Anyone who has heard Bruce talk about translations of the *Laozi* will be familiar with his low opinion of scholarly translations, unaware as they are of Daoist oral traditions and practices. He makes a very good point. Luckily, he will soon be bringing out his own commentary written from within the oral tradition. All traditions develop their own technical terms, and it is often these that are unavailable to scholars who are outside the tradition. All they can offer is the meaning of the text on a public level – what the words meant to readers of the time. Still, in my view, engaging with the text as well as we can at that level is a worthwhile undertaking (especially if you also have access to the oral tradition), and some of the translations below make some interesting connections in the direction of possible technical and practical readings of the text. While they are no substitute to training within the living tradition, the best of these translations can still be a supplement of great value to our own practices.

I have been collecting translations of the Laozi for the last thirty-five years or so, and studying the original text(s), with an eye to practice, for thirty. The following is not a complete catalogue of my collection, but rather a selection of the best, the more useful, and the ones to avoid.

**A brief note on the different versions of the Laozi**

The history of the transmission of the text is somewhat tangled (see https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/ for the complete story). This is a simplified overview. The received version is, at the end of the day, the one that accompanied the most popular and widely circulated commentary, namely that ascribed to Heshanggong (179-157 B.C.E.) from the Han dynasty. The received version is often called the ‘Wang Bi’ version named after the author of the other great early commentary (Wang Bi 226-249 C.E.), however, it is clear that the text of the Laozi that is now attached to the Wang Bi commentary is not the original (see Wagner, page 4 below, for details), but is actually a version – with some differences – of the Heshanggong edition.

In the early 1970s, two ancient Han dynasty editions (before 168 B.C.E.) of the Laozi were unearthed near a village called Mawangdui. These remain the earliest complete versions that we have. Recently another Han version has come to light (known as the ‘Beida’ as it is housed in the Beijing University), but it is yet to be fully translated. It is interesting in that in parts it is identical to the Mawangdui versions and in others to the Heshanggong.

The oldest version (c. 400 B.C.E.) that we have was found at Guodian in 1993, but represents only about 40% of the full text.

These early editions have transformed the modern study of the text. It is worth remembering that the oldest texts are not necessarily the ‘original’ or most accurate versions. Still, there is no denying their significance as you will see in this bibliography. While there are many differences between the various versions, there is no radical philosophical difference between them. In
fact, the modern discoveries have in many cases demonstrated how coherent and stable the transmission of the text has been over the last 2500 years.

Below, I have listed translations, in alphabetical order of the (senior) translator, within sections. The books collected within each subsequent section need to be treated with greater caution than those listed in the preceding section.

**Recommended translations**

These are editions with which you cannot go wrong. I recommend having several if you are interested in becoming familiar with the text.


This is a first class translation. It is actually three translations in one: the Mawangdui versions, differentiated when necessary, with the received version in the notes where it differs. This is my favourite. Were you to buy only one edition, this would be an excellent choice.


The oldest version of the *Laozi*. This is an excellent companion to the Henricks above.


A simple and accurate translation of the standard received text (Wang Bi).


Not as accurate as Wagner (page 4 below) – meaning the actual Chinese text Lynn uses is not the critical edition that Wagner has produced – but it is much more accessible if a bit wordy. Lynn is a very good translator. His translation of the Yijing is the one I reach for first.


French edition: This is a very good piece of scholarship. Matthieu has drawn successfully on the Henricks books above, both in terms of content and style, as well as on some of the most interesting Chinese scholarship. He offers four complete translations: the received text (which he calls «vulgate») in the main translation, with the Mawangdui and Guodian variations clearly noted. The notes are rich,
with useful glosses and references to other important texts. My only quibble is that there is not a single Chinese character in the entire book, but that will please many more people than it bothers.

Other noteworthy translations

If you wish to continue your exploration of, and engagement with, the Laozi, these will fill out your perspective, though they are not quite as reliable as the ones above.


A simple and fairly accurate translation. Gets close to the spareness of the Chinese, but at the cost of depth.


Well regarded, now a bit dated.


This translation is based on the Mawangdui finds, with additions from other versions. It is just about possible to work out the additions, though it is not easy. The commentary gives some insight into modern Chinese scholarship. While I am not convinced by his overall view of the Laozi, this is an interesting if rather challenging book. Not the place to start and not suitable as a stand alone copy.


The great thing about Lau’s translation is that he understood that the concrete nature of Anglo Saxon is a much better fit with Chinese than more abstract, Latin-based English. This edition has translations of both the received version, and a conflation (regrettably) of the two Mawangdui texts. There is a Penguin edition of his translation of the received version.


My initial impression was that this translation is rather poor. It struck me as rather archaic in places, attempting to be overly poetic at the expense of accuracy. Reading the introduction, commentary and notes has somewhat improved my view, if not entirely. Roberts has some real insights, and there is a great deal that is thought provoking and makes you look at the familiar with new eyes. And for
that I thank him. However, there are many word choices that would have ben-
efitted from some explanation and reference to the original. And this brings us 
to the real sticking point for me: he is not always as clear as he could be about 
which version he is working from, ostensibly it is the received text ... except when 
it’s not. He does refer to the Mawangdui and Guodian texts separately, though his 
translations of those are also problematic in places. This is where including the 
Chinese would have been very helpful. This is an interesting version, with some 
valuable scholarship, but it needs to be read carefully (along side other transla-
tions), and it is certainly not the place to start and not suitable as a stand alone 
copy.

Critical Text and Translation* SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture. (Albany: State 

This is a superb piece of scholarship. Wagner has produced a critical edition of 
the version of the *Laozi* that Wang Bi must have used (or as close to it as can 
presently be inferred) and of his commentary. The translation itself isn’t as read-
able as the Lynn (page 2 above). It is important, but very demanding.

**Less useful translations**

These translations are still better than most, just not quite as good as those above; several just 
due to their age.

Ames, Roger T., and David L. Hall, *Daodejing - Making This Life Significant - A Philosophical 

The philosophy that comes across is more often their own than *Laozi*’s.


Rather loose in places. No longer new.

Gibbs, T., trans., *Lao-Tzu: “My words are very easy to understand”, Lectures on the Tao Te Ching by 

Tai Chi Master Cheng Man-Ching’s reading of Laozi. Cheng was rather Confu-
cian in orientation. His commentary doesn’t add much at all to the text.


An early translation, now dated. Out of copyright and easily available.


Poetic, but not that accurate.

Karlgren was a giant in the study of the ancient Chinese language. His work continues to be relevant if you are engaging with the original text.


Mixes the order of the chapters according to his own theory.


A Victorian translation showing its age, but used by many because it is out of copyright.


This is a translation of the Mawangdui versions (conflated). It is not too wordy, which I like; though not as accurate as the Henricks or Lau. Mair has long been an advocate of the view that early Chinese philosophy was directly influenced by the Indian traditions; a view I find unconvincing.


Michael attempts a practice-oriented reading. Unfortunately, he is not a practitioner and it has not occurred to him to talk to any. His complete translation is at the back of the book.


Still well regarded, despite its age. Waley taught himself Chinese. His translation of the Odes (as The Book of Songs) is still valuable.
Problematic

These translations are to be treated with great caution. They cannot be relied upon to give you an accurate reading of any of the traditional versions. By the term ‘pick-and-mix’, which I use below, I mean that the translator has chosen his (they are all men) favourite bits of different versions of the text to produce his own, unique blend. The result, while perhaps interesting, belongs to no tradition or community; a purely (post)modern invention.


Very patchy. It was the only Heshanggong translation for a long time.


A recent, much praised translation. I find it surprisingly cavalier and woolly considering that Minford was a professor of Chinese. His rendering of ‘the sage’ as ‘the Taoist’ is problematic and quite misleading. His Heshanggong commentary is inaccurate, and he mixes the Laozi text and commentary in confusing ways, adds in his own bits, and formats passages in peculiar ways. His other favoured commentary, by Liu Yiming, is his own translation of two commentaries by Liu redacted and amalgamated in a way that makes it impossible to check against the originals, rendering it useless.


A pick-and-mix.


Pick-and-mix of editions and commentaries.


As with many versions, this is more of an interpretation than a translation.


This version is interesting in that it offers a view of modern Chinese scholarship on the text. Generally, the translation is quite good. Unfortunately, it is a pick-and-mix with no way of knowing which version is being used; an all too common practice. Wang also mixes the order and even puts specific lines in different places according to his thematic presentation.
Ones to avoid

This list is to caution against what may appear to be good translations, according to reviews on Amazon etc., but are in fact so distorted in one way or another that they cannot but lead the reader astray. Any of the books above would be better.


This is anything but a definitive edition. It is interesting in that he gives a breakdown of the Chinese to each chapter, giving you the idea that you can build your own translation. Bizarrely, his own rendering of the text at the front is a very long way from the original; so far that it cannot really be called a translation.


An interpolation from someone who knows no Chinese.


I have tried many ways to detail the pitfalls of this book without sounding brutally negative. No luck so far.

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