

DOCTORAL THESIS

The "invention" of different English Tao-te-chings (1868-1905)

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The “Invention” of Different English *Tao-te-chings* (1868-1905)

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Abstract

This thesis explores how *Tao-te-ching* was “invented” differently in the Anglo-American world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. *Tao-te-ching* is one of the most widely translated Chinese classics. In English alone, there are well over a hundred versions. This thesis focuses on 14 English translations published in the period 1868 to 1905, which can be considered the most significant and most fascinating stage in the history of the English translation of *Tao-te-ching*. Although these translations were done exclusively by Western sinologists who were undoubtedly highly competent in the Chinese language, they differ so widely from one another that they hardly seem to represent one and the same source text. For this reason, it seems more appropriate to call them “inventions” rather than “translations”.

The study will demonstrate that the instability of the source text and the existence of commentaries can explain to some degree why the 14 translations studied in this thesis differ so greatly from one another. But since the translations also express values and concepts never touched upon in the Chinese commentaries on *Tao-te-ching*, it can be assumed that there are yet other reasons accounting for the enormous differences among the translations.

Four factors accounting for the appearance of the 14 translations during the period 1868 to 1905 are identified — imperialism, Christianity, universal philosophy, and the theory of “foreign influence”. These factors are found to have in turn shaped the English translations of *Tao-te-ching* when it was first transplanted into the Anglo-American world.

Finally, the implications the translations of *Tao-te-ching* may have for our study of the notion of translation as invention are explored.

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