

The Theosophical *Daodejing*

The beginnings

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Introduction

An enigmatic and succinct text, the *Daodejing* 道德經 has a central place in the Euro-American esoteric reception of East Asia. Ridiculed and vilified at first by most clerical commentators of Chinese religions, nineteenth-century scholars ‘discovered’ the book’s mystical message. A Chinese expression of a universal Divine Wisdom (*Gottweisheit*), the *Daodejing* penned by ‘the mystic’ Laozi 老子 was seen to be ‘theosophic’ (*theosophisch*) in nature; that is, being directed at the illumination of this very Divine Wisdom, as one of its first translators, Viktor von Strauß (1809–99), put it (von Strauss 1870: xxvii–xxix). This line of argument was happily adopted by many Theosophical writers who credited the *Daodejing* to be a verbalization of the perennial truth as systematically unearthed by Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–91). Notably, a number of Theosophists were actively participating in the early stages of the wider *Daodejing* translation endeavor: Walter Richard Old (1864–1929) in 1894; Franz Hartmann (1838–1912) in 1896–7; Johan van Manen (1877–1943) from June 1898 to July 1901;¹ Charles Spurgeon Medhurst (1860–1927) in 1905; Johannes Assuerus Blok (1867–1955) in 1910; Isabella Mears (1853–1936) in 1916/1922; and Charles Henry Mackintosh in 1926.² Many more provided and continue to offer their Theosophical ruminations on the ‘ancient wisdom’ contained in it. To many Theosophists today, the *Daodejing* is mandatory reading, and indeed – as the high-ranked American Theosophist Richard W. Brooks (1931–2013) once observed – ‘Many Theosophists have fallen in love with the little Chinese classic . . . We see in it an echo of many familiar Theosophical ideas’ (Brooks 2001: 18).

This chapter traces the use of the *Daodejing* in the first some two decades following the foundation of the Theosophical Society (1875–1896/1897). It (1) examines which translations (and *Daodejing* verses) were used in the Theosophical literature, (2) explores what (Theosophical) role the authors ascribed to the *Daodejing* and (3) takes a look at the first two Theosophical translations by Old and Hartmann. To give a glimpse of the pool of translations (several of which early Theosophical writers consulted) crafted before Old and Hartmann, a brief outline of the Western translation history of the *Daodejing* from its Jesuit beginnings is given as follows.

The *Daodejing* in translation

The beginnings of the Western translation history of the *Daodejing* was an exclusively Jesuit project. The earliest partial (i.e. one verse each) Latin translations date back to the Austrian Martino Martini (1614–61) and the Belgian Philippe Couplet (1623–93) in 1658 and 1687, respectively. The first two complete (Latin) translations were crafted several decades later. Of these only one is extant today,³ namely, that by the French Figurist Jean-François Noëlas (1669–1740) produced in the 1720s (von Collani 2015). However, these handwritten translations did not reach a wider public and thus had virtually no impact.

In 1842, the first full rendition by an academically trained sinologist was published – *Lao Tseu Tao Te King. Le livre de la voie et de la vertu* (Lao Tseu Tao Te King: The Book of the Way and the Virtue) by Stanislas Aignan Julien (1797–1873), professor of Chinese at the Collège de France (Zhang and Xie 2022). Four years prior, the French orientalist Guillaume Pauthier (1810–73) had translated the first nine verses into French and Latin in his *Tao-te-King* (1838). Julien's translation proved to be a template for many subsequent translations, starting with the first English rendering *Tau Tëh King. The Speculations on Metaphysics, Polity, and Morality of 'The Old Philosopher' Lau-tsze* by the Scottish missionary John Chalmers (1825–99) in 1868. Heavily criticizing Julien's translation, the German astronomer and hobby sinologist Reinhold von Plänckner (1820–84) published his own in 1870, entitled *Lao-Tse Táo-Të-King. Der Weg zur Tugend* (Lao-Tse Táo-Të-King: The Way to Virtue), which in turn received very unfavourable reviews due to its lack of philological rigour (see e.g. Legge 1883: 78). The first such being voiced by the German poet, China specialist and fellow *Daodejing* translator Viktor von Strauß in his *Laò-Tse's Tao Të Kīng* (1870: xiii–xiv) published shortly after that of von Plänckner.⁴

The 1880s saw four further translations: *Taoist Texts: Ethical, Political and Speculative* (1884) by the Shanghai-based English sinologist Frederic Henry Balfour (1846–1909); a partial rendition in his article ‘The Remains of Lao Tzu’ (1886) by the English professor of Chinese at the University of Cambridge Herbert Allen Giles (1845–1935);⁵ and two renditions largely unknown to Theosophical writers: the German *Taòtekking von Laòtsee* (1888) published by one Friedrich Wilhelm Noak,⁶ and the Spanish ‘Tao-Te-King de Yan-Tsu’ (1889) written by the Spanish Dominican Bishop of Hauara and former Vicar apostolic of Fujian 福建 Salvador Masot (1845–1911).

A seminal translation was subsequently produced by the former Scottish missionary and professor of Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Oxford James Legge (1815–97) with his *Tào Teh King* (1891), published as part of Friedrich Max Müller’s (1823–1900) *Sacred Books of the East* series. The same year, the Belgian Orientalist Charles Joseph de Harlez de Deulin (1832–99) published his *Textes Tàoïstes* (Daoist Texts; 1891).

These were the chief translations in European languages more or less available prior to Old’s rendition of 1894. Further translations up until the publication of Hartmann’s rendition of 1896–7 include ‘Le Tao de Laotseu’ (1894) by the French Martinist Eugène-Albert Puyou de Pouvourville (1861–1938),⁷ Tao ре кингъ (Конисси 1894) by the Japanese Russicist Konishi Masutarō 小西増太郎 (1862–1940) and *Lào-Tzse: The Great Thinker* (1895) by the British major-general turned writer George Gardiner Alexander (1821–97). As will be indicated later, Theosophists also occasionally drew on additional translations, which were included in other works not exclusively dealing with the *Daodejing*.

The Theosophical *Daodejing*

Whereas Laozi and the *Daodejing* were but a footnote in the earliest Theosophical writings,⁸ interest slowly but gradually increased from the late 1880s onwards – concomitant to the surge of translational work. One of the first Theosophical writers emphatically recognizing the importance of the *Daodejing* as the nucleus of a ‘Chinese Theosophy’ was Marie, Countess of Caithness (1830–95).⁹ In her *The Mystery of the Ages, Contained in the Secret Doctrine of All Religions*, she determined that the teachings of the ‘Tao-Sse’ (i.e., *daoshi* 道士) chiefly represent the Chinese manifestation of Theosophy. Their ‘Tao-Te-King’ would be a work of Theosophy ‘adapted to the Chinese mind’ and indeed ‘should be studied by every Theosophist’ (Countess of Caithness 1887: 193–8). While Lady

Caithness repeatedly referenced Balfour,¹⁰ the four unnumbered *Daodejing* verses she added in translation (Fifteen, Sixteen, Twenty-Five, Forty-Seven) are her English renderings of the Julien version.

Another early aficionado of the ‘mystical school of Lao-tzeu’ (*école mystique de Lao-tzeu*) and the *Daodejing* was the French Edouard J. Coulomb (pen name: Amaravella), who was a chief figure of early French Theosophy (Godwin 1989), founding member of the Blavatsky Lodge and prolific translator of Theosophical writings. With his self-reported sinological background, he appeared amid his peers as the first Theosophist connoisseur of ‘Chinese esotericism’. The ‘great “Lao-Tseu” also, the Founder of Taoism’ would have retired to the supposed hub of Chinese mystical and alchemical learning, the Kunlun Mountains, ‘after having written his “*Tao-TE-King*”’ (Amaravella 1889b: 372). Coulomb views the *Daodejing* as to confirm the notion of *ganying* 感應 (resonance or moral retribution), which he attempted to corroborate by abbreviated translations (Verses One, Five and Six) based on the Pauthier rendition (1838) of the *Daodejing* (Amaravella 1889a: 147). Pauthier’s translation of Verse One and commentary snippets alongside Julien’s translation of Verses Fifty and Fifty-Two also served Coulomb in his perennialist *magnum opus* *Le Secret de l’Absolu* (The Secret of the Absolute) to highlight the inherent complementarity of *dao* 道 as a paradigm of the ‘absolute’ (Coulomb 1892: 16–19).

At one point also Blavatsky, albeit posthumously, addressed the *Daodejing* more elaborately,¹¹ namely, in her *The Theosophical Glossary*. Following the entries on ‘Lao-tze’ (‘A great sage, saint and philosopher who preceded Confucius’; Blavatsky 1892: 186) and ‘Tao’ (‘The name of the philosophy of Lao-tze’; Blavatsky 1892: 319), in the one on the ‘Tao-teh-king’ she stated (Blavatsky 1892: 320):¹²

‘The Book of the Perfectibility of Nature’ written by the great philosopher Lao-tze. It is a kind of cosmogony which contains all the fundamental tenets of Esoteric Cosmogogenesis. Thus he says that in the beginning there was naught but limitless and boundless Space. All that lives and is, was born in it, from the ‘Principle which exists by Itself, developing Itself from Itself’, *i.e.*, *Swabhâvat*. As its name is unknown and its essence is unfathomable, philosophers have called it *Tao* (*Anima Mundi*), the uncreate [*sic*], unborn and eternal energy of nature, manifesting periodically. Nature as well as man when it reaches purity will reach *rest*, and then all become one with Tao, which is the source of all bliss and felicity. As in the Hindu and Buddhistic philosophies, such purity and bliss and immortality can only be reached through the exercise of virtue and the perfect quietude of our worldly spirit; the human mind has to control and finally subdue

and even crush the turbulent action of man's physical nature; and the sooner he reaches the required degree of moral purification, the happier he will feel. (See *Annales du Musée Guimet*, Vols. XI. and XII.; *Etudes sur la Religion des Chinois*, by Dr. Groot.¹³) As the famous Sinologist, Pauthier, remarked: 'Human Wisdom can never use language more holy and profound.'¹⁴

Her translation of *Daodejing* as 'The Book of the Perfectibility of Nature' is based on de Groot's rendition 'Le Livre de l'excellence de la Nature'. Inner Group member and Blavatsky's private secretary George Robert Stow Mead (1863–1933) in his 1892 essay 'The World-Soul' also drew on de Groot (1886) (besides Balfour 1892).¹⁵ He gives the title of the *Daodejing* slightly differently as 'The Book of the Perfection of Nature'. His discussion, which is largely a collection of quotations from de Groot and especially Balfour (1892), revolves around the notion of 'Tao' as the Daoist expression of 'that supreme intuition of Humanity, the essential Unity of all things' (Mead 1892b: 121). To Mead, Daoism 'is the most mystical of the creeds of the far East' (Mead 1892a: 30; cf. Anonymous 1881: 9) and Laozi a 'great Chinese Mystic' (Mead 1893: 12).

The rising interest in Daoism and the *Daodejing* in particular is captured by another of Blavatsky's Inner Group disciples, Alice Leighton Cleather (1846–1938), in a correspondence (June 1892) for *The Theosophist*, writing that the 'awakening of a general interest in Tàoism seems just now to be widespread' (Cleather 1892: 703). She then mentions two recent, related and very well-received publications, Legge's *Tào Teh King* and the French Japanologist Léon de Rosny's (1837–1914) *Le Taoïsme* (de Rosny 1892). Before, Cleather reports on the upcoming Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society in London, attended by key exponents of Theosophy, including, among others, the likes of Judge, Mead, Coulomb, Annie Besant (1847–1933), the president of the Madrid Lodge Josef Xifre (1856–1920)¹⁶ and Walter Richard Old (1864–1929), who was also scheduled to deliver a lecture entitled 'On Tao' in the course of the weekly Blavatsky Lodge meetings two months later.

Also known by his nom de plume 'Sepharial', Old was an Inner Group member and Assistant Secretary of the European Section, the chief Theosophist astrologer and the first Theosophist translator of the *Daodejing*. Born in Birmingham and slated to become a pharmacist, as an adolescent Old rather immersed himself in Swedenborgianism, the Kabbalah, numerology and astrology. In addition, he professed to have turned to studying ancient languages, such as Hebrew, Sanskrit and literary Chinese, which, however, must have been at an elementary level. In his early twenties, he started a career as an astrologer, later becoming indeed one

of the most eminent practitioners of his days. In 1887, he published a first small booklet entitled *Astrological Judgment upon the Great Solar Eclipse of 1887* and would subsequently take up the pen name ‘Sepharial’ in many of his writings. The same year, he started a correspondence with Blavatsky, became Fellow of the Theosophical Society in Birmingham in January 1888 and moved to the London headquarters in April upon Blavatsky’s invitation who appointed him vice-president of the Blavatsky Lodge in 1889 and general secretary of the British Theosophical Society in 1890. Closely working with Blavatsky at the time, she asked him to preface her *Gems from the East* (Blavatsky 1890). The following year, he published *What Is Theosophy?* (Old 1891), prefaced by Besant for her ‘friend’ Old. Notably, Daoism or the *Daodejing* were not mentioned. When Blavatsky died of influenza, the ‘Astral Tramp’ (how Blavatsky had nicknamed him) was reportedly at her side, ‘[h]olding her hand and kneeling at the foot of her chair’ (Farnell 1998: 35). Old kept himself busy becoming the chief Theosophist librarian in 1891 and secretary of the European Section Convention held in July 1892.

His Blavatsky Lodge lecture from September 22 was published with the simple title ‘Tao’ in the November issue of *Lucifer*, the organ of the Blavatsky Lodge. The article was republished as ‘The Tao’ as postscript to his *Daodejing* translation (Old 1894: 33–46). Therein Old outlines basic Daoist tenets, not outing himself as being proficient with the Chinese language or Chinese religions overall. Yet, he already assigns to the ‘Tao-te-King’ the translation of the title used in his rendition – *The Book of the Path of Virtue*. The ‘Tao’ he describes as ‘a mystical term . . . among the Tao-tze, meaning ‘Supreme Reason, and Nature, the Alpha and Omega of all things’ and representing the “diversity in Unity” of Nature and the “Unity in diversity” of God’ (Old 1892: 207). Old also subscribed to the common view at the time that ‘the pure Tao of Lao-Tze’ degenerated in the later use of ‘the sect of the Tao-tze’¹⁷ (Old 1892: 209). Only twice in the essay does Old effectively cite a passage in translation from the *Daodejing*. However, he does not do so based on any existing complete translation. First, he adopts a passage (Kenealy 1866: 36) from *The Book of God: The Apocalypse of Adam-Oannes* by one of his early favourite authors, the Irish barrister Edward Vaughan Kenealy (1819–90), which apparently draws (and very liberally so) on Verse Forty-Two as given by Julien. Shortly thereafter, he quotes (again with reference) a translation of Verse Twenty-Five made by Friedrich Max Müller in his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (Müller 1873: 249–50).¹⁸ Müller’s rendition was not from the original Chinese but from the French version by Julien. These quotes aside, Old throughout draws on the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 in Herbert Allen Giles’s translation

(Giles 1889) when citing Laozi.¹⁹ This is surprising and suggests (all the more because of the citation of the deficient rendering or paraphrasing by Kenealy) that Old at the time was unfamiliar with any existing *Daodejing* translations.

The article was lauded by Old's best friend Sydney V. Edge as an 'extremely interesting and a useful *résumé* for students who have not time to read authorities, first hand' in the January issue of *The Theosophist* (Edge 1893: 242). Edge had left London in August 1892 to become assistant secretary of the India Section of the Theosophical Society. His best friend Old would join him to Adyar in December. With his arrival commenced in earnest what was to be called the 'Judge affair', that is, the struggle for power following the passing of Blavatsky between Besant and Henry Steel Olcott, the president of the Theosophical Society, on the one side and William Quan Judge, General Secretary of the American Section, on the other. By siding with his friend Olcott against Judge (but later turning against Besant), Old was involved at the very heart of the controversy. It was in the midst of these difficult times – which would ultimately entail a lasting schism within the Theosophical Society and Old's ousting in 1894 – that he committed to his translation of the *Daodejing*, a book he reportedly deemed most superior in its 'philosophical depth and subtlety of wit', even eclipsing the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Dhammapada* (Anonymous 1894: 463).

Old finished his work in early 1894 and left for England in late March²⁰ after the book was put into print. His *The Book of the Path of Virtue* was meant to be the second volume in a series entitled 'Studies in Theosophy'²¹ with the aim to 'supply the members of the Section from time to time with [freely disseminated] publications of matter which might be of use to them in their studies', as it was announced in the April issue of *The Theosophist* (Anonymous 1894: 463). As soon as the book was released, Olcott himself penned an amiable review in the May issue of *The Theosophist* of this 'very charming monograph', whose translator thanks to his 'theosophic studies' could catch the 'spirit of ... Laotze, the Theosophist of China' (Olcott 1894). He further informs the readers that Old 'has utilized the several translated editions of the *Tao-teh-king* in the Adyar Library for the purpose of compiling the present version' and to bring 'contradictory passages in the several translations into accord with the spirit of Taoist philosophy' (Olcott 1894). Olcott eventually calls on scholars of Chinese to see whether Old's version would be 'warrantable'. Another Theosophical reviewer, the then assistant general secretary of the American Section Alexander Fullerton (1841–1913), writing for *The Path*, the organ of the American Section, while praising Old's 'ever-pleasing style' is somewhat baffled by the mostly 'superficial and commonplace' wisdom the *Daodejing* would have to offer and

wonders how this ‘could form the basis of a national school of philosophy’ (Fullerton 1894: 102).²²

Old’s translation, which is otherwise unannotated save for one remark,²³ is introduced with a brief three-and-a-half pages text in which he casts a glance at the supposed origin of the *Daodejing*, the development of Daoism in subsequent centuries and ‘the use of the terms *Tao*, *Teh* [*de* 德] and *Tien* [*tian* 天]’ (Old 1894: ii). His historical outline is undoubtedly informed by (in fact partly a mere summary of) portions of Legge’s introduction (1891: 4–8) to his 1891 *Daodejing* translation. In addition, he paraphrases (with a wrong dating) from Müller’s preface to the same volume (1891: xi–xii). Old’s reflections on the Daoist key terminology are likewise largely drawing on Legge (1891: 12–19) with some of his own Theosophically minded conclusions, when he takes, for example, the ‘Tao of Heaven’ (*tian zhi dao* 天之道) to mean ‘the Path of God’ (Old 1894: iii). Finally, Old notes that his rendition ‘has been adapted after careful reading of the several translations extant, aided by such intuitions as have arisen from familiarity with theosophical and mystical speculations’ (Old 1894: iv).

Old adds a title to every verse. Whereas he points out that he follows one of the *Daodejing*’s ‘numerous commentators’, he indeed does do so primarily via Chalmers and lesser so via Legge (who both provide a translation of the titles given to the verses by the major commentator Heshang Gong 河上公), essentially rephrasing the translation and occasionally adjusting it with a view to the verse translation or the ‘chapter’ outline in Legge. Notably, Old’s translation of the *Daodejing* is in its entirety likewise a rephrasing of the Chalmers version with the occasional help of Legge. Needless to say that Old did at no point express his indebtedness to these two scholars. The ‘several translations carefully read’ by Old were indeed only these two. Old did not employ the Balfour or Giles versions nor any German and French ones available at the time.

Despite its endorsement by Olcott and *The Theosophist* as well as its alleged Theosophical-cum-mystical imprint, Old’s translation exerted little influence at first. This might have been connected to Old turning into a veritable *persona non grata* for many Theosophists shortly after the publication due to his crucial involvement in the Judge affair and specifically the bad press it caused, for which he was deemed responsible. The impact of his translation at first was indirect, as will be briefly discussed further below with respect to the *Daodejing* translation into German by the German Theosophist Franz Hartmann (1838–1912). Only with the re-publication of his *The Book of the Path of Virtue* ten years later in a new guise did Old’s translation reach a substantial audience (including Theosophists and fellow esotericists). Distributed by large publishing houses in the United

States and England, now equipped with annotations – the translation itself largely remained untouched – and an extended introduction (which absorbed the postscript on the *Zhuangzi* of the 1894 version), *The Book of the Simple Way of Laotze* by Walter Gorn Old²⁴ (Old 1904) saw at least eight re-prints from 1905 to 1943. Facsimile editions circulate to this day.

Even if the Old translation of 1894 was at first only sparsely used by Theosophists,²⁵ it echoed a wider reclamation of the *Daodejing* as a natural part and the foremost Chinese expression of global Theosophical knowledge. Indeed, interspersed quotes from the *Daodejing* started to become more frequent in the Theosophical literature around the time.²⁶

A Theosophist who later came to appreciate Old's translation, himself gaining the reputation of a Theosophical authority of Daoism specifically due to his publication of *The Inner Life and the Tao-Teh-King* (1912; a collection of previously published essays), is the Danish-American librarian Carl Henrik Andreas Bjerregaard (1845–1922).²⁷ His first notable step to become a well-regarded connoisseur of Daoism within Theosophist circles dates back to 1895 and his essay 'Tao the Chinese "Being"'. To Bjerregaard, the 'Tao-te-King' was reestablishing the mystic connection 'with the abyss', that is, the transcendent realm or 'the Deity' (Bjerregaard 1887).²⁸ Being 'one of the few remarkable books in the world', the *Daodejing* would be a manual on the esoteric and exoteric dimensions of 'Being', which is Bjerregaard's idiosyncratic translation of *dao* (Bjerregaard 1895: 410). In the essay, he assembles a number of quotations from the *Daodejing* to give account of each dimension (Bjerregaard 1895: 411–14). He does not indicate the respective verse numbers, nor does he disclose which translation he uses. To the contrary, his concluding statement that '[i]n all the above quotations the term [Tao] has been left untranslated in accordance with common custom' (Bjerregaard 1895: 415) might be read to insinuate that this is Bjerregaard's own rendition after all. In fact, what Bjerregaard does is to largely stack together portions from the *Daodejing* translations of Chalmers (1868) and Balfour (1884) with his own modifications. For the esoteric teachings, for example, he so starts with Verse One, bringing together (slightly modified) portions from Chalmers,²⁹ Chalmers's translation of Julien,³⁰ and a mixture of Balfour and Chalmers. Next come selections from Verse Four, again largely based on Chalmers with a brief Balfour insertion; Verse Six combining Chalmers and Balfour; Verse Fourteen with Balfour first while also picking up a note by Chalmers (which is perhaps even further informed by von Strauss 1870: 61–2) and then once again Chalmers; Verse Fifteen is based on one sentence by Chalmers only; Verse Twenty-One comprising of Balfour and a modified ending

of Chalmers; and Verse Thirty-Two which is yet another combination of Balfour and Chalmers.³¹ At the time, Bjerregaard apparently had not taken notice of the Old version yet. He would do so later at least with respect to Old's slightly revised rendition (Old 1904) (see e.g. *The Inner Life and the Tao-Teh-King*).

Another early Theosophist commentator on Daoism and the *Daodejing* is Annie Besant who was to become long-term president of the Theosophical Society, Adyar (1907–33). In her essay programmatically entitled 'The Unity Underlying All Religions',³² Besant unsurprisingly discovers Theosophy to be 'the origin and basis of all religions' (Besant 1896a: 405). She subsequently tries to locate its chief characteristics in the Daoist tradition, especially drawing on the Tang Dynasty (618–907) *Qingjing jing* 清靜經 (Classic of Purity and Quietness)³³ as 'a fragment of an ancient scripture' from the days of the 'great Fourth Race'³⁴ settling in what is today China. To bolster her argument, Besant also adds passages from the '*T'ao Teh King*' exclusively according to the Legge translation³⁵ (1891) – in order of appearance: Verses One, Twenty-Five, Forty, Forty-Two, Thirty-Four and again One – with which she tries to give evidence of the first four (of altogether five) 'spiritual verities of religion', namely: 'i. One eternal infinite incognizable real Existence. ii. From That the manifested God, unfolding from unity, from duality to trinity. iii. From the manifested Trinity many spiritual Intelligences, guiding the kosmic order. iv. Man a reflexion of the manifested God and therefore a trinity fundamentally, his inner and real Self being eternal, one with the Self of the universe' (Besant 1896a: 406).³⁶ Across the ages, Besant avers (Besant 1896b: 488–9), Theosophy had its 'definite custodians'. The *Daodejing* would confirm that with a view to the Daoist tradition, an argument Besant anchors in a collection of verses relating to those following the *dao* such as the 'sage' (Forty-One, Seven, Twenty-Two, Forty-Six, Forty-Nine, Fifty-Five, Sixty-Seven).

Whereas Besant shunned Old's translation, another chief exponent of Theosophy (and, incidentally, an avid translator of Besant's works) embraced it wholeheartedly – the famous German Theosophist Franz Hartmann. A medical doctor, Hartmann immigrated to the United States in 1865 where he encountered Spiritualism and Theosophy. He joined the Theosophical Society via Olcott in 1882 and relocated to Adyar a year later where he became one of Blavatsky's closest aides, accompanying the latter back to Europe in 1885. He subsequently settled in Austria, embarking on a prolific occult publishing career and becoming the most eminent Theosophist in the German-speaking world. He eventually founded the short-lived *Theosophische Gesellschaft in Europa (Deutschland)* (Theosophical Society in Europe [Germany]) in 1896, which was a branch of Judge's US splinter

group then led by Katherine Tingley (1847–1929), and a year later the *Internationale Theosophische Verbrüderung* (International Theosophical Fraternization) with the aim to end the Theosophical schism. In 1896, he commenced his translation of the ‘Tao-Teh-King’, which he published serially in his monthly *Lotusblüten* (Lotus Blossoms) from July 1896 to February 1897 (Hartmann 1896a–f; 1897a–b). The whole translation – yet without his two-page introduction contained in the first *Lotusblüten* installment – was published as a book carrying the same title, namely, *Theosophie in China. Betrachtungen über das TAO-TEH-KING* (Theosophy in China: Reflections on the TAO-TEH-KING) in Leipzig in 1897 (Hartmann 1897c). Several additional unrevised editions followed over the years (1900, 1903, 1910, 1920, 1922).³⁷ Hartmann’s serialized publication of his German *Daodejing* rendition was continuously mentioned in various issues of *Le lotus bleu* and *Lucifer*. Moreover, the translation was well-received by German esotericists,³⁸ and led many subsequent generations of readers to believe that it was indeed crafted based on the Chinese original, since the subtitle of the book publication indicates: ‘Aus dem Chinesischen des Lao-tze übersetzt’ (Translated from the Chinese of Lao-tze). Instead, the translation is in fact essentially a verbatim rendition of Old’s translation of 1894, supplemented with annotations by Hartmann meant to render the supposed Theosophical nature of the *urtext* explicit, for Laozi himself was a ‘Chinese Theosophist’ (1896a: 467). Evidently, Hartmann never gained the slightest proficiency of (literary) Chinese nor had he any actual knowledge of the contemporaneous scholarly literature on Chinese religions and Daoism in particular. In the introduction, he states that Laozi’s teachings had developed into a religious system that had many followers especially among the higher strata of Chinese society. Next, he addresses the terms ‘Tao’, ‘Teh’ and ‘King’ (*jing* 經): whereas he gives ‘Tao’ as ‘word’ (*Wort*) and ‘way’ (*Weg*), his renderings for ‘Teh’ as ‘truth’ (*Wahrheit*) and ‘law’ (*Gesetz*) and ‘King’ as ‘heaven’ (*Himmel*) and ‘light’ (*Licht*) are peculiar. He ultimately translates the book title as ‘The Way to the Knowledge of Truth’ (*der Weg zur Erkenntnis der Wahrheit*), thereby referencing Old (Hartmann 1896a: 467–8), who does not give such (paraphrasing) translation himself. Hartmann seems to allude to Old’s notion of ‘the Path of God’, which is meant as the Theosophical way to uncover the divinity within one’s self, that is, one’s alleged true self. Indeed, the German title mirrors Hartmann’s Theosophical grasp of the *Daodejing*, which also represents the guiding thread of his whole commentary. Equipped with the Christian New Testament, Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*, the *Bhagavadgītā* and quotations by Christian mystics Thomas a Kempis (1380–1471), Jakob Böhme (1575–1624), Angelus Silesius (1624–77) and Miguel de Molinos (1628–96), Hartmann establishes the *Daodejing* as a wisdom text in

line with his own distinct Theosophical soteriology where Christian mysticism is wed with Blavatskian Theosophy.

Concluding remarks

Clearly, among Asian religions, the *Daodejing* and Daoism or Chinese religions overall did not occupy the centre stage in the Theosophical discourse. This status was held by the Indian traditions. However, Theosophy's engagement with Comparative Religion and the surge of translations of the Chinese classics in the 1880s and 1890s entering the intellectual mainstream assigned the *Daodejing* and Laozi a firm place in the perennialist project of Theosophists and fellow occultists. Laozi and his Daoist following as code words for carriers of millennia-old Chinese mysticism came handy in Theosophical enumerations of a ubiquitous Ancient Wisdom. For most Theosophists, Laozi – let alone the *Daodejing* – were exactly this: an additional (and otherwise generally ignored) element in their itemization of the multifarious utterers/expressions of the one universal Truth. As part of the Theosophical narrative, however minor its significance at first, the mysticism of Laozi and 'his' *Daodejing* waited to be explored and appropriated to fit Theosophy's grand scheme. Indeed, a number of eminent Theosophists embraced this very agenda.

In their accommodation of Daoism, early Theosophists made use of several of the major translations of their time: Julien (1842) – also in partial translation by Müller (1873) – Chalmers (1868), Balfour (1884) and Legge (1891). Scattered (occasionally modified) quotations were also based on Pauthier (1838), von Plänckner (1870), Alexander (1890), Old (1894) and de Pourvoirville (1894). In addition, some Theosophists knew the works of von Strauß (1870) and Giles (1886). With the increasing visibility of Daoism in the intellectual discourse at the time, Walter Richard Old provided the first 'Theosophically-inspired' translation in 1894. Franz Hartmann was to follow in 1896–7 with his German rendition. Yet, their Theosophical *Daodejing* was essentially a case of what would be called plagiarism today. Having only elementary proficiency in Chinese, Old copied vastly from the Chalmers version guided by Legge. Subsequently, and even more bluntly, Hartmann (lacking any knowledge of literary Chinese) copied verbatim from Old. But their translations – initial setbacks for that of Old notwithstanding – endured for many decades to come. They mark the inception of a 'Theosophical lineage' within the general translation history of the *Daodejing*.

Notes

- 1 A serialized translation with extensive commentary of parts of the *Daodejing* published in the Dutch Theosophical journal *Theosophia*. Van Manen calls it ‘a Dutch approach’ rather than ‘a translation’ (van Manen 1898: 25) since he draws on the existing renditions by Legge (1891), de Pouvoirville (1894), Noak (1888), von Plaenckner (1870), von Strauss (1870) and Old (1894).
- 2 Knut Walf (b. 1936), a German theologian and scholar of the Western reception of Daoism, even suggests that Theosophical translators and editors were possibly ‘the main cause for popularizing Laozi’s book in the West’ (Walf 1999: 126). Important as their contribution was, they were certainly not ‘the main cause’.
- 3 The other one being a translation by the Belgian François Noël (1651–1729) done before 1711.
- 4 A third translation published in 1870, but having only a very limited audience, was a Spanish rendition based on Julien entitled *Lao-tseu-tao-te-king. Libro de la vía eterna y de la virtud* (Lao-tseu-tao-te-king: Book of the Eternal Way and of Virtue) by the Mexican poet Agustín de Bazán y Caravantes. Furthermore, in 1878, the Czech philosopher František Čupr (1821–82) published a Czech translation: *Tao-Tě-King. Cesta k Bohu a ctnosti* (Tao-Tě-King: The Path to God and Virtue).
- 5 In his article (which even featured in a brief review note in *The Theosophist’s* 1895 March issue), Giles gave a damning review of Balfour’s translation, whose ‘exegetical value’ he considers to be on a par with – would it ever be written – a ‘commentary of the fourth Gospel from Madame Blavatsky’ (Giles 1886: 234).
- 6 That the Noak rendition was made accessible at least to some early Theosophists is indicated by a gratitude note of the Dutch Theosophical Society in April 1897, in which the receipt of the Noak volume alongside that of von Plänckner for their library collection is reported (Theosophische Vereeniging 1897: 232). Van Manen making use of this collection also consulted the Noak translation.
- 7 On de Pouvoirville, see the chapter by Davide Marino in this volume.
- 8 Laozi is mentioned twice (qua ‘the Chinese philosopher’ Laotsen [*sic*] or Lao-tsi, as well Tissoo) in Helena P. Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* (Blavatsky 1877: 600, 159). In her story ‘A Bewitched Life’ she referred to the Japanese *yamabushi* 山伏 as ‘(the ascetics, or “hermits”) who follow the doctrines of Lao-tze’, the ‘followers of Lao-tze’ (Blavatsky 1885a: 267) and the ‘initiates of Lao-tze’ (Blavatsky 1885b: 285). Here Blavatsky apparently drew on a *The Theosophist* article of 1881 on ‘The Religions of Japan’, where account is given on ‘the doctrines of Lao-Tye, the most mystical and spiritual of all’ and their followers the ‘*Yamabusi* or the “Hermit-Brothers”’ (Anonymous 1881: 9; for an early Dutch translation of this part, see Anonymous 1895: 495). Other early Theosophical writers, such as Henry Steel Olcott (1832–

- 1907), Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921) and William Quan Judge (1851–96), left things Daoist unmentioned.
- 9 An ardent spiritist and early member (1876) of the Theosophical Society, she was the first president of the Société Théosophique d'Orient et d'Occident, which she founded in Paris in June 1883.
 - 10 Yet, she does not reference Balfour's *Daodejing* translation but his earlier *The Divine Classic of Nan-hua* in which he remarked that contemporary Daoism would be 'one of the most degenerate systems of belief in the entire world' (Balfour 1881: xxix). Lady Caithness deridingly called this into question (Countess of Caithness 1887: 198).
 - 11 Before that, Laozi is mentioned once (qua 'the predecessor of Confucius' Lao-tse) in Blavatsky's two-volume *The Secret Doctrine* (Blavatsky 1888a: xxv), in which she also alludes to Daoism as 'Lao-tse doctrine' (Blavatsky 1888a: xxv) and the 'esotericism of Lao-tse' (1888b: 37) and to Daoists as 'priests and followers of Lao-tse' (1888a: xxv) and 'Lao-Tze sect' (1888a: 173). She references the *Daodejing* ('*Tao-te-King*' or 'the sacred scriptures of the *Taosse*') twice, drawing on Julien's translation and Friedrich Max Müller, whom she quotes stating that 'the text is unintelligible without commentaries, so that Mr. Julien had to consult more than sixty commentators for the purpose of his translation' (1888a: xxv; see Müller 1873: 115; for an early Dutch translation of this part, see Blavatsky 1893: 206), as well as on Julien's teacher Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832) again through Müller (Blavatsky 1888a: 472; see Müller 1873: 332). Laozi ('Laotze' and 'Lao-Tze') and the *Daodejing* are also mentioned *en passant* in *The Key to Theosophy* (1889: 49, 117).
 - 12 In two further entries (Blavatsky 1892: 224, 320) she also uses the term 'Taoist'.
 - 13 The Dutch sinologist Jan Jakob Maria de Groot (1854–1921). Blavatsky draws on the brief description of Daoism in de Groot 1886: 691–706.
 - 14 See Pauthier 1839: 118: 'La sagesse humaine n'a peut-être jamais exprimé des paroles plus saintes et plus profondes.' Blavatsky picked up the reference from de Groot 1886: 695.
 - 15 The essay was reprinted alongside three others in Mead 1895.
 - 16 Whereas Laozi was occasionally mentioned in the early Spanish Theosophical literature, *Daodejing* quotations are absent.
 - 17 Here (as well as in the subtitle of his book) Old seems to use an early rendering of *daozi* 道子 in the sense of 'sons of the *dao*' (another meaning used in early Western texts is 'Master Dao' referring to Laozi) for 'Daoists'. The terms 'Tao-tze' and 'Tao-tse' in the sense of 'Daoists' was already largely obsolete at the time. Also, he might have simply taken 'Tao-tze' as being synonymous with the more common transcription 'Tao-ssé' (i.e. *daoshi*). At any rate, this and the text at large do not necessarily suggest that Old had any (other than perhaps rudimentary) knowledge of Chinese at the time of writing.

- 18 This is from the same brief discussion of Müller on Daoism that had already been referenced before by Blavatsky (1888a: xxv).
- 19 Although not referenced, Old was also clearly informed by the Dutch religious historian Cornelius Petrus Tiele's (1830–1902) account on 'Religion among the Chinese' (Tiele 1877: 25–38). Moreover, he was also sympathetic to the philosophical note by English theologian Aubrey Moore (1848–1890), whom he references in Giles 1889: xviii–xxviii.
- 20 Notably, the same month a note in *Lucifer's* 'Theosophical and Mystic Publications' section reports on a new French 'literal translation of *The Tào* of Lao-tsze, which is at least an improvement on the paraphrase of M. Stanilas [*sic*] Julien' (T. 1894: 88). The said translation was published in four parts in the first few 1894 issues of the French esoteric journal *La Haute Science* (de Pouvourville 1894). The translator was the French Martinist and self-styled Daoist initiate Eugène-Albert Puyou de Pouvourville (pen name: Matgioi). In the introduction, de Pouvourville criticizes the paraphrasing of Julien, which would have urged him to produce an 'exact' rendering of the *Daodejing* based on his first-hand knowledge of the tradition. His (philologically inexact) translation was indeed well-received in French Theosophist circles. A very early quotation from his rendition (namely, that of Verse One) in the Theosophical literature can be found, for example, in the December 1896 issue of the French Theosophical monthly *Le lotus bleu* (Luxâme 1896: 394–5).
- 21 The first volume being *Theosophical Gleanings: Notes on 'The Secret Doctrine'* (Indian Section of the Theosophical Society, 1893).
- 22 Yet another brief review by George William Russell (1867–1935) in *The Irish Theosophist's* June issue notes that the book 'is largely Ethical, and will . . . be welcomed by a large circle of readers' (Russell 1894: 135).
- 23 In his translation of Verse Fourteen Old takes up Abel-Rémusat's view that the Chinese characters *yi xi wei* 夷希微 would phonetically refer to the tetragrammaton (Abel-Rémusat 1823: 40–54). Curiously, he does not mention Abel-Rémusat but wrongly refers to Chalmers as suggesting this. In fact, Chalmers, although mentioning that 'some scholars have fancied [these] to be the syllables of the sacred name of God in Hebrew' (Chalmers 1868: 9), explicitly rejects this idea. Old must have effectively drawn on Legge's commentary to the verse that also gives the name of Rémusat (Legge 1891: 57–8).
- 24 Old had changed his name to 'Walter Gornold Old' in 1895.
- 25 The only early use of Old's translation up until Franz Hartmann's rendition I could trace is Julia van der Planck's – pen name: Jasper Niemand; the wife of the prominent English Theosophist Archibald Keightley (1859–1930) – reference to Verses Sixty-Three and Sixty-Four (in a slightly modified form) in an article for *The Irish Theosophist's* June 1895 issue (Niemand 1895: 151).
- 26 For example, *The Path's* March 1894 issue has a quote of Verse Seven according to the Legge translation on top of its cover page (Judge 1894a: 369). *Mercury's*

September 1894 issue (Walters 1894: 44) concludes with an alleged Laozi quote, of which only portions are indeed based on the *Daodejing*, namely, Verses Seven (drawing liberally on Balfour) and Twenty-Two (drawing on Chalmers). The *Path's* December 1894 issue (Judge 1894b: 265) front page starts with the beginning part of Verse Twenty-Five in Müller's rendering. The English Theosophist Ernest Temple Hargrove (1870–1939; alias Che-Yew-Tsäng), the founder of The Theosophical Society in America (1898), quotes parts of Verse Twenty-Eight (using Chalmers) in an article for *Lucifer's* October 1893 issue (Tsäng 1893: 100; for a contemporaneous Dutch translation of the article, see Tsang 1894) as well as parts of Verse Thirty-Eight (again Chalmers but with modifications) in *The Path's* January 1895 issue (Tsäng 1895: 304). Prior to the 1890s, *Daodejing* quotations were virtually absent in the Theosophical literature. Additional quotations from the early 1890s are found in *Lucifer's* January 1891 issue, which contains a translation (Blavatsky and Besant 1891: 401) by George Gardiner Alexander taken from his *Confucius, the Great Teacher*, in which he also added several *Daodejing* verses in translation. The translation consists of Verse One (Alexander 1890: 305–6) and Verse Sixteen (Alexander 1890: 96) in a peculiar adaptation of a paraphrase by Pauthier; quotations by the German Theosophist Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (1846–1916) in the February 1891 (Verse Thirty-Three) and March 1892 (a portion of Verse Seventy-Eight) issues of his journal *Sphinx* in which he cites von Plänckner's rendering (Hübbe-Schleiden 1891: 128; 1892: 96); an article by the American Theosophist Jerome A. Anderson (1847–1903) in the May issue of his journal *The New Californian* (Anderson 1892: 329) (made available to European readers through a reprint in *Theosophical Siftings* the same year) where he quotes parts of Verses Forty-Nine and Sixty-Three according to Chalmers; or an earlier article by the Vice-President of the Oakland Lodge Marie A. Walsh in the same journal's November 1891 issue (Walsh 1891: 187) where again Chalmers is used when quoting Verses Seven and Twenty-Two.

- 27 On Bjerregaard, see the chapter by Johan Nilsson in this volume.
- 28 Bjerregaard drawing on the Chalmers translation of Verse Fifteen: 'The skilful philosophers that were in the olden time had a mystic communication with the abyss' (Chalmers 1868: 10).
- 29 Bjerregaard generally replaces Chalmers's 'Tau' with 'Tao'.
- 30 In doing so, Bjerregaard accidentally adds two different versions of one sentence.
- 31 Regarding the supposedly exoteric teaching of the *Daodejing*, Bjerregaard, in the same vein, brings together jumbled portions of the Chalmers and Balfour translations with his occasional own interventions in terms of style: Verse Four (Chalmers/Balfour); Verse Six (Chalmers); Verse Twenty-Five (Chalmers and little bit Balfour); Verse Thirty (Chalmers/Balfour); Verses Thirty-One and Thirty-Two (modifications of Balfour); Thirty-Four (Chalmers with slight adaptations); Thirty-Five (Chalmers and a tad Balfour); Thirty-Seven (Balfour/Chalmers, partly

intermingled); Thirty-Eight (Chalmers); Forty-Two (Balfour); Forty-Six (modified Chalmers); Forty-Seven, Forty-Eight, Fifty-One, Fifty-Five and Sixty-Two (all Chalmers); Sixty-Three (modified Chalmers); Seventy-Three and Eighty-One (once again Chalmers). Eventually, Bjerregaard adds another selected collection of statements under the heading 'Moral aspect and uses of Tao', taken from Verses Twenty and Twenty-One (Chalmers), Twenty-Three (modified Chalmers), Twenty-Four, Thirty-Eight, Forty-One and Fifty-Two (Chalmers, adding an alternative translation from the Balfour version to the latter verse), Fifty-Seven (modified Chalmers), Fifty-Nine (mixing Balfour and Chalmers) and Sixty-Five (Chalmers).

- 32 Reprinted in her seminal *The Ancient Wisdom* (Besant 1897).
- 33 Besant uses Legge's translation of 1891.
- 34 Besant invokes Blavatsky's root race theory (see Lubelsky 2013).
- 35 Besant was indubitably aware of Old's rendition but most likely shied away from using it due to their enmity as a result of the Judge affair.
- 36 The fifth feature ('v. His evolution by repeated incarnations, into which he is drawn by desire and from which he is set free by knowledge and sacrifice, becoming divine in potency as he had ever been divine in latency') she discovers partly in *Daodejing* Verse One and partly (among others) in the *Zhuangzi*.
- 37 New facsimiled editions are circulating since 2010.
- 38 Notably, even some subsequent German translations of the *Daodejing* were informed by that of Hartmann.

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