seemingly unresolvable scholarly debates. On the other hand, the connotation of *wudai*, understood according to Guo Xiang’s original sense of “depending on all things”, aligns well with Zhuangzi’s philosophy. To break away from the vortex of controversy and confusion, this study has returned to Zhuangzi’s original text and language to investigate *dai* itself. The sentence *bie qie wuhu dai zai* is the key to this and to Zhuangzi’s method of becoming *xiaoyao*. I conclude this sentence is not a rhetorical question but, rather, a direct question. When understood this way, it does not indicate that *xiaoyao* can only be achieved if you do not depend on anything, but it rather functions as an inquiry into the conditions for mounting on the truth of Heaven and Earth and riding the changes of six breaths. This question can be further unpacked into the proper object to depend on and the best way to depend on it.

Regarding the object, Heaven is the fundamental answer to this question. Depending on (*dai*) Heaven means both to internally depend on one’s Heaven-given but self-transformative nature and externally depend on the Heaven-based interrelations of all things. Only in this way can we both attain “self-made success” and “keep in step with things”; in other words, we not only can maintain self-sufficiency but also an openness

to forming mutual coexistence-type relationships. Zhuangzi also further inquired about the way that one should achieve this dependence on Heaven. This method involves the ostensibly paradoxical state of having an interdependent relationship with Heaven that is seemingly non-interdependent; that is, to be dependent in a way that does not seem to be interdependent. This type of dependence is the fundamental basis for *xiaoyao*, and the way to attain this special dependence requires being seemingly non-interdependent amid the process of *hua*. The idea of *hua* includes an implicit critique of any fixed perspective, and so to engage *hua* as a way to depend on Heaven requires disrupting one's inflexible sense of self, acknowledging interdependence with external objects, and emptying oneself so that as a subject one can transform one's identity and role at any time, thus breaking through self-limitation and enabling infinite identity.

To summarize, achieving *xiaoyao* does not come from total isolation or independence from reliance on anything but instead requires dependence on the proper objects. These objects both come from Heaven and are one's nature and the natural interrelationship between all things. *Xiaoyao* is not an escape but a full integration into the cosmos.

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Notes

- ¹ Many scholars share this perspective, such as Lian Xinda 連心達, Shi Xiangqian 史向前, and Yuet Keung Lo 勞悅強. For a comprehensive understanding, please refer to their respective scholarly works. See Lian (2009), Shi (1998), and Lo (2017).
- ² Scholars who take the concept of *wudai* to mean depending on nothing perceive *xiaoyao* solely as the liberation of heart-mind. David Chai thinks that "Identifying with the *Dao*, the sage relinquishes all dependency on his physical self and so is formless; in being free of body and heart-mind" (Chai 2022). Unless Zhuangzi is approached from a religious perspective, it is obvious that the body cannot sustain itself without dependence on external things, such as food and water.
- ³ False *xiaoyao* is similar to the "Ah-Q spirit" found in Lu Xun's 鲁迅 *Biography of Ah-Q*. The Ah-Q spirit refers to an imaginary victory in the form of self-consolation or self-deception in the face of external oppression. For example, in the face of those who bully him, he does not resist. Instead, he assumes because he is a person with high moral quality, he does not care about it. This is his way to deal with the external reality of oppression through mental escapism.
- ⁴ If there is no wind, Liezi cannot walk. This is a kind of dependence, as anything can become a prerequisite for achieving *xiaoyao*. Ziporyn thinks "Only he who has nothing on which he doesn't ride is *wudai*". He further gives an example, "Liezi's inferiority to the sage lies in the fact that he wants to walk on wind when there is no wind, whereas the sage lets there be wind or no-wind, walking or no-walking, according to what he happens to encounter" (Ziporyn 2003, pp. 87, 91). Fraser explains in detail the concept of *wudai* proposed by Guo Xiang, "To attain non-dependence, then, our reliance on any particular conditions must be strictly provisional, leaving us continually ready to adapt to new conditions through our own independent transformation. If we are bound to any one direction, we cannot achieve non-dependence" (Fraser 2020). *Wudai* understood in this way means depending on everything.
- ⁵ The meaning of *you dai* is similar to that of *dai*, with the term *you* emphasizing the existence of a dependent relationship.
- ⁶ This passage has been translated variously, but these approaches all can be broadly categorized into two distinct groups. Martin Palmer and Chung Wu both translate this sentence very directly. Palmer writes, "He would have had to depend upon nothing!" (Palmer 2006, p. 3), while Wu writes, "He would have depended on nothing" (Wu 2008, p. 27). According to this line of reasoning, *xiaoyao* is merely a subjective illusion that is fundamentally unattainable. The second group, which includes the greater number of translators, uses the question word "what" in their renderings. Herbert Giles, Lin Yutang, Victor Mair, and Richard Lynn, respectively, translate this sentence into "upon what, then, would he have had to depend?" (Giles 1889, p. 3), "upon what, then, would such a one have need to depend?" (Lin 1942, p. 631), "what would he have to rely on?" (Mair 1994, p. 5), and "on what would such a one then ever need to depend?" (Lynn 2022, p. 8). Behind the variation among translations are the scholars' different readings of the text. I propose another alternative.

- 7 This passage says, “What does the Way hidden by, that we have true and false? What do words hidden by, that we have right and wrong” (Watson 2013, p. 9). It refers to the following questions: How and why does the *Dao* become obscured, leading to the emergence of truth and falsehood? How and why does speech become obscured, resulting in the manifestation of right and wrong? Liu Wu concurs with Wang’s perspective, claiming that “the following two sentences serve as further inquiries into the preceding two sentences” (Wang and Liu 2012, pp. 23–24, 414). This example helps confirm that *wuhu* functions as an interrogative word.
- 8 Lai Xisan has pointed out that “all *dai* in nature inherently depend on and are interconnected with other entities, thus establishing an essential interdependence among all things” (Ziporyn et al. 2022). Zhang Heping posits that “*youdai* constitutes the fundamental attribute of things existence”, and further analyzes that “Without them, we would not exist; without us, they would have nothing to take hold of” (Zhang 2021). Zhang further asserts a general ubiquity and omnipresence of *dai* from a philosophical standpoint: “whether it entails oppositional relations or interdependence, the existence of one entity relies on the presence of another. Consequently, the change of things mentioned by Zhuangzi occurs within the process of this depending on ... As for man, as one of all things, Zhuangzi expressed his *youdai* incisively and vividly through expressions such as no escape (*wusuotao* 無所逃) and no choice (*budeyi* 不得已)” (Zhang 2021). Huang Shengping claims that “fundamentally, due to the inherent limitations of human existence, depending on others becomes an essential aspect of human survival; thus, interdependence is innate and intrinsic” (Huang 2011).
- 9 *Cheng* encompasses various connotations, such as rise, ride, sit, and command. In a nutshell, it means to achieve an effect by depending on the object.
- 10 The above sentences come from Watson (2013, pp. 15, 28, 56, 101, 156, 210).
- 11 This idea is present in the dialog between Master Dongguo and Zhuangzi, “Master Dongguo asked Zhuangzi, ‘this thing called the Way—where does it exist?’ Zhuangzi said: ‘There’s no place it doesn’t exist’” (Watson 2013, p. 182).
- 12 In Zhuangzi’s philosophy, “things” (*wu* 物) need to be understood through the concept of the “transformation of things” (*wuhua* 物化), which implies things should be dynamic and ever-changing rather than static and solid.
- 13 When discussing Guo Xiang’s thought and Daoism’s self-cultivation, Coles proposed that “the transcendence of the sage is not something available to or even desirable for the vast majority of people, but rather a quality dependent on a particular and rare inherent nature” (Coles 2019). Clearly, Coles has noted that nature (*xing* 性) is the object of dependence, but he did not discuss this question.
- 14 I disagree with Ziporyn’s translation of the Chinese character *ruo* 若, as *ruo* should mean “similar to” or “as if”, which is not quite the same as saying that this interdependence manifests itself in a non-codependent way. I think Ziporyn recognizes this; he wrote in notes that “the sounds of the wind, the voices of the debates, may depend on and wait for a true rouser, but this has turned out to be indistinguishable from depending on nothing, for this rouser can have no identity and thus is as if nonexistent” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 27).

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