

# Ursula K. Le Guin's *Tao Te Ching*: An Interpretation Crossing Cultural Boundaries

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The *Tao Te Ching* 《道德經》 (*TTC*) is one of the most-translated texts next to the Bible. More than just a Chinese religiophilosophical classic that only deserves scholarly translations, the *TTC* and its ever-growing acceptance as popular literature deserves more attention within the realm of translation studies both domestically and abroad. Despite knowing no Chinese, Ursula K. Le Guin, the legendary literary icon, published her popular yet gender-conscious *TTC* translation as a non-scholar in 1997. The present study traces her lineage of *TTC* interpretation across cultural boundaries to arrive at the overlooked implications of a *TTC* “translation” by a world-renowned “translator” who knows no Chinese, exploring her special case among myriad *TTC* translations in a renewed trend of *Lao Tzu* 《老子》 studies (*laoxue* 老學) that no longer sees historically and culturally significant or “serious” texts only through scholarly lenses, but also from the viewpoint of non-scholarly or “popular” literature. This is achieved by positing Le Guin’s unique case within the context of interpretive genealogy in the international extension of the Chinese study of *laoxue*.

*Keywords:* *Tao Te Ching*, Ursula K. Le Guin, interpretation, *Lao Tzu* studies, cross-cultural

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## 娥蘇拉·勒瑰恩《道德經》譯本： 跨越文化籬籬的詮釋現象

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《道德經》（*Tao Te Ching*）是翻譯數量僅次於《聖經》的文本。《道德經》不僅是一部值得進行學術翻譯的中國宗教哲學經典，它做為通俗文學的日益普及，在國內外翻譯研究領域中應得更多關注。儘管不懂中文，科幻文學大師娥蘇拉·勒瑰恩（Ursula K. Le Guin）在1997年以非學者身分出版了她通俗的、具有性別意識的《道德經》譯本。本研究追溯她跨越文化籬籬的《道德經》詮釋傳承族譜脈絡，以得出一位不諳中文的世界知名作家做為「譯者」來「翻譯」《道德經》的背後意義，探索她在眾多《道德經》譯本當中的特殊案例，並透過《老子》研究（即老學）的新趨勢觀點，不再僅透過學術視角看待具有歷史和文化意義的「嚴肅」文本，而是從非學術「通俗」文學的角度，將勒瑰恩的特殊情況置於中文世界老學於其全球延伸的詮釋族譜背景下來看待。

關鍵詞：《道德經》、娥蘇拉·勒瑰恩、詮釋、《老子》研究、跨文化

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## Introduction

As Penn sinologist Paul R. Goldin puts it, despite many of its “popular” translations “translated” by those who do not know Chinese, the *Tao Te Ching* 《道德經》 (hereafter *TTC*) is one of the most-translated texts next to the Bible, and notably, Americans consume more copies than its Western counterparts such as Aristotle (Goldin, 2002, p. 183). In one count of the most-translated texts in the world by languages, the *TTC*, among other works of religious and popular literature, ranks fourth (more than 250 languages) after the Bible (as of July 2020, 3,385 languages) (Wycliffe Global Alliance, n.d.), *The Little Prince* (as of April 2017, 300 languages) (CTV News, 2017), and *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (260 languages) (Associazione Nazionale Insegnanti Lingue Straniere, 2015; TranslateDay, 2023). The *TTC*, often understood as merely a Chinese philosophical classic, is now among the most widely read books the world over, owing to its uniquely interpretation-inspiring nature, and consequently to have been commentated and translated over 2,000 times (Tadd, 2022b, p. 1).

What if an acclaimed author of modern world literature becomes a “translator” of the ancient *TTC*, but knows no Chinese? Ursula K. Le Guin, the legendary American literary icon and winner of numerous literary awards mostly known for her fantasy and science fiction—many of which heavily influenced by the *TTC* actually—managed to publish her “jargon-free” and “rich, poetic and socially relevant version” of this ancient Chinese classic to popular acclaim in 1997 (Bookauthority, n.d.), notably for “perhaps the unmale reader” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. x). Le Guin is the famed American author of novels, children’s books and short stores featuring genres of fantasy and science fiction as well as her concerns for gender, religion and environmentalism, most famously through her *The Earthsea Cycle* fantasy series (published 1968-2001). She has a broad range of influences,

including fantasy writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien, feminist writers such as Virginia Woolf, and Eastern religious works such as the *TTC*. In regard to Taoism, Le Guin stated in a radio interview that “[she’s] been a Taoist ever since [she] learned what it was” (as cited in Huang & Dai, 2017, p. 39). Clearly, we can see how much the *TTC* has influenced her since her youth to gradually motivate her to produce a translation of her own. What’s more important is Le Guin’s careful handling with the gender issue in her rendition, which corresponds to her feminist awakening apparent in her writing after the 1970s. She often mentions the impact of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1960s on her persona and her writing, claiming herself as a feminist: “I consider myself a feminist: I didn’t see how you could be a thinking woman and not be a feminist” (Le Guin, 1989, pp. 7-8). As is well known, the *TTC* features the all-encompassing, productive and procreative qualities attributable to the feminine gender. Contemporary feminist scholarship may seem like a modern Western phenomenon, but in fact its roots are traceable in masterpieces among Eastern classics from ancient times over the span of centuries by turning to Chinese religiophilosophical texts such as the *TTC* for supporting evidence of “ancient feminism” (Patt-Shamir, 2009, p. 408). As such, Le Guin’s feminist ideals go hand-in-hand with the femininity and tenderness as manifest in the *TTC*.

As a matter of fact, feminist and Taoist ideals also often go hand-in-hand in Le Guin’s thought as well as fictitious works. For example, the book title as well as seven out of 11 chapter headings in *The Lathe of Heaven* (published 1971), Le Guin’s most explicitly Taoist novel, are actually quotations taken from the *Lao Tzu* 《老子》 and the *Chuang Tzu* 《莊子》. Furthermore, in mentioning the modeling of an imaginary androgynous planet Gethen (as appears in her famous novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*) after numerous Taoist ideals in her essay collection of her literary works *The Language of the Night* (published 1979), she states that, when

compared to the male-centric sides of ancient China, Taoist ideals such as “circularity” (as opposed to the male “linearity,” i.e., the phallus/uterus pair), “the valuing of patience” and “balance” seem to possess more feminist potential and thus more beneficial to the world (Le Guin, 1992, pp. 164-165). Androgyny is certainly a nod to the creative tension and reconciliation of opposites in Taoism. As is widely known, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (published 1969) is among the first works of gender-based science fiction to gain critical success, in which a “‘thought experiment’ that examined gender stereotypes” and the theme of Taoist light/darkness balance are featured (Higgins, 2009, p. 77). Also, feminist themes such as adaptation to nature’s rhythm (as opposed to conquering) are found in the novel’s characters, which are traceable to Taoist philosophy (Reid, 1997, pp. 3-8). Ethan Mills, a scholar at the conjunction of science fiction and philosophy, went so far as to call her version of creatively reinterpreted Taoist insights as a kind of “science fictional feminist [T]aoism” by a “philosophical author” who seeks “new ways of seeing the world” (Mills, 2020, pp. 11, 21). He sees that Le Guin’s reimagined Taoism in the context of science fiction is the product of fusing premodern Taoism and modern feminism as a kind of philosophy crossing cultures that “encourages a transformation of both [T]aoism and feminism—a feminist rethinking of [T]aoism and a [T]aoist rethinking of feminism” (Mills, 2020, p. 12).

What is Le Guin’s feminist vision in regard to femininity in the *TTC*? She revealed in an interview that when asked of her motivation behind creating her *TTC* version that does not limit wisdom solely to males, she states:

When you gender the philosopher and when you talk only about Kings and Sages—though technically that word is non-gender—I do believe that most readers immediately see an ancient person with a beard. A bit like God. And [since] I had taken this book to my heart as a teenage girl, it obviously is a book that speaks to women. Lao Tzu feminized mysteries in a different way

from anybody else. These are not “feminine mysteries,” but he makes mystery itself a woman. This is profound, this goes deep. And the most mystical passages in the book are the most feminine. This is something women need, I think, and long for, often without knowing it. That’s undoubtedly one reason why all my life I’ve found the *Tao [Te] Ching* so refreshing and empowering. (Peterson, n.d., para. 4)

In relation to this Taoist solution to gendering, elsewhere Le Guin reflects on her own feminist view on gendering:

The deepest foundation of the order of oppression is gendering, which names the male normal, dominant, active, and the female Other, subject, passive. To begin to imagine freedom, the myths of gender, like the myths of race, have to be exploded and discarded. (as cited in Miller, 2023, p. 75)

In this manner, Le Guin sees the basis of oppression in the cultural and societal constructs of gender, and hence criticizes the traditional view of masculinity and femininity, or “antiessentialist feminism”; her vision of feminism, on the other hand, sees that oppositional gender constructs are meaningless and only work in (antagonizing) relation to each other (Lothian, 2006, p. 383). This is reminiscent of the Taoist ideal of relativity and mutual interdependence. It is argued that from her self-stated viewpoint that Taoist philosophy has been a major personal influence permeating all of her works, so much so that she could live with Lao Tzu’s book her “whole life long” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. ix), Le Guin’s works would not take shape “without the structuring principle of Taoist philosophy” (Lothian, 2006, p. 383). Her brand of feminism as appears in her *Earthsea* and *Hainish* series as well as *The Left Hand of Darkness* takes on the particular manifestation of the reconciliation of darkness and light, and of the “mutual interdependence of male and female, visually depicted in the yin-yang symbol of interlocking dark and light semicircles” (Spivack, 1984, p. 7). For these reasons, naturally Le Guin’s affinity to “ancient

feminism” as appears in her *TTC* translation is undoubted.

Regarding her *TTC* translation, despite previous studies pointing out the great divide between scholarly and “popular” translations of the *TTC* (Goldin, 2002; Kirkland, 1997), Le Guin’s translation stands in the middle ground between the two camps, as she is certainly no scholar, but she also received external scholarly assistance during translation, thus contributing a special case among *TTC* translations. After having studied the original *TTC* text for more than 40 years, Le Guin consulted other renowned translations and worked with scholars to arrive at her personal version that speaks to modern readership while preserving the poetic beauty of the original, full of her personal commentaries and notes. This paper attempts to trace Le Guin’s hidden lineage of *TTC* exegesis from the perspective of *Lao Tzu* studies (*laoxue* 老學) via her translation of gender-aware elements in the *TTC*, with the hope of arriving at some implications to understand the astonishing phenomenon behind unceasing chains of *TTC* translations and retranslations that deserve the attention of translation studies: A special case of “translation” by a world-renowned “translator” who does not know the source text language, and where this case stands within the context of *TTC* translations in the West, i.e., the Western branch of the Chinese study of *laoxue*.

## Literature Review

In this section, the timeline and notable publications on gender-related and popular *TTC* translations are reviewed as follows.

### Gender Awareness in *TTC* Translations

There exist basically three periods in *TTC* translations in the West: the first characterized by comparisons with the Christian doctrine in the 18th and 19th

centuries, followed by its usage in criticizing Western ideas and values since the beginning to the middle of the 20th century, and lastly, followed by recent scholarship from the late 1970s onwards (Hardy, 1998, p. 165). In another relevant study, a similar three-stage division is also suggested, namely the first covering the 18th and 19th centuries and primarily concerned with the comparison of the *TTC* with doctrines in Christianity, the second beginning around 1915 and participated by scholarly contributions to criticize Western thoughts and values, and the third from the late 1970s characterized by attempts to avoid appropriation and producing translations based on Chinese sources (Hardy, 1998, p. 165). The latter is colored by multiplicity and multivocality, during which an unprecedented number of *TTC* translations were produced, resulting in unprecedented input from influential women translators, or translators from both genders with a distinct awareness of feminist concerns in the West (Wang, 2015b, p. 96). One proposed connection is perhaps of the Women's Liberation Movement in the late 1960s and "a more gender—emphasized society, where 'social gender' was unprecedentedly focused on" (Wang, 2015b, p. 96). The first woman involved English translation of the *TTC* was published by Feng and English (*Tao Te Ching*, 1972), after which there were several versions translated by women translators on their own, for example, Chen (*The Tao Te Ching*, 1989) and Le Guin (*Lao Tzu*, 1997). Feng and English stated that the notion of *ci* 雌 (female) in the *TTC* has triggered the interest among present-day cultural scholars, with its affirmation of the feminine qualities that seems to provide solutions to today's social and political problems in the midst of the Women's Liberation Movement, in the sense that it arouses the awareness that women are not simply passive or submissive, but rather forms and shapes our society with the male counterpart in harmony (*Tao Te Ching*, 1972, p. xxi).

As a matter of fact, Le Guin's gender-aware *TTC* translation is neither alone nor the first. In the latter half of the 20th century to the present, other gender-aware

popular and scholarly translated versions of the *TTC* have emerged, including the aforementioned Ellen M. Chen, Ursula K. Le Guin, Kohn (1989), as well as male translators such as Mitchell (*Tao Te Ching*, 1988), Mair (*Tao Te Ching*, 1990), and Hinton (*Tao Te Ching*, 2002). Of special mention is Anderson, whose book title explicitly states as *The Divine Feminine Tao Te Ching*, owing to her discovery that “Tao was profoundly *feminine*” and thus constituting a guideline in her translation (*The Divine Feminine*, 2021, p. 3). These translations have, albeit in different degrees, highlighted the female gender in their translations, so as to put the issue of the gender in translation in consideration. For example, Chen (1969) attributes the formation of the *TTC* having originated in matrilineal societies of ancient China, and also that there exists a strong link to early Chinese religions and philosophies that concepts in the *TTC* such as *wu* 無, *ruo* 弱, *xuan* 玄, *xu* 虛 perhaps have derived via the worship of maternal procreativity (pp. 401, 403). In discussing Le Guin’s *TTC* translation, gender elements such as these are examined.

### **Popular *TTC* Translations**

Some of the most studied “popular” translations (i.e., non-scholarly renditions or versions) include those by Stephen Mitchell, whose highly popular *TTC* translation sold over a million copies, and Ursula K. Le Guin. For instance, Bebell and Fera (2000) examined Mitchell’s version among others, and found it representing “a more recent wave of interest” and helpful for understanding the *TTC* among first-time Western readers (p. 137). Solska (2008) studied both Mitchell’s and Le Guin’s translations under a relevance-theoretical perspective, and concludes that these personal and even controversial *TTC* renditions are now highly popular due to their current relevance to present-day global audiences gradually diminishing the ancient text’s cultural specificity, that is, now less merely “Eastern” or “Chinese” (p. 242). Wang studied Le Guin’s translation among others, albeit

under the frameworks of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and corpus-critical translation studies (Wang, 2015a, 2015b, 2018). Jiang (2019) studied Le Guin's translation while expressly designating Le Guin's translation as representative among female translators (pp. 688-694).

In these previous studies on exemplary “popular” *TTC* translations, however, a possibly overlooked problem surrounding the linguistic capabilities of the said “translators” exists: Whether they do know Chinese or not. Motives behind the publication of a *TTC* translation by a “translator” who does not know Chinese are manifold. In the case of Mitchell's popular yet controversial version, he confounds his 14-year-long Zen training with *TTC* exegesis, takes excessive liberties such as ignoring certain keywords or phrases in the source text or replacing them with modern clichés, and receives a six-digit advance for it (Goldin, 2002, pp. 184, 187-188, 192). In an attempt to correct such a problem, literary scholar Eoyang (1999) criticizes Mitchell's “compositely borrowed renderings of the *Tao Te Ching*” as a form of “plagiarism, where one translation pretends to be a different and original translation”, as “Mr. Mitchell does not read or speak Chinese” (pp. 269-270, 281). Similarly, Kirkland (1997) also regards Mitchell's and Le Guin's “translations” as “Taoism of the Western imagination” (p. 1). Also, Fan and Yu (2020) see that Mitchell's “version” is “not a scholarly faithful translation but a spiritual interpretation that is heavily improvised,” (p. 486) risking its contents devoid of the original Chinese sociocultural context while misguiding the readership by confounding non-Taoist (i.e., Buddhist and Christian) teachings with that of the *TTC*. In addition, Goldin (2002) fears that “English translations of the [*Tao Te Ching*] by people who do not know Chinese... rely heavily on earlier translations, fail any basic test of accuracy, and distort and simplify the philosophy of the original,” (pp. 183-184) and considers Mitchell's and Le Guin's “translations” to be problematic. However, despite viewing Le Guin's “translation” as somewhat

problematic, Goldin also acknowledges that among the Chinese-incompetent “translators” selected for his study (Witter Bynner, Stephen Mitchell, Thomas H. Miles, and Ursula K. Le Guin, who all admit that they have no adequate command in Chinese), only Le Guin stays true to the original by having received assistance from Jerome P. Seaton. Seaton is a translator of classical Chinese and Professor Emeritus of Chinese and Asian studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Seaton is hailed as a respected sinologist as well as an excellent translator and explicator of Chinese poetry who translated the works of Tu Fu 杜甫, Ou-yang Hsiu 歐陽修, Yuan Mei 袁枚, and notably Chuang Tzu (Bradbury, 2005, p. 33), and is thus a linguistically competent authority. Also, her translation reworks upon earlier translations with “more care and integrity” on the grounds that she provides chapter-by-chapter explanations for such reworkings into her own words while avoiding merely copying earlier translations, and is thus the best among the four (Goldin, 2002, pp. 183-185). Also, in coming up with her own rendition of the *TTC*, Le Guin herself found Mitchell’s version not useful among her consulted translations, some scholarly, some popular (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, pp. 121-123). For these reasons, in deciding which “popular” translation to be incorporated for investigation, a decision is made in this paper to exclude Mitchell’s and enlist Le Guin’s translation in examining an exemplary “popular” *TTC* translation.

As Seaton himself puts it, his collaboration with Le Guin was “the greatest, the most intense, intellectual fun [he] ever had . . . it was a great thrill to watch a great literary mind like hers at work” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 41). In the aforementioned interview, Seaton revealed several points worthy of attention as follows. Firstly, Seaton is hailed by the feminist poet and Pulitzer winner Carolyn Kizer for being “a genius for interpretation and impeccable scholarship” that can “magically transcend intuition and learning: he is a poet” (as cited in Bradbury, 2005, p. 33). Secondly, as a scholar, Seaton states that actually he translates “for

people who don't want footnotes" (Bradbury, 2005, p. 43), when many ancient works require annotation when rendered into English—that is, he writes for the layman, and thus fits well with Le Guin's popular rendition of the *TTC*. Thirdly, Seaton chooses to teach nature poems in Chinese poetry courses about field botany or bird watching besides introducing students to Taoism, and Le Guin, as is widely known, is also an ecologically-minded writer.<sup>1</sup> Fourthly, as a scholar, Seaton discovered that actually Le Guin, a non-scholar, knows more about *Lao Tzu* than he does, teaches him “not just technical stuff, everything” about *Lao Tzu*, challenges him to do his best scholarship on this project, and, most importantly, she herself “read all the [*TTC*] translations and kept up with the scholarship” during her fifty years engaging with the *TTC* (Bradbury, 2005, p. 42). All these point to a natural affinity between Seaton's poetical inclination and Le Guin's self-stated “poetical” translation (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 121) to produce their particular version of the *TTC* that shows depth and quality, defying the traditional view that Le Guin knows no Chinese and is thus incompetent.

### **Le Guin's Translation of Gender-Aware Elements in the *TTC***

If Le Guin knows no Chinese, how could she “translate” the *TTC*? In order to unveil Le Guin's *TTC* exegetical lineage, some background concerning how Le Guin arrived at her own translation throughout the years should be briefly mentioned here, particularly, in terms of *laoxue*, which previous *TTC* exegeses she consulted upon and what assistance she received, evident in the appended materials next to the main body of translated text in her 1997 publication. In this publication, she clearly states in her Concerning This Version section that she knows no Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> Le Guin went so far as to refuse to attend a Harvard conference on “Taoism and the Environment” unless Seaton is also invited (Bradbury, 2005, p. 42). Also, it is noted that themes on ecology are also at the core of Taoist philosophy as well as the *TTC*, and are featured in Le Guin's fictional works.

and thus received help from the aforementioned sinologist Jerome P. Seaton, which is followed by the Sources section, in which she mentions that she also consulted a few other established *TTC* translations by renowned scholar-translators, ranked in the order of usefulness, of which the topmost is the famed American philosopher and orientalist Paul Carus's translation. When she was young, she found Carus's contents very fascinating. Elsewhere it is stated that when Le Guin encountered it as her first copy of the *TTC* at 12 and immediately loved it, and found her cultural anthropologist and "strongly anti-religious" father Alfred L. Kroeber reading it often and enjoying it as a "religious belief" and "lifelong pleasure" (McCaffery & Gregory, 1984, pp. 83-84). Seaton, in the aforementioned interview featured in the journal *Translation Review*, states that Le Guin almost memorized Carus's entire text (Bradbury, 2005, p. 42). Back to her appended materials, in her Introduction section she hails it as a lucky discovery of a foundational text for her personal rendition of the *TTC*, lucky in the sense that she discovered it at a young age (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. ix). Further, in her Concerning This Version section, Le Guin states with "unending gratitude" that her rendition is made possible "only because" of Carus's transliterated edition she encountered very young, and again hailing it in her Sources section as "endlessly valuable" (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, pp. 119-120). With these clues, in the spirit of *laoxue*, it would be necessary to trace the exegetical lineage of her consulted *TTC* translations, since translations and commentaries are also forms of textual interpretation. Consequently, for the reason that Carus's translation is the foundation of her personal *TTC* rendering, naturally it would be ideal to compare Carus's and Le Guin's translations, which form the comparative basis of research materials for investigation in this paper.

A second rationale in the selection of materials is as follows. Firstly, in dealing with a gender-aware writer such as Le Guin, the importance of the *TTC* among feminist scholars cannot be overlooked. Modern feminism has turned to ancient

religiophilosophical texts such as the *TTC* for evidence supporting what one has termed “proto-feminist” (Chen & Ji, 2015, p. 4). Hence, it is natural that Le Guin should turn to *TTC* for inspiration for many of her gender-aware literary works, and now “translating” the *TTC*. In terms of the feminine gender, the *TTC* is known to be rich in its images and allusions, celebrating the productive and procreative and qualities attributable to the all-encompassing feminine body and psyche, and by extension, mother nature.

Secondly, in order to discuss the translation of religiophilosophical texts such as the *TTC*, one cannot ignore translation as a “translator-driven activity” as well as a “process of communication” (Solska, 2008, p. 233), in which, as Sperber and Wilson put it, “the communicator is communicating her presumption of relevance to whoever is willing to entertain it” (as cited in Solska, 2008, p. 233). Counting the uniquely numerous translations of the *TTC* emerging every year, we see that the international *TTC* translation phenomenon is bound to retranslations, or, in other words, an unceasing chain of re-interpretations and re-contextualizations. Even Le Guin herself is amused at how many “*TTCs* have appeared or reappeared” and wonders if “Lao Tzu has more translators than he has readers” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 123). Under a relevance-theoretical perspective, Solska (2008) sees that the *TTC* translation phenomenon could be viewed as whether the numerous translators are at times mediators of meaning between the ST writer and the TT reader, in the sense that the choices made by the *TTC* translators are “determined by their potential target audiences” (pp. 233-234). In Le Guin’s case, this rings true in that she, in her Introduction section before her main translated *TTC* text, clearly defines her potential target audience by wanting her translation accessible to a “present-day, unwise, unpowerful, and perhaps *unmale* [emphasis added] reader” who listens “for a voice that speaks to the soul” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. x). As such, with her potentially female readers defined, then comes Le Guin’s various translatorial

choices of words according to her potentially female or gender-conscious readership's expectation. To this end, what to compare between Le Guin's and Carus's translations in this research paper could be defined here: The gender-conscious elements in the *TTC*, of which two exemplary ones frequently studied are *ci* and *pin* 牝.

Non-action (*wuwei* 無為), a central philosophy of the *TTC*, is embodied by gentleness or pliancy (*rou* 柔), as Paul Carus's translation of Chapter 36 states: *rouruo sheng gangqiang* 柔弱勝剛強, or, "the tender and the weak conquer the hard and the strong" (*Lao-Tze's*, 1898, p. 115). Gentleness, pliancy, tenderness and weakness are some of the prominent attributes of femininity, one of the main themes in the *TTC*. As noted in many other studies on the *TTC* such as Ma (2009) and Wang (2018), the discussion of a gender-conscious translation of the *TTC* cannot begin without examining the various linguistic elements of femininity in the ancient text, most notably the conceptual metaphors of *ci* (lit. female) and *pin* (female body; female animal), whose occurrences in the *TTC* far exceed that of their counterparts *xiong* 雄 (lit. male) and *mu* 牡 (male body; male animal), and also exceeding that of pre-Qin Chinese classics as well as of ancient philosophical treatises from other regions of the world.

### ***Conceptual Metaphors of Femininity: The Case of Ci***

First, let us take a look at *ci*. *Ci* occurs twice in the *TTC*, notably in Chapter 10 and also Chapter 28, in which *xiong* makes its only occurrence in the entire text once. These chapters are also the ones frequently studied by feminist scholars and translators. Let us turn to Le Guin's translation of *ci* in Chapter 10, on cultivating femininity:

**[Source text:]**

tianmen kaihe, nengwei ci hu

...

wei er bu shi, zhang er bu zai, shi wei xuande

天門開闔，能為雌乎

...

為而不恃，長而不宰，是謂玄德

**[Translated text:]**

Opening, closing the Gate of Heaven,

can you be like a bird with her nestlings?

...

to act and not lay claim,

to lead and not to rule:

this is mysterious power. (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 16)

Before further comparisons of the first verse, let us compare Le Guin with the aforementioned Rosemarie Anderson's "divine feminine" *TTC* translation: "can you receive like a woman as fate opens and closes its doors?" (*The Divine Feminine*, 2021, p. 42). Firstly, *ci* is rendered straightforwardly as "woman." On the other hand, here we see that Le Guin differs from Anderson and renders *ci* according to the ancient meaning of the character as appears in the Han-period dictionary *Showen Jiezi* 《說文解字》, in which it is expounded as *niaomu* 鳥母, a female bird (Kawaguchi, 2013, p. 159). In her notes below the translated text, Le Guin provides no explanation to her rendering of *ci*, except to comment that contrary to common belief that it is about meditation, this chapter is actually "profoundly mystical, the images are charged, rich in implications" (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 16). Since Le Guin expressly states that her translation is based on the 1898 translation by Paul Carus, the rendering of this verse can also be compared to Carus's translated text: "Opening and closing the gates of heaven, he will be like a mother-bird / ... He acts but claims not. He excels but rules not. This is called profound virtue" (*Lao-Tze's*, 1898, p. 159). Here we see that Carus uses prose in his

translation. In Carus's Transliteration of the Text section after his main translated text, *ci* is transliterated accordingly as "[like] a mother-bird" (*Lao-Tze's*, 1898, p. 159). Moreover, in his Notes and Comments section, Carus states that he consulted two earlier Japanese translations as well as that of Stanislas Julien's famous 1842 French translation, all of which rendered as "mother-bird" to confirm his personal interpretation (*Lao-Tze's*, 1898, p. 291). Here we see that in Le Guin's translation, Carus's "mother-bird" element is being featured, yet it is rewritten to a different form as "bird with her nestlings" to highlight the mother-to-child nature (*muzi* 母子) of maternity, via an international lineage of co-exegesis of *TTC* translations: Japanese, French, and American. Here it should be noted that the mother image is actually featured in Le Guin's translation of Chapter 1 (often regarded as most pivotal chapter in the *TTC*) as the following: *youming wanwu zhi mu* 有名萬物之母 "name's the mother of the ten thousand things" (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 2). In the *TTC*, *mu* 母 is regarded as the primacy of the feminine in the philosophy of *Lao Tzu* (Ma, 2009, p. 272), hence a valid interpretation here.

Moreover, though highly allusive, the "Gate of Heaven" (*tianmen* 天門) imagery has been substantial in a feminist discussion of the *TTC*. On the surface, the "Gate of Heaven" was commonly understood as the orifices of the body through which air enters and exits in various Taoist meditative practices. However, the famed sinologist Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 states that beginning with Heshang Gong 河上公 and Wang Bi 王弼, the void of the gate actually denotes *tiandi zhi men* 天地之門, from which all phenomena of the world appears, since emptiness and openness is central to femininity (as in the uterus), and also that the human body as a microcosm is the projection of the cosmos as a macrocosm (Liu, 2003, p. 183). Here we see that Anderson renders *tianmen kaihe* 天門開闔 as "fate opens and closes its doors" (*The Divine Feminine*, 2021, p. 42), thus equating *tian* 天 as "fate," which leaves the doubt whether "fate" denotes *tian*, usually translated as

“heaven.” Based on available sources, it is argued elsewhere that, via a later conceptual shift in the Taoist “heaven” as *taiyi* 太一 (“the great one,” as appears in the famous *Guodian* 郭店 version of the *TTC* unearthed in 1993) found in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子》, *taiyi*, though predating the *Huainanzi*, may denote a “celestial ruler over a court which includes numinal beings such as the Arbiter of Fate [*Siming* 司命]” (Littlejohn, 2016, p. 175), thus validating Anderson’s translation. This allusive reading is also validated elsewhere in stating that the gate’s opening and closing functions as a “nominative for a numinal or ontological reality from which the adept, if receptive (*feminine*) [emphasis added] either through ritual activity or meditation” (Littlejohn, 2016, p. 166), hence immediately followed by *nengwei ci hu* 能為雌乎 in the verse. On the other hand, the “Gate of Heaven” in Le Guin’s translation may denote several varying ideas in ancient Chinese thought (e.g., concepts in meditation and inner alchemy); as a matter of fact, Le Guin acknowledges that “most of the scholars think this chapter is about meditation... the language is profoundly mystical, the images are charged, rich in its implications” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 16). This gives a hint of Le Guin’s translatorial liberty to extend the limits beyond merely describing this chapter as meditation. To this interpretation, modern exegeses by Chung (2013) and Hsieh (2015) see a parallel to Carus’s translation of *zhongmiao zhi men* 眾妙之門 as “of all spirituality it is the door,” (*Lao-Tze’s*, 1898, p. 97), again referring to Chapter 1 of the *TTC*: It may denote the gate from which the myriad phenomena of the world begin, or, “origin of all things,” which in turn denotes the “mother.” Putting together the above, this idea certainly points to the all-yielding, productive power of the universe, in which creation is seen as feminine in nature, here depicted with the imagery of the “mother” figure (with her nestlings) in Le Guin’s translation. Also, returning to the core concept of *wuwei*, the central issue in Chapter 10 is the idea of softness and pliancy, which is in turn embodied through *ci* or femininity, where the

expression *nengwei ci hu* conveys the idea of feminine values in Lao Tzu's philosophy, and highlights the importance of feminine characteristics in the *TTC*. This is supported by eminent sinologist Benjamin Schwartz's view that the "mother" metaphor is the "exaltation of the feminine as the symbol of the principles of nonaction (*wu-wei* 無為) and 'spontaneity' (*tzu-jan* 自然)" (Schwartz, 1998, p. 194). As such, whether Le Guin's translation does justice to the source text is up to every reader's judgment, but one of the criteria for judging is to see if her translation meets such central idea for exegesis based on Carus's translation, while in turn Carus's interpretation is based on earlier Japanese translations and Julien's French translation. Now we turn to Le Guin's translation of *pin* below.

### ***Conceptual Metaphors of Femininity: The Case of Pin***

The other gender element in the *TTC* frequently studied is *pin* (female body, female animal), which occurs twice in Chapter 6, once in Chapter 55, and twice in Chapter 61, totaling five occurrences and exceeding that of its counterpart *mu* by three in the entirety of the *TTC*. Of these, the most crucial occurrences are that of Chapter 61:

**[Source text:]**

daguo zhe xialiu, tianxia zhi jiao, tianxia zhi pin

大國者下流，天下之交，天下之牝

pin changyi jing sheng mu, yi jing weixia

牝常以靜勝牡，以靜為下

gu daguo yixia xiaoguo, zequ xiaoguo

故大國以下小國，則取小國

xiaoguo yixia daguo, zequ daguo

小國以下大國，則取大國

gu huoxia yiqu, huoxia erqu

故或下以取，或下而取

**[Translated text:]**

The polity of greatness  
runs downhill like a river to the sea,  
joining with everything,  
woman to everything.

By stillness the woman  
may always dominate the man,  
lying quiet underneath him.

So a great country  
submitting to small ones, dominates them;  
so small countries,  
submitting to a great one, dominate it.

Lie low to be on top,  
be on top by lying low. (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 89)

We can compare the first two stanzas with that of Carus's:

A great state, one that lowly flows, becomes the empire's union, and the empire's wife. The wife always through quietude conquers her husband, and by quietude renders herself lowly. Thus a great state through lowliness toward small states will conquer the small states, and small states through lowliness toward great states will conquer great states.

Therefore some render themselves lowly for the purpose of conquering; others are lowly and therefore conquer. (*Lao-Tze's*, 1898, p. 128)

Firstly, we see in the present paper that Carus alternates between poetry and prose in his *TTC* translation. Secondly, some issues of clarity in Carus's translation occur here: What is a "great state that lowly flows," and why is it "the empire's union, and the empire's wife"? Or even, what exactly is "the empire's union" and "the empire's wife"? The closest rendering to mend Carus's unclear translation is that of American Buddhist scholar Dwight Goddard and Dutch sinologist Henri Borel: "A great state that is useful is like a bond of unity within the Empire; it is the Empire's wife" (Goddard & Borel, 1919, p. 42). Best-selling author Tom Butler-Bowdon calls this translation a "rendering" since Goddard and Borel saw the European translations at that time as too scholarly and wanted to "capture the essence" of *Lao Tzu* instead of producing a "pedantically correct translation" (Butler-Bowdon, 2012, p. xxii). Linguistically, Carus's translation is problematic for Le Guin's usage as exegetical basis, and thus we actually see a guided rendering in Le Guin, just like Goddard and Borel. In her Notes on the Chapters section after the translated text, Le Guin expounds on the fact that the lines in this chapter denote the themes of assimilation and "'being woman,' 'being water,' the uses of yin" (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 140). Accordingly, womanhood and water both belong to *yin* 陰, the feminine principle in Taoist philosophy, which has a dual significance here. For comparison, Anderson's "divine feminine" translation renders the second stanza as "The female ever conquers the male through stillness / In stillness / She acts the lower" (*The Divine Feminine*, 2021, p. 96). Here Le Guin and Anderson are in unison in rendering *jing* 靜 as "stillness." The dual metaphor of the woman's stillness in "lying quiet underneath" and "[lying] low to be on top" of the man and "may always dominate" is firstly hinting to the sexual and productive roles of the woman, which in turn guides how social acts ought to be conducted, projecting from

interpersonal to international: There exists a way of harmony between nations in the sense that stronger ones need not use force to conquer weaker ones whilst embracing the feminine principle of tolerance towards them. Thirdly, the feminine metaphor of water as a concrete symbol of Tao “that gives birth to all yet does not try to own them” is at work. Just like water in mother nature being low-key, nurturing all while asking nothing in return, the feminine quality of water is embodied in such a harmony between nations through the imagery of a woman’s grace flowing downwards from a stronger nation to a weaker nation, hence the “woman to everything” running “downhill like a river to the sea” in the first stanza in depicting mutual benefit. Weaker nations, on the other hand, have nothing to lose in surviving by adhering to a stronger nation who embraces the feminine principle of tolerance and acceptance, not forceful means of conquer. At the same time, note Le Guin’s word usage in translating *guo* 國 (state): “Polity” is followed by “country.” The latter is more or less neutral, whereas the former seems to be marked with deliberate diction by semantic addition. In Taoist cosmology, Tao is ontologically not only the source of the universe, it is also the model of human affairs if axiologically embodied in real-life practice. Since this chapter deals with the application of the embodiment of Tao in political affairs, Le Guin’s exegetical addition to the neutral “state” in “polity” sees a state as a politically organized unit, highlighting the aspect of political science and is thus grounded and valid. Lastly, in comparing Le Guin’s final verse “Lie low to be on top, / be on top by lying low” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 89) with Carus’s “[t]herefore some render themselves lowly for the purpose of conquering; others are lowly and therefore conquer” (*Lao-Tze’s*, 1898, p. 128), basically the two agree in meaning, but Le Guin is much more concise. Carus provides a lengthy note by mentioning that actually John Chalmers and Charles de Harlez agree on his rendering, whilst providing evidence from earlier authoritative French translation notes by Stanislas Julien, and also that

Julien in turn heavily follows Sin-Kie-Fou (misspelled; actually Lü Huiqing 吕惠卿, a Song-dynasty *TTC* commentator), and, in turn, the famous German translator Victor von Strauss follows Julien, thus forming an intriguing chain of exegetical lineage.

### **“Translators” Who Know No Chinese: Exegetical Lineages**

In tracing Le Guin's exegetical lineage, recall that in the aforementioned discussion on Le Guin's and Carus's translations of Chapter 10, Carus (*Lao-Tze's*, 1898) mentions in his translator notes that he consulted two earlier Japanese translations as well as that of Julien's famous 1842 French translation, the first complete translation in both French and Western sinology. Carus makes it clearer in his Introduction section that he actually listed four Japanese *TTC* commentaries in addition to Julien (*Lao-Tze's*, 1898, p. 43), and states that he has “freely availed myself of the labors of my predecessors . . . most valuable of all has proved to be Prof. Stanislas Julien's work” (*Lao-Tze's*, 1898, p. 45). Moreover, in discussing Le Guin's Chapter 61, we see that Carus agrees in his chapter notes with the first complete English translation by John Chalmers (published 1868) and a French translation by Charles de Harlez (published 1891) in their earlier respective interpretations, notes that Chalmers agrees closely with Julien, and Julien follows a person whose name is misspelled as Sin-Kie-Fou (*Lao-Tze's*, 1898, p. 314). Upon verification, the “Sin-Kie-Fou” that Carus refers to is actually a misprint of what Julien indicated in his French translation as Liu-Kie-Fou, who is in fact more widely known as the Song scholar and politician Lü Huiqing (1032–1111 CE, style 字 Jifu 吉甫, hence “Kie-Fou”), the famous ally to Wang Anshi 王安石 who helped establishing the proto-welfare state for peasantry under Emperor Shenzong's 宋神宗 reign (1067-1085). Lü produced a famed *TTC* commentary, the

four-volume *Daode Zhenjing Zhuan* 《道德真經傳》, which Julien indicated as *Lao tseu tch'ouen* (*Laozi Zhuan* 《老子傳》), issued in 1078 CE and now incorporated into the *Daozang* 《道藏》. It can be seen that Lü's commentaries is heavily featured in Julien's *TTC* translation in the form of notes, occurring 47 times in the entire work.

Then, in addition to primarily using Carus's translation as basis, Le Guin goes further back in history. Her in-text notes point to the possibly layered structure of the source text in seeing that there is a change of tone, a flattening from the fourth verse onwards, and compares the received text (that is, *textus receptus*) with the Mawangdui variant from Han dynasty (c. 168 BCE) to observe a noticeable difference between the two, stating that the latter is actually a corruption (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 140). Moreover, in an interview listed as the sole entry of supplementary reading on the official website of Le Guin's *TTC* publication (hence a primary *epitext*), it is revealed that Le Guin actually prefers Arthur Waley's translation that "is never going to be equaled for what it does" (Peterson, n.d., para. 6), thus providing a clue to Le Guin's knowledge of consulted translations that serve various purposes. Sometimes side-by-side with that of Carus's or even adding that of other renowned sinologist such as Robert G. Henricks and D. C. Lau 劉殿爵, in many notes after her translation she quotes Waley's translation and comments that his interpretation is "never to be ignored" (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 129) or is her guide to a particular verse (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, pp. 86, 141). Matter of fact, her frequency of consulting Waley's translation as seen in her notes ranks second to Carus's throughout the entire text, and in the Sources section she ranks Waley's translation second place in a list of consulted translations ordered by their usefulness (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 121).

Yet another exegetical lineage found in Le Guin's translation, though loosely related to femininity, is one of technological progress. In her translation notes on

the utopian Chapter 80 of the *TTC*, she sees that although we think we use “labor-saving machinery, ships and land vehicles, weapons of offense and defense” for our benefit, we are actually “used . . . shaped and controlled by our machines, cars, planes, weaponry, bulldozers, computers” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 143). Rather than being merely anti-technological, she actually corresponds to the British Chinese science giant Joseph Needham’s view that Taoists are not against technology for its own sake, but only when used by centralizing military states (such as the Zhou) against the people (Rapp, 2012, p. 54). It should be noted that apart from Holmes H. Welch, another major source of information about Taoism consulted by Le Guin is Needham’s monumental series *Science and Civilisation in China* (Spivack, 1984, p. 163), notably the chapter on Taoists and Taoism in *Volume 2: History of Scientific Thought* (published 1956). In comparison to the Western roots of science and democracy as “masculine, managing, hard, dominating, aggressive, rational and donative,” Needham (1956) sees the solution to these ailments is the Taoist embrace of the “feminine, tolerant, yielding, permissive, withdrawing, mystical and receptive” (p. 59). Needham (1956) also states that nature respects nobody, not even a state ruler; and a ruler’s controlling force is useless, for “neither kings nor sages can withstand or reverse the Tao of Nature” (pp. 130-131). In a sense, the opposite of authority, domination and progress as masculinity is, in fact, the following of the ways the universe works, or as Needham (1956) puts it, the “Order of Nature” (p. 33). This finds affirmation in present-day ecofeminism when “radical feminist analyses of the psychodynamic underlying patriarchal social relations . . . return to the symbolic killing of mother/nature/woman as the root cause of the ‘masculine’ will to objectify and control other forms of being” (Salleh, 1993, p. 228), and is echoed in Le Guin’s feminist vision in stating “when you gender the philosopher and when you talk only about Kings and Sages” in the previous section.

In sum, throughout her translation, we see Le Guin, despite not knowing Chinese, exercises her writerly yet reasoned subjective judgment in taking her liberty to interpret the original message according to each of the stated agendas in her appended materials before and after the main body of translated text, with external assistance from a scholarly translator such as Seaton as well as other scholarly translations such as Carus and Waley, and Carus likewise receiving exegetical assistance from previous Japanese translations and the famous French translation by Julien, who in turn follows Lü Huiqing's Song-dynasty commentarial exegesis, thus forming an intricate interweaving of exegetical lineage. In terms of *Lao Tzu* studies (*laoxue*), this hidden international lineage of co-exegesis of *TTC* translations (Chinese, Japanese, French, British, and American) actually spans four cultures and almost two centuries, a notable phenomenon in the realm of translation studies as revealed in Le Guin's *TTC* translation from a *laoxue* perspective, deserving attention among *TTC* circles both domestically and abroad.

### **Le Guin Knows No Chinese: Is She a “Translator,” or an Alternate View?**

Does the work of someone not knowing Chinese count as “translation”? Is knowing Chinese an absolute prerequisite in her efforts? At the outset of the present discussion, it should be noted that Le Guin openly states that her version of the *TTC* “is a rendition, not a translation,” for she “do[es] not know any Chinese” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 119). One issue of interest, however, is whether a “translator” like Le Guin be denied of qualification for translating the ancient Chinese text based on her incompetency in Chinese, as in the case of Goldin's designation of her as a “pseudo-translator,” or could we take a look at her methodologies, or in what

other ways she has to offer?

Recall that from the previous section on popular *TTC* translations, it is stated that Le Guin found Mitchell's version not useful among her consulted translations, some scholarly, and others popular. Besides Carus's, the scholarly translations Le Guin consulted include those of Waley, Henricks, Lau, and Welch, all of which are accountable translations to help her translate, since she herself knows no Chinese. Perhaps some may even doubt whether Le Guin merely copied from them, but Seaton revealed that Le Guin knows more about the *TTC* than himself. Seaton, a sinologist who had never met her previously, knew through a friend that Le Guin was working on bits of a new version of the *TTC*, wrote her and requested to view them (Bradbury, 2005, p. 41). Seaton encouraged her to publish her version after reading them in bits at first, and subsequently asked her for more (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 120). She agreed and proceeded to work on the whole translation, and in turn Seaton recommended himself to her aid (Bradbury, 2005, p. 41). When asked whether Le Guin reads Chinese, Seaton replied "not really, but she certainly knew this book verse, line, and sinker" (Bradbury, 2005, p. 42), besides having nearly memorized Carus's version and "really did her homework" by keeping up with relevant scholarship in her 50 years engaging with the text, so much so that he only "helped her in a few places, but the work was largely hers" (Bradbury, 2005, p. 42). On the back cover of her rendition, it says that she worked with Seaton "to develop a version that lets the ancient text speak in a fresh way to modern people, while remaining faithful to the original Chinese," and also that her translation is a "personal and poetic meditation" done through "her own careful study of these ancient teachings" (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, back cover page). Furthermore, she states that most translations merely capture meanings, but let the beauty of the language slip through, for "in poetry, beauty is no ornament; it is the meaning" and "it is the

truth” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. x). Perhaps some may argue that the kind of Chinese language we use today is now different from that of the ancient times, and thus the ability to read contemporary Chinese is irrelevant in her efforts. But to her, it could be reasoned that her lifelong engagement with the *TTC* escapes superficial discussions on whether she knows ancient Chinese, modern Chinese, or any Chinese at all. One can always argue for the importance in knowing Chinese (as in the case of Goldin), but for Le Guin, as a world-renowned poet, we may speculate from the aforementioned statements that it is the depth of the ideas of the *Lao Tzu* that she is after wholeheartedly, while the linguistic fidelity is guaranteed in receiving help from an authoritative sinologist. It is to this that Goldin dismisses Mitchell but actually praises Le Guin to consider her as caring for fidelity.

Furthermore, recall that Le Guin, who knows no Chinese, still wishes to “translate” the *TTC* for, in her own words, the “present-day, unwise, unpowerful, and perhaps unmale reader” who listens “for a voice that speaks to the soul,” because earlier scholarly *TTC* translations use a vocabulary that emphasize the masculinity and authority of “the Taoist ‘sage,’” which should be “degraded in most popular versions” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. x). Methodologically, in achieving so, Le Guin consults reliable translations as seen in this study for assistance in addition to coauthoring with Seaton, but employs these translations “with more care and integrity” than other popular *TTC* “translators” who know no Chinese by “reworking each passage in her own words rather than simply copying convenient phrases” from them (Goldin, 2002, p. 185). In her own words, she compares these earlier interpretations to observe their varying wordings to discover “several English meanings might lead [her] back to the same Chinese word,” coupled with her “intuition of the style, the gait and cadence, of the original . . . if [she] was to try to reproduce it in English” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 119). In terms of *Lao Tzu* studies in the international arena today, firstly there are the Chinese-knowing scholarly

translators who seek the meaning of the “original” text, and secondly the often dismissed camp of *TTC* interpreters who know no Chinese but still wish to engage in the “widespread, popular practice of subjectively reading a text for contemporary relevance” (Carmichael, 2017, pp. 42-43), to which Le Guin belongs. What is crucial here is that “both are acknowledged as possible ways of reading” (Carmichael, 2017, p. 43). What’s more, lest we ignore the fact that the latter camp is and probably will still be “the dominant one among the majority of readers” (LaFargue, 1998, p. 255), and also that *TTC* reinterpretations by authors who do not know Chinese occupy “more than half of the dozen versions of the [*TTC*] that sell among the top 1% of all books on Amazon.com” and may collectively “outsell all other English versions combined,” illustrating how unnoticedly popular these renditions are (Carmichael, 2017, p. 132). For these reasons, perhaps it may be stated whether Le Guin knows Chinese or not is of lesser importance than, say, the consequential international phenomenon of cross-cultural *TTC* transmission and dissemination resultant to re-interpreted versions and renditions of the *TTC* by Le Guin and similarly-minded authors. Under this perspective, being considered a good or bad translation is surpassed by the status quo resultant to Le Guin’s efforts in the international reception of the *TTC*. This phenomenon has now been termed “Western [T]aoism” (Komjathy, 2004, p. 6), in which the *TTC* is received as an “American” scripture (Carmichael, 2017, p. 17). Instead of merely deploring Le Guin’s *TTC* rendition as amateur translation under the rubric of traditional sinological scholarship, Le Guin’s cross-cultural exegetical phenomenon, seen in the light of an internationally concerted effort in *Lao Tzu* studies (*laoxue*), should perhaps be even more treasured in interdisciplinary fields such as translation studies and world literature as opening up to the reality of a modern international participation of the reception and transmission of a perplexing text of Chinese antiquity.

Traditionally, mainstream academia has focused on the “original” *TTC*, as in the case of Goldin’s criticism of “pseudo-translators” who “rely heavily on earlier translations,” “fail any basic test of accuracy,” and “distort and simplify the philosophy of the *original* [emphasis added]” (Goldin, 2002, p. 183). There is nothing wrong with pursuing the “original” text or “original” meaning of the *TTC*; matter of fact, this has been widely practiced in established scholarly communities and is the standard. Goldin is certainly right in examining the accuracy of dubious translations by “translators” who know no Chinese, for it is certainly unidealistic for the reader if Lao Tzu’s philosophy becomes distorted via improper translation. Yet, in Le Guin’s case, although she edits passages (none of which are discussed in the present paper) that do not resonate with her “spiritual sense” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 125), she provides explanations to her editing in the notes after the translation, thus demonstrating a more genuine concern for fidelity to the original than Mitchell. In the other cases of pseudo-translation discussed by Goldin, for example, Stephen Mitchell freely appropriates or even outright ignores crucial elements, taking his liberties and making the translated text original in its “own right” (Goldin, 2002, pp. 187-188). Also, as the present paper has examined Le Guin’s translation and her gender-conscious methodologies in the sections above, if, for example, we conversely view how Goldin pointed out that her translation of Chapters 10 is not without errors or groundless additions, if her gender-aware translation on the discussed chapters pass the tests of exegetical accuracy with grounded additions, then there is something in her translation to offer.

Throughout modern history, various well-known writers or professionals other than scholar-translators of the *TTC* have been fascinated by the thoughts of Lao Tzu, just like Le Guin. For example, Zhang (2021) observes the “astonishing cross-cultural enigma” resultant to Franz Kafka’s mental dialogue with Lao Tzu as well as other Taoist philosophers such as Chuang Tzu and Lie Tzu 列子 —what she

terms “Kafka’s [T]ao” (p. 113). This particular brand of Tao by the well-known novelist has it that Kafka is “spellbound” by Lao Tzu’s aphorisms in the *TTC* and felt they are “adamantine nuts” whose “kernel remains concealed” to him (as cited in Zhang, 2021, p. 113). Tadd (2022a) notes how Leo Tolstoy was drawn to the *TTC* and actually went on to produce his very own “translation” of the Chinese classic, interestingly also after having read Carus’s English translation, just like Le Guin (p. 101). Note that both Kafka and Tolstoy have no command in the Chinese language. In the former case, Tadd reminds us that one of the crucial questions to ask is what philosophical vision is embedded in which text of the *TTC* Kafka was interested in, namely the influential German translation by Richard Wilhelm (*Tao Te King*, 1911). In the latter case, Tadd (2022a) again reminds us that Tolstoy also read Victor von Strauss’ German translation and was particularly drawn to Stanislas Julien’s French, immanence-influenced interpretation and the first complete European-language translation of the text (1842), which was influenced by Lü Huiqing, the aforementioned Song-dynasty *TTC* commentator from home soil, and, in turn, strongly influenced Tolstoy’s translation (p. 101). At the same time, Carus, a comparative theologian by training and a monist thinker, whose translation influenced both Tolstoy and Le Guin actually has its interpretive leaning towards monism suited to a “scientific” understanding of the world, for he, as a monist, believed that “all religions are ultimately expressions of the same fundamental truths,” and also stressing “the compatibility of religion and science” (Carmichael, 2017, p. 21). In turn, though Le Guin expresses unending gratitude towards Carus’s translation as her personal exegetical basis, she found it unsatisfactory at times and improved them with her personal interpretive leaning towards feminist ideals, as seen in the present paper. However, regarding her usage of Carus’s translation among others, she states:

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. If I could focus on which word the translators were interpreting, I could begin to understand why they made the choice they did. I could compare various interpretations and 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. As it was, working from Carus's text, I learned how to let them lead me into it, always using their knowledge, their scholarship, their decisions, as my light in darkness. (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 119)

We can clearly see just how much the Carus's translation has influenced her to the extent to use it as the basis of her own translation, at the same time acknowledging its flaws and wanting to amend them in her own translation. Moreover, here we have a web of chains of influences of exegeses, and thus of translations, across space and time and across languages and cultures, a phenomenon Tadd (2022a) terms "interpretive lineage" (p. 88). Viewed from this angle, is it still strictly necessary to reject Le Guin's translation as incongruent to the "original" *TTC*, simply owing to her Chinese incapacities? Another example is expounded below.

Another line of Le Guin's exegetical lineage is that, in the Sources section of her translation, she recommends readers who want to know more about Taoism to read a prominent work of *TTC* interpretation entitled *Taoism: The Parting of the Way* (published 1957) by the famed sinologist Holmes H. Welch for guidance in understanding the *TTC*, for it is the "best, soundest, clearest introduction and

guide” (*Lao Tzu*, 1997, p. 123). Recall that she states that all her literary works are deeply influenced by the *TTC*, and she makes a reference to the idea of “spirit journey” in her *Earthsea* series, which is mentioned in Welch’s book: “journeys of the soul are one of the themes of the philosophical Taoists” (Welch, 1957, p. 94). To add even more details to the intricate interweaving of exegetical lineages in the present paper, Le Guin actually received assistance from Jerome P. Seaton, an authoritative sinologist and thus an expert, during the production of her *TTC* rendition. In the front matter of her *TTC* translation (*Lao Tzu*, 1997), particularly in the publisher data and copyright section, the authors are stated as “Ursula K. Le Guin, with J. P. Seaton.” In the U.S. Library of Congress catalogue information section, we also see Seaton listed as second author after Le Guin’s name (II. Seaton, Jerome P.). With this, we can see that Seaton, despite being a second author, still holds authorship to Le Guin’s translation, thus establishing its credibility as a work of translation. Then, counting Goldin’s mention that she exhibits more concerns than Witter Bynner and Stephen Mitchell in translatorial fidelity, and also that she is just like other exegetes of the *TTC* who inevitably possess a personal interpretive stance, we could probably say that her rendition is worthwhile in joining the international discussion of sacred texts of world religions, just like the numerous commentators and translators of the *TTC* before her. In building a comprehensive understanding of the increasingly growing international *TTC* translation phenomenon, we need to capture its web-like nature by looking at the genealogy of Le Guin’s translations among other consulted translators and their works. Through this web, we are allowed the opportunity to look into the “intricate interconnections” between different *TTC* translations, in which the “interpretive lineages” or “conceptions of the text transmitted by whom and to whom” are revealed (Tadd, 2022b, p. 11).

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen that by tracing Le Guin's translation of gender-aware elements in the *TTC*, actually her lineage of *TTC* interpretation across cultural boundaries (Chinese, Japanese, French, British, and American) are revealed to arrive at a novel perspective on *TTC* translation by seeing it as, firstly, translated by a non-Chinese-competent "translator" receiving external aid to yield a valid interpretation, and secondly, the plurality of allowing cross-cultural interpretation that includes non-scholarly translations, where scholarly ones previously emphasized the "original" or "most accurate" *TTC* interpretation, which overlooks the complex nature of the text itself ever since its formation in ancient times, counting its earliest oral tradition. In the ranks of other widespread texts such as the Bible and *The Little Prince*, the *TTC* no longer sits on a pedestal of its own and steps down from it for worldwide consumption, now made popular by an extremely popular sci-fi writer who happens to "translate" it with a gender-aware stance to her rendition, as evident in her interpretation of *ci* and *pin*, contributing a special case among many a *TTC* translation.

Through the *TTC*, ancient feminine modes of being are recaptured in modern times and foreign soils by "philosophical" writers such as Le Guin to respond to issues arising from social and cultural constructs of gender. We have also seen that the *TTC* is yet again interpreted by Anderson and accordingly titled *The Divine Feminine Tao Te Ching*. In an advocacy for global scholarship on the *Lao Tzu*, it is seen that the ancient text now takes form in its many modern-day transformations (namely, a "mystical," "naturalist," "anarchist," or "liberalist" *TTC*, among others), and that Anderson's translation could be considered as a "feminist" *TTC* (Tadd, 2022b, p. 9). With hope we look forward to the interpretation-inviting nature of the *TTC* that it could further feminist thinking in Western philosophy with

opportunities to reflect upon itself through its Other, that is, Eastern philosophy, thereby crossing cultures to arrive at a fuller picture for the global good. It has been argued that there exists a “transcultural trend in which issues about gender intersect with [T]aoism,” at a time when feminist scholarship on Taoism “illustrates the diversity of feminist scholarship regarding Chinese traditions” (Dai, 2022, p. 136) by going beyond the traditionally dominant or even patriarchal Confucianism. In this manner, the Taoist “deconstruction” of a binary, opposing pair of genders to expose methods of domination may provide insights in contemporary feminist theory, for example. Within the realm of translation studies, however, a discussion on the ever-growing popularity of the *TTC* as “popular” literature and the international *TTC* translation phenomenon deserves more attention, for instance, among writers, translators and scholars who pursue gender studies or favor feminist translation strategies, or even publishers to create spaces where these transnational discussions may take place, including that of subdisciplines of feminism such as intersectionality (with emphasis on the Third World), a booming area in interdisciplinary translation studies. Given the attention the *TTC* receives in a wide array of humanities-related disciplines, this marvelous 5,000-word piece of literary work should not be regarded only as ancient Chinese philosophy, but in a “larger context as a classic of world literature with keen contemporary relevance” (Chan, 2018, para. 22). It is in this regard that this paper hopes to illuminate that *Lao Tzu* studies or *laoxue* is actually beyond Chinese soil and is now an international phenomenon. Lastly, novelists who write sci-fi/fantasy such as Kazuo Ishiguro and Le Guin are now among the ranks of Nobel laureates and Library of America authors. Given this enormous cross-cultural richness, it is hoped that the *TTC* may disseminate further globally in even fresher ways with Le Guin’s special case.

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