

# Laozi *Daodejing* Bibliography

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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.

Henricks, R.G., *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Mawang-tui Texts*, Classics of Ancient China (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989).

This is a first class translation. It is actually three translations in one: the Mawang-  
tui 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.

Henricks, R.G., *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching: A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian*, Translations from the Asian Classics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

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

Ivanhoe, P.J., *The Daodejing of Laozi* (New York and London: Seven Bridges Press, 2002).

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

Lynn, R.J., *The classic of the way and virtue: a new translation of the Tao-te Ching of Laozi as interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

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.

Mathieu, Rémi, *Lao tseu, Le Daode jing «Classique de la voie et de son efficience», Nouvelles traductions basée sur les plus récentes découvertes archéologiques (trois versions complètes: Wang Bi, Mawangdui, Guodian)*, (Paris: éd. Médicis-Entrelacs, 2008).

French edition: This is a very good piece of scholarship. Matthieu has drawn suc-  
cessfully 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.

Addiss, S. and S. Lombardo, *Tao Te Ching* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993).

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

Chan, Wing-tsit, *The Way of Lao Tzu (Tao-te ching)*, The Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).

Well regarded, now a bit dated.

Kim, Hongkyung, *The Old Master: A Syncretic Reading of the Laozi from the Mawangdui Text A Onward*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

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.

Lau, D.C., *Tao Te Ching: A Bilingual Edition*, Rev. ed (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1989).

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.

Roberts, Moss, *Dao De Jing: The Book of the Way* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

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 benefitted 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 translations), and it is certainly not the place to start and not suitable as a stand alone copy.

Wagner, R.G., *A Chinese Reading of the Daodejing: Wang Bi's Commentary on the Laozi with Critical Text and Translation* SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

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 readable 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 Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003).

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

Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, *Tao Te Ching: A New Translation* (New York: Vintage 1972).

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 Man-jan Cheng* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1981).

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

Giles, Lionel, *The Sayings of Lao Tzŭ*, Wisdom of the East Series (London: John Murray, 1904).

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

Hinton, D., *Lao Tzu: Tao te ching*, (Washington: Counterpoint, 2002).

Poetic, but not that accurate.

Karlgren, Bernhard, *On the Poetical Parts of Lao-tsi*, (Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1932), and, “Notes on Lao-Tse”, *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 47 (1975): 1-18.

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.

LaFargue, Michael, *The Tao of the Tao Te Ching* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

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

Legge, James, *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Taoism*, 2 vols. *Sacred Books of the East* 39-40 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1891).

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

Mair, Victor H., *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990).

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, Thomas, *In the Shadows of the Dao: Laozi, the Sage, and the Daodejing*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

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.

Waley, Arthur, *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Tê Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought*, UNESCO Collection of Representative Works—Chinese Series (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1958 [1934]).

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.

Erkes, Eduard, *Ho-Shang-Kung's Commentary on Lao-Tse* (Ascona: Artibus Asiae, 1950).

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

Minford, J., *Tao te ching (Daodejing): the tao and the power* (New York: Viking, 2018).

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.

Moeller, Hans-Georg, *Daodejing (Laozi): A Complete Translation and Commentary* (Chicago: Open Court, 2007).

A pick-and-mix.

Red Pine (Bill Porter), *Lao-tzu's Taoteching* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1996).

Pick-and-mix of editions and commentaries.

Ryden, Edmund, *Laozi: Daodejing*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

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

Wang, Keping, *Reading the Dao: A Thematic Inquiry* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011).

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.

Star, J., *Tao Te Ching: the definitive edition* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2003).

This is anything but a definitive edition. It is interesting in that he gives a break down 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.

Mitchell, S., *Tao te ching* (London : Frances Lincoln, 1999).

An interpolation from someone who knows no Chinese.

Yang, Jwing-Ming, *The Dao de jing: a qigong interpretation* (Wolfeboro: YMAA Publication Center, 2018).

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

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