

# Western Translations of the *Laozi Daodejing*

Richard John Lynn

University of Toronto

## 1 Introduction

The *Laozi* or *Daode jing* is the most translated work in the world after the *Bible*. More than 1500 versions have appeared—more than 450 into English.<sup>1</sup> However, most are not translations but literary paraphrases based on previous learned translations. Western versions generally follow three approaches: (1) Scholarly translation arrived at with linguistic and philological expertise and attention to original textual, philosophical/religious and historical contexts, aimed at recovering the original meaning and intent, often with explanatory material, including references to Chinese or Japanese translations and commentaries. (2) Scholarly translation achieved by collaboration between a Westerner illiterate in classical/literary Chinese and a Chinese or Japanese (more or less) trained scholar. (3) A translation of a traditional commentary combined with a new translation of the *Laozi* interpreted in light of that commentary—the two so integrated that one shapes the other. (4) Subjective interpretation by Chinese-illiterates and, though largely based on non-Chinese traditions of thought, exploit the work of one or more of the other three approaches. The majority of “translations” are found here—*caveat emptor*!

## 2 Literary Paraphrase

The last category deserves attention first, for it has been most successful in attracting readership interest, an unpleasant truth for the professional sinologist and translator, whose own versions, achieved only after years of training, may receive scholarly praise yet miserably fail with popular readership. Where this anomalous trend originated and why it so tenaciously persists are questions that can actually be found during the early days of *Laozi* translation, when interpretation was largely in terms foreign to the Chinese tradition but congenial to Westerners already familiar with the “Oriental” thought of Hinduism and Indian Buddhism who could relate the Dao to *Brahman* and *Dharma*. The classically educated also could associate it with the religious thought of Pythagorus, the *anima mundi* (world soul) of Plato and the Neo-Platonists, Gnosticism and other ancient and medieval traditions of mysticism. Its first Western students, Jesuit missionaries, started a trend to detach the *Laozi* from the Chinese tradition and universalize it by supposedly finding Christian dogma, especially the Trinity, prefigured in it. Such forced similarity of concepts provided access to a text that for translators and readers seemed otherwise inaccessible. Present-day *Laozi* “translations,” examples of “Eastern and Oriental Thought,” “Religion and Spirituality,” or “Self-Help and Self- Realization,” are products of a process in which *similar* is passed off as *same*, and *difference* is downplayed or

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<sup>1</sup> A bibliography listing 1576 versions, including twelve back translations into modern Chinese from Western languages and Japanese, has been published by Misha Andrew Tadd (Tadd 2019).

ignored. Such “translations” seamlessly join East and West in palatable servings, with *accessibility* and *marketability* the watchwords of all concerned. Other characteristics include (1) Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, introductions to such “translations” largely continue to assert that Laozi (Master Lao) was its single author, avoiding the thorny issue of authorship. Readers thus are assured they have access to a “scripture” by a genuine Oriental sage with whom to identify. (2) Anything not easily accessible in literal translation is paraphrased in terms of familiar experience. The *Good News Bible* (1966) similarly paraphrases the deeply learned and sophisticated prose of the *King James Version of the Holy Bible* (1611), which while easier to read loses much in accuracy of meaning. (3) As an exemplar of wisdom literature, the *Laozi* is largely de-sinified, because if too “Chinese” it would threaten accessibility and offend a non-Chinese readership. (4) Interpretation tends to use terms of comparative philosophy or religion and avoids reference to indigenous Daoist thought. In particular, the *Laozi* is often understood in terms of Chan/Zen 禪, because Westerners interested in “Eastern” or “Oriental” thought, if they know anything about it at all, are likely to know (or think they know) something about Chan/Zen.

### 3 *Laozi* Translations 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries

By the 1880s after some sixty years of translations and studies, the *Laozi* had become reasonably familiar to the West, a convenient overview of which appears in two essays, by James Legge (1815-1897), “*The Tao Teh King*” (Legge 1883) and Herbert Giles (1845-1935), “The Remains of Lao Tzu, Re-Translated” (H Giles 1886-1889). Legge reviewed Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat<sup>2</sup> (1788-1832), *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-Tseu* (Report on the life and views of Laozi) (1823); Stanislas Julien (1797-1873), *Lao Tseu tao te king: le livre de la voie et de la vertu composé dans le VI<sup>e</sup> siècle avant l'ère chrétienne par le philosophe Lao-Tseu* (*Daodejing* of Laozi: Book of the Way and Virtue composed in the sixth century before the Christian era by the philosopher Laozi) (1842); John Chalmers (1825-1899), *The Speculations on Metaphysics, Polity, and Morality, of the “Old Philosopher”* (1868); Thomas Watters (1840-1901), *Lao-Tzu: A Study in Chinese Philosophy* (1870); Reinhold von Plaenckner (d. 1884), *Lao-tse Táo-tě-king; Der weg zur tugend* (*Daodejing* of Laozi: the way of virtue ) (1870); Viktor von Strauss (1809-1899), *Laò-tsè's Tào tè Kīng: Aus dem Chinesischen ins Deutsche übersetzt, eingeleitet und commendirt von Victor von Strauss* (*Daodejing* of Laozi: translated from Chinese into German, with preface and commentary by Victor von Strauss) (1870). Legge in providing examples of how he thinks chapters should be rendered, treats twenty-one chapters, about a third of the entire text (Legge 1883: 74-107). Stating elsewhere that his own complete translation of the *Daode jing* had “already been written out more than once” by 1880 (Legge 1891: xiii-xiv), these 1883 translations thus must be from that yet unpublished work, which did not appear until 1891, when Oxford University Press published it in *The Texts of Taoism, Part I: The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu, The Writings of Kwang-Źze Books I-XVII*, Volume 39 in the series “The Sacred Books of the East” edited by Max Müller (1823-1900). Giles addressed the works by Rémusat, Julien, Chalmers, Watters, Plaenckner, and added Frederic Henry Balfour's (1846-1909) *The Tao Te Ching* (Balfour 1884) and excerpts from Legge's 1883 review. Giles faults and corrects earlier translations and provides his own for many passages, his only attempt to translate the *Laozi*, for he was convinced it was a forgery:

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<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to simply as Rémusat.

The work in question is beyond all doubt a forgery. (H Giles 1886: 235). . . . But Dr. Legge goes on to translate the rest of this [the first] chapter; and there we must part company. For in my opinion it forms no part of the pure teachings of Lao Tzu, but is, in common with the bulk of the *Tao Te Ching*, the invention of a later age. (H Giles 1886: 237). . . . I do not attempt to translate this chapter [the sixth]. . . . It seems to me to be a self-evident forgery, in connection with the mystic Taoism of later ages. (H Giles 1886: 241)

Giles believed the *Laozi* was a Han forgery of about 200 CE (H Giles 1886: 232) because (1) It was not by a single author, Laozi, (2) Sayings attributed to Laozi in early works such as the *Zhuangzi*, *Xunzi*, *Hanfei zi*, *Liezi*, and *Huainanzi* only say “Laozi said” (‘*Laozi yue* 老子曰’) (H Giles 1886: 231-32) but never mention a book, *Laozi*. (3) Sayings of Laozi quoted in early works often differ in wording in the received *Laozi* or fail to appear in that work at all. (4) Since much of the *Laozi* seems made up from other early works, it is manifestly a forgery. (5) The received *Laozi* contains characters not found in the *Shuowen* [*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explanation of Simple and Compound Characters (ca. 100 CE)], “a dictionary supposed to embrace all Chinese characters in use at or about the time of the Christian era.” (H Giles 1886: 235). (6) Although Sima Qian stated that Laozi “left a book in 5,000 and odd characters,” Giles says “that the historian had never seen it goes without saying.” (H Giles 1886: 265) However, his argument is easily refuted, as by LIU Xiaogan, for example:

Giles was a seasoned and serious scholar, and his arguments seemed logical given the evidence; however, his conclusion was clearly a mistake. . . . his problem lay not in his reasoning, but in his presuppositions. They were: 1. all ancient books should be recorded or mentioned in other books; 2. all those other books should have survived over two millennia to be available to us today; 3. as long as we cannot see X, we have grounds to suppose that it never existed. However, . . . unearthed texts have repeatedly proved these three presuppositions to be groundless, and so they should not be the basis for textual analysis. (Liu 2015: 33-34)

Professor Liu’s sifting of evidence, including the silk and bamboo *Laozi*-related materials discovered during the last few decades, encourages him to date the core parts to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and assign later emendations to the mid- to late-4<sup>th</sup> BCE (Liu 2015: 38-40), a view shared by William H. Baxter (Baxter 1998). A more recent exploration of the evidence by William G. Boltz has the received *Laozi* first assembled a century or so later in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. (Boltz 2005: 59) However, despite Giles’s faulty conclusions, his insistence the *Laozi* should be studied in terms of linguistic evidence and its place in the historical development of thought set precedents for later scholar-translators, whose works are a sharp contrast to the Chinese-illiterate ersatz “translations” that are peddled as timeless books of wisdom—produced by powers of imagination and empathy that supposedly transcend all linguistic and historical issues.

Giles’s skepticism placed him at odds with contemporaries,<sup>3</sup> who generally accepted

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps by the time his son Lionel Giles (1875-1958) authored a version of Laozi (L Giles 1904) Giles might have changed his mind. Lionel’s version consists of several chapters, “Lowliness and Humility,” “Government,” “War,” “Paradoxes,” “Miscellaneous Sayings and Precepts,” and “Laozi on Himself,” in which translated excerpts illustrate chapter themes.

Master Lao as the single author of a homogeneous work. Legge, for example, had this to say:

But he [Laozi] did write and leave behind him the *Tao Te Ching*. It is this which makes him an object of interest to thoughtful men even at this distance of time. We are concerned not about the events of his life but about his thoughts. All may not think of his Treatise so highly as some do, but all must cherish it as a κτήμα ἐς αἰῶ [ktema es aei, “a treasure for all time”] (Legge 1883: 81)

#### 4 Jesuit Figurist Reading of the *Laozi*

A similar attitude is also found in the works of John Chalmers (Chalmers 1868: xvii-xviii) and Thomas Watters (Watters 1870: 1), but such approval from others was complicated by the belief that the *Laozi* contains statements that anticipate Christian dogma, which originated with the figurist movement begun 200 years earlier by such Jesuits as Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), Philippe Couplet (1623-1693), Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730), Jean-François Foucquet (1665-1741), Joseph de Prémare (1666-1736), and Joseph Marie Amiot (1718-1793). Although they mainly searched Confucian classics for primordial knowledge prefiguring Christian teachings, they also included the *Laozi*. (Mungello 1989: 17, 312-328, 356; Mungello 2009: 100) However, by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the notion that Christian dogma was prefigured in ancient Chinese texts met increasing skepticism. As Max Müller observed in “On False Analogies in Comparative Theology” (Müller 1873: 330-331) in a passage he excerpted from Julien’s “Introduction” to *Lao Tseu tao te king* (Julien 1842b: iv-v):

. . . Jesuit missionaries in China . . . had themselves admitted the antiquity of the writings of Confucius and Lao-tse, . . . But in their zeal to show that the sacred books of the Chinese contained numerous passages borrowed from the Bible, nay, even some of the dogmas of the later Church, they hardly perceived that, taking into account the respective dates of these books, they were really proving that a kind of anticipated Christianity had been accorded to the ancient sages of the Celestial Empire. . . . Montucci, speaking of Lao-tse’s *Tao-te-king*, says: “We find in it so many sayings clearly referring to the triune God, that no one who has read this book can doubt that the mystery of the most holy Trinity was revealed to the Chinese more than five centuries before the advent of Christ. . . .”

Müller also derided Rémusat’s figurist-based reading of the *Laozi*, which among other absurdities finds the name *Jehova* in Chapter 14. He then praises Julien’s 1842 translation in which “all traces of the name of Jehova have disappeared.” (Müller 1873: 333) A brief survey of figurative interpretation reveals that Antonio Montucci (1762-1829) was the author of several Sinological works including *De studiis Sinicis* (On Chinese Studies) (1808) from which this passage is taken. Immediately preceding the above quotation, Montucci identified his source:

Ex duobus unus in Bibliotheca Regiae Societatis Londinensis asservateur, continetque textum verbali interpretatione adnotationibusque locupletatum libri celeberrimi Canonici (cujus titulus 經德道 *Tao-te-kim*, seu *De regula virtutis liber*), a Philospho 子老 Lao-çu Confucii coaevo conscripti, . . . (Montucci 1808: 19-20) One of two [Chinese

manuscripts] kept in the library of the Royal Society, London, contains the text with a literal translation and annotations, of a book (with the title *Daodejing*, or *Book on the Rule of Virtue*), composed by Laozi, a philosopher contemporary with Confucius. . . .

Study of the *De regula virtutis liber* is well documented in *Uroffenbarung und Daoismus jesuitische Missionshermeneutik des Daoismus* (Primordial revelation and Daoism: Jesuit missionary hermeneutics of Daoism), ed. Claudia von Collani (Collani 2008), and Claudia von Collani “The Manuscript of the *Daodejing* in the British Library,” in *Sinologists as Translators in the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries* (Collani 2015: 39-86). The author is identified as Jean-François Noëlas S. J. (1669-1740) (Collani 2008: 33-36; Collani 2015: 56-59), who translated eleven chapters into Latin: 1, 14, 4, 42, 10, 28, 27, 15, 20, 21, and 25, chosen because they easily admit figurist interpretation—but Chapter 14 is the most explicit:

視之不見名曰夷，聽之不聞名曰希，搏之不得名曰微。此三者不可致詰，故混而為一。 Qui videtur (et) non videtur, (ille) vocatur *Y*. Qui auditur (et) non auditur, (ille) vocatur *Hi*. Qui tangitur (et) non tangitur (ille) vocatur *Wei*. Istam Triadem non oportet usque ad fundum scrutari. Ideo (enim) chaos (est) unitas.<sup>4</sup> Who is looked at yet seen not, He is called *Y*. Who is listened to yet heard not, He is called *Hi*. Who is touched yet felt not, He is called *Wei*. This Trinity may not be examined as to its fundamental meaning, for, undifferentiated, it is actually a Unity.

As God is present in all things seen, heard and felt, but is invisible, inaudible, and intangible, just so also the Dao. Although figurists believed that *yi* 夷, *xi* 希, and *wei* 微 were proper nouns devoid of meaning, they formed two camps: interpreting them as names of the three sovereigns of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity (*Sanhuang* 三皇) of Daoist lore, which prefigured the Trinity; or believing that *they* transliterated the Hebrew יהוה Yəhōwā, (Yahweh or Jehovah), arrived either by direct contact with Hebrew tribes in antiquity or derived from the primordial state of mankind’s spiritual mind.

This passage from Noëlas, which can be dated to 1721-1729 (Collani 2015: 56), was also soon re-translated and annotated, for example, by Joseph Marie Amiot, also fully committed to the figurist reading:

Celui qui est comme visible & ne peut être vu, se nomme *Khi*; celui qu’on peut entendre & qui ne parle pas aux oreilles se nomme *Hi*; celui qui est comme sensible & qu’on ne peut toucher, se nomme *Ouei*; en vain vous interrogez vos sens sur tous trois, votre raison seule peut vous en parler, & elle vous dira qu’ils ne font qu’un. . . . Or à ne les prendre que sur ce pied, il est naturel d’en conclure que les anciens Chinois ayant quelque connoissance du mysere adorable de la très-sainte Trinité (Amiot 1776: 300). . . . One who is as if visible yet cannot be seen is called *Khi*; one whom one can hear yet who speaks not to the ears is called *Hi*; one who is as if tangible yet whom one cannot touch is called *Ouei*; in vain you question your senses about all three, but your reason alone can tell you about them, and it will tell you than they are one. . . . Now, taking them only on this basis, it is natural to conclude that the ancient Chinese had some knowledge of the adorable mystery of the very holy Trinity.

<sup>4</sup> Transcription by Claudia von Collani (Collani 2015: 74).

## 5 Early Scholarly Versions

Half a century later, in *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-Tseu*, Rémusat, first professor of Chinese and Tartar-Manchu Language and Literature in Paris (1814), also believed *yi* 夷, *xi* 希 and *wei* 微 transliterated “Jehovah”:

Il me paraît impossible de douter que ce nom ne soit, sous cette forme, originaire de la Syrie, et je le regarde comme une marque incontestable de la route que les idées que nous nommons Pythagoriciennes ou Platoniciennes ont suivie pour arriver à la Chine. (Rémusat 1823: 48) It seems to me impossible to doubt that this name, in this form, originated in Syria, and I regard it as incontestable mark of the route that ideas, which we label Pythagorean or Platonist, followed to arrive in China.

Just as Pythagorus and Plato prefigured the concept of God in the West, so did Master Lao in China. However, Rémusat interpreted the passage more abstractly:

Celui que vous regardez et que vous ne voyez pas, se nomme *I*; celui que vous écoutez et que vous n’entendez pas, se nomme *Hi*; celui que votre main cherche et qu’elle ne peut saisir, se nomme *Weï*. Ce sont trois êtres qu’on ne peut comprendre, et qui, confondus, n’en font qu’un. (Rémusat 1823: 40)<sup>5</sup> One whom you look at but do not see is called *I*; one whom you listen to but do not hear is called *Hi*; one whom your hand searches for but cannot grasp is called *Weï*. These are three beings whom one cannot comprehend, and who, merged, form only one.

He then goes on to say:

Les trois caractères employés ici n’ont aucun sens; ils sont simplement les signes de sons étrangers à la langue Chinoise, soit qu’on les articule tout entiers *i*, *hi*, *weï*, soit qu’on prenne séparément les initialès, que les Chinois les ne savent pas isoler dans l’écriture. . . dit le commentateur, signifie le vide, ou le *rien*; ce qui doit s’entendre, non par opposition à l’être, mais par exclusion de la matière: car les Chinois désignent souvent l’*esprit* par ces mots *hiu-wou* [虛無], qui signifient proprement *vacuum* et *nihil*; et l’on a cru trop facilement que les Bouddhistes Chinois, qui emploient ces mots aussi bien que les Tao-sse, rapportoient au néant l’origine de toutes choses, et nioient même l’existence de l’univers. (Rémusat 1823: 40) The three characters employed here have absolutely no meaning; they are simply the signs of sounds foreign to the Chinese language, either articulated entirely as *i*, *hi*, *weï*, or from which the initials are taken separately, . . and which, as the commentator says, signify emptiness or nothingness; which must be understood, not by opposition to being, but by exclusion of matter; because the Chinese often designated *spirit* by the words *xuwu*, which properly signify *emptiness* or *nothingness*, and which has been too easily believed to mean what the Chinese Buddhists,

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<sup>5</sup> Abel-Rémusat’s *Laozi* was actually first published by the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres as “Mémoire lu le 15 juin 1820” (Report read 15 June 1820) in *Mémoires de l’Institut royal de France* (7) 1820: 1-54. (Cheng 2014: 966, n. 22)

who use these terms as well as the Daoists, use in attributing the origin of all things to nothingness and even to negate the very existence of the universe.

Rémusat thus expanded on *I-Hi-Wei* to mean the pure spirit (absolute immateriality) of God. The “commentator” is Xie Hui 薛蕙 (1489 - 1541), and the passage cited is 夷希微皆虛無之意 (Xie 1896: A:9a) “*yi*, *xi*, and *wei* all mean *xuwu* (emptiness/nothingness).” Rémusat’s view allied the *Laozi* with Christian dogma in opposition to the Buddhists’ nothingness/non-being, condemned by Christian missionaries as nihilistic and atheistic. (Meynard 2011: 15-16) (App 2012: 27-28, 31, 45, 81-82, 100-101, 104-105, 133-134) However, Rémusat prepared the way for the later open-ended readings of the *Laozi* as a universal, trans-temporal/cultural, and secular/agnostic repository of wisdom. Note that Rémusat’s *Laozi* influenced such contemporaries as Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), F. W. J. Schelling (1775-1854), and Victor Cousin (1792-1867). All had initially lumped Buddhism and Daoism together as “hideous superstitions” but, thanks to studies and translations of Buddhist and Daoist texts by Rémusat, Julien, and Guillaume Pauthier (1801-1873), eventually admitted Buddhist and Daoist thought into their pantheon of world philosophy. (Cheng 2014: 965-971).

Max Müller thought that Julien’s translation, based on Chinese commentaries, should have completely debunked such alien readings, but since they persisted and were actually promoted by Strauss, he went on to attack Strauss’s defense of Rémusat’s in “Das vierzehnte Kapitel des *Taò-tě-kīng* von Laò-tsè” (The Fourteenth Chapter of the *Daode jing* of Laozi) (Strauss 1869), repeated a year later in his Introduction to *Laozi* (Strauss 1870: xxv- xxvii):

Man schaut Ihn ohne zu sehen: sein Name heisst *Jī* (Gleich); man vernimmt Ihn ohne zu hören: sein Name heisst *Hī* (Wenig); man fasst Ihn ohne zu bekommen: sein Name heisst *Wēi* (Fein). Diese Dreikönigen nicht ausgeforscht werden; drum werden sie verbunden und sind Einer. (Strauss 1870: 61) One beholds Him without seeing: his name is *Jī* (Equal), one listens to Him without hearing: his name is *Hī* (Slight); one grasps Him without getting: his name is *Wēi* (Fine). These Three Powers may not be explored; therefore, they are so compounded as to be One.

Strauss used arguments by Bouvet, Fouquet, Prémare, and Montucci to find the Trinity and Jehovah in the *Laozi*, and, like Rémusat, concludes that Laozi’s Dao is commensurate with the pure spirit and perfect immateriality of the Judaic-Christian God, with which he actually equates the Dao throughout his introduction (Strauss 1870: 61-79) and commentary, for example:

. . . weder durch Weg, Wort noch Vernunft übersetzt und allenfalls nur durch »Gott« wiedergegeben werden könnte. (Strauss 1870: 3) . . . [ Dao may be] translated neither by Way, Word nor Reason and at best only could be rendered by “God.”

Strauss also equates Dao with concepts borrowed from Western thought such as *Geist* (Spirit) and *göttliche Weisheit* (Divine Wisdom),

. . . dass in ihn aber zugleich hineingelegt wird, was die occidentalische theosophische Speculation als die göttliche Weisheit, חֻכְמָה [Chokmâh], die göttliche Σοφία [Sophia], die Idea der Platoniker, die göttliche Imagination oder Magia Jacob Böhmes etc. substantiiert

hat. (Strauss 1870: 34) . . . [the Dao is] what Occidental theosophical speculation has substantiated as Divine Wisdom, חֲכָמָה [Chokmâh], Divine Σοφία [Sophia], the Idea of the Platonists, and the Divine Imagination or Magia [Magic] of Jacob Bohmes [1575-1624], etc.

Moreover, Strauss linked the Dao, via *I-Hi-Wei*, with *Iao*, which the Gnostic Valentinians (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) used as the most sacred name for God, (Strauss 1870:62). Whereas his rummaging through world traditions for concepts equivalent to Dao cannot be covered here, three methodological constants emerge (1) He either completely rejects Chinese commentaries or (2) distorts Julien's translations of them to support his own views. (3) The *Laozi* is significant because it reflects, regardless of how distantly, Western belief and not because it expresses aspects of ancient Chinese thought.

Julien's version of the same passage is a great contrast:

Vous le regardez (le Tao) et vous ne le voyez pas: on le dit *incolore*. Vous l'écoutez et vous ne l'entendez pas: on le dit *aphone*. Vous voulez le toucher et vous ne l'atteignez pas: on le dit *incorporel*. Ces trois qualités ne peuvent être scrutées à l'aide de la parole. C'est pourquoi on les confond en une seule. (Julien 1842b: 19) You look at it (the Dao) but see it not: we say it is *colorless* [*transparent*]; you listen to it but hear it not; we say it is *voiceless* [*silent*]; you wish to touch it but do not reach it: we say it is *incorporeal*. These three qualities cannot be analyzed by means of words; this is why we merge them together into a single one.

Julien attributes much of his understanding of the *Laozi* to the Heshang gong 河上公 (Gentleman on the River) commentary (2nd cent. BCE), (Julien 1842b: vi), which for Chapter 14 states:

無色曰夷言一無采色不可得視而見之. . . 無聲曰希言一無音聲不可得聽而聞之. . . 無形曰微言一無形體不可搏持而得之 (Wang Ka 1997: 52) "Colorless is what *yi* mean, that is, being wholly without color it cannot be discerned by sight. . . Voiceless is what *xi* means, that is, being utterly noiseless, it cannot be heard by listening. . . Incorporeal is what *wei* means, that is, being entirely without form or structure it cannot be got by grasping.

He also stresses the importance of Chinese commentaries in general:

Cette interprétation de Ho-chang-kong est confirmée par les commentateurs les plus renommés, par exemple *Thi-we-tseu*, *Fo-koueï-tseu*, *Te-thsing*, *Li-yong* etc. Elle se trouve aussi dans un extrait considérable de *Lao-tseu*, qui fait partie d'un recueil de fragments philosophiques intitulé *Tseu-p'in-kin-han*, que possède la Bibliothèque royale. D'un autre côté, les nombreux commentaires de *Lao-tseu* que j'ai à ma disposition, n'offrent pas un seul passage qui permette de regarder les trois syllabes *I* (incolore), *Hi* (aphone) et *Wei* (incorporel) comme dépourvues de signification et étrangères à la langue chinoise. (Julien 1842b: vii-viii) This interpretation of Heshang gong is confirmed by the most renowned commentators, for example, Tiwuzi, Fuguizi [Cheng Yining 程以寧,

sobriquet Fuguizi 復圭子 (fl. 1522-1566), *Taishang Daode baozhang yi* 太上道德寶章翼 (Wings to the most high precious stanzas of the way and virtue)], Deqing [Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 (1546-1613) *Laozi Daodejing jie* 老子道德經解 (Explication of the *Daodejing* of Laozi)], and Li Rong [Li Rong 李榮 (act. 656-662), *Laozi Daodejing zhu* 老子道德經注 (*Daodejing* of Laozi, with commentary)], etc. It is also found in a sizable extract of the *Laozi* that is part of a collection of philosophical fragments entitled *Zipin jinhan* [Chen Renxi 陳仁錫 (1581-1636) ed., *Zipin jinhan* 子品金函 (Golden casket of philosophical works)] owned by the Royal Library. On the other hand, the many commentaries that I have at my disposal do not offer a single passage that allows one to regard the three syllables *Yi* (colorless), *Xi* (voiceless), *Wei* (incorporeal) as meaningless and foreign to the Chinese language.

Strauss's defense owed much to another student of Rémusat, Guillaume Pauthier, whose translation of the *Laozi* had been attacked some twenty years earlier by Julien, who found it literally flawed and misleading in general interpretation. (Julien 1842c) In defense, Pauthier launched counterattacks of his own (Pauthier 1831, 1842, 1872).

Finally, the translation of the *Laozi* with commentaries by Léon Wiegier, S.J. (1856-1933) (Wiegier 1913) deserves attention. Each page contains the texts of *Laozi Daodejing Zhang Hongyang zhu* 老子道德經張洪陽註 [of Zhang Wei 張位 (1538-1605)] and *Wang Yiqing yici* 王一清譯辭 (1597 preface) faced with Wiegier's translations of the text followed by a "Résumé des commentaires" (summary of commentaries). It is likely that Wiegier's choice of commentary editions was suggested by Chen Mingbin 陳明霖 (1854-1936), abbot of the Baiyun guan 白雲觀 (White Cloud Temple), where Wiegier lodged for much of his stay in Beijing. Since Wiegier was on close and friendly terms with the abbot, it is also likely that he discussed both text and commentary with him. This old and largely neglected work is still well worth consulting for it offers a rich reward of reliable interpretive insight.

## 6 Scriptural-Scholarly Divide

Besides personal animosity, these exchanges between Pauthier and Julien reveal opposed approaches: Whereas Pauthier's was a Western-oriented approach based ultimately on figurative readings, Julien read the *Laozi* as a Chinese text based on Chinese commentaries. This dichotomy persists to our own day: Subjective interpretation based on considerations foreign to the original text and its indigenous context versus scholarly translation based on sinological expertise and native Chinese traditions of interpretation. Representative examples from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century include for the former George G. Alexander, who was illiterate in Chinese but produced *Lao-tszé the Great Thinker: With a Translation of his Thoughts on the Nature and Manifestations of God* (Alexander 1895), and, for the latter, James Legge, whose *The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu* is still in print today (Legge 1891). However, of works that tried to bridge the gap two deserve particular attention C. Spurgeon Medhurst (1860-1927), Baptist missionary in China but later member of the Liberal Catholic Church and the Theosophical Society, was both literate in Chinese and fully committed to theosophy, so his *The Tao Teh King: A Short Study in Comparative Religion* exhibits characteristics from both sides of the divide, as in his

## Introduction:

. . . [I have] consulted in detail the works of Legge, Balfour, Giles, Carus, . . . and von Strauss during the whole of my preliminary labors. Although unable to agree with any of these gentlemen in their interpretations, to all I am indebted for guidance and suggestions . . . . In the course of my researches I have consulted nearly an equal number of native commentaries, but my chief claim to having come nearer to Lao-tzu's meaning than my predecessors is the fact that it requires a mystic to understand a mystic, and although I dare not venture to number myself with the mystics, I may confess that long before I dreamed of being presumptuous enough to endeavor to translate Lao-tzu into my own tongue, I was accustomed to carry his writing with me on my itineraries as a sort of spiritual *vade mecum*. (Medhurst 1905: vii)

By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the connection between the *Laozi* and the theosophical movement was well established, and Madame Blavatsky herself had included the *Laozi* in her canon of mysticism:

. . . there was ample time to veil the true Lao-tse doctrine from all but his initiated priests. The Japanese, among whom are now to be found the most learned of the priests and followers of Lao-tse, simply laugh at the blunders and hypotheses of the European Chinese scholars; and tradition affirms that the commentaries to which our Western Sinologues have access are not the real occult records, but intentional veils, and that the true commentaries, as well as almost all the texts, have long since disappeared from the eyes of the profane. (Blavatsky 1888: 7)

In taking up her challenge to lift the veils, Medhurst nevertheless used commentaries of Heshang gong 河上公 (2<sup>nd</sup> cent. BCE), Wang Bi 王弼 (226-249), Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039-1112), Wu Cheng 吳澄 (1249-1333), Xu Dachun 徐大椿 (1693-1771), Xue Hui 薛蕙 (1489-1541), Dong Sijing 董思靖 (fl. 1246-1260), and Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1540-1620), whose comments share footnotes with the *Old and New Testament*, *Bhagavad Gita*, the Gnostic Basilides (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471), Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260-ca. 1328), *Upanishads*, Madame Blavatsky, *Rig-Veda*, the Kabbalists, Philo of Alexandria (1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE), Thales of Miletus (7<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE), the *Koran*, and William James (1842-1910), among many others. Although Medhurst's *Laozi*, published by the Theosophical Book Concern and tied to the failing fortunes of the Theosophical Society, was soon forgotten, Strauss's attracted a large German readership well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, exerting profound influence, for example, on the philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965). (Nelson 2020: 107, 110). Note also that Buber was also informed and inspired by Richard Wilhelm's (1873-1930) translations of the *Classic of Changes* (Wilhelm 1924) and the *Laozi* (Wilhelm 1911).<sup>6</sup>

## 7 Illiterate Translators and Their Collaborators

Strauss's *Laozi* was also major source for another subjective interpretation plus scholarly

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<sup>6</sup> See also the English translation: (Wilhelm 1985).

version, Paul Carus's *Lao-Tze's Tao-teh-king* (Carus 1898), which initially made quite a stir and whose influence is now still felt. Two of the best-selling "translators" of the *Laozi*, Ursula Le Guin (Le Guin 1997) and Stephen Mitchell (Mitchell 1988), both draw heavily on Carus, of whom the autodidact scholar and translator Arthur Waley (1889-1966) fifty years earlier also thought highly:

Now scriptures are collections of symbols. Their peculiar characteristic is a kind of magical elasticity. To successive generations of believers they mean things that would be paraphrased in utterly different words. Yet . . . they continue to satisfy the wants of mankind. . . . The distinction I wish to make is between translations which set out to discover what such books meant to start with, and those which aim only at telling the reader what such a text means to those who use it today. For want of better terms I call the first sort of translation 'historical', the second 'scriptural'. . . . There are several good 'scriptural' translations of the *Tao Te Ching*. . . . I think Wilhelm's [Wilhelm 1911] is the best, and next to it that of Carus [added note: "Or rather, of his Japanese collaborator"]. (Waley 1934: 12-13)

Le Guin's and Mitchell's versions are exemplars of such "scriptures," but let us first examine Carus's own version. His collaborator was Suzuki Daisetsu Teitaro 鈴木大拙貞太郎 (1870-1966), better known as D. T. Suzuki, who during the 20<sup>th</sup> century introduced Zen to the West and probably did most to raise interest in Asian philosophy. Suzuki lived with Carus in Chicago (1897-1908), where they had met at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893. Carus's *Laozi* has three parts: "The Old Philosopher's Canon on Reason and Virtue" (Carus 1898: ) is a loose rendering synthesized from pre-existing scholarly editions, principally Julien's via the Protestant missionary Chalmers (Chalmers 1868), whose work is a virtual translation, and Legge's—despite claiming:

. . . [Legge's] is no great improvement on Chalmer's translation; on the contrary, it is in several respects disappointing. With its many additions in parentheses, it makes the impression of being quite literal, while in fact, it is a loose rendering of the original. (Carus 1898: 45)

Legge used parentheses to indicate material not literally present in the original but suggested by connotation. Although awkwardly impeding discourse flow, bracketed material may indicate a superior grasp of textual context and intent. Whereas Legge's parenthetical additions occasionally seem superfluous, many show sensitive insight informed by extensive experience with early Chinese texts, which Carus, who had no grasp of Chinese syntax whatsoever, lacked. Carus continued:

There is a very good German translation by Victor von Strauss, which might be better still had the translator not unduly yielded to his preconception that Lao-Tze was the representative leader of an ancient theosophical movement.

Whereas Strauss was more accurate than Rémusat and Pauthier, whose works he exploited, his *Laozi* is vitiated both by the figurative tradition to which he clung and by an extreme tendency to paraphrase. That Carus thought Legge's version "loose" and Strauss's "very good" indicates that

its literal meaning was utterly beyond him.

Strauss influenced Carus despite his supposed “theosophical” proclivities. The terms “theosophy” and “theosophical” (German *Theosophie*, *Theosoph*, *-en*), had become commonplace in philosophical discourse from at least 1828 with the publication of Isaac Jacob Schmidt, *Über die Verwandtschaft der gnostischtheosophischen Lehren mit den Religions systemen des Orients, vorzüglich dem Buddhismus* (On the relationship between gnostic theosophical teachings and the religious systems of the Orient, particularly Buddhism). (Schmidt 1828), whereas the “theosophical movement” of Carus’s own day only codified such terms with the founding of the Theosophical Society in 1875. Moreover, Carus indulged in the same kind of pan-cultural interpretation of the *Laozi* as Strauss, since references abound in his “The Fundamental Principle of Lao-Tze’s Philosophy” to Plato and Neo-Platonism, Buddhist Sanskrit texts, the Rig-Veda, Zoroastrianism, the thought of Immanuel Kant, “German mytics,” Spinoza, and the *New Testament*. His tendency to interpret Daoist thought in Buddhist terms, like Strauss, is also obvious (Carus 1898: 9-16)

The second part of Carus’s *Laozi*, “Transliteration of the Text: The Old Philosopher’s Canon on Reason and Virtue,” (Carus 1898: 147-274) provides the entire Chinese text printed in two vertical columns per page, where each character is provided with modified Wade-Giles romanization, a page reference to S. Wells Williams, *Syllabic Dictionary of the Chinese Language* (Williams 1874) and one basic meaning in English. Some strings form quasi-intelligible pidgin, for example, from Chapter 1: 故 *ku* 434, Therefore 常 *ch’ang* 740, eternally 無 *wu* 1059, not-having 欲 *yü* 1139, desire 以 *i* 278, thereby 觀 *kwan* 474 [one] sees 其 *ch’i* 342 its 妙 *miao* 592, spirituality. (Carus 1898: 148) Unlikely as it may seem, this is what most interested Le Guin and Mitchell:

I do not know any Chinese. I could approach the text at all only because Paul Carus. . . printed the Chinese text with each character followed by a transliteration and a translation. My gratitude to him is unending. To have the text thus made accessible was not only to have a Rosetta Stone for the book itself, but also to have a touchstone for comparing other English translations one with another. . . . I could . . . see why they varied so tremendously; could see how much explanation, sometimes how much bias, was included in the translation; could discover for myself that several English meanings might lead me back to the same Chinese word. . . . Without the access to the text that the Carus edition gave me, I would have been defeated by the differences among the translations, and could never have thought of following them as guides towards a version of my own. (Le Guin 1997: 107)

As to method: I worked from Paul Carus’s literal version, which provides English equivalents (often very quaint ones) alongside each of the Chinese ideograms. I also consulted dozens of translations into English, German, and French. But the most essential preparation for my work was a fourteen-year-long course of Zen training, which brought me face to face with Lao-tzu and his true disciples and heirs, the early Chinese Zen Masters. (Mitchell 1988: 2)

It appears le Guin and Mitchell thought the “original” Chinese could be accessed through strings of characters in Chinese word order without any sense of syntax. By juggling word order and playing with synonyms, they then must have chosen the most satisfying for “translation.” Le

Guin wisely consulted a trained scholar in Chinese studies, Jerome P. Seaton, to monitor choices, so her renderings are reasonably accurate, but Mitchell's renderings are often so wild that his imagination obviously had no such monitor. His *Acknowledgments* rings rather false:

*Lao Tzu: Text, Notes, and Comments* by Ch'en Ku-ying (Chinese Materials Center, 1981) furnished help on textual matters and commentaries. Of the many translations that I consulted, Liou Kia-Hway's *Tao Tö King* (Gallimard, 1967) was particularly useful. Occasionally I have borrowed a phrase from the translation of Gia-fu Feng and Jane English (Vintage, 1972). (Mitchell 1988:149)

The Chen Guying 陳鼓應 book Mitchell cites is not an original work but the English translation by Rhett Y.W. Young and Roger T. Ames of *Laozi zhuyi ji pingjie* 老子注譯及評介 (*Laozi* with Annotations and Critiques) (Taibei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1970). Comparison of Mitchell's version with this and the French translation by Liu Jiahuai 劉家槐 reveals no such "help"—such claim is entirely specious. *Tao te ching/Lao-tsu; translated by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English* is reasonably accurate, for English's collaborator Feng Jiafu 馮家福 (1919-1985) was a traditionally trained scholar—but Mitchell ignored most of it. Interestingly, the 1997 revised edition of the Feng and English work includes a *Foreward* by Toinette Lippe, who says:

... the more versions I read, the more I realized how inaccessible many of them were. I don't read Chinese and could not compare any of them with the original. So I chose a dozen translations ranging from Arthur Waley's historically accurate version to Witter Bynner's lyrical poem, which seemed to take liberties with the text while perfectly expressing its spirit. (Feng and English 1997: 8)

Another characteristic of Chinese-illiterates readers is their utter disregard of the wealth of recent *Laozi* translation and study. Here Waley's 1934 version is taken as the ultimate in historical accuracy—as if no further improvement were possible or even needed! Bynner's version, thanks to his collaboration with the traditionally trained Kiang Kang-hu (Jiang Kanghu 江亢虎 1883-1954), *The Way of Life According to Lao-tzu: An American version* (Bynner 1944), though an interpretive paraphrase throughout still seems not all that inferior to Waley's in accuracy. Non-Chinese readers' assumption that they can determine quality of translation, however assiduously persued, is manifestly fallacious. Nevertheless, it was Waley who perceptively observed that scriptures "to successive generations of believers . . . mean things that would be paraphrased in utterly different words. Yet for century upon century they continue to satisfy the wants of mankind." Mitchell's bestseller may have such scriptural force, but his claim that his Zen training grants him interpretation legitimacy is nonsense. Buddhist interpreters of the *Laozi* have made similar claims for centuries—all with a legitimacy that Mitchell lacks: reading knowledge of at least one of the original languages involved.

However, can the *Laozi* really be understood in Buddhist terms? One opinion worth noting is from the great translator of Indian Buddhist texts, Xuanzang 玄奘 (602-664), who, ordered by Emperor Wen [Taizong 太宗 (r. 626-649)] to translate the *Laozi* into Sanskrit, said:

"Since the essential principles of Buddhism and Daoism are innately incompatible, how can one use the principles of Buddhism to explain those of Daoism?" Nevertheless, discussion went back and forth for days on end thoroughly scrutinizing everything, but

what was said was vague and vacuous without supporting evidence. Some kept referring to the *sidi* [*ārya-satya*, four noble truths] and the *siguo* [*phala-satya*, four fruits (effects)], while others kept referring to the *wude* (incomprehensible) and *wudai* (freedom from dependency). . . . Xuanzang then said, “Masters, why do you indulge in such debate is beyond my understanding. As for the “four noble truths” and the “four effects,” which you cited earlier, Daoist scriptures are not clarified by them, so why go on with such drivel about the *Laozi* that misses its essential meaning? You might seize on the one gate provided by the “four noble truths,” but that gate means so many different things that the principles involved are hard to understand, . . . This Daoist scripture clarifies the Way in only one sense. Moreover, no independent treatise exists to interpret it. Therefore, it is an sure principle that one cannot cite Buddhist *yizong* (*pakṣa*, precepts) to interpret the *Laozi*.” However, returning to the issue Cai Huang 蔡晃 [fl. 629-647] said,. . . “In just the same way when Sengzhao 僧肇 [384-414] composed his treatises, he copiously cited the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, for he was so familiar with them that he could recite them by heart. . . . Since the sayings of Buddhism so resemble those of Daoism, why should not the thought?” Xuanzang replied, “When Buddhist teaching first began here, its profound scriptures were still unavailable, so the arcane principles spoken by Master Lao resonated somewhat with those of receptive mind, who entirely seemed to have fallen into a trap from which they could not escape. This is why in the *Zhaolun* (Treatises of Sengzhao) and its preface he used them as analogous examples. However, such analogies do not mean that the same absolute limits are shared.” (Daoxuan 1912-1926: 23:386c)<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, extensive Daoist-Buddhist dialogues spanned the ages with much mutual borrowing as each tried to interpret the other in its own continually mutable terms.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to Carus, his third part, “Notes and Comments” (Carus 1898: 277-323) is a heterogeneous collection of explanation of terms and analyses of syntax gleaned from dictionaries, earlier translations, and Chinese and Japanese commentaries. Suzuki’s help here must have been indispensable, and non-Chinese readers must have expended much time and energy over the years in puzzling out what to make of it. Besides Le Guin and Mitchell, Chinese-illiterate “translators” are legion. As Mitchell’s version is far inferior to Le Guin’s, so the rest are more or less deficient as his. No further space need be wasted on them here.

## 8 Modern Scholarly Versions

Listed in the bibliography are selected significant translations: (Karlgrén 1932, 1975), (Waley 1934), (Lin 1948), (Duyvendak 1953, 1954), (Blakney 1955), (Debon 1961), (Chan 1963), (Lao 1963), (Kaltenmark 1965, 1969), (Karlgrén 1975), (Chen 1989), (Henricks 1989), (Mair 1990), (LaFargue 1992), (Wang 1998), (Ivanhoe 2001), (Roberts 2001), (Ames and Hall 2003), (Moeller 2006), (Mathieu 2008), (Porter 2009), (Kim 2012), (Muller 2013), (Wu 2013), and (Minford 2018). Competent in the original language, these translators consulted traditional and modern commentaries (the more recent likely also consulted modern Chinese and Japanese annotated translations), are familiar with the historical context, and aim at the same elusive and illusory goal: an authentic representation of the original meaning of the text. All search

<sup>7</sup> Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667) completed this work in 651.

<sup>8</sup> See (Mollier 2008) and (Assandri 2015, 2021).

commentaries for what is hoped are the most “sensible” interpretations of words and expressions, but since different commentaries are chosen, such translations inevitably differ. Are some better than others? Of course, but none has ever convinced a consensus of scholars that it is unqualifyingly definitive. This can never happen, for the *Laozi* itself is far from an entirely stable text—the recently discovered Guodian and Mawangdui silk and bamboo versions that pre-date by centuries the received “Wang Bi edition” is proof of that.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, for complete “authenticity” the translator would have to be perfectly transparent—subjectively absent from the entire process. Not only is the choice of commentaries subjective, the very impetus to translate the *Laozi* surely reflects a need to engage with it personally, so who among translators can claim perfect objectivity of interpretation? And how many more such versions do we need? Barring new significant archaeological discoveries, justifying new versions, *Laozi* translations, as such, seem to have reached an impasse. However, another type of work surely offers a way out.

## 9 Text and Commentary Integration

Integration of text and commentary means the text of the *Laozi* and its commentary are fully integrated so the meaning of the one is determined by the other. Adjusting what the text means in translation with the meaning of the commentary and vice versa demands that the two complement each other and are not at odds. Such a technique precludes independent presentation of either *Laozi* text or commentary: a translated commentary cannot simply be attached, say, to one of the versions listed above, because none interpret its text consistently in terms of any one particular commentary. Commentaries direct how texts should be read, so if a translated commentary were attached to a text already translated in different terms, incompatibility results. Such is the case with Ariane Rump’s translation of the Wang Bi commentary to the *Laozi* attached to Wing-Tsit Chan’s *Laozi* (Chang and Rump 1979). Isabelle Robinet (1932-2000) insightfully critiqued the problem:

. . . translating a *Lao tzu* commentary by basing it on a previous translation of the *Tao-to ching* leads to difficulties, which means that some distortions are bound to occur in the translation and in the way in which the commentator understands the text. A. Rump’s work suffers owing to her choice of a translation of the *Tao-to ching* which, in more than one respect, does not at all correspond to Wang Pi’s interpretation. . . . (Robinet 1982: 573)

Paul J. Lin’s *A Translation of Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching and Wang Pi’s Commentary* (Lin 1977) attempts such integration but is seriously flawed by inaccuracies of translation and vitiated by excessive paraphrase (Chan 1980: 258-360) as well as overdependence on “Western philosophical and religious lexicon to translate words central to the Chinese intellectual and speculative tradition, without carefully considering the appropriateness or inappropriateness of their cultural connotations.” (Boltz 1979: 85)

Two more combined *Laozi* plus Wang Bi commentary editions have appeared: Richard John Lynn (Lynn 1999) and Rudolf G. Wagner (1941-2019) (Wagner 2003a). Wagner’s work is one part of a tripartite project, which includes Wagner 2000 and Wagner 2003b. All three were

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<sup>9</sup> Henricks 1979: 167-199.

derived from his 1981 habilitation thesis “Philology, Philosophy and Politics in the Zhengshi Era [240–249].” For the translated version see Chapter 4 of Wagner 2003a, “Extrapolative Translation of the *Laozi* through Wang Bi’s Commentary; and a Translation of Wang Bi’s Commentary on the *Laozi*.” Erudite and meticulously researched, Wagner’s version rewards careful reading, but the patchy formatting of the translated text and commentary, both peppered profusely with brackets, is not an easy read. Page after page of textual variants in footnotes also seriously dampen appreciation of what the *Laozi* and Wang Bi actually say. Nevertheless, if one has enough time and patience, it makes a good companion to my own work, which is a far simpler and straightforward presentation of both text and commentary. Note that both agree that Wang Bi’s *xuanxue* reading, which combines Daoist metaphysics with Confucian political philosophy, transforms the *Laozi* into a treatise of statecraft, which sets both clearly apart from any “scriptural” rendering. Note also that many passages from both the Wang Bi and the Heshang Gong commentaries have been accurately translated in a study by Alan Kam-leung Chan (Chan 1986).

The earliest text plus commentary version of the *Laozi* dates from the 1940s when the German sinologist Eduard Erkes (1891-1958) published his “Ho-Shang-kung’s Commentary on Lao-tse” in three issues of *Artibus Asiae* (Erkes 1945, 1946, 1949), later reprinted as a single monograph (Erkes 1950). Overall, the text and commentary are effectively integrated and their translations though rather pedestrian are also generally accurate. However, the *Introduction*, a scant four and a half pages, fails to account for what is known of Heshang Gong and what his commentary aimed at; all Erkes says is:

. . . the purpose of his commentary was not only the furnishing of a philological and philosophical interpretation of the Tao-te-ching but that his chief aim consists in enabling the reader to make practical use of the book and in teaching him to use it as a guide to meditation and to a life becoming a Taoist skilled in meditative training. (Erkes 1945:127-128)

The Heshang Gong commentary was a particular favorite of translators inclined to give it a “scriptural” character, for example, Strauss and Carus. Besides its reputation as a guide to meditation and mental and physiological self-cultivation, it has been described as having a decidedly “religious” character (Chan 1986: 3, 5, 44, 90, 106, 115, 119, 166, 190) (Chan 1998: 89, 90, 94); it was also instrumental in the development of religious Daoism. Erkes’s version seems neither “scriptural” nor “religious,” which seems to have prompted a new “scriptural” version by Dan G. Reid: *The Heshang Gong commentary on Lao Zi’s Dao De Jing, Translations and Additional Commentary*. (Reid 2015) However, it is a mystery how Reid did this “new” translation, since in his “Translating the Dao De Jing” note he makes some very odd observations about the nature of classical Chinese:

Because the ancient Chinese dialects are no longer spoken, “expert opinions” on correct translation can in many cases never be more than opinions . . . . The grammatical rules of Classical Chinese are very different from modern languages. For example, the subject of a sentence, articles, and specification as to whether a word is meant as a noun, verb, or adjective, may all be included or left out, often depending on style rather than grammar. (Reid 2015: 18)

Although we are told in “About the Author” that “Dan G. Reid taught himself how to read classical Chinese with the help of textbooks, online tools, and internet forums.” (Reid 2015: 248), we must conclude that his level of classical Chinese only allowed him to match original text passages with early translations—it is most unlikely that he actually understands texts directly, for no sense of the original syntax is found in his renderings. Note that his “translations” of the *Laozi* text and commentary are not presented as they appear in Chinese editions—as it does in Erkes version—interlinear commentary inserted between text passages, but is separated into two major sections: (1) numbered *Laozi* text chapters in “translation” (without original Chinese text) followed by (2) all passages of commentary with the Chinese texts keyed to the numbered *Laozi*. No attempt is made to integrate text and commentary. Reid does not identify the edition he used of the *Heshang gong zhangju* 老子河上公章句 (*Laozi* rendered by Heshang Gong in paragraphs and clauses), whose title is never mentioned (actually no Chinese work is referenced anywhere). Nevertheless, thanks to its “scriptural” appeal and infused with Reid’s proselytizing enthusiasm and convincing serious intent, his version has generated much popular interest, especially among Western Daoist circles. But the work as a whole, a facile, extremely loose paraphrase of both text and commentary, fails to improve on Erkes’s long out of date version. Would that a competent scholar undertakes a new version soon.<sup>10</sup>

The study and translation of the *Laozi xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注 (*Laozi* with commentary by Xiang’er), done by Stephen R. Bokenkamp (Bokenkamp 1999: 29-148) is an exemplar of scholarly acumen and translation accuracy. However, Bokenkamp does not attempt integration of the text of the *Laozi* and the commentary and only in “Key to Chapter Numbers in the *Laozi*” indicates to which parts of the text the commentary belongs. Since the commentary (late 2<sup>nd</sup>-early 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. CE) seems primarily a polemical catachism of the Tianshi dao 天師道 (Celestial Master movement) centering on the teachings of a deified Laozi, (Bokenkamp 1999: 29) only a minimum connection to the *Laozi* itself is maintained:

The introduction and translation presented here. . . . [are] to explicate the Xiang’er commentary and to learn from it as much as possible about the early Celestial Masters. I will thus not make reference to other translations or interpretations of the *Laozi*, nor will I attempt a thoroughgoing comparison of the Xiang’er understanding of the *Laozi* with that of other commentators and translators. (Bokenkamp 1999: 31)

As a Celestial Masters catechism, Xiang’er’s reading of the *Laozi* must be radically different from any other commentary-based interpretation, thus here is another project crying out for attention.

A recent work by Friederike Assandri, integrates translations of the *Laozi* with the commentary of the Daoist priest and leader of the *Chongxuan* 重玄 (Twofold Mystery) movement, Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (601/4-690) (Assandri 2021), the *Daode jing xujue yishu kaiti* 道德經序訣義疏開題 (Expository Commentary to the *Daode jing* with a Preface and an Introduction)<sup>11</sup>:

<sup>10</sup> An accurate and fluent annotated version has already appeared in an unpublished PhD dissertation by Misha Andrew Tadd (Tadd 2013: 444-572), which also meticulously situates the commentary in the context of Eastern Han (25-220 CE) intellectual thought.

<sup>11</sup> See also the detailed description of Cheng’s work in Robinet 1977.

. . . the Expository Commentary consists of different layers: there is firstly the base text of the *Daode jing*, which is set in smallcaps. Cheng Xuanying's line by line commentary is set in regular font. The structural commentary, which introduces each chapter and is repeated before sub-sections within chapters, is set in cursive font. (Assandri 2021: 43)

Assandri's admirable work should set the standard for other needed integrations of translated commentary editions, such as the *Laozi zhigui* 老子指歸 (Main gist of the *Laozi*) (chapters 38-81 extant) by Yan Zun 嚴遵 (fl. 83 BCE-10 CE), as well as works by later commenators such as Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039-1112), Wu Cheng 吳澄 (1249-1333), Xue Hui 薛蕙 (1489-1541), and Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1540-1620). Each would reveal both a different reading of the *Laozi* and an indication of the progress of Chinese hermeneutics and philosophical positions down the ages.

## 10 Conclusion

This detailed survey of the reception and translation of the *Laozi* from earliest times to the present incorporates much history of Western Sinology, for it began to attract intense attention from the very beginning with the Jesuit missionaries. Such attention has been sustained generation after generation for the next 300 years until now—and likely for many more years to come. Versions rendered into Western languages range from good to bad, from something close to genuine authenticity to misleading paraphrases that have little to do with the original meaning. The text obviously has a mysterious charm that inspires trained Sinologists and armchair Daoists alike to engage with it and render it in ever newer and hoped-for better words—a process for which there seems to be no end in sight.

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