

# Rewriting the Dao:

A look at introductions of English versions of the *Laozi*

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American Daoism is a unique development of the Daoist tradition that actually tends to separate itself from that tradition. The central text of American Daoism is the *Laozi*, which has been translated into English by trained scholars and other persons who may not have had formal training in approaching the text. One aspect of American Daoism is the production of new versions of the *Laozi* by authors who do not necessarily understand the Chinese language. In this paper, I look at the introductions of these pseudo-translations to gain insight to the authors' motivation and thoughts for their works. Through these authors' justifications for rewriting the *Laozi* and the process they undertake to do so is made clear and a new, Chinese-distant *Laozi* aligned with Western culture and religion is found as well.

アメリカの道教は、道教の伝統・歴史の中でユニークな発展を遂げており、実際にはその伝統と歴史から分離する傾向がある。アメリカ道教が重んじるテキストは英訳の『老子』であり、このテキストは、中国文化などを専門とする学者やまったく専門外の英語の『老子』に精通している人々によって書かれている。アメリカ道教の特徴の一つは、必ずしも著者が中国語を理解し、原文を読んで新しいバージョンの『老子』を作成するわけではない。この論文では、これらの中国語原文に基づかない英文『老子』の序文から、著者の動機と『老子』に対する考えなどを読み解く。その結果、著者が新たな『老子』を書き上げる理由、その過程などが明らかになり、西洋の文化や宗教と調和した中国離れした新たな『老子』の姿が見えてくるのである。

Keywords: American Daoism, *Laozi*, cultural interaction, translation,  
popular religion

## Opening

In a previous presentation I gave about Daoism and its development in America (King, 2022), I delved into a small explanation of my thoughts on the treatment of “American Daoism” by the many scholars in Academia today. While the question “What is Daoism?” is considered quite difficult for scholars, as no one specific definition can be agreed upon considering the breadth of Daoist teachings and culture and their influence around the globe, the idea of a somewhat definable and more than negatable “American Daoism” has taken hold in academic fields dealing with this culture and history. As I tried to give a basic introduction of what I understood to be American Daoism so

as to look at translations in different languages, I felt a strong similarity between the negation of religious Daoism that brought about the dichotomy of philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism that still persists today and this current view of “Real” Daoism and an almost deplorable American Daoism.

After I finished my presentation, I went back to the quotes that I happened to choose.

“Daoism was accordingly branded as an idolatrous superstition and ... dismissed as a ‘false sect.’” “Daoism betokened a form of perverted paganism, and in its modern religious embodiment represented a sorry lapse from the purity of its original philosophical teachings.” (Clarke, 2000: 38)

“Americans who have learned about Taoism from ... translators, and pseudo-translators, who have often been wholly oblivious to the true realities of Taoism.” “For what passes for ‘Taoism’ in the books in B. Dalton has nothing to do with real Taoism, if we define ‘real Taoism’ as the traditions that have been practiced in China for over twenty centuries. ... [T]he truth about this situation is that thousands of Westerners have been literally deluded about Taoism.” (Kirkland, 1997: 1-2)

In the first quote Clarke sums up how religious Daoism was handled as westerners first began their pursuits in exploring Chinese culture and in the second Kirkland gives his opinion of the writings and traditions that have founded and propagated American Daoism. In these two quotes, I noticed the use of false, as in that which is either true or false, and real, where real means essentially what is found to be true (or the truth) in respect to what is then found to be false. It would almost seem that, in a way, Daoism or at least those who study Daoism are setting up a dichotomy once again. While the reasoning for this dichotomy of true versus false, traditional versus American, differs greatly from the philosophy versus religion dichotomy that most scholars would agree did not actually represent Daoism as we understand it now, I cannot help but to think that attempting any such a division, separation or negation may lead to future issues when scholars look back at the work aimed at once again defining true Daoism.

I am not very well read on the idea of cultural appropriation, but while reading the critiques of American Daoist writings, I found myself thinking that part of the negation of American Daoism is linked to it, especially when looking at how American Daoism does not have a strong link to Chinese culture or history. While I can understand this critique, in this short paper I would like to look at versions of the *Laozi* from the standpoint of cultural interaction, and as new developments in the global growth of Daoism.

The focus in this paper will not be the actual texts of the *Laozi*, which also merit much analyzation as they lay out the teachings of American Daoism, but instead will be the introductions and

explanations of the *Laozi* that the authors have added to justify or explain their works, to explain why they are suited for translating (writing?) the *Laozi* and/or how their version is different. I started looking more closely at these introductions after running across a simple introduction of a Chinese university scholar's *Laozi* translation which included the following explanations:

“Naturally, different translators had interpreted Laozi differently in places. I am lucky in that I have the benefit of referring to all these different interpretations, dwelling on them, and in the end unlocking many puzzles that had remained in many of the existing translations. My task is simple: to preserve the meaning of Laozi, to write in plain language, and to let the world know that Daodejing is a practical, down-to-earth guide for anyone who aspires to live a rich, peaceful life in harmony with nature.” (Ho, 2009: 2)

“The Living Dao is Living  
Because  
It is not bound by the text of this or that  
version of Laozi.  
Names are but names.  
Languages are only languages.  
The translator seeks the truth,  
the way of living,  
that will bring peace to the mind and the world.  
In this he is confident  
he is one with Laozi.” (Ho, 2009: 3)

Until reading this, I had maintained in my mind two kinds of translations of the *Laozi*: one of the scholarly kind that followed the text and was a true translation and one of the popular kind that was bound to stray from the original text and create a *Laozi* text the author feels is more authentic than a verbatim, word-for-word translation, often based on other translations. However, the above explanation shows a scholar who seeks to translate through reviewing existing translations and justifies his outcome by saying that the text is not the scale by which to judge a translation. If a trained academic can put forth such a far-reaching explanation and justification (a kind of ‘If I feel this is right then it is right, so who are you to say otherwise’), I would like to see other introductions as well to peer into the mind of those who ‘rewrite’ the Dao. I would like to point out here that when looking through various English versions of the *Laozi*, I noticed that many writers (translators?) chose not to use the word translation, but instead used the word version. While this may just be a chance choice of words and not have any deep meaning, it does seem representative

of the common practice of gathering English translations and commentaries in English to serve as material for a “new version” that is created through recycling and personal insight.

### Introductions in Popular *Laozi* English Versions

In looking through various versions of the *Laozi* that can be found in English, I found many different types of texts, from those that are produced through blogs to those that are published online, from those that try to follow the original text to those that take the ideas put forth in the *Laozi* and explain them in modern day terms. (Having little resemblance to its Chinese origins) I would like to start by looking at the introductions of three easily found popular English versions, one by Stephen Mitchell, another by Jonathan Star and the other by Ursula K. Le Guin. These are three books that I have come across often online and in bookstores, and are among those commonly recommended on homepages dealing with new age, religion, etc. Mitchell's and Le Guin's versions have previously been singled out specifically as part of American Daoism and representative of the its tendency to ignore the history and traditions of Daoist and Chinese culture. Please note that many of the English versions that can be found in the bookstores in America often include commentaries and you can find explanations and justifications in these as well. However, I would like to limit this paper to the introductions of the *Laozi*, focusing solely on the explanations and justifications I introduced above.

#### Stephen Mitchell's introduction

“As to method, I worked from Paul Carus's literal version, which provides the equivalent (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-years-long course in Zen training, which brought me face to face with Lao-tzu and his true disciplines and heirs, the early Chinese Zen masters.”

“I have often been fairly literal or as literal as one can be with such a subtle, kaleidoscopic book as the Tao Te Ching. But I have paraphrased, expanded, contracted interpreted worked with the text, played with it, until it became embodied in a language that felt genuine to me. If I haven't always translated Lao-tzu's words, my intention has always been to translate his mind.” (Mitchell, 1988: x)

In Mitchell's introduction, we see a trend that exists throughout English versions of the *Laozi*, background research that consists of collecting and reading translations and/or commentaries in languages the author can understand. In most cases, this does not include modern or classical Chinese texts. However, some authors do choose to look at the Chinese version, but this may be

limited to looking at the meaning of individual Chinese characters or consulting with a Chinese speaker, etc. about the text. Next there is the justification of why the author can or should be attempting a new version of the *Laozi*, which here is the author's 14 years of Zen training. (Zen training being justification for undertaking a translation of the *Laozi* shows not only the grouping or alignment of Daoism and Zen Buddhism in America, but also how the Daoist religious tradition is not considered related to the *Laozi*.) Finally, Mitchell explains why his text may differ from original versions of the *Laozi*, he is aiming not to follow the text but to follow the image of Laozi, the historical/fictional person, he has. (The authors of the American Daoist *Laozi* often write about Laozi, describing him as a spiritual guide of sorts that appears to them or whose thoughts they try to understand, as they may not be represented in any text, either Chinese or English. Their versions may represent a kind of spiritual achievement, where Laozi visits them and they attain insight that is of course not in the text.) However, how Mitchell has come to form this image or what it is based on is not explained, for it is not solely based on the *Laozi* text.

#### Jonathan Star's introduction

"I was not reading the Tao Te Ching, but someone's interpretation of it. So, in an attempt to penetrate the scripture's inner meaning. I read dozens of commentaries, studied the Chinese text in detail, and compared different texts and interpretations. This, finally, gave me the clarity I was looking for." (Star, 2001: 6)

"In most places I have stayed close to the original Chinese- going so far as to translate some of the characters etymologically. In other places I have strayed from the original in order to make clear certain ideas, or emphasize teachings. Sometimes I have added a connective line to link disparate ideas, bring integrity to the verse, or reveal a hidden teaching. This translation is certainly not definitive, but is one possible version. It is a blending of the original text, the insights of many past translators, and years of contemplation of the spiritual truths and vision put forth in the Tao Te Ching." (Star, 2001: 10)

Star justifies his translation by basically stating that the *Laozi* he had read was a translation and not the 'real thing.' To find this, he then read commentaries and translations and looked at the Chinese text (This translation is credited in the introduction to Star himself and another writer named Ming, who may be assumed to be of Chinese descent and may have helped Star approach the Chinese text. (Star, 2001: 11)). Somehow, the non-original translations and commentaries mixed with a study of the Chinese text led Star to the true meaning of the *Laozi* and he was then able to update or improve upon the previous English versions and possibly the original Chinese text. Part of his qualifications for writing his version are the years he spent contemplating spiritual truths and the *Laozi*.

### Ursula K. Le Guin's introduction

“The Tao Te Ching is partly prose, partly in verse; but as we define poetry now, not by rhyme and meter but as a patterned intensity of language, the whole thing is poetry. I wanted to catch that poetry, its terse, strange beauty. Most translations have caught meanings in their net, but prosily, letting the beauty slip through. And in poetry, beauty is no ornament; it is the meaning. It is the truth. We have that on good authority.” (Le Guin, 2011: 1)

“Scholarly translations of the Tao Te Ching as a manual for rulers use vocabulary that emphasizes the uniqueness of the Taoist “sage,” his masculine, his authority. This language is perpetuated, and degraded, in most popular versions. I wanted a Book of the Way accessible to a present-day, unwise, unpowerful, and perhaps unmale reader, not seeking esoteric secrets, but listening for a voice that speaks to the soul. I would like that reader to see why people have loved the book for twenty-five hundred years.” (Le Guin, 2011: 2)

Le Guin offers a literary justification for her translation and possibly for why it should differ from the other English versions of the *Laozi*. Her version of the *Laozi* is based on the idea that it is poetry and therefore translating it is not just a matter of conveying meaning, but conveying the beauty of the original text is what matters. As with Star, the original text and therefore its beauty are approached with outside help, this time through the collaboration of a professor of Chinese. She also mentions scholarly translations and seems to set her version aside, claiming she is writing for a different audience. Again justifying differences from other texts or the original, and it should be noted here that through my reading I have found readers' referring to Le Guin's version as a somewhat feminist work.

### Introductions in Self-help/Christian *Laozi* English Versions

In addition to the three versions that I introduced above, I would also like to look at three books that differ, not only in their audiences but possibly in their function, from the mainstream American Daoist versions that I have found in looking at trends in English versions of the *Laozi*. These versions seem to be more focused on a way of living and carry messages and stories about everyday life. These self-help or motivational type versions of the *Laozi* can often stray far from the scholarly works and even the pseudo-translations like the ones I introduced. The titles of these *Laozi* versions stray from the traditional titles of *Laozi* or “*Tao Te Ching*” as well: *Centered Living/Centered Leading: The way of Light and Love*, *Jesus and Lao Tzu: Adventures with the Tao Te Ching* and *Change your thoughts, change your life: living the wisdom of the Tao*. The first two of these are written aligning American Daoism with Christianity. (This itself is quite an interesting idea that could only come about through the definite negation of Chinese and religious Daoist

cultural ties. In other words, I believe the dichotomy of religious and philosophical Daoism is necessary for these Christian-Daoist works to have come to be written.) One shared trait of these and other self-help/motivational versions of the *Laozi* is that the books themselves are quite long and contain much commentary. Compared to many scholarly and popular versions that keep commentary to a minimum to allow the reader to draw their own conclusions and make their own discoveries, the authors of this group tend to give examples, stories and anecdotes to assist the reader in relating to the text of the *Laozi*. (even though they have already arranged/modified the text) Dyer's version, in digital format, is a whopping 799 pages long, so the short read of a concentrated text becomes a lengthy introduction of the author's Dao. Another interesting trait to be found in these versions is the tendency to use not only male pronouns (he, his, him) but to incorporate female pronouns (she, her, her) as well.

#### G. Christopher Scruggs introduction

"When I began reading the Tao Te Ching, the similarities between the teaching of Lao Tzu and the wisdom literature of the Old Testament were immediately apparent. As I began studying the book I was struck by the many parallels between the teachings of the Tao and the feel and content of Jesus, especially the wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount. (Scruggs, 2016: 1)

Soon I began to paraphrase the wisdom of the Tao in Christian terms ... I tried as best I could to find a way to make Eastern wisdom accessible to Christian laypeople ... I have adopted the Tao in expressly Christian terms. The result is not the Tao Te Ching; it is an overtly Christian adaptation of the book." (Scruggs, 2016: 2)

"The goal is to help Christians, and especially Christian leaders live wisely."

The Tao Te Ching contains a lot of advice applicable to leaders and to the process of leading. This advice is directed not so much at what we do as it is directed toward who we are as leaders." (Scruggs, 2016: 3)

Here is the first introduction from a "Christian" version of the *Laozi*. When I first discovered the existence of "Dao of Christ," I immediately wondered how authors would deal with linking Daoism to Christianity. I read through Scrugg's introduction and found that while the idea of mixing the two traditions (I believe 'tradition' was chosen to avoid any religious connotations and/or definitions.), there was no definition of Daoism in any form and no real description of the tradition it has produced, whether religious or philosophical. Scruggs does consider that other Christians who read his book may object to his "inter-religious" dialogue (Scruggs, 2016: 5), and in the thirty-page introduction he wrote he tries to layout various similarities in teachings and also concepts and teachings that don't necessarily match with each other. What is seen is a clear explanation that his version of the *Laozi* that follows the explanation is a Christian one and is

written for a Christian audience, to help them as they practice Christian principles in their daily lives. The similarities to Christian teachings Scruggs found when reading the *Laozi* served as way to or a foundation for him to approach the *Laozi* in a Christian way, without negating this background. An interesting point that I would like to note is that many English versions take issue with the teachings for and about rulers in the *Laozi*. In general, American Daoism sees the *Laozi* as a book filled with insight to help people grow and understand the world around them, and not as a book about how to rule (which can also include oppress) others. This is why the parts about ruling or being a ruler are re-written or deleted in some texts. (Justification for this is sometimes included, blaming misplaced lines or phrases on the long history of the transmission of the *Laozi*.) Scruggs takes the rare stance of accepting the text as containing information about ruling and makes a point to stress this in his Christian version.

#### George Breed's Introduction

“For the past several decades, I have studied the teachings of Jesus in both the canonical and apocryphal gospels. During that same period, I also tracked down as many English translations of the Tao Te Ching as I could find; in the process, I became quite familiar with the consciousness of Lao Tzu, the reputed author. I came to feel that I knew both Jesus and Lao Tzu personally. When someone else's consciousness becomes your consciousness, this is as personal as it gets. I wanted to write about the experience.” (Breed, 2014: 7)

“As I pondered how to express this in writing, something wonderful happened. Jesus and Lao Tzu appeared in my writing room most every morning over a period of several months ... we had various adventures and conversations in which they educated me further on the meaning of a particular Tao Te Ching chapter.” (Breed, 2014: 8)

Breed's version of the *Laozi* is explained/accompanied by stories of his adventures and conversations with Laozi, the historical figure, and Christ. While I cannot really explain the above quote from his introduction, it seems that he felt he developed a special link to both of these figures and this then led him to wanting to explain this and what he came to understand to others. Once Breed began this task he not only understood Laozi and Christ, but they came to him as friends to help him understand the Dao. This version of the *Laozi* is one of the more original, with the chapters of the *Laozi* being overshadowed by the stories and explanations within these stories. Breed has created a spoken-version of the *Laozi* using Laozi and Christ as characters to spell out the understanding he has obtained.

#### Dr. Wayne W. Dyer's Introduction

“*Change your thoughts-Change your life* is the end product of my yearlong journey of research,



contemplation, and application of the Tao Te Ching” (Dyer, 2007: 1)

“From those ten translations I’d gone over, I pieced together the 81 passages in *Change your thoughts-Change your life*, based on how they resonated with me. This book is my own personal interpretation of the Tao Te Ching, each verse of which gave me an insight into life and nature. As you read on, know that these pages were pasted together from what I personally felt were the most useful aspects of those ten different translations I studied, and I apologize for any exclusions (or if the inclusions don’t seem to be a perfect fit)” (Dyer, 2007: 4)

“As you read *Change Your Thoughts-Change Your life*, you’re going to find your way through Lao-tzu’s mystical and practical philosophy, along with the joy of applying it to your life in today’s modern world.” (Dyer, 2007: 7)

In the final introduction for this paper, we see what I believe has now become the norm for versions of the American Daoist *Laozi*. Dyer states clearly that his version of the *Laozi* is his own personal version based on ten other English versions of the *Laozi*, not based on but pieced together from these existing versions without him introducing his own material. and he also states that his text of the *Laozi* writing is that. This clear admission differs greatly from the one-line admissions that are easily glanced over stating the assistance of a Chinese speaker or that they author used a specific English version of the *Laozi* as a base. This difference represents an important change in American Daoism. Early versions of the American Daoist *Laozi* danced around the original Chinese text, making mention of it and the characteristics of the Chinese language, and sometimes mentioned working with someone of Chinese heritage or versed in Chinese culture to give background support to their new version, showing the author’s desire to link his/her work to the original Chinese text. However, recent translations openly treat the available English versions of the *Laozi* as viable resource materials that, when consulted in numbers, allow one to grasp the teachings of the *Laozi*. This admission of not referring to the original Chinese text, may be overlooked, but effectively allows the establishment of an American Daoist tradition based on English versions only. This *Laozi* may be more practical and applicable to people’s daily lives, which could be why of English versions of the *Laozi* in America are continually popular.

### In conclusion

Translators of the *Laozi* often explain how difficult it is to read and translate the text as it is simple and dense in form, but lacking almost any auxiliary explanation of what the author(s) wanted to express or their reasoning. In contrast to this situation, the *Laozi* of American Daoism gives us much information about the author’s motivation, background, and the materials used in writing their version.

In relation to existing or previous English translations/versions of the *Laozi*, authors tend to criticize them as not fitting the image of what the *Laozi* should be, while not making clear where this image actually comes from or what it is based upon. Even with this critique, these same authors then turn to these along with other references (mostly in English) to determine what the real *Laozi* should be. In recent versions, authors admit openly that they only refer to English versions of the *Laozi*, which may represent a clear division from Chinese history and culture and Daoism in China. Authors whose expertise comes from spiritual or (non-Daoist) religious training consult various sources, once again mostly non-Chinese language sources, to piece together the *Laozi*, improving on not only the English versions, but also the Chinese versions as well. American Daoist authors often have an image of Laozi the historical figure and express an understanding of what he is trying to expound upon, which also facilitates their rewriting of the *Laozi*.

The *Laozi* versions that are produced in American Daoism are becoming more unique as they are written for varying audiences. Traditionally, the market group for English versions of the *Laozi* may have been high school or college students that have become interested in new age religions or spiritualism (and occasionally a middle-aged person looking for guidance in his/her life), but now the *Laozi* is written for different audiences, including Christian readers, and authors make clear note of this. The versions are often labeled as personal versions based on the authors own experiences and understanding, even while they put forth the idea that their version of the *Laozi* is better. Last, I think it is important to note that the connection between Chinese and Daoist culture and history is all but vacant from the American Daoist versions of the *Laozi*. I hope to dive further into the American Daoist versions of the *Laozi* and document how the concepts of the *Laozi* and Daoism develop in order to gain further insight into this cultural interaction.

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