

Laozi *Daodejing* Bibliography

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Anyone who has heard Bruce talk about 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 good point. Luckily, he brought out his own commentary in November 2022, *Daodejing: The Oral Tradition* (Kindle Edition, ASIN: B0BMSRHMS6), 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(s). 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. It 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**, below, for details), but is actually a version – with some differences – of the Heshanggong edition.

In the early 1970s, two ancient Han dynasty editions (pre 168 B.C.E.) of the *Laozi* were unearthed at 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 *Laozi*. 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 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.

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** (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: WangBi, Mawangdui, Guodian)* (Paris: éd. Médicis-Entrelacs, 2008).

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. They are generally not the place to start, and not suitable as a stand alone copies.

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

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

Assandri, Friederike, *The Daodejing Commentary of Cheng Xuanying: Daoism, Buddhism, and the Laozi in the Tang Dynasty*, Oxford Chinese Thought (New York: Oxford University Press 2021).

Assandri, a student of **Wagner** (below), has produced the first complete English translation of this important Tang dynasty commentary, which was heavily influenced by Buddhist scholarship. It is an excellent piece of work, and a fascinating view into the reading of the *Laozi* a millennium or so after it was written in light of the concerns and culture of the time.

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.

Chen, Guying, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul D'Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock, R. A. Carleo III, Joanna Guzowska, Lidia Tammara, Dimitra Amarantidou, Modern Chinese philosophy, Volume 19 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020).

The blurb from the publisher explains the value of this translation: 'Chen Guying's *Laozi* dissects different versions of the *Laozi* and provides close readings of traditional and contemporary commentaries, from Han Fei, Wang Bi, and Heshang Gong through to Shi Deqing, Xu Kangsheng and Ding Yuanzhi. This book completely changed *Laozi* studies in China, where no serious student or scholar can ignore Chen's ... work. It is the standard interpretation of the *Laozi* at nearly every Chinese university.'

The English translation provided here seeks to accurately reflect the detail of Chen's meticulous work by providing multiple English translations of key characters, allowing the reader to follow complex Sinological arguments. The close "word-for-character" translation of the *Laozi* text enables scholars to interact with the *Laozi* on a level previously unavailable in English.'

The downside of this translation is that it is ultimately a 'pick and mix' (see below under **Problematic**), which is why I have moved it out of the **Recommended** section.

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 (above), and his interpretation is not always convincing. It is important, but very demanding.

Ziporyn, B., *Daodejing Laozi* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2023).

This is an interesting and thought provoking translation by a highly regarded scholar, who has also produced valuable translations of the *Zhuangzi*. His view that the text is 'a grab-bag combination of fragments' similar to a best-of anthology has allowed him to 'pick and mix' (see below under **Problematic**) his 'best-of' the ancient versions: 'Which variant this process finally landed on in each case should be obvious to any reader who is familiar with the options (i.e. anyone to whom this question is relevant), but where it seemed possibly not to be completely obvious, I have indicated in an endnote which version of the text was followed in that particular case.' This, to me, is to underestimate his readership, it is not only the few who are familiar with all of the ancient texts, and have access to the *Beijing daxue zang xihan zhushu* which he used as his primary source, who are interested in the origin of the variants that have been chosen. It also renders the text a modern abstraction, divorced from any tradition, community or time, and from its status as *jing* - a sacred text. This is quite the opposite of the **Assandri, Henricks, Linn, and Wangner** translations above.

That said this translation is worth adding to your collection. It will expand your engagement with the text, so long as you are willing to read the end notes carefully - especially since Ziporyn uses many double translations (the same word/phrase given twice) in order to bring out various word plays and intentional double meanings.

Less useful translations

These translations are still better than most, just not quite as good as those above; several simply 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.

Feng, Gia-Fu and Jane English, *Tao TeChing: 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-tse* (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. Legge, a Scottish missionary, was not always the most sympathetic translator of the Chinese Classics.

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 (and above), 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, is a purely (post)modern invention, belonging to no tradition or community.

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

Very patchy, often wildly inaccurate. 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.